Co-Creating our Cities

AM✕Journal

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About AMJournal

Amsterdam Museum Journal (AMJournal) is a (diamond) open access, peer reviewed research journal that is published twice per year on the Amsterdam Museum website (AMJournal | Amsterdam Museum).

As the city museum of the eclectic capital of the Netherlands, the art and objects we show, the stories we host, and the societal issues that occupy us are complex by nature. This complexity requires a polyphonic approach; not one field or research can, or indeed should, tell the whole story. As such, rather than disciplinary, AMJournal is thematically oriented. Each calendar year, we publish editions that center on themes relevant to the cultural domain, public discourse and urban spaces, such as *War, Conflict and the City* (edition 1; October 2023), *Deconstructing Gentrification* (edition 2; Summer 2024), *(Re)production* (edition 3; Winter 2024), and *Co-creating our Cities* (edition 4; Summer 2025 – current edition).

Whilst AMJournal strictly publishes contributions that meet its high standards, the aim is to make research publications accessible for both readers and authors. AMJournal therefore publishes peer reviewed contributions by scholars in all stages of their research careers, from outstanding master students to the most lauded full professor (and anyone in between).

In addition, we publish essays and research papers by authors from all disciplines, from legal scholars to sociologists and from historians to economists. By centering on a theme rather than a discipline, complex issues are approached from various angles; demonstrating that it is through a polyphony of perspectives that we advance academic discourses. In short, multidisciplinary research is not merely encouraged, it is at the core of the Amsterdam Museum Journal.

To support scientific multivocality and offer a platform for various disciplines, AMJournal is modular, meaning each edition may include a combination of the following contribution types:

1. *The Short Essays*: short form texts in which authors succinctly defend topical thesis statements with proofs.
2. *The Long Essays*: long(er) texts in which authors defend topical thesis statements with proofs.
3. *The Empirical Papers*: qualitative and/or quantitative data analyses, or research papers.
4. *The Dialogue*: a conversation between the guest editor and another renowned scholar in their field on questions relevant to the edition theme.
5. *The Polylogue*: a thematic roundtable conversation with expert voices from various fields, from academic to artists, and from journalists to activists.
6. *The Polyphonic Object*: short complementary analyses by scholars from different disciplines of a single thematic object from the Amsterdam Museum collection.
7. *The Visual Essay*: a printed exhibition in which the analyses are based on images, which are then analyzed empirically and/or by means of a theoretical framework.

All contributions are published in English and written according to strict author guidelines with the broader academic- and expert community in mind. Each AMJournal edition and each separate contribution is freely downloadable and shareable as a PDF-file (www.amsterdammuseum.nl/journals). To further aid accessibility, for both authors and readers, AMJournal does not charge readers any subscription- or access fees, nor does it charge authors Article Processing Charges (APCs).

Interventions

For the visual layer of the fourth edition of AMJournal, Co-creating our Cities, the editorial board has chosen to highlight a selection of collaborations from the Amsterdam Museum program line *Collecting the City,* a museological form of storytelling through co-creation. *Collecting the City* focusses on highlighting underrepresented narratives, allowing for a more inclusive approach to accounts of contemporary urban life. Through partnerships with the education department of the Amsterdam Museum, Amsterdam-based organizations and the

communities they represent play an active role in bringing their own voices and stories into the museum. The visual section of AMJournal #4 features excerpts from exhibitions that emerged from these co-creative processes.

All original pictures were commissioned by the Amsterdam Museum and taken by various photographers during openings or other events by the museum itself. For AMJournal #4, these pictures were edited by the journal's designer: Isabelle Vaverka.

Editors' Note

Dear Readers,

We are proud to present the fourth edition of the Amsterdam Museum Journal (AMJournal), which is dedicated to the opportunities and complexities that come with 'co-creating our cities'. Coexistence, coproduction, and cooperation are vital ingredients of (contemporary) cities. In fact, most of our urban experiences are born out of collaborations, which shape our environments.

AMJournal Edition #4 presents a diverse range of research that addresses the complexities of co-creating. It includes insights from various fields and domains, which are presented in the form of The Visual Essay, The Essays, The Empirical Papers, The Polyphonic Object (polyphonic object analyses), and The Polylogue (expert round table). From research papers on dynamic citizenship and collaborative argumentation to essays on co-creation in the practices of cultural institutions, this special issue examines equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging as key aspects of co-creation projects and processes. By focusing on research from different disciplines and different places in the world, this AMJournal edition is able to study co-creation in different contexts and through different lenses.

As co-creation is not only a valuable field of study, but also a method employed in collaborative practices, this special issue includes a round table between various field experts and researchers on 'how to define and

Editors' Note

build a community', 'the importance of balancing different voices and power', as well as 'the impact of co-creation' in their own research and practices. In addition, the insightful visual essay on Amsterdam-Egyptian snackbars, which has won this edition's Best Paper Prize, highlights the importance of (migrant) communities in co-creating cities.

We would like to thank our contributors and readership for their engagement with this special issue. It is with your collaboration that we have been able to create such a comprehensive and layered edition on co-creation. We present an edition in which co-creation can be examined as a starting point for coexistence, as a practice for production, and as the result of communication.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. GL Hernandez
Edition Guest Editor

Dr. Vanessa Vroon-Najem
Edition Guest Editor

Dr. Emma van Bijnen
Editor-in-Chief

Homeless in the city: stories from the street 2025

The exhibition *Homeless in the city: Stories from the street* (2025) focuses on homelessness in the city of Amsterdam. At the time of the exhibition, 17.000 Amsterdammers were homeless or itinerant. To present this topic in an appropriate manner, the museum worked in close collaboration with two organizations for homeless people: HVO Querido and *De Regenbooggroep* [translation: *'The Rainbow Group'*]. In addition to this collaboration, curators – Dorine Maat and Gonca Yalçiner –

worked with lived-experience experts through focus groups. This made for conversations that clarified what themes should be part of the exhibition and how these could be presented. The final exhibition included artworks made by such experts-by-experience, while also highlighting the complexities of the bureaucratic system that homeless people are forced to navigate. During the exhibition, special tours were organized to welcome people (formerly) experiencing homelessness in the museum.

The Essays

Experimental Co-Becoming: Post-Commoning Practices in ACTA

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Discipline
Cultural Analysis

Keywords
Commons / Urban Space / Aesthetics / Precarity / Gentrification

Doi

Abstract

This paper analyses ACTA, a former dentistry school in Amsterdam's Nieuw-West repurposed into affordable student housing. The building embodies the ambivalence of urban life: it offers a communal refuge amidst a deepening housing crisis, while simultaneously commodifying bohemian aesthetics to legitimise substandard living conditions. We argue that ACTA exemplifies a mode of existence that catalyses commoning practices in conditions otherwise hostile to collectivity. Our analysis is conceptualised through 'post-commoning' – the practices of adaptation that appropriate both material and social structures in response to precarity. Repurposed classrooms and salvaged materials give ACTA its visual and ideological character, reflecting the efforts of early residents to create a self-managed, world-making space in the context of late capitalism. Methodologically, this paper draws on interviews with residents and photographs of its interiors. It puts into conversation the theoretical frameworks of Lauren Berlant's commons, Henri Lefebvre's 'right to the city', and Pierre Bourdieu's 'social space' to unpack ACTA's physical, social, and aesthetic complexities.

Introduction

In the Netherlands, the fate of so-called 'free spaces' (*vrijeplaatsen*), 'breeding grounds' (*broedplaatsen*), and squatted cultural venues reflects broader shifts in Amsterdam's urban policy. Creativity has become "*sutured to a mobile policy frame that has evidently been enabling, sustaining and normalizing a culturally tinged form of neoliberal urbanism*" (Peck 464). Amid growing precarity, squatter initiatives are increasingly pressured to negotiate their survival through strategic concessions, often trading radical autonomy for institutional legitimacy (Uitermark 693). These forms of urban commoning – once positioned as resistance to the privatisation and commodification of city life under late capitalism (Harvey 87; De Angelis 10) – are now regularly co-opted (Martinez 51) or incorporated into municipal agendas (Uitermark 695). These energies are channelled into Amsterdam's 'creative city' framework, which appropriates existing cultural histories and organisations in ways that render them marketable within a curated urban identity (Peck 472). Once rooted in housing struggles, these movements are increasingly redirected toward cultural programming, lending "*progressive legitimacy to an increasingly business-oriented model of creative urban growth*" (Peck 469). With little to no long-term security, this shift reflects the city's unwillingness to support commoning practices grounded in shared living rather than cultural production.

This paper examines what happens when commoning emerges not before or outside of co-optation, but from within it. What forms of commoning become possible in spaces simultaneously enabled and constrained by institutional and corporate structures? In what follows, we explore this question, taking as its main case study the former ACTA building – a repurposed dental school in Amsterdam's Nieuw-West now functioning as temporary student housing and artist studios. While scholarship has extensively covered *vrijeplaatsen* and *broedplaatsen*, ACTA occupies a distinct position between the urban commons and the private housing sector. Jointly owned by creative organisation Urban Resort and housing corporation De Alliantie, but shaped largely by its residents, the building reflects a new social terrain which we analyse through the concept of 'post-commoning', describing the collective practices that rework institutional infrastructures from within. Rather than seeking autonomy or resisting co-optation outright, ACTA's residents navigate contradiction, reworking infrastructural constraints to forge common worlds afforded by, yet not reducible to, neoliberal urbanism.

A Few Words on ACTA

When the Academisch Centrum Tandheelkunde Amsterdam (ACTA) relocated to the Zuidas in 2010, its old building was left vacant, soon squatted by housing rights activists, and later acquired by De Alliantie to become 'affordable' student housing (operated by a company called Socius)[2] and an artist 'breeding ground' run by Urban Resort. Today, the old ACTA building stands as a composite of 75 artists' studios, a night club Radion, and TWA (Tijdelijk Wonen Amsterdam) – a temporary accommodation spread across 8 floors and 28 'hallways,' or communal housing units, home to 460 students from different higher educational institutions in the Netherlands including Hogeschool institutes, Art Academies, and Universities. In this paper, our focus lies on the residential aspect of the building; TWA will be referred to as "ACTA" – the name commonly used by residents and visitors alike. But by using this term, we do not mean to encompass the artist studios or Radion, as those spaces function under different logics, and we do not have much insight into their practice. What we will refer to as ACTA is a set of relations and modes of living that exist specifically among the residents of the student housing – those who, by virtue of spending the most time in the building, have had the greatest opportunity to shape it as a shared environment.

Figure 1. *Old ACTA building from the outside*: Amsterdam 2025. Photograph by: Simon Pillaud.

Our focus here is on what kinds of community, commons, or publics emerge in a housing solution that affords more agency in shaping its governance and everyday life than conventional residential buildings. At ACTA, residents can modify their spaces – they build additions to kitchens and bedrooms, paint murals on the walls, and choose housemates – creating a dense ecology of collective expression and co-becoming. Over the years, lecture halls became kitchens, classrooms were turned into bedrooms, and the sterile institutional architecture of the dentistry school gave way to a more layered and textured environment made out of mostly salvaged materials. Whilst a dedicated team of residents oversees larger operations, the day-to-day tasks are delegated to democratically chosen representatives of each flat. This does not come without internal tensions: residents often feel limited by what seem like arbitrary rules set by the TWA administration[3]. The space of agency also exists within a fraught lineage: the building, once squatted, is now privatised and owned by a corporation, exemplifying the ways Amsterdam's activist-based housing solutions are being absorbed into the city's corporate apparatus. At the same time, ACTA does not meet the official legal designation of an *antikraak[4]* property, yet it exists within a broader framework of urban anti-squatting solutions. Distancing the building from a formal anti-squat can serve as a means to legitimise ACTA's image as an alternative and socially progressive space whilst masking its contribution to the continued privatisation of non-commercial community spaces and affordable long-term housing.
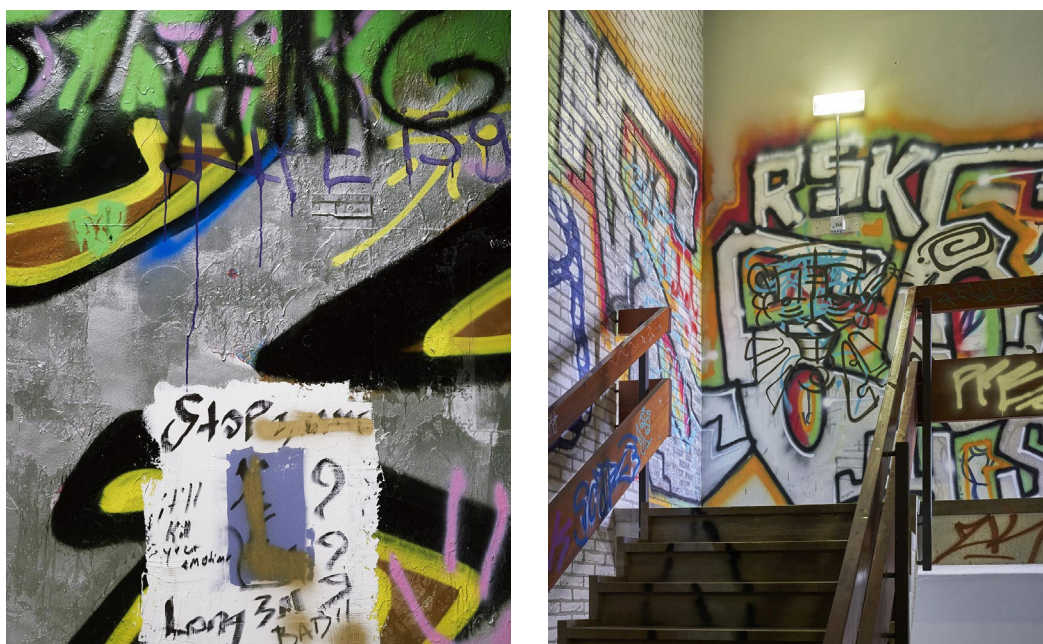
Figures 2 and 3. *Staircase in ACTA*: Amsterdam 2025. Photographs by: Simon Pillaud.

Outline

As residents, our years of experience living in ACTA make us attentive to the conditions that shape it today. In what follows, we take a reflexive and situated approach to our analysis – one that foregrounds modes of relationality, negotiation, and world-building while also recognising how these dynamics are themselves implicated in larger politics of urban space. We argue that ACTA is an example of a mode of existence that catalyses commoning practices in conditions that are otherwise hostile to collectivity. This results in unexpected manifestations of growth, entanglement, and co-becoming that emerge within the cracks of housing infrastructures, ultimately not intended for these purposes. In Section 4, we explore how ACTA's material and social infrastructures afford practices of collective life. This process unfolds through acts of repurposing on both macro and micro levels: ACTA itself is a repurposed institution, shaped by the appropriation of the very structures it seeks to resist (i.e. housing corporations, Dutch universities, and government programmes offering subsidised student housing). On a micro level, appropriation takes the form of everyday adaptations – supermarket shopping carts turned into makeshift transport or impromptu BBQ grills in the courtyard. These practices draw on the material and affective remnants of past commons to shape what we conceptualise as the post-commons: a social world forged within, rather than apart from, capitalist and institutional frameworks, reworking them without achieving autonomy from them.

The concept helps us account for the generative social forms at ACTA as modes of living and resisting that endure amid the precarity of late capitalist urbanism. While squats, squatted social centres, and 'free spaces' have historically nurtured similar forms of commoning, these practices are not limited to settings outside the law. Neither a squat nor a *vrijeplaats*, ACTA offers an instructive case, where the postcommoning potential does not reside in its structural features alone, but in how residents inhabit, repurpose, and socially organise within. In Section 5, we explore this ambivalence: ACTA's postcommons, expressed through what we identify as an 'aesthetic of appropriation', offers a communal refuge amid a deepening housing crisis, yet one that simultaneously commodifies bohemian aesthetics to justify substandard conditions[5]. Any creative or radical potential within ACTA, as we explore in this paper, does not stem from the building itself but from the residents who continuously choose to experiment, collaborate, and reimagine new forms of co-becoming. They do so despite the pressures of gentrification, rising living costs, threats to critical political speech and protest, and dwindling third spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Social theorist Michael Warner understands 'the public' not as a configuration of individuals, but as an entity structured through discourse and textual forms – self-organised rather than dictated by an external authority (51). At ACTA, this manifests in the materiality of the space itself – graffiti-covered walls, political slogans, kitchen meetings, and the constantly evolving use of space do not merely reflect an aesthetic of resistance but function as a means of structuring life in common. This resonates with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' – the relationship between sociality, space, and style. In his understanding, habitus is a mechanism through which one's social position shapes how one interacts with the world. It marks collective identification through representational aesthetics, manifesting in both physical and social space. At ACTA, this becomes tangible through acts of decorating, dismantling, (re)building, and dialogue.

 Drawing on philosopher Henri Lefebvre's notion of the 'right to the city' – and its further elaboration by Alexander Vasudevan – we situate post-commoning practices at ACTA as responses to urban developments that constrain alternative imaginaries and forms of inhabiting the city under late capitalism. Historian Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactic as distinct modes of engaging with urban space is relevant here: strategies are the mechanisms of power that structure the city, while tactics are the improvised, everyday manoeuvres through which people reclaim and reshape space (xix). We use this framework to understand ACTA's ongoing existence and experimentation as reliant on tactics – on the ability to manoeuvre within dominant strategies, forging common worlds that elude, but are not entirely outside of, these systems.

 In its ephemerality, the post-commons reveals something about the infrastructures of co-belonging that emerge when official structures fail – about how people assemble, make do, and create forms of collective life even in the remnants of what came before. We take as a starting point cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's discussion of the commons, where they make a distinction between institutions, which congeal exclusionary power, and infrastructure, acting as a means through which "*patterns, habits, norms, and scene of assemblage*" happen (95). While institutions mainly build and facilitate infrastructure, infrastructure is not inherently institutional. This distinction is what our conception of the post-commons hinges on: the notion that the non-institutional commons is so easily co-opted by corporate forms of collectivity. The post-commons acknowledges the lack of infrastructure that non-corporate publics have access to and control over; at the

"This layering of objects and images creates a palimpsest – a layering of sedimented attachments written on the walls in which the material traces of new inhabitants and the pasts of previous tenants mingle, presenting a shared history through material sediment."

same time, it retools pre-existing institutional infrastructure and adapts it, as Berlant puts it, "*to invent alter-life from within life [6]*" (95).

Methodology

Our methodology is rooted in Cultural Analysis – an approach that emphasises the process of 'concept work' through close reading of texts, objects, and practices. It involves critically engaging with cultural artefacts to unpack their ideological, aesthetic, and social dimensions. In this paper, we treat the space of ACTA and interviews with its residents as a lens through which to think conceptually. In this way, our understanding of ACTA was shaped by lived experience, close reading, and ongoing concept work (with the post-commons as our primary theoretical tool). Drawing on Mieke Bal's approach to Cultural Analysis[7] and Donna Haraway's call for situated knowledge[8], we grounded our analysis in partial, embodied perspectives that acknowledge the researcher's positionality and embeddedness. This process was framed by questions such as: How does space shape behaviour? How do bodies move through and experience ACTA? How do aesthetics reflect and reinforce political ideologies? Rather than positioning our paper as an ethnography, the Cultural Analysis method offers a reflexive mode of knowledge production. The aim is not to provide a descriptive account of the community, but to develop theoretical insights through a process of conceptual engagement.

In an attempt to capture ACTA's collectivity, our choices have been shaped by an endeavour to write with many voices[9]. As residents ourselves, we worked collaboratively, conducting interviews and shaping our reflections through ongoing conversations with hallmates and others (former and current residents) referred to us through our networks. Our inquiry began with a set of pressing questions – ones that shape the everyday conversations of residents while also situating the building within Amsterdam's broader urban and social landscape. How does ACTA compare to a squat? How does it mobilise political action? What role does it play in fostering collective living? And how do its aesthetics shape the social lives of its residents? Guided by these conversations, our interview questions were organised around five general themes: General Experience, Space and Atmosphere, Aesthetics and Community, Positionality, and Ideology. All interviews were conducted in English[10], and we prioritised participants with different kinds of engagement in ACTA's communal life, ensuring a range of backgrounds and perspectives, including a variety of ethnicities, sexualities, gender identities, and class backgrounds.

The interviews sparked nuanced conversations around ACTA's role in gentrification, ideological echo chambers, mental health, drug exposure, and physical concerns about building safety, with varying degrees of criticism toward both the building and TWA's responsibility. All but one (conducted online) took place in ACTA's communal kitchens and residents' rooms. Surrounded by personal objects, we pointed to posters, furniture, and belongings to prompt discussion and evoke memory. In this way, our object of analysis is not only the spoken word, but also the atmosphere, texture, and materiality of ACTA itself. While our selection inevitably leaves out many voices, it aims to capture key dynamics of ACTA's commons while acknowledging the limits of representation. To further contextualise our work, we also invited a former resident, Simon Pillaud, to contribute in a different form. Instead of participating in an interview, he offered photographs of the building, adding another layer of interpretation to our paper.

Configuring Social Space

In what follows, we look at ACTA as a form of place-making that is improvised, reclaimed, and ever-evolving; a space not built from scratch but one (re)built, through acts of (re)construction and (re)imagination. This form of collaborative world-building occurs in the wake of the encroaching absorption of counter-culture into marketable forms. When the commons is subsumed, what emerges in its wake is the postcommons. This can be understood as a practice of adaptation: working with what is left behind and repurposing both material and social structures in response to precarity and instability. This process requires a constant state of negotiation, a pragmatic politics of inhabiting contradiction in order to survive. Postcommons spaces attempt to balance the threat of radical potential being flattened through its connection with institutional or corporate infrastructures, productive friction with institutional norms becomes essential to maintaining meaningful identity in these spaces. The following section's analysis focuses on the everyday configurations of social space in ACTA: how continual rhythms of negotiation, stylistic expression, and affective accumulations constitute forms of post-commons practice.

The building filters the community into 'halls' – clusters of 12–21 residents who select each other through 'hospiteeravonden', informal gatherings where potential new hallmates are collectively chosen. This process creates distinct social ecologies within ACTA, with each hall developing its own collective personality shaped by shared beliefs, styles, and habits. The selection process is ambivalent: while it opens space for intentional community-building, it is also inherently exclusionary, with the potential

to foster overly homogenous groups and reproduce discriminatory biases. That said, ACTA currently hosts a remarkably diverse community, with residents from a wide range of international backgrounds, ethnicities, sexualities, gender identities, class positions, neurodiversity, religions, and ideological beliefs. The enclosure inherent to the 'hospiteer' system, then, serves as a mechanism to protect vulnerable groups, for instance, by rejecting candidates who misgender trans residents or display racial bias (Harvey 70). Still, ACTA's position as one of the few remaining affordable living spaces is limited by its designation as a student building, inherently enforcing a form of class privilege afforded to those able to pursue full-time post-secondary education.[11]

Once selected, hallmates begin to build their shared lives in the spaces that bind them together. At the core of these micro-communities are the hall kitchens, which serve as both functional and symbolic spaces: sites of communal meals, collective decision-making, and the infamous 'hall parties,' where kitchens transform into makeshift clubs or music venues. The hall kitchens, then, are not just spaces of cohabitation but of world-building, where ACTA residents configure their social space through ongoing acts of curation and negotiation.

"On the surface level, it might look like a squat, but it helps to conceal the market forces that make its existence possible."

Experiments in Stylistic Identification

Figure 4. *Kitchen in ACTA on the 4.1 hall*: Amsterdam 2025. Photograph by: Simon Pillaud.

In his interview, Santi describes that the layout of his kitchen directly influences how hallmates interact, shaping patterns of movement, conversation, and collective life within the space. In this way, ACTA's interiors become material expressions of its paradoxical condition: fostering forms of self-organisation and alternative living, yet always within a structure that can, at any moment, be renewed. Even small changes in the kitchen's layout shape hallmates' interactions:

> *"Every now and then, there's kind of a lull in how people are hanging out... and then a few people just out of nowhere get the spark to rearrange the kitchen... Maybe some new furniture gets added, and then people start gathering because it's like, oh, nice new kitchen" (Santi).*

This quote illustrates how Rearranging the layout of the space can have a reinvigorating quality, leading to an immediate shift in how hallmates interact. It suggests that the arrangement of these kinds of collective spaces carries significance beyond function or aesthetics, becoming a configuration of the social space in physical form. As Bourdieu describes in his talk

"The building borrows the aesthetics of a squat but participates in redevelopment strategies, making the area appear more attractive, "creative," and "bohemian" without challenging the logics of urban planning, property ownership, or capital investment."

'Physical Space, Social Space, and Habitus', "*social space is an invisible set of relationships which tends to retranslate itself, in a more or less direct manner, into physical space in the form of a definite distributional arrangement of agents and properties*" (10). This configuring of social and physical space is also reflective of the affective undercurrents involved in negotiating the personal and the collective, that which make up co-becoming. In so doing, spaces like ACTA become a physical manifestation of post-commons collectivity – a conversation in the form of repurposed couches and strung-up photos.

Figure 5. *Walls in the kitchen in ACTA's 2.2 hall*: Amsterdam 2025.
Photograph by: Simon Pillaud.

Another key part of the spatial set-up in the kitchens is cultivating a distinctive style that represents the hall. Cemre describes how his hallway kitchen's walls serve as a living archive: "*Filled with memories from the earliest residents to the newest – pictures, old dartboards, calendars… You see a history of what has been here and what hasn't*". Over time, the style changes as new residents modify or remove decorations, leaving behind traces of the past. "*You still see the corner pieces of torn-down posters*", Cemre notes, "*a reflection of – okay, yeah, this was here, but also not, because now it's a different type of hallway*". This layering of objects and images creates a palimpsest – a layering of sedimented attachments written on the walls in which the material traces of new inhabitants and the pasts of previous

tenants mingle, presenting a shared history through material sediment (Figure 5). This kind of use of space, through style and expression, acts as another form of configuration, creating a material embodiment of collective identity/personality through aesthetic impression.

The inclusion of decorations from residents' years past alongside current hallmates' contributions also creates an archival characteristic to the space. This throughline in decoration between residents across time, even after moving out, marks a persistent sense of belonging. The style of these collective spaces also marks signifiers of identity with all kinds of implications – aesthetically, socio-economically, ideologically, and politically. Anna[12] reflects on how spatial configuration both facilitates sociality and reinforces a shared ethos:

> *"When it comes to the common spaces, you're also forced because you cannot make a decision by yourself, being like, oh, I would like to buy this huge IKEA table because I think it looks great. You're forced to also comply with whatever the legacy of the building is, as in how you run the spaces. I think we do follow the legacy of the building. I think these things have been decided way before we moved in. We follow how people live and then just continue on with this flow of reusing, refurbishing, not paying money" (Anna)*

This 'ACTA legacy' describes a kind of social code exhibited materially and aesthetically. It constitutes a counter-script of what is considered acceptable in terms of furniture and decoration, one that contradicts the mainstream capitalist logic of following trends and continually purchasing new items. Here, the space articulates its form of cyclical style as its aesthetic seems to be rearticulated in similar ways, even when changes or modifications are made, such as patching furniture, creating decorations out of pre-existing items, or repurposing materials. ACTA's stylistic expression seems to try to exist outside of the mainstream economy as much as possible. It even manifests into a counter-economy of ACTA in which furniture cycles between halls through group chats and building-wide swaps and sales, as we'll elaborate on further in the second section. "*You don't really buy things here*", Cemre explains. "*You inherit them. You see something and think, 'What can I do with this? How can I change it?'*" This acts as one of the key practices within the post-commons mentality of ACTA, the continual repurposing of infrastructure on both macro and micro levels as a means of survival and expression outside of capitalist logic.

Habitus and Collective Aesthetics

Turning now to a broader scale of representational aesthetics in ACTA, the building leaves a distinctive stylistic impression on those who see the space. This impression marks a collective orientation toward particular stylised objects and modes of behaviour that make up and visually mark habitus, constituting a broader picture of what Anna called the 'ACTA legacy'. Habitus (synonymous with disposition) is how a person's social position subjectively informs the ways they see and interact with the world (*Social Space and Symbolic Power* 19). Bourdieu explicitly connects style and habitus, arguing, "*One of the functions of the notion of habitus is to account for style unity, which unites both the practices and goods of a singular agent or a class of agents*" (*Physical Space...* 13). This accounts for the recognisable aesthetic of ACTA as a social space, both physically and socially. The ability to choose one's own hallmates and reconfigure spaces fosters a form of everyday world-building (both practical and symbolic). As Bourdieu writes, "*Habitus are these generative and unifying principles which retranslate the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary life-style*" (13). ACTA thus becomes a space for pockets of alternate forms of growth and collectivity within a precarious and often hostile housing system, this is the habitus ACTA cultivates. In turn, experiments in co-becoming, repurposing, and extra-capitalist logic become the rhythms through which the everyday is practised in this space.
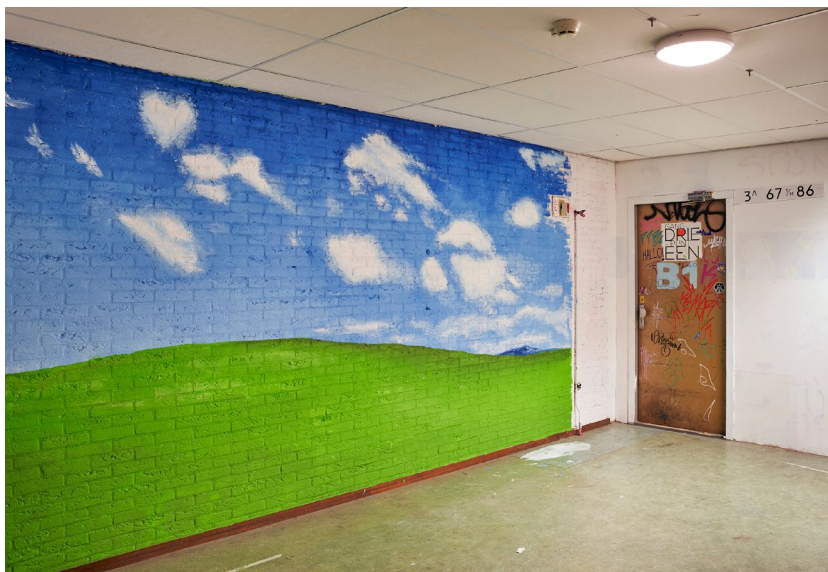
Figures 6 and 7. Hallways outside the housing units in ACTA: Amsterdam 2025. Photographs by: Simon Pillaud.

Beyond having a collective style or interests and ideological beliefs in common, hallmates also circulate on an affective register through the intimacy of a shared home space built in collaboration with one another. This is another register of co-becoming, in which individual experiences of the everyday rhythms of life and emotion coalesce into collective impressions. Cemre offers one of these moments of collective emotion:

> *"This week or the past two weeks, good things have been happening to me. The past week, good things have been happening to another roommate. I noticed that at least for five or four people, easily they're all in good moods. And when you're in good moods, you sort of infect each other with that ... What's going on? Are we collectively, you know, just having good news? So, yeah, definitely the mood affects each other significantly... And the same goes with bad moods." (Cemre)*

This kind of collective mood or atmosphere conveys the entangled social affect present in ACTA. Hallmates reinforce each other's emotional states, creating a porous network of feeling that challenges ideas of individualised perspective. We believe this is in part related to the distinct collective aesthetic ACTA cultivates. In her influential paper 'Happy Objects', Sara Ahmed explores the idea that objects are 'sticky', meaning they can accumulate emotional and affective associations through our interactions with them (29). Ahmed argues that objects contribute to social cohesion, as shared judgments about certain objects help shape group identities and dynamics (35). If we view the common spaces in ACTA as collections of stylised objects, each with their own histories and potentials of identification, the accumulation of expression written on the walls acts as a physical manifestation of each hall's particular social space.

In this case, aesthetic identification is closely tied to reinterpreting the building's existing materials and histories. This creates spaces that hold contingent atmospheres of collective material expression. This collective aesthetic expression, defined in part through the post-commons practice of creatively repurposing pre-existing structures, also manifests in the rearticulation of emotion between residents. This constitutes an affective layer to what Bourdieu calls social space. Multifaceted collectivity allows the building to maintain anchor points of commonality for residents to attach to, despite the constantly shifting demographics as students move in and out. We share a home in common, we share a stylised history in common, and so we share a vision for living together in common. Being constantly

surrounded by this polyphony of co-constituency marks the residents of ACTA's halls as a post-commons, bleeding into atmospheres of collective emotion and intersubjectivity.

Aesthetics of Appropriation

The residents' ideological and political preferences reveal themselves through layers of overlapping visual markers that constitute a mode of address, or what Warner might describe as a 'counterpublic' – a public constituted through discourse that positions itself in opposition to dominant norms (81). Counterpublics suppose a social marking; those willing to participate in this kind of scene are never just 'anyone.' Ordinary people, Warner writes, "*are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk*" (86). Furthermore, a counterpublic maintains, consciously or not, an awareness of its subordinate status (Ibid.). ACTA residents are not incidentally drawn to repurposed furniture or collective living arrangements; these reflect a conscious negotiation of their position as resistant to dominant economic and social norms. Their material practices are underpinned by a political understanding of precarity, exclusion, and refusal – an intentional alignment with a counterpublic logic, and not solely an aesthetic preference.

Figure 8. *Mural in ACTA on the fourth floor*: Amsterdam 2025. Photograph by: Simon Pillaud.

Figure 9. *Swing in ACTA courtyard*: Amsterdam 2025.
Photograph by: Simon Pillaud.

Co-becoming here is visual, emotional, and political; residents attract like-minded people while shaping and reinforcing shared values. Sabi reflects, "*At the end, people get stuck with each other's beliefs a lot... It attracts other more activist people of the like-minded type*". Over time, this produces a distinct ideological framework – what Titus calls a 'bubble', where radical left-wing politics are the norm, and deviation can feel isolating. In what follows, we argue that ACTA's mode of address is expressed through what we understand as an aesthetics of appropriation – a visual identity set by how residents repurpose, re-signify, and inhabit the remnants of pre-existing structures for anti-institutional agendas. Working across several scales and media, this aesthetic risks appropriating the visual language of squatting, even though residence is fully sanctioned and legally regulated. While ACTA offers the potential of alternative living by repurposing the building for for-profit purposes, it ultimately forecloses the possibility of more radical arrangements (e.g., rent-free squatting) being established there. On the surface level, it might look like a squat, but it helps to conceal the market forces that make its existence possible. This raises important

questions about what kinds of resistance are allowed to exist under capitalism, and how aesthetics once tied to radical autonomy become absorbed and rebranded within marketable bohemian imaginaries.

Counter-Economies as Urban Tactics
De Certeau's distinction between 'strategy' and 'tactics' helps unearth a politics to ACTA's postcommoning practices. Strategy, in de Certeau's terms, is the logic of institutions, the calculated ordering of space that defines ownership, control, and long-term planning. Tactics, by contrast, are the fluid, opportunistic manoeuvres of those who do not have the luxury of long-term control. A tactic "*insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety*" (xix). It is an act of creative survival within the precarity of an imposed system.

In Amsterdam, social interaction often comes with a price tag. "*Hanging out with people is so expensive*", Sabi remarks,

> *"Like, you leave your house and any place to hang out costs*
> *money... I like that ACTA still has spaces for interaction, for*
> *hanging out and socialising, that are completely free. You can*
> *just sit in the kitchen with your hallmates, or in the court-*
> *yard, or if there's a party, you can just go without paying to*
> *get into a club". (Sabi)*

ACTA functions as a rare sight in the city where social life unfolds outside the pressures of consumerism. "*It's a public space that exists outside of the economy*", Sabi continues. "*Whichever definition of the commons you look at, sharing resources is always central – and ACTA is no exception*" (Marta). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Marta recalls that this informal economy of favours and exchanges became even more pronounced.

> *"It's like a marketplace where you can find anything you*
> *need for free or for a beer. I remember this one time our cat*
> *was sick, and we needed a syringe – either to feed it or to give*
> *it anaesthesia, I don't remember. And somebody on the eighth*
> *floor just happened to be a veterinary student, so they had all*
> *the syringes we needed". (Marta)*

ACTA's qualities for supporting postcommoning cannot be reduced to its function as student housing alone. When compared to more conventional student accommodations like Uilenstede, the contrast becomes sharper.

"Uilenstede was just a bit... cleaner, you know?" Santi notes, *"Like, it was physically cleaner, but also structured in a way that made it clear it was built for students. The colours, the organisation, the little gym and restaurants – it all felt designed and controlled. You were always aware that you were in a student city."* *"Every time I see ACTA when I'm walking towards it, even from far away, it just represents a different way of doing things"*, he continues, and this time, compares the building to a squatted artist community outside Amsterdam.

> *"Ruigoord is seen as a success story of a place that lives by its own rules. But I think ACTA is an even more relatable success story because it's not so far outside the city. It's not about reject-ing the city's rules – it's about engaging with the city but still doing things our way." (Santi)*

Differently to Ruigoord, ACTA negotiates its existence within the city's frame-work. Its aesthetic of appropriation – the swing and tables in the courtyard fashioned from old doors, the pop-up bars built from wooden pallets – is not just a response to the economic realities of Amsterdam, but also an interven-tion, where alternative urban realities co-exist within capitalist municipal agendas. *"What is counted* [by logics of strategy] *is what is used, not the ways of using"* (De Certeau 35), and use is precisely where ACTA's significance lies. In a way, the aesthetic itself can be seen as a tactic.

Within the landscape of Amsterdam's 'creative city' programmes as de-scribed by Peck, ACTA represents a pseudo-private space that enables a dif-ferent trajectory. Its capacity to host communal life stems from a series of contradictory adaptations: a legally sanctioned but under-regulated building inhabited by a student population engaging in everyday acts of mutual aid, infrastructural improvisation, and informal governance. As such, ACTA's post-commons demonstrates how collective autonomy survives by repurpos-ing, not escaping, the constraints of institutional frameworks. In this way, the residents' tactical practices function as an 'alterlife' – a life already recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism; a life in the ruins of public infra-structure, where community can only flourish through a repurposing of hostile systems. Unlike the *vrijeplaatsen* or *broedplaatsen*, ACTA was never fully in-corporated into Amsterdam's municipal cultural policy. This structural ambi-guity creates a grey zone where forms of collective world-making can persist. These practices neither defy nor comply with the city's developmental logic; they instead navigate it from within, with appropriation serving as a tactic to navigate dominant urban planning strategies and make space for life otherwise.

"But ACTA is also a Ship of Theseus – its residents come and go and take along with them much of their energies to organise, build, and grow. As residents change over time, ACTA changes too, ebbing and flowing along with new visions of what the building should be."

The Right to (Re)Build and to (Re)Imagine

Lefebvre's conceptualisation of 'the right to the city' further contextualises the example of ACTA as a postcommons within the broader struggle over urban space. Lefebvre argues that cities are not merely built environments but 'oeuvres' – co-shaped by those who inhabit them in dialogue dictated by top-down forces of planning and capital (101). Yet, this dynamic is inherently unequal: institutions and other systems of governance ('the far order') impose their vision of urban life onto the everyday practices of residents ('the near order'), prioritising exchange value over use (152). In response, Lefebvre calls for 'a right to the city,' a demand for participation, appropriation, and inhabitation beyond market-driven urbanism (154).

But ACTA does not simply claim a right to exist within the city – it embodies what Alexander Vasudevan calls 'the right to a different city'. Extending Lefebvre's argument, Vasudevan emphasises the need to reimagine urban life in ways that go beyond securing access to space (318). He argues that alternative urban realities must be actively produced through occupation and self-organisation, creating spaces that foster political, social, and cultural experiments outside dominant urban systems (316). ACTA exemplifies some characteristics of a space that exercises these rights: it provides affordable housing in a city where living costs continue to rise and functions as a collective site of experimentation in post-common forms. Yet, while "the ACTA legacy" still permeates its walls, the building exists in flux. It is not a squat nor a conventional rental property, but a negotiated space, deliberately positioned within legal and economic structures that prevent it from being reclaimed as an actual squat. In many ways, it serves to legitimise anti-squatting policies.

"I think you can't take this building without its history of squatting", Cemre notes. "*The reason why it ended up becoming like this is because they wanted to prevent people from actually squatting in the building. So they were like, 'Okay, we should rent this out to some other company that ends up renting it out so that it can't be an anti-squat or that it can't be a squat place'*", Lefebvre's notion of 'the far order' becomes evident here. The Dutch state, in alignment with property owners and real estate developers, has long sought to regulate and contain the practice of squatting[13]. ACTA, in this sense, is a symptom of the broader struggle between pro-squatting movements and anti-squatting policies in the Netherlands.

"The way that ACTA is built as a way of living space is a direct reflection of the neoliberal capitalist project that the anti-squat enables. Anti-squat is not there to care for us. Anti-squat is not there to make affordable housing in the city, no matter how many times they have to write this on their project proposals to get the municipality to agree to it. Anti-squat is there to ensure that big owners and land developers get to keep their properties for as long as they want before selling them for the highest price they can foresee without having to make them actually livable for people." (Marta)[14]

This tension between appropriation as an act of urban resistance and the institutional frameworks that co-opt and neutralise its radical potential complicates ACTA's position within the right to a different city. Vasudevan describes autonomous spaces as ones that operate outside dominant urban systems, generating alternative forms of living by occupying and re-imagining the city (321). ACTA embodies many of these characteristics, yet it remains legally sanctioned, bound to agreements that prevent it from fully becoming an autonomous zone. Berlant claims that the desire to have a public that is free to be an indeterminate space is integral to historical understandings of the commons (81). While ACTA's aesthetics of appropriation evoke the image of an autonomous space, the building's history exposes a contradiction. The building borrows the aesthetics of a squat but participates in redevelopment strategies, making the area appear more attractive, "creative," and "bohemian" without challenging the logics of urban planning, property ownership, or capital investment. In doing so, it risks contributing to the city's efforts to gentrify Nieuw-West, ultimately accelerating the displacement and exclusion of lower-income communities.

This situation echoes Warner's dialectic of circulation, where counterpublics embody a struggle between authenticity and commodification. He writes,

"To be hip is to fear the mass circulation that feeds on hipness and which, in turn, makes it possible; while to be normal (in the 'mainstream') is to have anxiety about the counterpublics that define themselves through performances so distinctively embodied that one cannot lasso them back into general circulation without risking the humiliating exposure of inauthenticity"
(73).

Many scholars have highlighted that artists act as a 'colonising arm' (Ley qtd. in Mathews 665) or as 'canaries' (Peck 467) for new urban economies, with cycles of gentrification beginning with artists and/or students settling neighbourhoods. This process acts as the inversion of post-commons appropriation, with capitalist institutions syphoning the energy and generative outputs of post-commoning practices. This flattens the 'coolness' of bohemian lifestyles into a commodifiable product, thus restarting cycles of precarity and dispossession that necessitate these tactics of appropriation in the first place. ACTA here operates as a mechanism that maintains the illusion of autonomy through a right to appropriate while preserving the city's power to withdraw its support when convenient.

Conclusion: Is There Such a Thing as an Actan?

In times of increasing polarisation and exhaustion from the intensive individualism and competition that capitalist systems require, maintaining an authentic and non-commercial collective is difficult. The figure of the 'acta resident' is bound by tension between collectivity and rebellious individuality. But ACTA is also a Ship of Theseus – its residents come and go and take along with them much of their energies to organise, build, and grow. As residents change over time, ACTA changes too, ebbing and flowing along with new visions of what the building should be. As discussed in Section 4, traces of residents' pasts leave material marks, influencing in turn the scripts or legacies of the building. There are ongoing debates around whether or not ACTA used to be more connected as a building, as Cemre puts it: "*The relationship to the other sort of hallways you can see more clearly has definitely waned. I feel like hallways are more isolated nowadays*". There are disagreements about the term 'Actan' —in Titus's interview, he rejected the term, suggesting it is a product of TWA management's effort to designate a community in a top-down manner. This feeds into what Berlant describes as the "*contemporary crisis of the 'we'*" (82), in maintaining a collective without the external power influences of institutions and corporations. What ACTA's post-commons attempts at collectivity show us is constant negotiation, expressed materially in the space and in its particular modes of post-commons relation.

In Section 5, we delved into the aesthetics of appropriation, as well as post-commoning practices like repurposing, and how they create a distinctive impression of the building that many residents latch on to. "*ACTA changed that horizon of possibility for me*", says Marta after having moved out for 2 years, "*the possibility that this could be in Amsterdam allows you to dream and imagine and take action towards a lot of different worlds than*

the one you are inhabiting", she continues. Santi, too, reflects that ACTA "*has made people a lot more conscious of how they would ideally like to live and I think that's also maybe where the rebelliousness comes from a little bit, is just realising that this is possible somewhere and not wanting to give that up for living somewhere else*". The residents mark ACTA, but the building marks them too, prompting them to carry its post-common creative ethos into other contexts.

ACTA is constituted in part by its impermanence. Sabi remarked,

> *"I think it promotes a positive association with change and the feeling that nothing will last forever. And I really appreciate ACTA for that. The fact that I know it's not gonna last forever and everybody knows that and the fact that we are enjoying it and change will come and things will get demolished, but still it's cool right now". (Sabi)*

At the same time, even as the body of residents is constantly shifting and decorations and layouts evolve over time, a feeling of constancy also endures. ACTA lingers like the moss clinging and growing on pre-existing institutional structures, and the collective maintains its continuity by adjusting to constant change. Precarity necessitates this constant adaptation, a process that embodies the ambivalence of post-commons urban life, fueled by Amsterdam's deepening housing crisis. The building's identity is steeped in Amsterdam's history of squatting and grassroots resistance, but it also reflects the strains of neoliberal urbanism that charge rent for impermanence. As Peck notes, "*For their very credibility... creative-cities policies must tap into, and valorise, local sources of cultural edginess, conferring bit-part roles to creative workers as a badge of authenticity for the policies themselves*" (468). The perceived freedom in expressive possibility of the post-commons comes with the flip side of chronic under-maintenance, masking substandard living conditions. The generative potential of the building exhibits in experimental collective expression often comes in spite of these structural deficiencies. We suggest the post-commons as a tactic for maintaining extra-capitalist collectivity, as its potentials and shortcomings hold relevance far beyond the walls of ACTA, suggesting new ways of co-becoming and fostering alter-life in contemporary urban life.

Throughout this paper, we have argued that the residents of ACTA survive in an environment hostile to non-commercial collectivity by appropriating pre-existing infrastructure, using it for their own world-making needs and experiments in co-becoming. Despite the impermanence

"ACTA lingers like the moss clinging and growing on pre-existing institutional structures."

of ACTA both in terms of looming threats of demolition and the constant cycle of change of residents, continuity remains in some form:

> *"This feeling of permanence is. I don't know, cancels out this temporary feeling… This thing is going to exist and persist even when you're gone. Even when I'm gone. You know, like when everyone's gone, it feels like this place will still remain or something…. People move out and then come back, they say, 'oh, it's so similar in a way, or the feeling is the same'"* *(Cemre).*

While ACTA is defined by constant experiments and changes, a continuous thread is maintained over time. This thread is carried through post-commoning practices of appropriation and renewal – processes ultimately necessary for the survival of common spaces in hostile capitalist ruins.

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Endnotes

1. *Broedplaatsen* emerged in the 1990s as a result of the municipal government's strategy to use derelict spaces for creative and community-driven pursuits until further developmental projects can be put to action. *Broedplaatsen* have since been spaces designed to incubate artistic and cultural production in Amsterdam, but their existence is temporary and oftentimes precarious (Gemeente Amsterdam). This policy reflects a larger shift the Amsterdam municipality made to regulate community spaces facilitated by squatter organisations via the Free Spaces Accord (vrijplaatsenakkoord), first introduced in 1999. This policy is controversial among squatting organisations, with some groups criticising the accord as a means of absorbing the cultural vibrancy of squatting without meaningfully supporting squatter organisations. The main criticism entails the transformation of Free Spaces into non-residential cultural hubs, pushing out local artists and other residents who rely on the affordable housing that squats provide (Squat.net).

2. The residential section of the former ACTA building is owned by housing corporation De Alliantie. It is operated by Socius Wonen, an organisation that manages temporary housing for young people across the Netherlands. This location, officially called TWA, provides student accommodation ("TWA," *Socius Wonen*).

3. One such tension between TWA management and residents is the mechanism through which cleaning and fire safety measures are enforced: hallway managers are expected to fine residents for not finishing cleaning tasks on schedule and for not keeping their hallways free of clutter. While hallway managers are themselves residents of each hall and their management styles vary, this system also acts as internal policing and monetary punishment for an already financially vulnerable demographic.

4. *Antikraak* (in English: anti-squatting) refers to temporary housing arrangements in which tenants, often with limited rights, occupy vacant properties to deter squatting and vandalism. Though presented as flexible and affordable, such contracts typically lack tenant protections and allow property owners to avoid vacancy while retaining control over the space. See: Boer, René, Marina Otero Verzier, and Katía Truijen, editors. *Architecture of Appropriation: On Squatting as Spatial Practice*. English ed., Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2019.

5. Confer: Peck, Jamie. "Recreative City: Amsterdam, Vehicular Ideas and the Adaptive Spaces of Creativity Policy." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2012, pp. 462–85.

6. Originally coined by Michelle Murphy, alterlife "*names life already altered*", or life "*recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism*" and "*entangled within community, ecological, colonial, racial, gendered, military, and infrastructural histories that have profoundly shaped the susceptibilities and potentials of future life*" (497). In revoking this concept in a different light, Berlant proposes that alterlife can be invented from within, reframing it as a process rather than a pre-existing condition.

7. Confer: Bal, Mieke (Maria Gertrudis), and Bryan Gonzales, editors. *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*. Stanford University Press, 1999.

8. Confer: Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99.

9. Writing with 'many voices' as a focus on hearing others and an effort to democratise discourse often overlooks how those voices have been framed and organised (Robbe). We write with many voices, but not with all, selectively including certain testimonies over others to explore a defined domain of inquiry – the (post)commons. This approach does not claim to provide a complete or more truthful account than others; rather, it represents an effort to engage meaningfully with the specific questions that shape and guide this research.

10. While all interviews were conducted in English, it is important to note that English was a second language for both us as researchers and for all participants. Titus and Cemre were the only interviewers whose native language is Dutch; One of the co-authors speaks Dutch as a second language. Despite the Dutch context, English has become the dominant language in ACTA. This wasn't always the case, but over time, ACTA has shifted into a predominantly English-speaking community, shaped largely by the influx of international students. English now functions as the main language of everyday communication among residents.

11. This structure excludes many marginalised groups, including disabled individuals, those who cannot afford to study, and those excluded due to immigration status. A clear example of this is TWA's recent decision to end eligibility for students pursuing secondary vocational education, thereby reinforcing societal biases against trade-based education.

12. One interviewee wished to remain anonymous; we will refer to her as 'Anna' throughout the paper.

13. Squatting was decriminalised in the 1970s but increasingly restricted through legal reforms, culminating in the 2010 ban.

14. The quote was edited to remove profanity at the request of the interviewee.

The Undercurrents of Co-Creation. An Exercise in Embracing Discomfort in the Slavery Exhibition *Herdenken en Helen* in Amsterdam

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Co-creation / Memory Culture / Slavery / Amsterdam / Intangible Heritage

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Abstract

Through this essay we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of co-creation. We present 'Herdenken en Helen' (to Commemorate and Heal), a 2023 project on the annual commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, co-created with memory activists, heritage professionals and scholars. By bringing together our combined experiences, building on expertise in the field of participatory practices and the topic of this co-creative project, we provide a critical reading of the affordance of co-creation when aiming for multivocality, and offer some considerations on how to re-think ideas of co-creation.
We argue that a focus on 'community' in co-creation risks glossing over existing differences and antagonisms. These 'undercurrents of co-creation' – the tidal push and pull beneath the surface – need to be brought into view. We propose to acknowledge that the undercurrents are part of the co-creative process, and to find ways to make them productive.

Through this essay we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of co-creation. We present *Herdenken en Helen* (to Commemorate and Heal), a 2023 project on the annual commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, co-created with memory activists, heritage professionals and scholars. By bringing together our experiences, building on expertise in the field of participatory practices and the topic of this co-creative project, we would like to provide a critical reading of the affordance of co-creation when aiming for multivocality, and offer some considerations on how to re-think ideas of co-creation.

Within the art and museum field co-creation is increasingly popular as a way to address challenges institutions have been facing in recent decades. Institutions were pressured to rethink their relevance to wider audiences, and to become more diverse and inclusive both in terms of content and as an institution as such. Though part of a broader framework of participation, the idea of co-creation is often connected to theories of 'community art', a term used by British artists in the 1960s who wanted to 'make "art" that would reach beyond the usual art world audiences. These artists wanted to make art not only for but *with* those they saw as excluded from the elite world of 'high art' (Crehan 2011, 13). In recent decades the idea of participatory work methods and theory have been adopted by museums and heritage institutions and are reflected in strategies and definitions of museum associations like ICOM. It is becoming incorporated into standard curatorial practice as a way of "*involving people in the making of anything that those institutions can produce. This could be object interpretation, displays and exhibitions, educational resources, artworks, websites, tours, events or even festivals.*"[1]

Co-creation and participation are concepts now used in such a widespread manner[2] that doubts have been raised as to their "*performativity*" (Chirikure et al. 2010) promoted by the "*box ticking expediencies associated with ideas about social inclusiveness*" (Watson and Waterton 2010, 1). Stephen Welsh, for example, has recently raised concerns that in some cases co-creation might become a way of branding the museum as much as an emancipatory project (Welsh 2024). Pablo Alejandro Leal characterized participation as "*a buzzword in the neoliberal era*" (Leal 2007). In co-creative and participatory practice there seems to be a thin line between opening institutions for participation and multivocality, and conscripting the vernacular into the institution, thus potentially glossing over contrasts between multiple voices (Beeksma and De Cesari 2019).

The use of the term 'community' plays a central role in this tension between participation and conscription. From the early community art to present day applications in the framework of participation, the idea of community has been coupled to an idea of emancipation. The initial analysis of community artists was that the art world and museums have become elite institutions of 'high' art and culture with their own internal logic, language and laws. This was a highly exclusive world that was inaccessible to those without training at recognized institutions, or without the necessary networks in the art world. This situation reproduced racial, gender, and class inequalities, and thus marginalized, for instance, people of colour, women and people from lower-class backgrounds. The community artists wanted to change conventions and practices in the art and museum world by involving people who were marginalized. The emphasis, however, seems to have shifted from addressing exclusion and discrimination to a focus on 'communities'. Increasingly, 'community' now appears as a stable and homogeneous group. Indeed, as Steve Watson and Emma Waterton have argued, "*the very notion of 'community' seem[s] to have ossified into a set of assumptions and practices that were now rarely examined*" (Watson and Waterton 2010, 1). In this view, the community acquires the characteristics of an individual: it is imagined to have a voice, an experience, self-awareness and feelings. It is also associated with attributes such as 'oppressed', 'silenced', or, conversely, 'emancipated'.

Here a dilemma emerges. Striving for emancipation and representation is a political process that requires the formation of political subjectivity. That is, in the process of co-creation the 'community' must emerge as a subject, and this necessarily requires the selection of a representative body (a spokesperson, a committee, etc.) that speaks for the community.

The trouble is that political subjects are not homogeneous 'groups' (Beeksma and De Cesari 2019; Brubaker 2004), but the product of socio-political-juridical dynamics (Krause and Schramm 2011). Indeed, initiatives such as the Black Arts Movement or AfriCOBRA ought to be seen as efforts to *create* a sense of community and a *claim to* political subjectivity, rather than simply as *expressions* of an already existing, clearly delineated 'group'. Moreover, experiences of oppression and exclusion work intersectionally (that is, intersecting divisions of gender, race and class), further complicating notions of community as a stable and bounded entity. This raises questions for central concepts of multivocality, equality, knowledge and empowerment in the co-creative process. Political subjectivity tends to absorb rather than foreground opposing positions within a group. For example, co-creative toolkits may include the step of selecting one partner

"In this view, the community acquires the characteristics of an individual: it is imagined to have a voice, an experience, self-awareness and feelings."

organization out of a range of "*potential partners*".[3] The selected partner will be representative of, for instance, the neighbourhood as a whole.

Our experience with *Herdenken en Helen* (both the research phase and the exhibition itself) shows that it is not possible to think of the people who have been involved in the commemoration of slavery as a 'community', let alone one that could be represented by one partner that speaks for all. Instead, as we will show, different, and sometimes opposing, positions exist with regards to commemorating slavery. Absorbing them into one position would not do them justice, and may even violate them. This is what Chantal Mouffe has called "*agonistic pluralism*": an understanding of democracy that, in contrast to 'deliberative democracy', accepts the existence of an oppositional other, but it "*presupposes that the 'other' is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question*" (Mouffe 1999, 755). We call this form of 'agonistic' dynamics the undercurrents of co-creation, to point to the need to bring into view the tidal push and pull beneath the surface. We propose to acknowledge that the undercurrents are part of the co-creative process, and to find ways to make them productive.

The exhibition Herdenken en Helen
The Dutch government designated the year from July 1, 2023 to July 1, 2024 as a 'commemorative year for slavery' (herdenkingsjaar slavernijverleden), and provided more than 12 million Euros for cultural, societal and educational activities. The year was inaugurated by King Willem Alexander's apologies for the Royal House's involvement in slavery. It generated heightened attention at transnational, national, and local levels, prompting joint reflection on the history of slavery and its lasting consequences, which many people continue to experience today. Next to the Royal apologies, activities included the launch of a 'Black Canon' focusing on the history of enslaved Africans and the rehabilitation of the Surinamese icon Anton de Kom and Curaçaoan resistance fighter Tula by the Dutch government.[4]

Amsterdam having been one of the most important players in trans-Atlantic slavery (Brandon et al. 2020), the City Council wished to stimulate initiatives addressing this past in the context of the commemorative year. One of these activities was an exhibition about the history of the commemoration of abolition in Amsterdam, Keti Koti (lit. 'broken chains'). This exhibition was to emphasize the importance of the slavery past, thus giving it a more permanent place in the city's historical canon. The Council also acted upon a promise made by Prime Minister Mark Rutte when he apologized for the Dutch government's role in trans-Atlantic slavery in December 2022.

There he acknowledged that this apology constituted merely the starting point of a prolonged process of healing: "*the most important thing now is that all of the steps we take, we really take together. In conversation, listening with the only intention being: doing justice to the past, healing in the present. A comma, not a full stop.*"[5] In keeping with this emphasis on healing, the Council wished for the exhibition not only to emphasize slavery's afterlives in the present, but also wanted it to explore pathways towards healing.

The Council asked Imagine IC, a heritage organization in Amsterdam Zuidoost, to create this exhibition. For 25 years, Imagine IC has served as an open floor for contemporary heritage conversations. Operating out of Amsterdam Zuidoost, Imagine IC is dedicated to the practice of heritage democracy. The organization does this by collaboratively attributing multiple layers of meaning to objects and memories, involving as many different people as possible. Together with their network, Imagine IC reflects on the past in the present in order to imagine the future. Through ongoing conversations Imagine IC seeks to foster a more inclusive and democratic approach to the Amsterdam heritage collection. These conversations can lead to co-created exhibitions or public events as instruments to foster exchange. Over the years, Imagine IC has developed innovative methods, which they actively share with the heritage field at local, national, and international levels (Rana, Willemsen, and Dibbits 2017). It is due to their distinctive approach and accumulated experience that they were commissioned by the City of Amsterdam's Department of Art & Culture to contribute to the celebration of Keti Koti.

Imagine IC proposed to develop the project in accordance with their own established working tradition, which is rooted in a combination of ethnographic and participatory action research. In order to create a multivocal representation, a working group was formed that could connect with various networks. Through a series of conversations and interviews with people from these networks involved in commemorating slavery the aim was to exchange and gather perspectives, to share the rituals and traditions connected to commemorating slavery, and bring them together in the exhibition. The selected interview approach is always to let the interviewee lead the way, to interfere as little as possible and not to steer the conversation too much.

This research was done by the authors of this essay. Jessica Dikmoet is a freelance journalist, guest editor at Imagine IC and herself involved in organizing the commemoration of slavery at Surinameplein (Amsterdam) on June 30 since the 1990s. Markus Balkenhol is an anthropologist working on colonial heritage and memory at the Meertens Institute. He was pre-

viously involved in realising a "baseline" for Imagine IC's neighbourhood archive. Jules Rijssen is researcher at NL Lab and a network collector at Imagine IC. Danielle Kuijten is the director and co-curator of Imagine IC. For the design of the exhibition they collaborated with the local creative agency Vinger.nl and graphic design artist Kevin Rooi.

The research conducted for the exhibition focused on obtaining diverse perspectives on the legacy of slavery, the practices of commemoration over time, and its enduring impact on the present. To this end, the researchers conducted thirty-one semi-structured, in-depth focused life story[6] interviews with a varied group of respondents, including politicians, activists, cultural practitioners, and young people, who had been playing a pioneering role in the commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam.[7] These interviews explored their views on the history of slavery, practices of remembrance, the personal impact of this history, and processes of healing and restoration, both on an individual and collective level. Additionally, we also did archival research in a number of personal archives as well as in the Black Archives, Vereniging Ons Suriname, Vereniging Opo Kondreman, Vereniging Majuri Amsterdam, Kip Republic, Stichting Profor and Loson.

The interviews were intensive; respondents often noted that they had rarely delved so deeply into their personal histories, memories, and emotions. Afterwards, many described feeling exhausted, yet relieved and fulfilled. At the end of the interview, one participant said:

"These were heavy questions. Man! I thought it was good,
but it was heavy just then. I had to reach deep into myself. I
thought it was a heavy interview. I had not thought that the
questions would be this profound. I thought it was good, but
also heavy."

In addition, group discussions – part of Imagine IC's methodology – were organized in a Surinamese café, at an Antillean neighborhood center, at a Javanese-Surinamese organization, at a Historic House Museum and a Surinamese-indigenous (inheems) association, to explore the collective experience of the legacy of slavery and its emotional reverberations in daily life.[8] We chose this addition because they create a different dynamic than individual interviews, because participants are able to enter into conversations amongst themselves. These gatherings provided accessible spaces for the exchange of experiences and insights related to recognition, processing, and healing. Strikingly, participants were quick and willing to share deeply personal and emotional experiences. There was a sense of attentive-

ness, mutual respect, and openness in these encounters. For instance, one man shared how he personally struggles with his manhood, torn between wanting to be a good father and colonial stereotypes of black masculinity circulating in black communities and society at large.

Our conversations revealed a wide range of, at times conflicting, perspectives on the commemoration of slavery—a vibrant memory culture that serves as a platform for reflecting on how to live with a difficult past and for exploring ways forward.

When working collaboratively on projects like this one, the question of power is always present. Importantly, this plays out not only between the institution(s) and interlocutors but also amongst interlocutors themselves. All of them have different stakes in the process. This is a given, and rather than seeing it as a problem to be solved or worse, to be glossed over, one should be aware of its presence, and we try to work this out in our discussion of the undercurrents of co-creation below. For institutions and researchers it is important to avoid extractive practices in which objects and knowledge flow from participants to institutions in a monodirectional way. When engaging in co-creation, institutions and researchers must take on a responsibility and commitment vis-à-vis their co-creators that goes beyond one particular project. The openness and frankness we encountered in these conversations is the result of the team's years of involvement and familiarity with grassroots organizations and individuals. People shared their knowledge also because the project's collaborative method provided an environment in which they felt safe to do so.

These conversations provided four broad themes: commemorating slavery, its afterlives, ownership of slavery's memory and healing. Each theme comes back in the exhibition in the form of a short description, certain images and audio fragments from the conversations. In addition the exhibition featured a showcase with objects that people brought to the collecting meetings. There was also a *begi,* an altar in honor of the ancestors (see below). We cannot do justice here to the richness of what people shared with us. We will discuss some aspects of the four broader themes that bring into view the undercurrents of co-creation discussed above.

Commemorating what, exactly?
Keti Koti, literally the day of 'breaking the chains', has become the single most prominent event commemorating slavery in the Netherlands. It is celebrated with a televised, national ceremony at the slavery memorial in Oosterpark, but also across the country in countless local Keti Koti events. The day has developed into the main reference point for society at large.

It is the achievement of black grass roots organizations who have worked tirelessly for decades to make slavery a part of the Dutch memoryscape. It is supported and recognized by both the national government as well as the Amsterdam City Council.

Our conversations brought to light a tension in this celebration. Although the recognition that goes with a nation-wide event celebration was generally welcomed, the *national* character of the day also led to doubts because it glosses over differences. For example, both the date (1 July) and the year of abolition (1863) have become a matter of discussion over the past few years. Slavery was *formally* abolished by Royal decree in Suriname in 1863, but it was followed by a period of so-called State Supervision (Staatstoezicht) in which the freed people were compelled to carry out wage labor under contract for ten more years (Ramsoedh 2024). This led some to reject 1863 as the year of abolition, preferring 1873 instead. Some told us that they even reject both the date (1 July) and the year (1863/73):

> *"July 1st was enacted by the government of the oppressor. It was not 'abolition' because the slaves[sic] had to continue to work [on the plantations] for ten years. 1 July is not ours. I cannot celebrate this day, it is fake".*

Others disagree:

> *"But there has to be one moment where we say: we all stand up together. And that is 1 July. And I know it, Jessica. It is the date that was given to us by the colonial authorities. But you can go on like this indefinitely, and it will be the same in 20 years' time."*

These positions make clear that 'community' does not exist in and of itself, but it takes a conscious, political effort to build it. We will come back to this below.

But it gets more complicated. The date is also strongly associated with Suriname. The name Keti Koti (breaking the chains) is a Sranan Tongo term (Surinamese Creole). It has long been a day for reflection and celebration for African Surinamese people across the world, who often also know it as the Day of Emancipation, or Manspasi in Sranan Tongo. The celebration already started with the first student and workers associations for Surinamese people in the big cities. The oldest Surinamese association in the

Netherlands is the association Ons Suriname, founded in January 1919, which emerged from the Bond van Surinamers (Bosma 2009; Esajas and Krouwel 2024). While our Antillean participants do not necessarily reject the day, they also do not feel a strong sense of connection to it. They celebrate Dia di Tula, on 17 August, to commemorate Tula, the leader of one of the largest slave uprisings in the Caribbean in 1795.

Moreover, Keti Koti is not only associated with Suriname, but, more precisely, with Surinamese Creoles, that is those who were freed by Royal decree in 1863/1873. It is less important for the Surinamese Maroons who had freed themselves long before that date. Although our Maroon interlocutors did not necessarily reject the day, they also pointed out that since 1973 the different Maroon tribes both in the Netherlands and in Suriname have celebrated October 10, the day marking the signing of the first durable Peace Treaty between the Aukaner Maroons and the colonial regime in 1760.

Our interlocutors struggled with these questions. They all agreed that it is important to commemorate slavery, but they also felt that pouring all these different perspectives into the mold of the nation was problematic. Keti Koti's national character does not necessarily jeopardize the existence of other commemorative days, but its high profile also means that other days receive much less attention, and thus also – at least potentially – less political and societal recognition, as well as less government funding.

Our respondents also emphasized that even though they might disagree, they find it important to *respect* different positions. They recognized the need to be united, but at the same time to also respect different positions within this polity. These complexities reveal a dilemma at the core of the demand to recognize slavery as 'national' history. Such a focus on the national also tends towards a homogenization of memory under the banner of one national narrative, thus running the risk of glossing over the multiplicity and multivocality of memories. Might it be precisely the multiplicity of memory that undermines national narratives as a form of colonial legacy?

This also has implications for practicing co-creatively or collaboratively. The different, and to some extent conflicting Creole, Maroon, and Antillean perspectives on commemoration – often also within these categories – make references to a clearly circumscribed 'community' problematic. On the other hand, showcasing oppositional grass roots perspectives rather than unity runs the risk of undermining a political subjectivity that has proven crucial in pushing for change.

Territories of Slavery

Related to these ruminations about July 1st and Keti Koti was the question of ownership. The fact that Keti Koti is now strongly associated with Suriname and people of African-Surinamese descent is in large part due to the fact that the most successful initiatives to commemorate slavery in the public sphere originated from Surinamese grass roots organizations and activists (Esajas and Krouwel 2024; Stipriaan 2001). Virtually all public commemorations of slavery, from the earliest commemorations in the 1950s and 1960s to those on Surinameplein and later in Oosterpark, were Surinamese initiatives. Most of the political struggle to have slavery recognized officially as part of Dutch history came from African Surinamese organizations. In recent years, however, the question has come up whether and how other dimensions of the Dutch slavery past should be part of the narrative. For instance, the Dutch East India Company, too, engaged in enslaving people on a massive scale (Brandon et al. 2020). Some respondents argued that slavery in the 'East' should be included:

> *"To me, Keti Koti is already about slavery in the Indian Ocean. I mean, … slavery in the Indian Ocean is also about Africans. It's about South Africans, it's about East Africans. … It's about Africans who have been displaced by Europeans in Africa, but also about Africans who were brought to other parts, like Indonesia. That people know less about this is possible, but that history simply exists."*

This respondent argued for a multidirectional approach to memory (Rothberg 2009), where different memories support and gain from one another. Other respondents disagreed. They felt that because African Surinamese organizations had pioneered the political struggle for recognition, these groups should now bear the fruit of this labor (see also Jouwe 2020). They are not pleased about other claims to slavery. "*Where have they been when we needed them most*", is the feeling among some. One respondent said:

> *"Now everyone is being called up to talk about 'the comma'⁹: Indonesians, Javanese, Hindustani, Afros. Foul play. Foul play. It is about trans-Atlantic slavery. There were no Javanese there. There were no Chinese, Hindoestani, contract laborers. … So I say, a shared past? It is not a shared past. It is a Dutch past, and black people suffered from it."*

"Might it be precisely the multiplicity of memory that undermines national narratives as a form of colonial legacy?"

The position of strictly distinguishing slavery in the 'West' and in the 'East' might be seen as a re-territorialization of transnational memory (De Cesari and Rigney 2014). The formation of political subjectivity, as discussed above, seems to require a form of strategic essentialism that is tied to territorial claims. The claim, however, that Keti Koti should be about trans-Atlantic slavery alone did not imply that slavery in the 'East' should not be remembered, as this respondent argued:

> *"To me, Keti Koti refers to trans-Atlantic slavery. And I think that if we talk about slavery, the Eastern part should be made explicit, too, but on a different day or in a different framework. Why do we always want to throw everything on one pile? That is something the government always does."*

This assessment brings us to the heart of the matter. Co-creative projects are not somehow exempt from power relations, but right in the middle of them. In the case of the commemoration of slavery, not only the different layers of (local and national) government are involved, but also the multiple positions within a broader memory field often referred to as a 'community'. All of these actors have their own stakes in the commemoration of slavery. Ignoring this would not only misrepresent the complexity of these dynamics, but also amount to a new form of silencing multivocality in favor of a homogeneous narrative.

Although a decision was made to include slavery in the 'East' in the forthcoming slavery museum (Brandon 2024), – scheduled to open in 2030 – this does not mean that the underlying questions will cease to exist. The challenge for co-creative projects is to acknowledge oppositional positions without jeopardizing their political claims.

Afterlives

All of our respondents agreed that slavery continues to inform the present in a harmful way. One respondent pointedly said:

> *"I see these traces everywhere: in the way we think; in the convictions that we pass on to our children; they are in all kinds of systems that we use every day, from the educational system to the way we organize work and the health system. And the elections we had in 2023[10] show that a sense of superiority is still present, where one has more rights than the other."*

Respondents saw a link between slavery and racialized inequalities in the present. As they saw it, enslavement is a process in which human beings are dehumanized and turned into commodities. The massive scale of this practice and centuries of its duration imply that it was not the consequence of individual acts, but that it required a system encompassing not just a trans-Atlantic, proto-capitalist economy, but also a cultural system of beliefs and values justifying and supporting that practice. This has become ingrained in what Gloria Wekker, following Edward Said, has called a 'cultural archive' that continues to inform Dutch society today (Wekker 2016).

While all respondents felt that slavery continues to affect the present in a negative, or even devastating way, not all of them agreed that an exclusive focus on oppression should be the most important strategy to address this. One respondent said:

"Everything that goes even slightly wrong in the Afro-Surinamese community is being hooked up to that past. ... That does not mean that we should not take it seriously. But I think a few things do not add up."

For instance, this respondent disagreed with the idea that enslavement on the plantations has led to an aversion against agricultural labor among descendants, arguing that many freed people afterwards had bought the plantations they had been forced to work on during slavery. This respondent felt that the focus should be less on anti-racism, and more on the strength of the ancestors who, in spite of all odds, not only survived slavery, but were able to build highly resilient social, cultural and religious institutions. Importantly, he said, the word 'slave' never played a role in his upbringing:

"When my grandma talked about this period, and I also knew her sister, she was born in 1881, she died at an old age when I was twelve - they talked about our 'bigisma' (lit. big people, a respectful reference to older people and the deceased). Our ancestors. Never about 'slaves'. Our 'bigisma.'"

This respondent felt that although combating racism is important, an exclusive focus on racism disregards the strength these institutions can provide today. He points to the ancestors not only in terms of cultural pride, but also as a source of spiritual strength. After all, in the African-Surinames Winti religion, the ancestors are an important presence in many people's lives that can be appealed to in times of crisis.

References to the ancestors, however, can be risky. After centuries of demonization by the colonial regime, and in particular by the Protestant Church in Suriname (Pieterse and Stegeman 2025), Winti has a bad name especially among the older generations. Some see it as superstition at best, and as black magic and dangerous at worst, and many do not want to get involved. In spite of this rejection, there are frequent rituals, performed to seek strength and stability during significant and life-altering events, such as birth, illness, or death, as well as in times of major personal challenges. These rituals often include prayers, singing, dancing, the offering of sacrifices, and the solicitation of spiritual guidance from ancestors or respected members of the community. In such moments, spirituality assumes a central role. It supports both individuals and the community in finding inner peace, protection, and resilience, thereby fostering harmony on both a personal and collective level. Beyond these pivotal life events, spiritual devotion or connection to spiritual power also constitutes a daily practice for many. Most of our respondents agreed that the ancestors must play a crucial role in processes of healing.

In the exhibition we therefore involved a Winti priest, who helped us create a *begi* - an altar at which people could have a moment of contemplation or prayer. Considering the contested position of Winti among descendants, including an altar was a bold move. Religious expressions in the space of the secular state (in this case, City Hall) can be sensitive. Also, our choice for Winti, and not, for instance, the Curaçaoan Montamentu, might have been interpreted as privileging one religious tradition over another. Would the exhibition be rejected because of the presence of Winti?

The working group did reflect on this together and also consulted some of the respondents. We felt that going for the safe option would not do, but that these undercurrents needed to be approached head on. For us, co-creation is not about reaching for the safe option, but about bringing into relief 'agonistic pluralism' in a respectful way. In the end, we have not received any complaints about the *begi*, in fact, visitors told us that they were deeply moved by it.

Conclusion

In this essay we discussed a co-creative exhibition on the commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, named *Herdenken en Helen*. Thinking and writing about this project we came to the realization that co-creative projects tend to be framed in a way that shies away from what we call the undercurrents. Yet it is precisely within these undercurrents that we see the opportunities for coming together *while* sustaining the differences and discomfort. In

particular, we found that the term 'community' – an often used term when speaking about co-creation – does not capture the multiplicity, and indeed sometimes oppositionality of positions in the memory field around the Dutch slavery past. Also, an emphasis on 'empowerment', another central term in co-creation theory, is not sufficiently equipped to describe the intricate, capillary, and shifting relations of power and authority involved in commemorating slavery. What we found was that multivocality can be harmonious, but can just as often be dissonant and jarring. We believe that co-creative projects are more likely to fail in their aim for multivocality if they do not allow these undercurrents the space they need.

In the exhibition we tried to let the different perspectives speak for themselves, without trying to resolve oppositional views into the homogenizing narrative of community or nation. In this way we hope to have contributed to developing a sense for what we call the undercurrents of co-creation: an 'agonistic pluralism' that undergirds all co-creative projects, precisely because they are embedded in existing social relations.

The undercurrents of co-creation pose a challenge, but also an opportunity: undercurrents generate movement and dynamism. They are the motor of innovation. Co-creative projects who ignore these undercurrents do so at their own peril, risking failure at best, and reproducing power relations at worst.

"Co-creative projects are not somehow exempt from power relations, but right in the middle of them."

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Endnotes

1   glam.ox.ac.uk/co-creation-of-content

2   For instance: European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe 2000; Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, UNESCO 2001; Faro Convention, Council of Europe 2005; Fribourg Declaration, UNESCO 2007.

3   For instance in the toolkit developed by the Amsterdam Museum: amsterdammuseum.nl/publicaties/publications/5195

4   Tula was a leader of the 1795 slave revolt in Curaçao, fighting against Dutch colonial slavery. Though the uprising was defeated and Tula was captured and executed, he became a symbol of resistance and the fight for freedom. His legacy continues to

inspire movements for justice. Anton de Kom (1898-1945) was a Surinamese-Dutch writer and activist, renowned for his book Wij slaven van Suriname (1934), in which he described the horrors of slavery in Suriname.

He opposed colonialism and racism, both in Suriname and in the Netherlands. During World War II, he joined the resistance but was arrested by the Nazis in 1944 and died in 1945. De Kom is included in the Dutch Canon of History as a significant figure in the struggle against oppression and for equality.

5   rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ toespraken/2022/12/19/toespraak-minister-president-rutte-over-het-slavernijverleden, accessed 19 February 2025. See also (Esajas and Krouwel 2024, 485), who point out that the metaphor of the comma was originally introduced by Serana Angelista.

6   Focused life story interviews seek to embed specific themes or periods of a respondent's life in their biography as a whole (Atkinson 1998).

7   Participants were selected through the researchers' networks, established through their decades of engagement with the commemoration of slavery. We sought to include both prominent pioneers as well as people whose involvement was more recent. Next to people of African-Caribbean descent, participants also included people of Surinamese-indigenous and Hindostani descent.

8   We use the terms 'Antillean', 'Surinamese', 'African Surinamese', 'Maroon', 'Surinamese-indigenous (inheems)' and 'Javanese-Surinamese' because they are self-identifications by our interlocutors.

9   In reference to the metaphor the Prime Minister used in his apologies, described above.

10 In the 2023 elections the right-wing populist Freedom Party became the largest party in the Dutch Parliament after having campaigned for 'the strictest asylum policy ever'.

Becoming 'Good Neighbors': Co-Creating Spaces for Interspecies Hospitality in Urban Encounters

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Abstract

Cities are diverse ecosystems, inhabited by various life forms that interact, share each other's space, and co-create urban life. This essay is an attempt to learn about the conjuncture of interspecies reciprocity, hospitality, gift-giving practices, and the co-creation of urban spaces, while focusing on the potential for and complexity of neighborly relationships between humans and plants. Borrowing the concept of the 'good neighbor' from Robin Wall Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass, it considers the conditions under which relationships based on care and responsibility can thrive through 'circular reciprocity'. Sites for close interspecies encounters, like urban foraging practices and community gardens, show the potential of a caring and attentive striving toward neighborliness but also reveal the multiplicity and ambiguity of what can be considered different, sometimes irreconcilable, interests and needs of various urban dwellers. Nevertheless, this essay argues that the practice of becoming 'good neighbors' ultimately benefits both humans and plants.

*"What if you were a teacher but had no voice to speak your
knowledge? What if you had no language at all and yet
there was something you need to say? Wouldn't you dance
it? Wouldn't you act it out? Wouldn't your every movement
tell the story? In time you would become so eloquent that just
to gaze upon you would reveal it all. And so it is with these
silent green lives". (Robin Wall Kimmerer 2020, 128-9)*

Introduction

Growing up in a small village in Southern Germany, I was constantly sur-
rounded by sloping grass-covered hillsides and small woodlands with mossy
grounds that seemed to swallow all noise. When I first moved to a city, I
began searching for spaces that offered similar experiences. Luckily, this is
not as difficult as I expected. Currently, I live in Amsterdam and encounter
plant life every day, all around me. From the city's many parks and elegant
elm trees lining the canals – which are not only characteristic of the city's
landscape but serve the practical function of strengthening the swampy soil
along the waterways with their roots (Bons 2018; Los 2018; van Steenberg
et al. 2021) – to weeds finding their way through cracks in the pavement,
plants share urban spaces with us humans.

Indeed, urban spaces are diverse ecosystems populated by many dif-
ferent lifeforms that interact and co-create urban life.1 Co-creation, in this
context, refers to spaces and processes of collaboration and encounters be-
tween humans and plants within urban environments. It is about shaping
the city through practices of reciprocity that benefit each other's flourishing
and enable humans and plants to thrive. However, co-creation in interspe-
cies encounters is not always a seamless collaborative process with a shared
goal. Instead, it is often characterized by conflicting and even irreconcilable
goals and agencies, so co-creation happens with some degree of judgment
and exclusion.

Within this essay, I will primarily focus on Amsterdam, but refer to oth-
er spatial contexts to illustrate the diversity and complexity of multispecies
co-creation. I will closely examine some of the existing spaces for multispe-
cies co-creation, the dynamics between humans and plant life that occur
within them, and consider the potential to enhance our urban environments
to benefit many inhabitants through attentiveness and care. Therefore, the
following essay will grapple with how we can become 'good neighbors' with
urban plants and co-create spaces for interspecies hospitality in our cities.
I will conduct close readings of foraging practices and community garden
projects, and consider how we co-create our cities in multispecies encounters.

My theoretical framework draws from a variety of fields and disciplinary traditions, including Indigenous epistemes. Therefore, it is crucial to note that while my analysis heavily relies on concepts coined by Indigenous theorists such as Rauna Kuokkanen and Robin Wall Kimmerer regarding gift-giving, hospitality, and neighborliness, this is not a lived experience I share. At this point, it is important to stress that being 'Indigenous' is not a monolith, and I am aware of the potential to be reductive when using this term. I do not seek to generalize or homogenize experiences and epistemes of different Indigenous groups within my analysis. However, there seem to be certain overlapping tendencies between different Indigenous worldviews. For instance, Kuokkanen suggests that they are generally more focused on a holistic view of the "*human relationship* with *the world*" (Kuokkanen 2006, 255) than Western philosophical conventions. In this context, she mentions the expression 'all my relations' as used by many North American Indigenous peoples, which highlights a focus on "*kinship and interdependence with the world and all life forms*" (Kuokkanen 2006, 255)2.

Additionally, Indigenous people worldwide remain in a lingering colonial situation and are largely not self-determined (Kuokkanen 2006), which makes it especially crucial not to romanticize or simplify their paradigms. Furthermore, Kuokkanen notes that "*Indigenous epistemologies consider the knower as situated in his or her community and knowledge as rooted in and stemming from a specific location*" (Kuokkanen 2006, 254). As described by Édouard Glissant, it is essential to consider the right for 'opacity' in cross-cultural encounters (Glissant 1997) and recognize that one can never fully know the perspective of an 'Other'. Consequently, as a non-Indigenous researcher working within Western urban environments, I do not claim a complete understanding of these concepts or the completeness of my analysis. Instead, this essay attempts to think with concepts like Wall Kimmerer's 'good neighbor' and 'gift economy,' as well as Kuokkanen's conceptualizations of gift-giving and hospitality, to gain insights into how urban spaces are co-created by humans and plants, and the potentialities for making cities into places of multispecies flourishing. I approach these questions from a place of learning and critical reflection, aiming to engage respectfully with Indigenous scholarship while acknowledging the limitations of my standpoint. Throughout this essay, I will sometimes refer to a 'we' that has to strive toward becoming good neighbors – with this, I aim to speak to all readers of this essay, in particular those living in Western urban environments and craving a deeper relationship with the space they inhabit and the plants that share it with them.

Becoming 'Good Neighbors'

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, originally published in 2013, Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that Indigenous knowledge and scientific perspectives are complementary, and that an abundance of knowledge is revealed to us if we listen to plants as our teachers. A fascinating plant teaching pertinent to the co-creation of any ecosystem is the concept of the 'good neighbor', or more precisely, the process of *becoming* a 'good neighbor'.

Wall Kimmerer introduces this term when she describes the immigration story of broadleaf plantains, also known as *Plantago major* or *White Man's Footstep*. The plant is native to Europe but was brought to North America by European settlers and naturalized there over time (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 213 ff.). It is not an Indigenous plant, but it is often considered native as it fits well into the preexisting ecosystem and possesses many healing qualities, without harming the surrounding plants (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 214). According to Wall Kimmerer, the story of this plant can teach us that by giving freely and slowly building trust and relationships, one *becomes* a 'good neighbor' and valued member of a community or ecosystem.

Being a 'good neighbor' and co-creator is about reciprocity, but not necessarily in the form of binary exchange. In her book *The Serviceberry* (2024), Wall Kimmerer describes reciprocity as a currency within a 'gift economy', not as a direct form of payment but rather as something that "*keep[s] the gift in motion*" (Wall Kimmerer 2024, 14). This can be described as a 'circular reciprocity' – one is not giving to receive a direct counter-gift, but to acknowledge and affirm relationships and being "*attuned to the world beyond oneself*" (Kuokkanen 2007, 39). 'Circular reciprocity' can be considered a way of being attentive and caring for each other to foster reciprocal relationships. Thus, being a 'good neighbor' to urban plant life involves acknowledging the role humans play within a city's ecosystem and taking responsibility for one another.

One central aspect of such 'circular reciprocity' is the concept of 'care'. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Wall Kimmerer describes the usually unwritten rules of the 'Honorable Harvest', an "*indigenous canon of principles and practices that govern the exchange of life for life*" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 180), and begins with: "*Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them*" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 183). This notion of 'care' implies a certain intimacy that comes with knowing the other's needs. There is no step-by-step guide on how to 'take care of those who take care of us' – instead, we need to find the most suitable mode of 'caring' by paying attention to the needs of our neighbors.3 The particular context of our encounter can require our 'care' to take on different shapes, which might

"No one had to teach them how to care for the strawberries; they learned by closely observing the plants after the initial gift sparked their interest."

change over time, but the first step is to establish conditions in which we can strive toward such 'care' and 'attentiveness'.

Therefore, I will borrow Wall Kimmerer's concept of the 'good neighbor' to consider the conditions under which relationships based on care and responsibility can thrive between humans and their environments, particularly between humans and plants within urban ecosystems. Akin to a gift, which can be understood as a token of responsibility for fostering an ongoing relationship (Wall Kimmerer 2020), successful relationship-building and co-creation of hospitable environments is not an unconditional practice but a mutually beneficial investment in one's relationships with others.

Theory of the Gift

The relationship-building potential of gifts is beautifully illustrated through an anecdote on strawberries shared by Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She describes how her siblings and she found strawberries in a field, like "*gifts from the earth*" (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 24). After strawberry season was over, they observed the plants sending out runners over the field to create new plants (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 25). This observation inspired them to clear small areas of ground for the runners, which resulted in more strawberry plants the following year (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 25). No one had to teach them how to care for the strawberries; they learned by closely observing the plants after the initial gift sparked their interest (Wall Kimmerer 2020, 25). With this, a 'circular reciprocity' of gift-giving and attentive care was born.4

Gift-giving is a much-theorized cultural phenomenon. In his influential text *Essai sur le don* [translation: '*The Gift*'], first published in 1925, French anthropologist Marcel Mauss describes the existence of gift exchanges in various traditional societies5 (Mauss 1954). While they seem voluntary, they are usually steeped in social obligations of reciprocity, through which social ties are created and maintained (Mauss 1954). Furthermore, Mauss notes that an object given as a gift carries a part of the giver's essence, which generates enduring bonds between the giver and recipient (Mauss 1954). Through this relationship-building capacity of gifts and counter-gifts, one can consider mutual gift-giving a form of co-creation. However, Mauss' theory is limited by its focus on human-to-human interactions as well as the implied power dynamics in which gift exchanges happen.

Precisely these power dynamics and bonds are seen rather negatively by French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida. In *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, he argues that for a gift to be genuine, it cannot involve

any reciprocity or even recognition as a gift by either the giver or recipient (Derrida 1992). As soon as a gift is recognized as such by the recipient, this recognition turns into a 'symbolic equivalent' (Derrida 1992). The gift-giving process becomes an exchange in which the gift-giver desires something, such as recognition or even gratitude, which contradicts the genuine nature of the gift (Derrida 1992). For Derrida, the gift is a paradox never truly outside the bounds of social structures and expectations6.

However, Derrida's perspective on the coercion exerted through the power structures in which gift-giving necessarily takes place is understood as limiting by French sociologist Alain Caillé7. He suggests that a gift can have ambivalent and plural motives, ranging from generous to self-interested (Caillé 2018). For Caillé, gifts and counter-gifts are at the core of society, exceeding the economic dimension and functioning instead as 'political operators' that produce social relations (Caillé 2018). With this, Caillé expands Mauss's perspective beyond the social obligation of the counter-gift and critiques Derrida's exploration of the gift as removed from lived reality.

Drawing from the work of US-American feminist philosopher Genevieve Vaughan8, Sámi researcher and Professor for Arctic Indigenous Politics Rauna Kuokkanen describes gift-giving practices in terms of two co-existing paradigms: a 'gift model' and an 'exchange model' (Kuokkanen 2006, 257)9. While the gift model is 'other-oriented', the exchange model relies on a 'double gift', where the recipient is expected to give back something of equal or comparable value to the person from whom they have received a gift (Kuokkanen 2006). In contrast to Derrida, Kuokkanen sees a possibility for a genuine gift within an 'other-oriented' gift model. Further, Kuokkanen contrasts the Western understanding of gift-giving practices with the perspective of an Indigenous 'gift logic' (Kuokkanen 2007). She argues, that in Indigenous epistemes the 'logic of the gift' transcends a mere exchange: a genuine gift might be impossible within a Western logic with its economic bias, but it is conceivable within an Indigenous understanding of the gift, which centers reciprocity and responsibility 'toward all others' (Kuokkanen 2007).

While there are many variations in both Western and Indigenous theories on gift-giving, the idea of transcending an 'exchange model' in favor of a more relational understanding of the concept opens doors toward becoming a 'good neighbor'. Indeed, the responsibilities and relationships crafted by such a perspective on gift-giving are often rewarded with benefits that exceed simple bilateral exchanges. Instead, they create lasting systems of mutual care and continuous sharing (Wall Kimmerer 2020). Of

course, this does not mean that plants care for humans in the same way humans care for them or each other, but they act as 'good neighbors' to us, contributing to the urban ecosystem they inhabit according to their capabilities.

Hospitality in Multispecies Encounters

Cities are 'contact zones' as described by US-American linguist and literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt – spaces where "*cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power*" (Pratt 1991, 34). In the case of urban green spaces, 'cultures' can be broadened to species. Humans, animals, and plants come with their needs, desires, and unique qualities, sharing space and shaping it according to their realms of influence.

Such spaces can also be described as 'borderlands', a term coined by Mexican American cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. According to Anzaldúa, 'borderlands' are dynamic zones of transition and cultural exchange that challenge established boundaries (Anzaldúa 1987). Despite writing about migration within the geographic context of the US-Mexican border, Anzaldúa's ideas can be applied broadly to any boundary at which such change and transition occur. In this way, urban green spaces are places of contestation, where the agencies of all involved co-habitants are tested, and those not deemed as full agents – in our animal, and particularly human-centered worldview, that is usually plants and inanimate objects – are relegated to a liminal position, a limbo, a perpetual 'guest-ness'.

Urban green spaces offer many possibilities for interspecies hospitality. Yet, the distinction between 'host' and 'guest' can be muddied. As described by Derrida from a Western deconstructionist perspective, hospitality is a complex and paradoxical term. On the one hand, only unconditional hospitality is 'true hospitality'; on the other hand, hospitality within exchange economies is usually conditional, and the 'host' is in control of the threshold that the 'guest' might cross temporarily (Derrida 1999). Applying this to urban green spaces would mean that the 'host' holds the ultimate power while allowing the 'guest' marginal and temporally limited access to their space. He argues that to achieve true, unconditional hospitality, there must be a willingness to surrender control when allowing a guest into one's space because "*if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house […] there is no hospitality*" (Derrida 1999, 70-1).

The case of invasive species emphasizes the challenges of such a 'true hospitality'. For instance, *Cryptostegia grandiflora*, commonly known as rubber

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vine, is originally from Madagascar but has been brought to Australia for its use in rubber production (Head et al. 2015). It was introduced in 1875 and has since naturalized as an invasive species due to its great adaptability, spatial mobility, and capacity to influence the behavior of other plants and animals in the ecosystem (Head et al. 2015). However, its dense growth habits threaten the biodiversity of native ecosystems (Head et al. 2015). This ecological imbalance exemplifies the impossibility of extending unconditional hospitality as described by Derrida.

Based on Derrida's treatment of hospitality, Kuokkanen stresses in her book *Reshaping the University* (2007)10 that being a "*good host implies […] a commitment to responsibility […] [and] infinite openness toward the other*" (Kuokkanen 2007, 3). With Kuokkanen's 'gift logic' in mind, it becomes clear that hospitality and openness toward an 'Other' is more an invitation to take space and shape one's surroundings through giving and taking according to one's capabilities and needs rather than a strict binary expression of power. Hospitality is then about recognizing and welcoming relations that can be reciprocal and life-sustaining. However, as demonstrated by the example of invasive species like rubber vine, what can be considered 'life-sustaining' is not universal. Instead, rubber vine is both ecologically destructive and economically beneficial, highlighting that the values of humans, such as urban planners, play a crucial role in deciding which lives are sustained and which are not.

Despite the undeniable importance of human values in urban co-creation, it is important to problematize the opposition of humans and plants in 'contact zones' and 'borderlands'. Indeed, highlighting such power dynamics risks reinforcing a dichotomy of plants and humans as separate rather than co-creators. The 'contact zones' and 'borderlands' within which human-plant encounters happen are shaped by the complex and fluid entanglements between different species. Both exert mutual influence in shared environments. While plants are often seen as passive elements within these entanglements, they have agency, unique qualities, growth patterns, and resilience that make them active participants of their ecosystems (Ryan 2012, 102 ff.). For instance, plants possess phytochemicals, which are hypothesized to act as a defense mechanism against diseases and predators (Molyneux et al. 2007, 2974). These bioactive compounds are a central aspect of how plants interact with and shape their environments, challenging human-centered understandings of agency. That is to say, plants are different from humans. Instead of anthropomorphizing them, humans might learn more about plants through curiosity and attunement to how they express their needs and interact with their 'neighbors'. However, our

perspective will always be shaped to some degree by our situatedness as humans, so attempts toward interspecies hospitality, neighborliness, and 'circular reciprocity' will be a striving and practice rather than a finished project.

Therefore, any attempt to understand the co-creation of our cities should include the contributions of more-than-human actors, such as plants, in the creation and maintenance of urban ecosystems. When shifting the focus of interspecies hospitality away from power and toward openness, we, as Western urbanites, might heighten our receptiveness to lessons on neighborliness from unexpected agents. Nevertheless, interspecies hospitality in urban spaces is always mediated by the cultural imaginaries and ecological knowledge of the city's human inhabitants. While some might consider a plant a weed, others can understand it as a remedy, food, resource, or valued neighbor. This plurality in perceptions and interests highlights the political dimension of interspecies co-creation. It matters whose knowledge and needs are considered in deciding which life forms are welcomed in the city11.

Urban Foraging

On a sunny day in April, I joined a guided foraging walk in *Park Frankendael* in Amsterdam. It was organized by *Urban Herbology*, which offers foraging walks, workshops, and courses to "*inspire individuals to cultivate a deeper connection with their local environment, using herbs as a gateway to better health, well-being, and environmental stewardship*" (Urban Herbology).

On the most basic level, urban foraging is about finding food that grows in the city, including herbs, flowers, roots, and nuts. It is also a practice of noticing and being attentive to the plants co-habiting urban spaces with us. As described by Field philosopher Thom van Dooren from the Australian University of Sydney, 'attentiveness' is "*both a practice of getting to know another in their intimate particularity [...] and [...] a practice of learning how one might [...] cultivate worlds of mutual flourishing*" (Van Dooren et al. 2016, 17). It is a way to get to know the ecosystem one inhabits and appreciate the deeply entangled web of life.

As a group of seven, we embarked on a journey of attentiveness. While taking a gentle-paced walk through the park, we stopped every few meters to pay close attention to the different edible plants we encountered. We looked at them, felt them, smelled them, and – sometimes – tasted them. We ate fresh magnolia leaves that we caught as they fell from the trees, rubbed different plants between our fingers to recognize their scents, and

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carefully plucked ramson leaves to take home with us. Our guide made sure to emphasize the importance of not damaging the plants and never taking too much from a plant or spot.

Next to the historical *Huize Frankendael*, there are some foraging gardens filled to the brim with edible plants growing in a magnificent, organized chaos. They are *care*fully maintained, adapting and responding to the needs of the plants they house. While sitting on the ground of one such foraging garden, sharing crackers with ramson pesto and teas from foraged herbs, it was easy to romanticize a life in reciprocal harmony with urban nature. However, without the guidance of an experienced herbalist, the skills required for urban foraging can be daunting. Indeed, an intimate knowledge of the local and seasonal vegetation is necessary to avoid potentially poisonous plants. For example, our guide advised beginners to avoid foraging any plants from the *Apiaceae* family, which includes wild carrots, but also poison hemlock. As they are from the same family, they share many visual characteristics, such as fern-like leaves and white, clustered flowers.

Despite its risks, urban foraging is growing in popularity among Western urban dwellers. One example of this is *Edible Alchemy*. On their *Instagram* page, *ediblealchemy.co*, they offer accessible education on foraging and fermentation to more than two hundred thousand followers. The company was founded in Canada in 2012 to teach people about food fermentation and preservation. In their second branch in Berlin, they offer in-person and online workshops at the intersection of sustainable food, fermentation, and digestive health (Edible Alchemy). When following social media accounts and blogs like *Edible Alchemy*, or even participating in a local foraging walk, it becomes clear that urban foraging can help urban dwellers develop deeper relationships with the food they consume. Indeed, the city can become like an open pantry12.

However, the knowledge required to determine which plants are safe for consumption goes beyond correctly identifying edible plant species. It also includes avoiding plants found near litter and busy roads, as well as being aware of the soil quality in the area where they are found. In Amsterdam, the soil in many neighborhoods contains lead from past and present industrial use (City of Amsterdam). In these contaminated areas, it is not recommended to eat plants grown directly in the ground, but rather those grown in separate containers filled with clean soil (City of Amsterdam). The municipality provides maps on which one can check the expected lead contamination by postcode (City of Amsterdam). This means that a responsible urban forager has to have a detailed understanding of not only the plants they plan to gather, but also the past and present specificities of

the location in which they are active. Becoming a 'good neighbor' can be demanding, as it requires the knowledge and skills necessary for a meaningful engagement with the ecosystems one inhabits.

Through urban foraging, human city dwellers can enjoy the gifts plants provide. In turn, these plants can benefit from plant-friendly urban planning, such as the foraging gardens in *Park Frankendael*. Ideally, the exchange of gifts in urban foraging practices is beneficial to all involved – an example of 'circular reciprocity'. The food harvested by urban foragers can be considered a gift that creates lasting bonds between humans and plants (Caillé 2018; Mauss 1954). Subsequently, experienced foraging guides can take on a valuable mediating role between plants and city planners, as they often have a detailed and intimate knowledge of plants and the urban environments in which they grow. This way, we can circumvent the asymmetrical power dynamics that can appear in multispecies hospitalities (Derrida 1999) and allow spaces for co-creation and mutual care.

Indeed, practices like urban foraging, which schools the capacity for noticing the non-human city dwellers that share our urban ecosystems with us, we as Western urban dwellers can become aware of the "*infinite web of relationships*" (Kuokkanen 2004, 71) that lies at the core of Kuokkanen's 'logic of the gift'. As described by Wall Kimmerer in *The Serviceberry*, "*all flourishing is mutual*" (Wall Kimmerer 2024, 33). If we take only what we need and in a manner that does not harm the plant, there is a good chance that it will continue to care for us in return.

Community Gardens

More clearly demarcated spaces for urban multispecies encounters of care and 'circular reciprocity' can be found in community gardens. Indeed, an increase in community gardens and similar initiatives correlates with increased well-being and longevity in the respective urban neighborhoods (Galle 2024). Both human gardeners and the plants populating a garden contribute to the local community and urban ecosystem. To keep a community garden running, a group of volunteers has to consistently show up and care for the garden, which will then reward them with a bountiful harvest. It is not a direct exchange, an hour of labor for an apple, but a continuous commitment to cultivating the garden. This responsibility and the resulting benefits can be shared among different members of a community according to their abilities and needs. Ultimately, community gardens teach urban dwellers that being a 'good neighbor' is the continuous commitment to caring for other human and non-human community members, fostering tight bonds and mutual flourishing.

One example of a community-run garden project is the *Voedseltuin IJplein* in Amsterdam Noord. It was founded in 2014 and is maintained by local volunteers (Voedseltuin IJplein). The yield in vegetables and herbs is shared between the contributing volunteers and donated to local food banks. The garden serves as a low-threshold meeting place and a means to support community members in need through food donations.

This illustrates how relationships between different urban dwellers are fostered through the exchange of gifts. Through the gift of cultivating the soil in which plants grow, gardeners are subsequently rewarded with nourishment that they can then gift to others. Relationships are built and nurtured through mutual gift-giving and care. Not everyone within such a local network or community has to contribute something of equal value for the 'circular reciprocity' to function as long as the gift is kept in motion (Wall Kimmerer 2024).

Additionally, community gardens offer a space for encounters between humans, plants, and even urban wildlife. This makes them 'contact zones' and 'borderlands'. Gardens are spaces co-created by a variety of species that all bring their qualities, desires, and limitations. Further, they are where the demarcations and influences between different species are negotiated. However, while, for instance, sowing and harvesting times are determined by the needs and characteristics of the plants in a garden, the decision for which plants are deemed worthy to occupy the beds is usually made by humans.

A slightly different approach to community gardening can be found in the foraging gardens next to *Huize Frankendael*. While they are still gardens with an element of planning and cultivation, they are populated by many plants that are commonly considered 'weeds' by gardeners, such as stinging nettles. Additionally, they are not planted in neat rows organized by kind, but grow according to their preferences. This makes the foraging gardens excellent spaces for observing plants and learning from them.

For instance, cleavers can be found among stinging nettles, using them as ladders to grow. This might appear one-sided, as the stinging nettles do not receive any immediate support in return. Yet, they are also not negatively affected by the cleavers and can indirectly benefit from the enhanced biodiversity in the ecosystem. This observation teaches us humans that being a 'good neighbor' does not mean self-sacrifice to care for the 'Other'. In many ways, our plant teachers appear very eager to focus on their benefit. However, the health of the overall ecosystem and the web of relationships is still a precondition for their thriving. Similarly, wild strawberries have been planted in the foraging garden with the objective

of caring for the plant. Yet, this care is not selfless, but motivated by the promise of sweet, red gifts to be found in the future. The *care*ful attention provided for them is a 'gift', but it is also an investment in a mutually beneficial relationship.

These observations raise the question of power dynamics again. Despite all efforts to consider the needs and characteristics of plants, community garden projects seem to serve primarily human interests, such as food production and fostering social relations. However, compromises with plant- and other non-human agents can be found in small but meaningful ways, for instance, through embracing 'weeds', allowing polycultures, and planting with pollinators in mind. The example of the foraging garden demonstrates that it is possible to strive toward gardens that provide for both human and more-than-human needs. Through the *care*ful attention to the needs and gifts of plants cultivated by gardeners, they can take on an essential mediating role between plant and human interests within the context of urban planning.

Neighbors and Co-Creation

Following the lessons of urban foraging and community gardens, it becomes clear that being a 'good neighbor' is about finding one's space in an ecosystem and contributing to its co-creation through attention and care (Wall Kimmerer 2020). Additionally, urban planning that prioritizes the well-being of plants also directly benefits human well-being (Galle 2024). According to Dutch-Canadian ecological engineer Nadina Galle, trees and other plants impact the microclimate of a city by reducing the surrounding temperature, providing shade, and releasing moisture into the air (Galle 2024, 51). Considering the increase in heatwaves expected in the coming years (Galle 2024), prioritizing the needs of plants in urban planning is a valuable strategy for creating more livable urban futures.

Yet, while the ideal of urban co-creation and neighborliness emphasizes a harmonious balance between human and plant interests, what is 'good' for one might not always be 'good' for the other. For example, while humans often prefer parks with regularly mowed lawns for picnics and games, many plants would thrive in a biodiverse environment with dense undergrowth. Of course, there are opportunities for compromise that can be negotiated between human and non-human actors, such as dedicating different areas of a park to center the needs of either plants or humans. Becoming 'good neighbors' and reconciling different 'goods' requires us to embrace multiplicity and ambiguity. Even among human city dwellers and between plants, conflicting interests are at play. While it is not possible to

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discard our human perspective, through paying close attention to our plant neighbors, we can come closer to understanding what is 'good' for each other.

Urban green spaces, such as parks, community gardens, or street trees, are 'contact zones' and 'borderlands' that are contested and co-created by both human and non-human actors. Nevertheless, not all such spaces offer the same conditions for urban co-creation and reciprocity. Indeed, the path to *becoming* a 'good neighbor' is not a template that can be copied, but a practice that has to grow through the careful attention to the intricate entanglements of beings in any particular place. Indeed, 'place' and its 'trans-local'13 entanglements are a central factor for urban multispecies co-creation. For instance, while community gardens are frequently spaces for collaboration between both human and non-human actors, botanical gardens have a history rooted in Western colonial expansion, resource extraction, and a desire to catalogue and control nature (Blais 2022; Center for Plants and Culture). While this history does not necessarily minimize present-day potentials for plant agency, many botanical gardens are still meticulously maintained and curated. Plants are often perceived as specimens and objects rather than collaborators (Center for Plants and Culture). However, plants are not humans, and they being perceived as objects does not necessarily diminish their potential to exert agency through, for instance, growth patterns, phytochemicals, and root networks.

No matter how attentive we humans are to our plant teachers, we are unable to leave our human perspective behind. Plants perceive and shape the world differently from humans, and there will always be a level of 'opacity' in our relationships (Glissant 1997). Nevertheless, by learning the language of the plants that surround us, we can attempt to be an interpreter for their needs and perspectives. While this carries the risk of projecting human ideas and values onto plants, it also offers the chance to develop multispecies care. A first step in this direction could be the resolve to become 'good neighbors' to our plant co-habitants by paying attention to the lessons they are teaching us.

Furthermore, urban planners could greatly benefit from seeking advice from humans who have already cultivated close relationships with plants, such as foragers and gardeners. While every possible mediation is situated and influenced by the experts' individual experiences, needs, and cultural knowledge, they are often the closest many Western cities can currently come to giving our plant neighbors a seat at the table when deciding how to shape urban ecosystems.

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Conclusion

To conclude, some urban dwellers already successfully co-create spaces along and beyond interspecies boundaries, such as urban foragers and community gardeners. These examples illustrate that becoming a 'good neighbor' is a mutually beneficial striving. Furthermore, they reveal the great potential of a deeper engagement with the lessons urban plant life can teach us.

Becoming a 'good neighbor' involves building reciprocal relationships with those who share a space or ecosystem with us. It is a process of freely giving and partaking in 'circular reciprocity' through which we, Western urban dwellers, can eventually co-create the spaces we inhabit with the human and non-human beings around us. This form of complex and multilateral reciprocity relies closely on gift-giving and interspecies hospitality. This can be partially observed in so-called 'contact zones' and 'borderlands', but is ultimately found beyond asymmetrical power dynamics and when we take a step back from human concepts of consciousness and involvement toward considering the world as a complex web of entanglements between beings. One example of becoming 'good neighbors' with urban plant life is urban foraging. As this form of food procurement requires high levels of attention to and intimacy with the plant life present in urban environments, it can be a way to create and foster mutually reciprocal relationships in multispecies encounters. Similarly, community gardens offer a space where urban co-creation between humans and plants is already practiced. Through mutual care and gift-giving, a system of 'circular reciprocity' is created that contributes to the well-being of urban communities.

Consequently, successful co-creation of urban spaces will result in mutual flourishing and tight, more-than-human community bonds. Becoming 'good neighbors' with urban plants requires humans to pay close attention to plants' teachings and foster relationships with them, which includes finding a sustainable balance between receiving and giving gifts like care, attention, and nourishment. Despite all this, interspecies co-creation will never be able to do justice to the interests of all living beings. Instead, there is always a level of exclusion based on ecological function, economic use, and cultural perception, as not all goals and needs can be reconciled.

In addition to being aware of the power dynamics underlying such exclusions, urban planners and policymakers could greatly benefit from listening to our plant teachers and keeping the goal of *becoming* 'good neighbors' at the forefront of their decision-making. Perhaps we can eventually move toward a future in which a portion of the power currently held by human urban planners is shared with our plant neighbors. Until then,

human experts, such as gardeners and foragers, can bridge the gap between plant teachings and human understanding. Cities can be – and already are – spaces for interspecies encounters and relationship building. Enhancing these qualities can lead to more livable, sustainable, and flourishing environments for everyone sharing this space.

"Indeed, the path to *becoming* a 'good neighbor' is not a template that can be copied, but a practice that has to grow through the careful attention to the intricate entanglements of beings in any particular place."

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Endnotes

1   Contrasting the urban-nature divides in the popular Western imagination, urban ecosystems that developed in reaction to their human population are more biodiverse today than in the 19th century (Galle 2024). Indeed, a growing awareness of public health and the risks associated with water and air pollution has made many contemporary cities hubs of innovation that benefit both the plants and humans inhabiting urban spaces (Galle 2024).

2   Kuokkanen explores this philosophy in connection to the land on which Indigenous people live. Consequently, such teachings cannot always be seamlessly applied to different contexts.

3   While my essay focuses more on the general conditions under which reciprocal relationships that center care can thrive in urban ecosystems, it is important to acknowledge that care emerges in practice, is always situated, and is not a general condition that just exists once established. Regarding the situated practice of care, I recommend the article by Carolina Domínguez-Guzmán and others, 'Caring for water in Northern Peru: On fragile infrastructures and the diverse work involved in irrigation'.

4   In his book *The Wake of Crows* (2019), the field philosopher Thom Van Dooren describes another example of interspecies gift-giving. In 2015, a story of a young girl feeding a group of crows in her backyard in Seattle and being rewarded by these crows with 'gifts', such as buttons or *Lego* pieces, was reported by the *BBC* and touched many people (Van Dooren 2019, 173). While humans cannot fully grasp the motivations behind non-human givers like crows or even plants, the media attention for the crows of Seattle demonstrates a desire for an "*engaged, mindful, reciprocal 'connection' with a more-than-human world*" (Van Dooren 2019, 176).

5   *Essai sur le don* is an ethnographical and comparative text focusing on gift-giving practices in different societies, mostly Indigenous societies of the Pacific Northwest, and the 'potlach', a gift-giving feast where gifts and wealth are exchanged and destroyed for social, economic, and political reasons.

6   In *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Derrida attempts to deconstruct the gift through an analysis of French writer Charles Baudelaire's *Counterfeit Money*. In his analysis, Derrida refers to, among others, German philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Time and Being*, Mauss's *Essai sur le don*, and essays by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and French linguist Émile Benveniste.

7   This text is a response to and a dialogue with previous texts on gift-giving in a notably French tradition. Caillé is writing in response to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Anthropologie économique. Cours au Collège de France, 1992–1993*, who is referring to Derrida, who is referring to Mauss.

8   Vaughan is critical of the monetization of the gift within a capitalistic and patriarchal system. She writes about a gift economy centered around mothering.

9   Writing from an Indigenous, feminist, and decolonial perspective, Kuokkanen presents her conceptualization of the 'gift' in contrast to the dominant Western exchange economy. Her work is in dialogue with an understanding of the 'gift' as developed by Mauss, Derrida, and Caillé within this conceptual lineage.

10 In *Reshaping the University*, Kuokkanen argues that Western universities are not truly inclusive as they do not embrace Indigenous epistemes. The book focuses on epistemological hospitality. In this essay, I apply her concept of 'hospitality' to interspecies relationships between humans and plants.

11 For instance, the *The Wildbiome Project 2*, devised by Scotland-based ethnobotanist and herbalist Monica Wilde, seeks to explore the effects of only eating foraged food on the intestinal microbiome. To gather statistically significant data, the project aims to test the intestinal microbiome of approximately a hundred participants, who will consume only foraged food for a period of one to three months (Wilde 2023). Under the Instagram hashtag *#thewildbiomeproject*, participants share their experiences and recipes, showcasing the possibilities of a diverse diet based entirely on foraged food.

12 According to German cultural anthropologist Clemens Greiner and German geographer Patrick Sakdapolrak, 'translocality' describes multiple interconnected and non-linear processes in which different places provide for and depend on each other (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). It stresses the crucial role of 'rootedness' and location in a highly mobilized and interconnected world.

Women of Noord 2023

The exhibition *Women of Noord* (2023) took place at four separate locations in the northern part of Amsterdam: Amsterdam Noord. The exhibition highlighted how women's groups in this part of the city are committed to creating connections between people living and/or working in various neighborhoods. Amsterdam Noord is a large city borough, housing many people, cultural centers, and various industries. Its identity is, among other things, marked by the rich diversity of residents' cultural backgrounds, and the growing prominence of gentrification processes. In order to co-create the exhibition, the Amsterdam Museum collaborated with several women's groups that actively contribute to a sense of home and community in their neighborhoods. Through events, workshops, and photoshoots, the women were able to share with the Amsterdam Museum and its visitors their stories, values, and struggles. The exhibition was eventually divided into five themes: women for togetherness; women for empowerment; women for safe streets; women for connection; and women against loneliness.

The Visual Essay

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Mexicano from Egypt

Beyond Fast Food: Amsterdam-Egyptian Snack Bars as Neighbourhood Hubs

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Discipline
Cultural Anthropology, Migration and Diaspora Studies

Keywords
Snack Bars / Superdiversity / Egyptian Diaspora /
Co-Creation / Creolisation

Abstract

This paper explores the role of Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam as everyday spaces of co-creation and creolisation within the city's superdiverse landscape. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 16 snack bars, the study shows how these establishments function as informal neighbourhood hubs that foster cross-cultural interaction and a sense of belonging. Rather than fixed representations of 'Egyptianness' or 'Dutchness', these spaces are shaped by dynamic encounters between Egyptian-Dutch owners, diverse customers, and the urban environment. Grounded in theories of superdiversity, creolisation and co-creation, the paper highlights how cultural boundaries are continually negotiated and remade through daily practices. These snack bars extend beyond their commercial function, becoming overlooked yet vital sites of social connection and cultural transformation. By centring these spaces, the study offers insight into how diaspora, urban change, and everyday acts of co-creation and creolisation shape the city as a shared and ongoing process of belonging.

Object 1. *Abu Kareem at Snackbar Onze Hanny at the Van Hallstraat*. Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman

Introduction

It is King's Day in the Netherlands, and as I walk through the lively streets of the Jordaan, I pass one of my favourite snack bars. Amid the orange crowd, *Snackbar Aggie* set up a street stand selling not only the classic Dutch *broodje kroket,* but also *ta'ameya,* the Egyptian falafel made from fava beans, just as they do on the streets back in Egypt. The entire family is busy helping out, wearing orange Holland T-shirts. When I speak to Ahmed of *Snackbar Aggie* later, he tells me that King's Day is his favourite day of the year, proudly pointing to the photos on the wall—all snapshots of previous King's Day celebrations.

Object 2. *Snapshots of King's Day celebrations at the wall of Snackbar Aggie.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

This moment captures a broader phenomenon: the transformation of the Dutch snack bar by Egyptian-Dutch entrepreneurs. Traditionally, the Dutch snack bar has been a cornerstone of urban life—an accessible, informal space for quick meals open to all. After living in Egypt for nearly a year and a half, I was struck by the prevalence of Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam. Names such as Nefertiti and Sphinx, images of Cleopatra and Umm Kulthum, the renowned Egyptian singer, and the presence of Egyptian menu items alongside traditional Dutch snacks reflect how Egyptian culture is interwoven into these everyday spaces.

This paper first examines why so many snack bars in Amsterdam are owned by Egyptian-Dutch people. It continues to investigate how Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam function not merely as places of food consumption, but as neighbourhood hubs where diverse groups co-exist. It looks at how, through their aesthetic choices, culinary offerings, and social interactions, these snack bars become sites of co-creation and creolisation. The research examines how these spaces foster belonging and cultural transformation, illustrating how people shape daily life in a superdiverse city.

The idea for this research began in November 2023, when I stopped at De Dijk for a snack after a party and struck up a conversation in Egyptian Arabic with Mohammed behind the counter. That brief encounter sparked a longer process of building trust with the snack bar owners and employees—starting with informal chats and eventually leading to in-depth interviews at 16 Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam. Over time, I developed a mutual relationship with the people working in the snack bar. For example, I visited Ahmed's home to read Dutch children's books to his kids, and in return, was welcomed at family meals. I spent many hours at the snack bar—not ideal for my diet, but incredibly nourishing in terms of connection and a sense of belonging. I only began photographing after nearly a year, once strong personal connections had been built and clear consent was given. I see photography as something intimate, and I wanted to approach it with the same care and attentiveness that shaped the rest of my research. As a result, the photographs primarily feature the snack bar owners and employees—the people with whom I spent the most time, and who shared their stories most openly. I took most photos with a digital camera, with a few analogue shots added in later.

The Snack Bar

As an integral part of Dutch food culture, everybody loves the snack bar — whether it's a gezinszak patat [Translation: 'a family-sized portion of fries'] on a lazy Sunday or a late-night bite at 5 AM after a night out. Behind the TL-lit glass display, selection of quintessentially Dutch fast-food items, such as kroketten, frikandellen, and kaassoufflés sit neatly arranged between artificial green lettuce leaves.

Object 3. *Kipcorns and the Berenhap are showcased behind the TL-lit glass display. Amsterdam, 2024*. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 4. *Quintessentially Dutch snacks: frikandellen, kipcorns, bamischijven and kaassoufflès.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

The snack bar is more than just a place to grab a quick meal; it is a social equal-izer. Unlike high-end restaurants or exclusive cafés, the snack bar is accessible to everyone, regardless of social class, age, or background. Because snack bars are relatively affordable, Horstman and Knibbe (2022) argue in their book, translated as *Healthy City: Exclusion and Meeting in Public Spaces,* that snack bars gave a strong impetus to eating out among the wider public and contrib-uted to the emancipation of the lower middle class ⑦. The rise of the snack bar ensured that women were entitled to one cooking-free day a week. In line with this, historian Herman Belien suggests that in 1948, the snack bar played a key role in the collapse of Dutch *verzuiling* [Translation: 'pillarization'], as it was one of the first places where people from different religious and political back-grounds—Catholics, Protestants, and secular Dutch—ate side by side without social barriers (Home Academy, 2014). The snack bar therefore is a seemingly ordinary but deeply social place where cultural identities are negotiated, and new forms of urban belonging emerge.

To move beyond fixed and essentialist notions of identity, this paper draws on Steven Vertovec's concept of superdiversity (2007)—later expanded by Francio Guadeloupe (2015)—to emphasize the fluid, overlapping identities shaped through global migration. Rather than viewing culture as static, I ap-proach Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam as dynamic sites of creolisa-tion—a process of cultural mixing that, following Guadeloupe (2009) and Glis-sant (2008), produces new and unpredictable forms. Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of evolving diaspora identities reinforces this view. Finally, using the concept of co-creation (Brandsen & Honingh 2018), I analyse how these spaces are shaped collectively by Egyptian-Dutch entrepreneurs, diverse clientele, and their urban surroundings, making the snack bar a fluid, shared cultural space for all.

Superdiverse communities

Steven Vertovec (2007) used the term superdiversity to describe the complex and dynamic patterns of migration-driven diversity in the UK, particularly in cities like London. He argued that traditional categories such as ethnicity or nationality were no longer sufficient to capture the nuanced and multi-layered forms of diversity emerging from recent global migration patterns — diversity marked not just by more immigrant groups but by greater differences within them (Vertovec 2007, 1025). Francio Guadeloupe later expanded and reinterpreted the concept to fit his own critical analysis of Dutch society (2015). He rejects the concept of multiculturalism, which often presumes neatly separated cultural groups with fixed traditions. Superdiversity on the contrary, recognizes that individuals and spaces embody multiple, overlapping cultural influences. With regard to diaspora communities in the Netherlands, he states:

> *"Superdiversity is a concept that signals the bewildering multiplicity of diversities that cannot be captured in the simplified schemata of first came the postcolonial migrants from Indonesia, Papua, Suriname, and the Dutch Antilles, with which the Netherlands had colonial ties and then came the guest workers from Turkey, Morocco, and central and southern Europe. What this schema obfuscates is that there has always been movement of peoples, cultural expressions, and objects from within and without Europe." (Guadeloupe 2015, 21).*

According to him, these crosspollinations haunt any assertion of Dutch national homogeneity (ibid.). Although the snack bar could be seen as a typically Dutch place, in a superdiverse city like Amsterdam, both Dutch snack bar culture and the Egyptian diaspora in the snack bar cannot be captured in strict notions of 'Dutchness' or 'Egyptianness'.

Creolisation

Not only Francio Guadeloupe's interpretation of superdiversity, but also his application of the concept of creolisation offers valuable insights into understanding the case of the Egyptian-owned snack bar (2009). Originally a Caribbean concept, creolisation describes the blending of diverse people and cultures to form something new. Initially rooted in linguistics, creolisation referred to the creation of creole languages through the contact of different languages, particularly in colonial contexts. While scholars like Trouillot (1998) caution against applying the concept of creolisation beyond the specific historical context of plantation America, Guadeloupe challenges this view by allowing creolisation to travel through time and space (2009). He follows Édouard Glissant, who extended the concept beyond the Caribbean, and expanded creolisation into a dynamic process of cultural exchange and transformation (2008). Glissant emphasized that instead of a predictable blending of cultures, creolisation leads to the emergence of new, unforeseen cultural forms (83). Rather than treating it as a thing of the past, Guadeloupe rethinks creolisation as a dynamic, ongoing process. He states that *"nowadays no society exists outside this knotted relation of societies in motion. More importantly, no individual is fully captured by the norms and maxims of his or her respective society."* (2009, 83). Building on this perspective, I apply the concept of creolisation to the contemporary context of the Egyptian-owned snack bar in Amsterdam.

Stuart Hall (1990), who wrote about diaspora identities in relation to creolisation, states that diaspora identities are continuously evolving, shaped by transformation and difference. He argues that these identities are in a constant state of production and reproduction, adapting to the changing dynamics of the societies they inhabit (235). In this sense, combined with the concept of superdiversity, Egyptian-owned snack bars are not fixed representations of 'Egyptianness' or 'Dutchness'. Instead, they are fluid spaces of creolisation, where new cultural meanings arise from everyday interactions.

Co-creation

Co-creation can be seen as a collaborative process where collective efforts produce something new. Brandsen and Honingh define it as a process in which citizens or communities actively shape services, spaces, and cultural practices, rather than simply consuming them (2018, 12). In this study, co-creation refers to the participatory and dynamic process through which Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam evolve as shared cultural spaces, shaped by Egyptian-Dutch entrepreneurs, superdiverse clientele, and its urban environment. This approach rejects a top-down model and instead emphasizes collaborative participation from customers, workers, and the neighbourhood.

Within this process, creolisation can be understood as a specific form of co-creation. It highlights how superdiverse communities contribute to the emergence of cultural expressions within the snack bar. These establishments thus become superdiverse spaces, where cultural boundaries blur and new meanings are continually negotiated through collective participation.

Object 5. *Egyptian-owned snack bar Corner Inn at the Bilderdijk-straat.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 6. *Snackbar Sphinx at the Oostenburgergracht.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 7. *Snackbar Sphinx at the Eerste Oosterparkstraat.*
Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman

Object 8. *Snackbar De Dijk at the Haarlemmerdijk, where this research started in 2023.* Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

From fries to falafel: context of the snack bar

To understand why so many snack bars in Amsterdam are owned by Egyptian-Dutch people, it is essential to examine the history of the snack bar itself. There are indications that a Flemish friturist was the first in the Netherlands to sell French fries at the fair in Bergen op Zoom around 1905 (Fastfoodmuseum. nl). Jumping to 1949, after the fall of the colony Dutch East Indies, its cuisine made its entrance to the Netherlands (ibid.). Via Indonesian women, recipes ended up in magazines such as Libelle. Noodles and fried rice became a regular dish in cafeterias and snack bars. Over the years, snacks such as spring rolls, kroepia (in Rotterdam), satay and bamischijven (bami-slices) entered the snack assortment (ibid.).

Object 9. *Indonesian meals introduced in Dutch snack bars in 1949.* Photo by: Fastfoodmuseum.nl.

Object 10. *Snackbar Toetje "shoarma" at the Eerste Oosterpark-straat*. Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

A significant turning point came in 1986 when gambling machines were legalized in snack bars. These machines became a crucial source of revenue, enabling many owners to keep their businesses going. Ahmed, the owner of *Snackbar Aggie*, recalls that this was particularly appealing at the time because it allowed entrepreneurs to generate an income without depending on bank loans.

It is well-documented that, starting in the 2000s, many Chinese entrepreneurs in the Netherlands bought and opened snack bars as a response to labour shortages of chefs in Chinese restaurants (AD 2019, Volkskrant 2023). "Frietchinees" even became the word of the year in Belgium in 2012 and was often used in the Netherlands as well (Instituut voor Nederlandse Taal, n.d.). However, little or no research has been done on snack bars owned by Egyptian-Dutch people in Amsterdam. From the conversations with Egyptian-Dutch snack bar owners I had, it seems that the transfer of jobs and business ownership among Egyptians often followed community networks—Egyptians would hire fellow Egyptians, helping newly arrived migrants find employment. Trust played a crucial role in this process: "Can I trust Mohammed?" someone might ask. "Yes, he's a good man. You can trust him." If he was also from Alexandria, for example, that shared connection could be enough to secure a job. In addition, although the work is physically demanding, requiring long hours behind the deep fryer, it remains an accessible job for many newcomers.

The story of Egyptian involvement in Amsterdam's snack bars is reflected in individual success stories, such as Shaben's, who bought his first snack bar, *Snackbar 't Snorretje* at Krugerplein, in 1978 and went on to open six more. Similarly, at *Snackbar Jelle* on the Spaarndammerstraat, the story on how four Egyptian men took over the business from Jelle in 1988 is displayed on a poster at the wall. The men had studied economics in Egypt and were searching for work in the Netherlands. Initially taking jobs at McDonald's, they then started working in the snack bar.

Object 11. *Shaben posing in front of an Egyptian flag in snackbar 't Snorretje and a sign saying, "Nasi or Bami meal with satay and egg".* Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 12. *Story of how four Egyptian men took over Snackbar Jelle*. 2024. Photo: Facebook-page Jelle snacks – IJssalon.

Many snack bar owners and employees had the plan to return to Egypt after they made some money in the Netherlands, but returning did and does not seem to be a viable option due to ongoing political and economic instability in Egypt—topics that frequently prevailed in my conversations with snack bar owners. As a result, these businesses became not only a means of financial stability but also a cornerstone of the Egyptian diaspora in Amsterdam.

Neighbourhood community centres

Spending countless hours in these spaces, I have witnessed the ways in which snack bars extend far beyond their function as eateries and more so functions as neighbourhood community centres. Every neighbourhood has its own snack bar and 'the snack bar around the corner' became a household name. Egyptian snack bar owners have seamlessly integrated into the urban landscape, creating superdiverse spaces where everybody feels at home. Mohammed from Snackbar De Dijk on Haarlemmerdijk calls everyone buurman (neighbour) to give customers a welcomed feeling.

In the Jordaan, everyone calls Ahmed, the owner of *Snackbar Aggie*, *Aggie* (أخي), meaning 'my brother' in Arabic. Even those who are not there to eat find a space to hangout; at *Snackbar Onze Hanny*, Abu Kareem (Father of Kareem) prepares cups of Egyptian tea (*bil na'na*, with mint) for customers who stop by just to chat. The father-metaphor relates to the snack bar more often. At *'t Snorretje*, a customer tells me "He's the *abu* of the neighbourhood", pointing to Reder behind the counter—the father figure of the community. Abu Kareem greets regular customers with "*oei oei*", a twist on the Dutch farewell "*doei doei*". These small rituals and language adaptations reinforce a sense of belonging, creating an atmosphere where regulars and newcomers alike feel at home.

Object 13. *Mohammed greets customers from behind his desk upstairs, beneath a sign that reads: "Specialties for the neighbour."* Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 14. *Abu Kareem (father of Kareem) at Snackbar Onze Hanny.* Amsterdam, 2024.
Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 15. *Reder posing in front of the deep fryer at Snackbar Sphinx.* Amsterdam, 2024.
Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Conversations unfold about everyday life—someone makes an appointment at the local hairdresser while waiting for their fries, another person asks for help finding an apartment, and someone else leaves a message looking to swap their social housing flat for one with an elevator. A woman parks her typical Dutch Canta in front of the door and comes in for a chat. A man in search of a job is told there are no openings now but is handed a cup of hot tea. Mohammed at *Snackbar 't Centrum* at Haarlemmerplein boils water for a homeless person so he can make instant noodles. Meanwhile, politics are debated — discussions range from Palestine to Amsterdam's new 30 km/h speed limit. Snack bar owners are deeply embedded in the personal lives of their customers. *"Is your wife still sick?"* Reder asks one of his regulars, demonstrating a familiarity that goes beyond mere transactions. Ihab, the owner of *Tiba Cafetaria*, located next to the OLVG East hospital, offers a 10% discount to anyone working at the hospital. *"Everyone has their own discount"*, he says, reinforcing the personal connections that shape these spaces.

Object 16. *A typical Dutch Canta in front of Snackbar Onze Hanny.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 17. *A customer painted a mural of Abu Kareem on the snack bar wall, depicting him holding a cone of fries with the words "lekker hé?!"[translation: 'tasty right?!')* written beside him.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 18. *Tiba Cafetaria across hospital OLVG East where hospital workers can eat with a discount.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

This is where co-creation becomes visible: rather than passive consumption, customers play an active role in shaping the identity and function of the snack bar. It is not only about ordering a *broodje kroket;* more so, it functions as a neighborhood community centre. Within this space, different cultural backgrounds intersect, and unconscious acts of creolisation occur through everyday interactions. The snack bar allows different social groups to interact in informal settings and is therefore a site for social inclusion. By serving as a space for conversation, debate, complaints, and connection—often with people outside one's immediate social circle—the snack bar is actively shaped as a communal hub by the people who gather there.

The place is superdiverse; Moroccan sweets traded for a cup of tea, Surinamese women stopping by to get a *kapsalon* and to have a chat. Customers and owners alike contribute to a shared, co-created cultural experience that cannot be reduced to simple categories like 'Egyptian' or 'Dutch'.

Similarly, Horstman and Knibbe note that although the snack bar is often regarded with low prestige due to its association with unhealthy food, it plays a crucial role in fostering social connections (2022, 7). They say food brings people together, and snack bars are a place where newcomers connect with the Netherlands in a way not seen in many other places. A mix of regular customers and occasional visitors, often from the neighbourhood, sometimes from far away, makes the snack bar a meeting place (ibid.). To kill the waiting time, people chat, joke around, in different languages and dialects. In the snack bar, strangers become familiar strangers. The fact that in many neighbourhoods the snack bar is one of the few places of escape for people with little money gives food for thought, they argue (ibid.).

Ahmed's story offers another example of how snack bars function as neighbourhood centres. In June 2024, Ahmed witnessed a fatal stabbing in front of his snack bar *Aggie*—a deeply traumatic experience. In the aftermath, he received incredible emotional and financial support from the neighbourhood the Jordaan. Locals even advocated on his behalf, arranging for Amsterdam's mayor, Femke Halsema, to visit him and helping him resolve a dispute with the housing corporation to keep his social housing. Reflecting on the experience, Ahmed tells me:

> *"That's when I realized—this is not just a fries shop. I am surrounded by family; this is a community house. I haven't felt this kind of love since my father died when I was very young. My mother had to care for six children and was never really there. I never knew a mother's love. But now, I feel it again—because of this neighbourhood, because of the Jordaan."*

Object 19. *Ahmed posing in front of Snackbar Aggie.*
Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 20. *Photos with regular customers from the Jordaan at Snackbar Aggie, whom Ahmed describes as being like family.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

At *Snackbar Sphinx*, the sound of Umm Kulthum, a legendary Egyptian singer, echoes through the speakers, while at *Aggie*, Egyptian football matches—like Zamalek versus Al-Ahly—are always on the TV. These familiar sights and sounds create a bridge between home and diaspora.

Object 21. *Customers at Snackbar Sphinx.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 22. *Customers at Snackbar Sphinx.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Home in the snack bar

On a cold rainy Monday evening, I step into *Ma Baker* at the Rozengracht and find Hifny making ta'ameya. *"For myself for dinner"* he says. *"Do you want some too?"* I feel like I am in Egypt again, where they eat the deep-fried green fava beans for breakfast every day. We talk for hours over a cup of tea.

For Ahmed, the snack bar feels like being surrounded by family; for Hifny, it is like a living room where personal and communal life intertwine. At *Snackbar Sphinx*, the sound of Umm Kulthum, a legendary Egyptian singer, echoes through the speakers, while at *Aggie*, Egyptian football matches—like Zamalek versus Al-Ahly—are always on the TV. These familiar sights and sounds create a bridge between home and diaspora.

The Egyptian influence on Amsterdam's snack bars reveals itself not only through their names—such as *Sphinx, Nefertiti*, and *Aggie*—but also through visual references to ancient Egypt, including images of Tutankhamun, Qur'anic calligraphy, and Cleopatra, as seen in the photos below. These visual cues are complemented by culinary adaptations: just as the traditional Dutch snack bar once incorporated bamischijven and loempia's following the fall of the Dutch East Indies, it is now being subtly reshaped to reflect Egyptian food traditions. The Egyptian falafel made from green beans instead of chickpeas, ta'ameya (الطعمية), is their best-seller. At *Sphinx* in the Eerste Oosterparksstraat they sometimes sell koshary, Egypt's national dish of rice, pasta and lentils topped with tomato sauce and fried onions. *"For Dutch people, the snack bar is what koshary is for Egyptians,"* notes Ahmed—cheap, accessible, and quick. Alongside the classic Dutch huzarensalade, menus now commonly feature superdiverse options such as kebab, lahmacun (Turkish pizza), and an increasing selection of vegetarian snacks. At *Snackbar Onze Hanny* you can drink Egyptian mango juice and *Snackbar Toetje* is selling baklava alongside traditional Dutch snacks. The Transvaalbuurt's local newspaper advertises for *Snackbar 't Snorretje* by dedicating an article to the Mexicano from Egypt: a playful yet telling example of how culinary traditions at the snack bar are constantly remixed and reimagined.

Object 23. *The menu at Snackbar Onze Hanny features superdiverse options, e.g. Turkish pizza, falafel and shawarma.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 24. *In the vitrine of Snackbar Toetje, baklava sits alongside Dutch snacks.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 25. *An article written about Snackbar 't Snorretje's bestseller Mexicano in the local newspaper: Mexicano uit Egypte [Translation: 'Mexicano from Egypt'].* Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

← **Object 26.** *Ahmed in front of Snackbar Aggie and a sign that says "Egyptische falafel" [Translation: 'Egyptian falafel'].* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 27. *Egyptian falafel in Snackbar Aggie.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 28. *De Buurman [Translation: 'The Neighbour'] advertises their Egyptian falafel on the sign of their more upscale snack bar.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 29. *The classic Dutch huzarensalade at Snackbar Onze Hanny.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

← **Object 30.** *Old photos of Amsterdam from back in the day, displayed next to a sign that reads "Doner Kebab Menu" at Snackbar Aggie.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 31. *Egyptian mango juice at Snackbar Onze Hanny.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Horstman and Knibbe note varieties of snacks, like increasingly vegetarian snacks, create new connections between diverse populations on a narrow budget and play a connecting role in the dynamics between different people within the neighbourhood (2022, 7). The snack bar around the corner is also a window on an ever-expanding world, they say (ibid.).

Co-creation emerges not only in kitchens but also in everyday acts of mutual care. When Ahmed from *Snackbar Aggie* runs out of spring rolls, he stops by *Sphinx* to pick some up. In return, during Ramadan, he brings an iftar meal, the meal to break the fast, to Reder. *"Because he is alone",* Ahmed says. *"That is how we take care of each other".*

Religious practices find their place in the snack bar too. Hifny notes that he and his brother often perform their prayers inside the snack bar. Most customers are accepting of this, though occasionally, some leave upon seeing them pray. Such tensions reveal that co-creation does not mean perfect harmony, but rather an ongoing, negotiated coexistence. This reflects the broader reality that creolisation, as Stuart Hall reminds us, is never neutral. It unfolds through the *"continuous play of history, culture, and power"* (1990). Creolisation in places like the snack bar is always entangled in social and political hierarchies.

Halal practices, for example, demonstrate how values are negotiated within these spaces. By sourcing ingredients from halal-certified suppliers and omitting pork, the snack bar becomes accessible to a broader clientele. *"It is better this way",* says Hifny. *"Not just for ourselves, but because this way, everyone can eat here".* Still, such decisions may draw criticism in broader Dutch society, where debates about halal slaughtering may clash with different views on animal welfare.

Object 32. *Snackbar Sphinx at the Oostenburgergracht advertises with their 100% halal food.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 33. *An image of Tutankhamun's mask at Snackbar Toetje.*
Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Thus, Egyptian-Dutch snack bar owners do not merely 'add' Egyptian culture to the Dutch landscape but reshape the very notion of what a snack bar is through everyday encounters and exchanges. Importantly, these snack bars are not preserved capsules of 'ethnic identity'. Rather, they are dynamic spaces shaped by creolisation, co-creation and collaboration. The visual environment—papyrus scrolls, Qur'anic calligraphy, Cleopatra portraits—reflects a proud heritage, while also inviting others in. These are spaces of belonging, where a halal frikandel lies next to baklava, and where everyone is welcome.

At the same time, longing persists. Belonging in diaspora is rarely without ambivalence. Hinfy tells me he feels as if he lives half in Amsterdam and half in Alexandria in Egypt, which makes it difficult for him to feel fully at home in either place. Almost every owner lights up when talking about Egypt—the sun, the language, the family left behind. *"Egypt is حياتي , my life,"* one tells me. Mohammed for example, often closes his snack bar for months to visit his family and spend time in sunny Hurghada. Others celebrate Ramadan half in Amsterdam, half in their hometown Alexandria.

"These are spaces of belonging, where a halal frikandel lies next to baklava, and where everyone is welcome."

Object 34. *A portrait of renowned Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum behind the display counter at Snackbar Toetje*. Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 35. *Images of Tutankhamun and the Quran displayed at Snackbar Onze Hanny*. Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 36. *Small statues of the Quran, Tutankhamum and Umm Khaltum behind the display counter at Snackbar Toetje. Amsterdam,* 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 37. *An Egyptian plate behind the display counter at Snackbar Toetje.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 38. *A Holland scarf in Snackbar Aggie.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

"In a time when cities are often perceived as spaces of increasing individualization—marked by home deliveries, take-out food, and digital interactions—the Egyptian-owned snack bar reminds us of the persistent power of collectivity."

Object 39. *Images/statues of Tutankhamun and a Sphinx stand between the soft-serve ice creams at Snackbar Sphinx.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 40. *A photo depicting a dromedary, the Nile, and the pyramids displayed at Snackbar de Dijk, gifted by a Dutch customer*. Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 41. *A calligraphic inscription of an Islamic prayer at the wall at Snackbar Toetje.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.
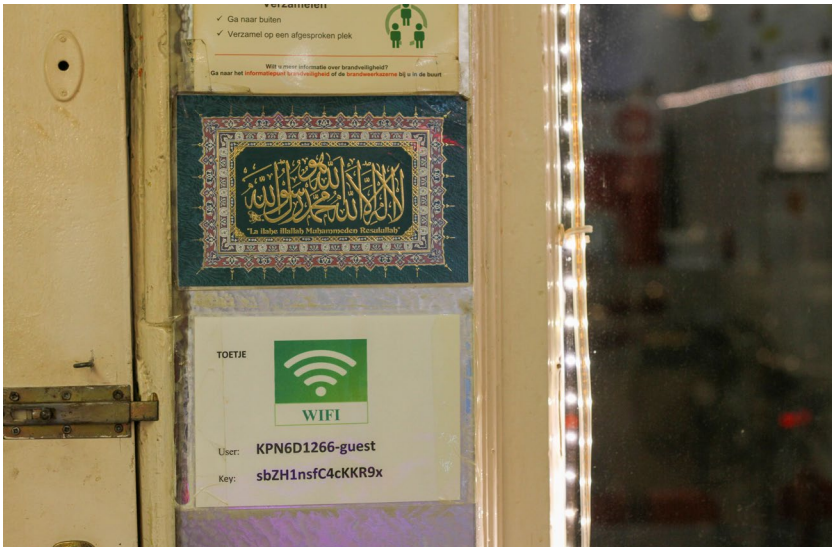
Object 42. *An Egyptian papyrus displayed at Snackbar Aggie.* Amsterdam, 2024. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Object 43. *Mohammed taking a break from work under a film poster of Lawrence of Arabia.*
Amsterdam, 2025. Photograph by: Lieve Wijman.

Conclusion

In a time when cities are often perceived as spaces of increasing individualization—marked by home deliveries, take-out food, and digital interactions—the Egyptian-owned snack bar reminds us of the persistent power of collectivity . These snack bars are not static symbols of cultural heritage (Dutch or Egyptian) but dynamic sites of creolisation, where owners and customers collaboratively shape new forms of home and belonging. From the inclusion of ta'ameya on the menu to the visual references to Egyptian heritage, the Egyptian diaspora in Amsterdam contributes to the social and cultural fabric of Amsterdam through the snack bar, making it a superdiverse place.

More than economic ventures, these snack bars serve as vital community spaces. They create a sense of home and belonging not only for Egyptian migrants, but for the broader neighborhood, where residents from superdiverse backgrounds gather—not just to eat, but to connect, exchange, and support one another. These snack bars demonstrate that spaces of everyday life—often overlooked in academic research—are crucial sites of co-creation and belonging.

Approaching these spaces through the lens of creolisation helps move beyond fixed ideas of 'Dutchness' or 'Egyptianness'. It emphasizes the fluidity of culture in motion and highlights the ways in which everyday interactions give rise to something new. Co-creation, in this context, is not just collaboration, it is the mechanism through which creolisation happens on the ground.

It is important to acknowledge that creolisation is never a neutral process. As scholars have pointed out (Hall 1990, Vergès 2016), it inherently involves power dynamics, inequality, and hierarchies, issues of domination and subordination, control and resistance. Although this study did not explicitly focus on these power relations, their presence should not be overlooked in any analysis of cultural interaction and mutual transformation.

On a concluding note, Egyptian-owned snack bars in Amsterdam do not simply reproduce Egyptian culture in a Dutch setting. Rather, they evolve through constant engagement with their environment—reshaping and being reshaped in return. As such, they stand as vibrant examples of how urban spaces can be reimagined through the lived practices of care, adaptation, and collaborative efforts. In doing so, they challenge static multicultural paradigms and offer a glimpse into a more interconnected, co-created urban future.

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Kazerne Reigerbos 2024

Collecting the City #4 featured two museum rooms where the Amsterdam Museum collaborated with creative hub Kazerne Reigersbos (2024). This makers space was named after the eponymous neighborhood initiative that was founded in 2020 to create a meeting place for local, young people. Reigersbos is a neighborhood in the Southeast of Amsterdam, and although the area is home to many creative people, Kazerne Reigersbos is one of the few places where young people can meet each other and develop their talents. At the exhibition, a group of young creative talents connected to Kazerne Reigersbos designed the content of one of the museum rooms: among other things, it included an art installation through which they shared their vision on the future of their neighborhood.

The Empirical Papers

The Role of the Artist Interview in Co-Creation Projects: a Continuation of Co-creation?

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Discipline

Collection Management, Conservation, Museology

Abstract

This paper examines how artist interviews can support and sustain the goals of co-creation in contemporary museum practice. Taking the Jacob Geel Project in Amsterdam as a case study, it explores how interviews with artists, residents, and museum professionals can help preserve both tangible and intangible outcomes of co-created projects. These outcomes were evaluated through the lens of the Amsterdam Museum's four core co-creation values: equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging. The paper also considers whether existing literature on artist interviews and oral history reflects these values. Findings indicate that reflective, dialogic interviews enrich understanding of diverse perspectives while shaping future strategies for acquisition, care, and display. Far from being merely evaluative, the interview emerges as a co-creative tool in itself—one that reveals intentions, fosters dialogue, and actively contributes to shaping the future of co-created outcomes. As such, it should be seen as an essential, forward-looking component of the co-creation process.

Introduction[1]

In 2020, the Amsterdam Museum initiated a co-creation project with residents from the Jacob Geel neighbourhood, in the Western part of Amsterdam. This area, originally characterised by social housing apartments, has undergone significant transformation. The social housing was slated for replacement by new apartment complexes with considerably higher rents, potentially forcing residents to relocate to other parts of the city. Since a shortage of affordable housing and gentrification have severely increased in Amsterdam during the past decade, the project's central objective was to focus on the narratives of residents on the brink of losing their homes. Some residents were relocated in (renovated) apartments in the immediate neighbourhood, while others found a new home somewhere else in Amsterdam, but the local community as it was, would disappear. Through co-creations between artists and residents, stories and objects about their life in the neighbourhood were produced and presented in an exhibition in the neighbourhood in 2021, and secondly, at the Amsterdam Museum in 2022.

As a museum professional specialised in collections management, I am particularly interested in how the Amsterdam Museum engages with the preservation of material and immaterial results of co-creation initiatives and the positionality of the co-creation stakeholders, i.e., the artists and residents involved, as well as of museum staff. In reflecting on and advancing the processes of this co-creation project —both by analysing its outcomes and envisioning its future— I argue it is essential to adopt methodologies that uphold the project's co-creative spirit. This consideration resulted in two interrelated questions. First, in what ways does the act of conducting interviews contribute to and sustain the co-creative aims of the project? Second, how can artist interviews promote a more layered understanding of the project's outcomes while enhancing future accessibility, ownership, preservation, and conservation of the produced objects and narratives?

To gain an understanding of the perspectives of different stakeholders, I have conducted interviews with residents, artists and museum workers involved in this project. Reflecting on the successive stages of the project in interviews, I believe, can yield valuable insights for the design of future co-creation projects (Nikkessen et al. 2022; Rausch et al. 2022; Simon 2010). It may offer a more nuanced understanding of the thoughts and aspirations of the Jacob Geel co-creators concerning their engagement in the project and its tangible and intangible outcomes. For instance, regarding to what co-creators identify as crucial in preserving their objects and stories

as part of the city's collective narrative. These reflections can then serve as a starting point for discussions on decisions in regard to acquisition, presentation, care, and conservation.

The publication *The Artist Interview* (Beerkens et al. 2012), initially designed for in-depth interviews with artists focusing on the meaning, materiality, and evolution of their work, has served as a guide for interviewing the co-creation makers. The results were analysed in relation to theories on artist interviews and closely related elements of oral history interviews as discussed in Farinati (2024) and Stigter (2016; 2024). Given that the Jacob Geel project is part of the ongoing Collecting the City program, I have focused my inquiry on four core values as employed by the Amsterdam Museum for co-creation methods: equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging. Although these values may not apply universally to every co-creation project or stakeholder, they provide a meaningful framework for assessing whether the museum's objectives resonate with the participants' experiences.

This paper begins with a concise description of the Jacob Geel Project, followed by an outline of the four core values of co-creation employed by the Amsterdam Museum. It then explores the use of the artist interview methodology to assess whether it can help sustain the project's co-creative character, using the Jacob Geel Project as a case study. The second half of the paper discusses how questions derived from the Artist Interview provided insights into stakeholders' perceptions of the project's various phases, with particular attention to their visions for the future of their co-creations.

The Jacob Geel Project
The Jacob Geel project is part of the Amsterdam Museum's 'Collecting the City' program line, through which the museum aims to explore and collect underexposed stories of the city of and with city communities (Nikkessen, 8). As part of this project, the museum invited storytelling coach and photographer Fouad Lakbir to engage with residents of the Jacob Geel neighbourhood. Together with radio- and podcast maker/illustrator Jesper Buursink, he began building relationships with a wide range of residents to co-create and document their experiences and perspectives as they faced relocation due to urban redevelopment. Some residents became active members of the project team, while others contributed more independently. Over the course of several months, a rich collection of stories emerged through conversations, audio recordings, and the (co-)creation of meaningful objects that reflected personal memories and connections to the neighbourhood. The results offer an intimate view of the area's significance to its residents.

From collecting favourite recipes, to recording conversations at the local hairdresser, to jointly drawing while discussing the neighbourhood with a mother and her two children: the outcomes were diverse and deeply personal. The photographs in this paper represent only a small selection of what was co-created.

These works were presented in a temporary 'Jacob Geel Museum' route, developed in collaboration with artists from Moving Art Projects (MAP), and installed in and around the soon-to-be-demolished housing block in the Hemsterhuisstraat (Figure 1). Visitors were invited to not only see and listen, but also to contribute their own reflections. Key objects, audio fragments, and some building elements from this installation were featured in *The Jacob Geel Chronicles*, a smaller exhibition at the Amsterdam Museum, co-curated by residents, artists, and museum staff (Figure 2).[2]

Figure 1. *Entrance of the Jacob Geel Museum in the neigbourhood:* Amsterdam, April 2021. Photograph by: Noud Verhave, MAP Moving Art Projects.

Figure 2. *Jacob Geel Exhibition in the Amsterdam Museum, tour with and by co-creators in the Amsterdam Museum:* Amsterdam, June 2022. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

Values of Co-creation in the Amsterdam Museum

When reflecting on the outcomes of the project, several key questions emerge: To what extent are the co-creation values embraced by the Amsterdam Museum visible in the outcomes of the project? How might these values be further strengthened in future phases of co-creation initiatives? And is it possible to implement a method that inherently embodies these co-creative values? Before exploring these questions, a brief description of the four core values of co-creation, as defined by the Amsterdam Museum, are briefly outlined below:

> **'Equity'**: Co-creation is based on equitable collaboration, ensuring that all parties have an equal voice in decision-making. Shared creative leadership makes both partners and residents co-owners of the content.

> **'Empowerment'**: projects are driven by empowering co-workers as equals, enabling them to make decisions as a community, retain control over their own narratives, and creating opportunities to express this agency.

'Belonging': Co-creation seeks to foster a sense of belonging by ensuring that every voice is heard. Through involvement and ownership, partners and residents become part of a larger whole.

'Reciprocity': Co-creation depends on mutual exchange, where all parties both contribute and benefit. Identifying each other's needs and offerings is the first step, with balanced give-and-take kept central throughout the process (Nikkessen 2022, p. 10).

Co-creation can take many forms and engages a diversity of people: "Every partner and resident differs, and therefore every working method is different. Nevertheless, all projects are based on the same four core values, which together comprise the Amsterdam Museum's co-creation method." (Nikkessen, 9).

Co-creative Values in Interviewing

In museum practice, interviews with artists play a crucial role in providing insights into meanings, materiality, presentation, and future life of artworks. These interviews can be conducted at various stages, including acquisition, exhibition preparation, or when conservation issues arise. Engaging with co-makers —such as technicians— and former owners or conservators can also enhance understanding, particularly when direct communication with the artist is no longer possible. Depending on the context, various terms are used for these interviews. The term 'artwork interview' refers to interviews focused on a specific artwork; 'collection interview' applies when several works within a particular context are examined; and 'stakeholder interview' is used when individuals with a personal or professional relationship to artworks or heritage are interviewed (Stigter 2024, 65). In this research, the term 'artist interview' is used when referring to the general method and theoretical approach. In the context of this co-creation project, I will use the term 'co-creator interview' to better reflect the diversity of participants—each playing a different role in the creation of the project, the presentations, and (partly) the objects. To distinguish between the co-creators, I will group them as: artists (though many refer to themselves as 'makers'), residents, and museum staff.

The publication *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art* (Beerkens 2012) is widely used by museum professionals. The questions it outlines have served as a starting point and best-practice framework for conducting effective interviews. The publication emphasises dialogue as a joint exploration of artist and interviewer on

"Over the course of several months, a rich collection of stories emerged through conversations, audio recordings, and the (co-)creation of meaningful objects that reflected personal memories and connections to the neighbourhood."

"*what is meaningful in the work*" (Beerkens 2012, 15). It acknowledges that interviews are not neutral: both interviewee and interviewer shape the outcome, and the values of other stakeholders must also be taken into account.

In particular longer interviews with artists or stakeholders often bear similarities with oral history interviews (Van Schaik 2023, 3). As Lynn Abrams (2016, 3) states in *Oral History Theory*: oral history is research through interviewing *"a living witness in in-depth conversation about the past"*. In the case of the Jacob Geel project, it was important to ask questions about the artworks and creation of it, but also about the lives of the residents.

Interviews have the unique characteristic of creating new sources rather than solely analysing existing ones. As Alessandro Portelli observes, an interview is a *"cocreated narrative between subjects— the interviewer and the interviewee"* (Portelli 2018, 239). In *Theorising the Artist Interview* (Farinati 2024), interviewing is described as a "*co-construction*: *the result of interaction between interviewer and interviewee"* (Farinati 2024, 6). Conservator Sanneke Stigter highlights in her article on the artwork interview within this publication that interviews contribute to articulating the meaning and context of an artwork. Moreover, the interview itself can even become part of the preservation and conservation process, collaboratively shaped by those participating in the exchange (Stigter 2024, 75). This perspective positions interviewing as inherently co-creative, both in its methodology and its outcomes.

How do the core values of co-creation, equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging—as articulated by the Amsterdam Museum—manifest in the practice of interviewing?

Portelli (2018) describes the oral history interview as a *"mutual, personal encounter based on some form of reciprocity"* (p. 239), and as an *"experiment in equality"* (p. 243).[3] He further connects this practice to the value of empowerment, noting that interviews provide an opportunity, for previously unheard voices, *"not only to answer our questions but also to volunteer stories of their own"*(p. 243). Empowerment, reciprocity, and equity are also identified as inherent values in *Theorising the Artist Interview*. Interviewing *"dismantles old hierarchies in favour of valuing dialogue and collaboration"* (Farinati, introduction). This brings us to the concept of 'belonging', which holds particular significance in interviewing—particularly in oral history, where individuals are often chosen because they belong to a specific community or group. While this value may be less prominent in artist interviews, it can take on a more central role when engaging with stakeholders in a co-creation project. The act of conducting an interview can itself be regarded as a means of maintaining an ongoing relationship.

Interviewing Co-creators of the Jacob Geel project

To gain insight into the perspectives of various stakeholders, I conducted nine in-depth interviews with residents, artists, and museum staff. Four interviews were held with residents—including one joint interview with a mother and her child, both of whom were co-creators—three with artists, and two with museum staff involved in the project. Two of the residents had prior experience with artistic work, either professionally or through their own creative practice.[4]

The interviews consisted mainly of open-ended questions, many of which were adapted from *The Artist Interview* (Beerkens, 2012). For residents and artists, additional questions about their lives were included. Interviewees were also asked how they became involved in the project and what roles they played. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; the transcriptions were subsequently approved by the interviewees. Interviews took place at locations convenient for the interviewees, such as their homes, studios, or the Amsterdam Museum office. Each interview lasted between one and one and a half hours. In particular, the interviews with residents and artists resembled oral history interviews, with additional time devoted to discussing their lives and (artistic) practices, as this was the moment to gain a broader context.[5]

Co-creative Values in the Jacob Geel Project

The Jacob Geel Project was one of the Amsterdam Museum's earlier co-creation initiatives, carried out prior to the publication of *Collecting the City* in 2022, which introduced the museum's co-creation methodology. Since the method was not yet formalised, the interview questions did not explicitly address the four core values. Instead, insights emerged from more general questions such as: 'What did you create?', 'What did the project mean to you?', and 'How did you work together?' Often, multiple values were reflected within a single response. For example, the following quote from an interview with Resident 1 encompasses all four values:

> *"You are one of the crew [equity and belonging]. The reason I kept participating in the project is that I discovered so many things, not just about the neighbours, but also about myself "[reciprocity and empowerment].*

Equity

In the interviews it becomes clear that the aim for equity was realised within the project, while acknowledging that everyone has their own positionality. Museum staff member 2 states: "*Okay, we are equal collaboration partners in this, but you both really do have different interests*". Resident 3 mentions: "*I find it really, really special and beautiful that you are completely involved in that project*". The combination of equity and belonging is also found in what museum staff member 1 tells: "*That we are also there [in the neighbourhood], that we [show that we] are involved, and that their stories matter for the Amsterdam Museum... Together, we have worked really hard*".

Empowerment

Different forms of empowerment emerged from the interview responses; therefore, diverse concepts are presented here to distinguish them:

Ownership

"Everyone who was there felt a little bit like an owner [of the project]". This quote from resident 4, refers strongly to the definition of empowerment as used by the Amsterdam Museum, in which the expression of the joint strength of the co-creators is central. Other forms of empowerment are linked with reciprocity. They express what the interviewee gained by joining in the project.

Proudness and recognition are found in diverse answers of residents: Resident 1: "*It felt like we were important, right?"* [Resident 2 nods enthusiastically]. Resident 3 tells: *"Yes, you're proud that you're represented there. And, you know, that people listen to you— that's, of course, very nice".* Resident 5 mentions: *"The artists said to me: 'We think the things you create are impressive'".*

Learning

Four interviewees (residents, artists, and museum staff) described the project as a valuable learning experience, which can be interpreted as embodying both empowerment and reciprocity. Artist 1 **says:** *"As a person, in my career, in all aspects of my life, it has enriched me too. How do you say that? I've also grown as a person because of it".* Resident 5 states: *"For me, in some aspects, it was a process of observation and learning".*

Healing

At least one resident stated that the project served as a healing process during a challenging period. The healing process can be understood as a form of empowerment. Resident 1: *"This project has honestly softened the blow [of demolition and relocation] quite a bit".*

Belonging

Both residents and artists expressed they felt more connected to the neighbourhood through the co-creation project, and also to the co-creation team of Jacob Geel. Resident 4 **tells:** "For me, it was a way to connect more with the people. That was the most important thing". He found a new apartment nearby and benefits now from the connections he made through his participation. Resident 3 felt a deeper compassion for her neighbours: "And then you think, well, there are always stories about how people lived, but you never visited them you know? So, for me, it really had an impact to see [their apartments] in the Jacob Geel Museum". Resident 1 expresses her belonging to the team: "you are one of the crew". The artists involved mention how their own sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and the team grew during the course of the project, and what that means for them regarding the future. Artist 1: "*So we tried to become part of the Hemsterhuisstraat in the Jacob Geel neighbourhood. At a certain point, we knew everyone, just by being there often enough*". Artist 2: "*We built such strong personal relationships with people that it's very challenging not to maintain contact with all those people, all the time. Those relationships exist, [although] it's invisible, and those connections are there, and I think they won't easily go away*".

Reciprocity

The fact that the participants experienced learning, healing, recognition and ownership suggests that they gained by working together. It shows that there was reciprocity in the project, but it is not mentioned in a purely transactional sense. Artist 2: "It's not about participation; it's about exchange. You create something together". In the Jacob Geel Museum in Amsterdam New West, visitors were invited to interact in the former residents' apartments, and therefore could also experience the values of reciprocity and belonging. Artist 3 explains: "[In one of the apartments people could visit], we asked them to take a piece of the floor covering with them. By doing so, the public helped to clear out the apartment of one of the leaving residents, thus sharing both the work and the bitter pain felt by the resident who had to leave".

In summary, the co-creators frequently offered examples that illustrated the realisation of co-creation's core values, even though they were not explicitly prompted to address these values during the interviews. While all three groups—museum staff, residents, and artists—reflected on experiencing these values, they did so in distinct ways. Museum staff described a learning process in how to implement a co-creation project; one resident referred to it as "a process of observation and learning" in the development and presentation of his work; and an artist noted that the project enabled him to take new steps in his practice and contributed to personal growth. In this way, the project exemplifies the Amsterdam Museum's co-creation values in various dimensions. I argue that conducting in-depth interviews using the Artist Interview method is a suitable approach for retrospectively assessing whether these co-creation values were upheld throughout a co-creative project.

The Value of Creating
To identify which phase of the co-creation process was most valued, participants were asked to evaluate five stages: project initiation, creating objects and stories, the exhibition in the neighbourhood, the presentation at the Amsterdam Museum, and final reflections. Overall, responses were highly positive across all stakeholder groups, with the majority rating their experience as very positive or positive. Neutral or slightly critical responses—related to uncertainties at the start or dissatisfaction with the exhibition design—were evenly spread among residents, artists, and museum staff. No negative ratings were given. The phase 'Creating objects and stories' stood out, receiving the highest scores from both residents and artists. While some residents collaborated closely with artists, others created objects independently. All works were included in the final group presentations. Regardless of the form of participation, the creative process itself was deeply valued. Museum staff, less directly involved in this stage, gave it comparatively lower ratings.

The creation phase of a co-creation project—whether undertaken individually or collaboratively—is a process that merits closer attention. This stage can be further illuminated through co-creator interviews, as these offer an opportunity to articulate and make the creation process more visible. One of the residents who created objects that were exhibited at both locations expressed that he was less satisfied with the display at the Amsterdam Museum. The reason was that one object had been positioned differently, and a small but significant element was lost during transport—substantially diminishing the object's meaning (Figures 3 & 4).[6] In the in-

"How do the core values of co-creation, equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging—as articulated by the Amsterdam Museum—manifest in the practice of interviewing?"

terview, he explained the relevancy of the element and the placing in the room, thus articulating the object and the installation of it in a space. The questions from the artist interview were useful to better understand his creation and were therefore helpful in articulating the voice of an individual participant making a creation within a co-creation process.[7]

Figure 3 (left). *Saw, by Hadi Tehrani, in the Jacob Geel Museum in the neighbourhood:* Amsterdam, April 2021. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

Figure 4 (right). *Saw in the Amsterdam Museum exhibition. The small green plastic leaf in the middle of the branch is lacking here. The hanging is high and coming from the wall, instead of low and with the handle towards the audience:* Amsterdam, August 2022. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

 Another resident who had made an object also discovered that some small parts were missing. He expressed in the interview the meaning of this loss. All materials he used in the work came from the streets in the Jacob Geel area, just before the area was broken down, when people were doing away with parts of their household belongings. These materials were no longer available and replacing them with alternatives would have diminished the significance of the object. The interview revealed the importance these materials held for the maker. In addition, it offered a first step towards jointly exploring a solution to this loss through dialogue during the conversation. (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

Figure 5. *'Retablo', by Mehrdad Rahimi, as presented in the Jacob Geel Museum in the neighbourhood:* Amsterdam, April 2021. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

Figure 6 (top). *Detail with the bycicle:* Amsterdam, April 2021. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

Figure 7 (bottom). *The same detail in the exhibition in the Amsterdam Museum. The missing red parts of the bycicle were rescued, but the black front tire, made of an earring found in the Jacob Geel area, is lost:* Amsterdam, August 2022. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

The examples from the interviews highlight the equal importance of properly presenting and preserving artistic works—both in the case of individual professional artworks and those created within co-creation projects. Professional artists are (or have become) more experienced in articulating how their work should be displayed and treated. However, to ensure equity and balance in co-creation projects, it is essential to engage explicitly in dialogue with co-creators on these matters. Conducting interviews with co-creators can be a valuable tool in this process. Conservators Jane Henderson and Tanya Nakamoto, in *Dialogue in Conservation Decision-Making* (2016), examined cases involving decision-making with diverse stakeholders. Their research revealed that shared decision-making was more commonly applied to matters of heritage appraisal and use—whether for display or storage—than to conservation treatment decisions, even in cases with clearly defined stakeholder involvement.

The Future of the 'Jacob Geel' Stories and Objects

Questions regarding the future of the co-creations included: What would you like to happen to the objects and to the (recorded) stories? Which of the project's creations do you consider most important for a future exhibition on Jacob Geel? In many cases, the stories and objects were strongly interconnected, forming a single, inseparable creation. In addition, stories were presented in audio tours in the presentations. However, asking about stories separately from objects revealed differing perspectives on their accessibility, ownership, and future use.

Stories

Residents reflecting on what should be done with the recorded stories expressed a desire for archiving them to ensure future access. Resident 2, the youngest interviewee, shared: *"Keep it so I can listen to it again when I am old, and that new generations can hear it"*. The artists acknowledged the ongoing effort required for (digital) preservation, emphasising the need to *"transfer, transfer, and transfer it again to keep it accessible"*. Additionally, there is a suggestion to keep the stories in the Amsterdam City Archives, as its primary function is to preserve and provide access to digitised information. Museum staff highlighted the importance of maintaining accessibility within a museum context, aligning with the institution's policy of collecting stories as part of its broader collection.[8]9

Objects in the near and the distant Future

The co-creators expressed varying perspectives on the future of the objects. Unlike stories, which can be shared widely in digital form, physical objects exist in a single location, complicating decisions about their future. Some of the residents indicated that they want to keep their objects at home, while others were open to the museum holding onto them, with the condition that they can reclaim them if the museum no longer wishes to keep them. The participating artists believe that ownership should remain with the residents, with the museum acting as a borrower, both for the residents' objects and the portraits created by the artists. Artist 2 emphasises that keeping objects in residents' homes adds value, as their context is significant. Following the project's presentations, the museum temporarily placed the objects in storage as loans from the co-creators, ensuring their safekeeping for a planned future exhibition showcasing multiple co-creation projects.

To determine which objects should be included in a future exhibition on *Jacob Geel*, interviewees were asked about what they thought would be meaningful to display. Some of the stories and certain objects were highlighted, including a front door of one of the Jacob Geel neighbourhood apartments—a collaborative artwork involving public interaction (Figures 8&9). This door was specifically mentioned by an artist and two museum staff members as an object that could be preserved in the museum's collection. By consulting all co-creation stakeholders on what they consider significant, a curated list of essential objects can be created, whether they remain within the museum or elsewhere.

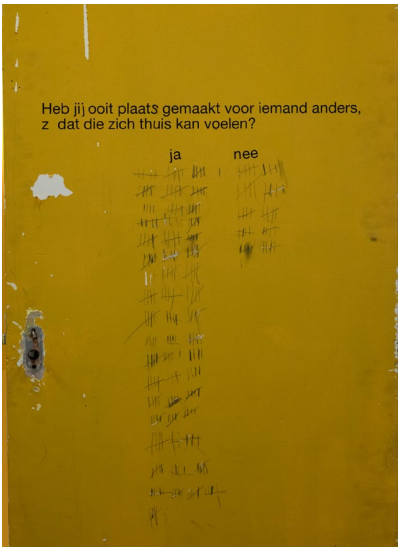Figure 8. *Retablo and door in the Amsterdam Museum:* Amsterdam, 2022. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

Figure 8. *Retablo and door in the Amsterdam Museum:* Amsterdam, 2022. Photograph by: Amsterdam Museum.

"Professional artists are (or have become) more experienced in articulating how their work should be displayed and treated. However, to ensure equity and balance in co-creation projects, it is essential to engage explicitly in dialogue with co-creators on these matters."

When asked about the long-term future of the objects, interviewees often expressed views that differed from their thoughts on the near future. Resident 4 suggested that, over time, it might be best to store the objects in the museum's depot. The maker of the saw, Hadi, mentioned that he might migrate in the future and would like to keep some of his work. However, he felt that the saw (Figures 3 and 4) should remain in Amsterdam, as it is deeply connected to the city. In his view, relocating the object would diminish its significance. Residents 1 and 2 reflected on what might happen in 100 years. Resident 1 envisioned the objects being rediscovered in an attic, while Resident 2 proposed burying them so that they could be unearthed like a time capsule. Resident 1 also emphasised that the Jacob Geel collection could hold meaning for future generations. By preserving these stories and objects, people facing similar challenges a century from now might find connection and solace in them.

Collections at Home and in the Museum
One of the artists acknowledged the importance of preserving meaningful objects created during the project, but also emphasised that *"when objects are part of everyday family life, they hold more value than if they are simply stored away in a museum storage".* As a specialist in collection preservation, I found it rewarding to have informal conversations during the interviews about how to care for objects at home. For many residents, this was a new consideration, and they were open to my advice —fostering a sense of reciprocity within the co-creator interview process. During one interview, I suggested placing a colourful drawing in a darker part of the room, where the television stood, to help prevent rapid discolouration of the drawing. This sparked a humorous discussion about getting rid of the television altogether and instead enjoying the drawing as the room's a focal point. Another resident playfully suggested that he might modify his object over time, adding new elements as a surprise for the museum if it were ever exhibited again. The museum staff interviewed recognised the need to maintain contact with the residents and ensure a smooth transfer of objects to their new apartments. They acknowledged that over time, some drawings might fade faster, remarking matter-of-factly, *"Yes, that's just how it is".*

For this part of the research, it is insightful to briefly examine how the Amsterdam Museum perceives its collection. The museum's guiding principle for its collection is *"of us"*—not in the sense that it belongs to the museum itself, but rather that it belongs to the city of Amsterdam and, by extension, belongs to all its citizens.[10] The museum is responsible for preserving and presenting a collection of over 100,000 objects on behalf

of the city. Within this framework, what is the status of these co-created objects? As museum staff member 2 reflects: *"These objects are in the city, though they may not be part of the museum's collection. Nevertheless, they remain connected to it".*

What I learned from interviewing the co-creators in this project is that if the goal is to keep objects and stories accessible to the museum and future audiences, while they are kept in people's home, it is essential for the museum to maintain contact with the residents and artists. The museum can offer advice on how best to care for the objects within domestic settings. These objects may gain value over time, as more emotions and stories become attached to them while they are part of everyday life—and they may also change, probably more than they would in museum storage. As conservators Farideh Fekrsanati and Helia Marcal (2022, 134) state: Reciprocity is not only *"about access, parity in decision-making processes, or the co-production of conservation as a social activity, but it also relates to a continuous engagement and the development of consistent and meaningful relationships".*

Conclusions

In this article, I aimed to explore whether interviewing co-creators using the artist interview as a framework serves as an effective approach to engage in dialogue about both the works resulting from a co-creation project and the co-creation process itself. Interviews with co-creators from the Jacob Geel project suggest that the Amsterdam Museum's core values of co-creation were embedded in the Jacob Geel project. These values align with concepts found in artist interview and oral history interview methodologies. The interviews offer a window into the perspectives of various stakeholders throughout different project phases and contribute valuable input for shaping future co-creation practices.

Interviewing is not a neutral act; both the interviewer and the interviewee—as well as the interviewer's background and the context in which questions are posed—influence the dynamics of the exchange, making it a critical and reflective practice. More than a tool for evaluation, the interview is inherently co-creative and co-constructive. It not only offers insight into the creators' intentions and expectations, but also serves as a process through which the future of co-created outcomes is actively shaped. In this way, the interview phase should not be viewed as merely retrospective, but as an integral part of the co-creation process itself—one that reinforces its continuous and evolving nature. In my role as a collection and preservation specialist, I was not actively involved in the exhibition

phase of the Jacob Geel Project, but I am a natural partner in its afterlife. The questions I bring to the artist/co-creator interview are inevitably shaped by the museum's responsibilities around object care and the preservation of meaningful legacies.

In future research on co-creative projects, several approaches can be considered and further explored. Conducting interviews with two interviewers from diverse backgrounds may broaden the perspective of the interview — a practice sometimes used in artist interviews. The term 'maker interview' or 'co-creator interview' can be broadened and deepened through further research on the methodology of interviewing participants with a diversity in backgrounds. The valuations of the project by co-creators themselves could be researched in addition to studying the realisation of the Amsterdam Museum's co-creation values, in order to gain more understanding of their personal thought processes and values. Further explorations could involve group interviews or collective assessments to identify key elements for collecting with stakeholders and the most effective methods for implementation. Additionally, I recommend incorporating considerations for the 'post-exhibition' phase, from the outset, in the project design. This approach recognises the time, costs, and sustained relationships necessary to support the ongoing lifecycle of the tangible and intangible results of co-creation projects, turning them into continuing co-creation processes.

"During one interview, I suggested placing a colourful drawing in a darker part of the room, where the television stood, to help prevent rapid discolouration of the drawing. This sparked a humorous discussion about getting rid of the television altogether and instead enjoying the drawing as the room's a focal point."

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Endnotes

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2. When the artists were commissioned by the museum for the project, they made contact with residents, which was a challenge since the project was executed during Covid-19 pandemic. The name of the Jacob Geel neigbourhood, derives from Jacob Geel (1789-1862), a Dutch philologist. 'Geel' means 'yellow' in Dutch, hence the yellow elements in both exhibition designs.

3. Portelli describes equality as follows: "meaning exactly this: speaking to each other not as if the difference (often in terms of status, class, power) did not exist, but rather recognizing it and endeavoring to communicate across and beyond, prefiguring a utopian world in which difference may not mean inequality" (Portelli 2018, 243). This interpretation closely aligns with the value of equity as expressed by the Amsterdam Museum.

4. I have interviewed approximately one third of the residents and half of the artists who were actively involved in the project. The artists do not always identify solely as artists; some refer to themselves as storytellers, makers, or use other terms. In this research, I use the terms 'artists' and 'residents' to distinguish between their different roles, although everyone in the project participated as a maker or co-creator.

5. Transcription was done with different automated transcription systems and afterwards relistened and corrected by hand. The interviewees all gave their consent to the interviews by subscribing a form. The quotes are translated from Dutch in English, with the aid of ChatGPT to remain close to the text in Dutch.

6. In this project, the transport of the objects was not executed by professional art handlers or museum staff of the collection management department.

7. In this case, the form of presentation was reflected on after the exhibion was held, during the interview. But

it is better to have dialogues and agreements on how to present objects before designing exhibitions. As this is one of the first co-creations projects, this was part of a learning process on how to work together through all stages of the project.

8   Some of the recordings are online: hart.amsterdam/ nl/page/1299727/jacob-geel-museum (in Dutch).

9   Some of the recordings are online: hart.amsterdam/ nl/page/1299727/jacob-geel-museum (in Dutch).

10   See for more information: amsterdammuseum.nl/en/about-us.

Decolonial Activism and Spatial Transformation in Berlin

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Abstract

This paper expands on research in memory activism and decolonial urban transformation by analyzing artistic and activist reinterpretations of Berlin's colonial monuments, focusing in particular on the Bismarck Monument and the Humboldt Forum. While prior scholarship has centered on the historical and material dimensions of these structures, the transformative role of artistic interventions and decolonial activism in reshaping them into spaces of resistance and co-created memory remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the research applies Edward Soja's Thirdspace model (1996), drawing on discourse analysis, spatial mapping, and digital ethnography. Artistic projects and decolonial activities (protests, performances, etc.) are examined as critical interventions that generate counter-memories and reconfigure urban space through embodied performance, dialogue, and collaborative engagement. By tracing how these practices transform colonial monuments into contested, lived Thirdspaces, this study contributes to critical urban geography and decolonial studies, foregrounding spatial justice and collective memory formation in the postcolonial city.

Introduction

As a city built on multiple historical layers, Berlin serves as a center for decolonial activism which seeks to dismantle colonial power traces present within the city's spaces. Recent movements led by grassroots organizations alongside artists and academics focus on transforming colonial monuments and other contested sites into spaces for discussion and transformation through resistance (Pinder, 2005). This study explores the transformation of Berlin's public memory through decolonial activism which uses co-creative methods to contest established historical narratives while promoting inclusive urban environments.

Decolonial activism within this framework represents joint initiatives dedicated to the destruction of ongoing colonial frameworks and narratives in modern society. This activism operates within the framework of decoloniality developed by Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano1 to challenge colonial legacies while creating knowledge spaces and cultural interactions that transcend colonial influences (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Quijano, Mignolo, Segato, and Walsh, 2024). Through their interventions decolonial activists in Berlin convert colonial monuments and institutions from oppressive symbols to active sites for critical exploration and alternative stories.

The core idea of this research involves decolonial space which defines both physical and symbolic sites where colonial legacies undergo active contestation and reinterpretation. These spaces serve as resistance sites where activists and artists use multiple tactics such as protests and educational programs along with artistic installations to dispute mainstream historical interpretations. Activists and artists generate alternative narratives that reshape collective memories by adding new interpretations to existing colonial structures.

Co-Creation

Co-creation functions as a joint meaning-making process which brings together activists, artists, local communities and scholars to transform contested spaces. Through critical engagement with colonial monuments co-creation introduces new perspectives that reflect the experiences of marginalized communities instead of removing these structures. This participatory approach challenges traditional top-down narratives and fosters a more democratic form thif public history. Beyond formal protest, co-creation in this study also includes dialogic interventions such as counter-tours and collaborative art-making, everyday spatial practices like gathering, resting, or performing in exclusionary spaces, and ephemeral acts that symbolically re-inscribe public memory through slogans, banners, and

performances. Crucially, these spaces of resistance also become spaces of belonging, especially for diasporic and immigrant communities with lived or inherited experiences of colonization, where collective mourning and resistance create shared purpose and a sense of home. In this way, the urban landscape is reimagined as a living archive, responsive to the multicultural and postcolonial dynamics of the contemporary city.

In this paper, co-creation is understood not only as collaborative artistic production among activist groups but as a broader participatory ethos that includes bystanders, local communities, and even institutional actors. The "co" signals a processual and relational mode of spatial author-ship, where memory is not imposed but continually negotiated. Through such shared engagement, public space becomes a site of plural storytelling, where counter-histories and collective futures can be imagined side by side.

Case Studies

The paper focuses on two emblematic sites of colonial memory in Berlin: the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument2. Both are central to the city's colonial urban fabric, yet they differ in architectural form, institution-al function, and modes of public engagement. The Humboldt Forum stands as a state-funded endeavour to reinterpret imperial history through cultural programming and curated narratives inside the restored former Prussian palace structure. The Bismarck Monument3 stands as an untouched mon-ument from 19th-century imperial Germany which represents a lasting symbol of national memory. These two monuments together offer a com-parative framework for analyzing how Berlin's monument landscape today displays colonial histories through space and discourse. But before we delve into the analysis section, let me clarify why both of these sites have been termed monuments in the title and throughout the paper.

Monuments are often seen as grand, lasting structures that commem-orate people, events, or ideals - anchoring dominant historical narratives and projecting permanence (Stevens et al., 2012). While the term "monu-mental" evokes significance and scale, its Latin root *monēre* - to remind or warn - reveals a deeper function: monuments not only honor (Ehrenmal) or commemorate (Denkmal), but also admonish (Mahnmal), urging reflection and responsibility.

Not all sites of memory are formally recognized as monuments, yet they may still function monumentally. The Humboldt Forum, though not a heritage-listed structure, evokes imperial grandeur and occupies symbolic space at the heart of Berlin. As a reconstructed palace, it projects colonial

memory and reinforces national narratives, operating as a site of ideological power despite lacking official monument status.

Therefore, the Humboldt Forum becomes an ideal subject for this study, not in spite of, but because of its ambiguous status. Its monumental presence without official monumentality blurs the boundaries between museum, memorial, and political symbol, illustrating the tensions inherent in urban memory-making. In parallel, the Bismarck Monument serves as a more traditional and explicit example of imperial commemoration, towering physically and ideologically over Berlin's public space. These two sites, among the most frequented colonial landmarks by visitors to Berlin - one a reconstructed palace-turned-cultural center, the other a literal statue of colonial power - allow for a comparative exploration of how decolonial activism intervenes across different scales and forms of urban memory.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* theory to examine how decolonial activism transforms Berlin's colonial monuments into dynamic arenas of contestation and co-creation (Soja, 1996). Soja's spatial triad offers a layered understanding of space: Firstspace refers to the tangible elements of our surroundings, such as buildings or monuments in this case; Secondspace deals with the symbolic meanings and ideological narratives connected to the physical spaces such as colonial pride or national identity; and Thirdspace develops from actual lived experiences which contest or reinterpret dominant narratives through protests, performances, or creative interventions. The framework shows us that historical sites are not static relics but are continually transformed through engagement, becoming spaces of resistance, negotiation, and reimagining.

Thirdspace extends beyond material and representational space by demonstrating how lived experiences and resistance contribute to evolving meanings of space over time. While some may question the continued relevance of a theory developed in the 1990s - particularly in light of more recent approaches emphasizing digital spatialities, affect theory, or urban infrastructure, these newer frameworks often overlook the grounded, relational negotiations that are central to co-creation and decolonial praxis.

Thirdspace thus remains uniquely well-suited to this study's aims. It provides a critical lens to trace how colonial-era spaces become sites of symbolic resistance, counter-memory, and negotiated belonging - key dynamics in processes of co-creation within the contemporary city. By illuminating how colonial legacies persist in built form but are continually

re-scripted through public engagement, Thirdspace is essential for under-standing co-created memoryscapes (Macdonald, 2013) in urban life today.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology to understand how decolonial activism reclaims and transforms colonial urban landmarks in Berlin. It combines archival research, discourse analysis, and digital ethnography to trace both historical narratives and contemporary interventions at key sites like the Humboldt Forum. Informed by Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* theory, the study maps how official space and lived space collide to produce contested geographies of memory.

However traditional historical or architectural approaches often focus solely on state-sanctioned narratives or material structures, neglecting how publics engage, disrupt, or reimagine space through activism. Such approaches also fail to capture the dynamic and symbolic layering intro-duced by grassroots movements and migrant communities.

For this reason, this methodology centers activist cartographies, pro-test ephemera, performance traces, and online critiques - including blogs, podcasts, and participatory tours - as vital sources. Field visits and spatial analysis of protest sites help visualize how co-created memory emerges out-side, around, and even within institutional borders. By mapping both curated and counter-routes through and around the Forum, this research highlights how urban space becomes an arena of negotiation, resistance, and shared meaning-making, aligning with the broader theme of co-creation in cities.

Its continued use in critical urban studies and decolonial scholarship speaks to its robustness, especially when examining cities not only as sites of governance and infrastructure but as arenas of lived contestation and co-produced futures.

Analysis

While the two chosen cases are distinct in form and context, they are ana-lyzed through the same spatial framework - Edward Soja's triadic model of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace - which allows for a comparative understanding of how spatial power, representation, and resistance unfold. Rather than repeating the theoretical framing for each site, this section explores each spatial dimension thematically across both cases, enabling a clearer view of their contrasts and intersections.

Firstspace: Materiality and Official Function

The Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument each play significant roles in Berlin's urban and monument landscape. They serve as significant physical markers of Germany's colonial history. Their forms and institutional functions lay a foundation for understanding how colonial power is displayed spatially within the city. It also showcases how these sites continue to influence public memory and urban contestation.

The Humboldt Forum is an architectural reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, a symbolic representation of Prussian imperial power. The grand Baroque façade, alongside its massive size and position on the Museum Island, creates a lasting impression of Germany's imperial past. The Forum's purpose as a cultural institution dedicated to intercultural exchange and examining Germany's colonial past faces criticism because its reconstruction promotes colonial nostalgia while failing to adequately confront colonial legacies (Larios, 2020; Bishara, 2020; Klinkenberg, 2021). The central position of The Forum in Berlin's museum district, as well as its large size, boosts its symbolic authority in a way that aligns it with major institutions such as the Pergamon Museum, which also receives criticism for its colonial-themed exhibits. Despite its modernized design elements, such as the glass walkways and contemporary exhibition spaces, the Humboldt Forum's architectural restoration reflects a longing for Prussian imperial splendor rather than a critical reassessment of imperial history (Oltermann, 2022). Yet its scale, central location, and decorative symbolism - including imperial motifs - signal an enduring nostalgia for Prussian power and Germany's colonial past. Activists argue that the Forum's location at Berlin's core reinforces the narratives of Germany's colonial history that it desperately tries to avoid. Thus, the Forum serves as a Firstspace which sustains colonial ideologies through its physical presence, even though it claims to promote postcolonial discussions.

Likewise, the Bismarck Monument acts as a lasting representation of Germany's imperial legacy. The monument, built in 1901, honors Otto von Bismarck, whose policies, among others, paved the way for Germany's imperial expansion. The monument's 15-meter height and the imposing figure of Bismarck, adorned in military uniform and surrounded by allegorical sculptures of power, emphasize his role in shaping German nationalism and imperialism (Landesdenkmalamt Berlin, 2024). The monument's physical prominence in Berlin's Tiergarten district positions it as an enduring symbol of the nation's imperial past. At the monument's base, the inclusion of allegorical figures - such as Atlas holding a globe and an Egyptian sphinx - serves to underscore Bismarck's role in European colonial

"Despite its modernized design elements, such as the glass walkways and contemporary exhibition spaces, the Humboldt Forum's architectural restoration reflects a longing for Prussian imperial splendor rather than a critical reassessment of imperial history (Oltermann, 2022)."

activities, particularly during the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which divided Africa among colonial powers (Sharma, 2018). Yet, the monument lacks a nuanced representation of the violence and exploitation associated with Bismarck's imperial policies. Today, the Bismarck Monument remains largely unaltered, maintained by the city's heritage preservation authorities without significant critical intervention or reinterpretation. This material presence unchallenged by contextual historical information, makes it a site that commemorates German imperial achievements without addressing the violent legacies of those actions (Massey, 2005)

Both sites - through their architectural design and public positioning - embody the power of Firstspace to reflect and reinforce dominant historical narratives. The Humboldt Forum's reconstruction of the Berlin Palace reasserts the symbolism of imperial power in the heart of Berlin's cultural district, while the Bismarck Monument stands as a towering tribute to the founder of the German Empire. Despite their distinct functions - one as a museum of cultural exchange, the other as a monumental commemoration - their material forms continue to sustain colonial memory by anchoring public space in a past that is both imperial and exclusionary. As such, these spaces serve as Firstspaces where contested colonial histories are not merely remembered, but also spatially embodied, asserting their ongoing presence in the urban environment.

Secondspace: Symbolic Narratives and Curated Histories

The Secondspace of the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument refers to the symbolic meanings and historical narratives embedded in these sites. Both monuments, while vastly different in their material forms, serve as vessels for national memory, ideological messaging, and colonial symbolism. The curatorial frameworks that surround these sites shape how the public engages with and interprets their histories, and in turn, reveal the contested ways in which colonial legacies are negotiated in the present. The ways these monuments present these symbols - through design, and institutional rhetoric - inform the public's understanding of Germany's historical legacy, particularly regarding nationalism, empire, and the ongoing process of decolonization.

The Humboldt Forum: Ideological Messaging and Curatorial Intentions

The Humboldt Forum's Secondspace is shaped by a state-sanctioned narrative that attempts - but ultimately fails - to critically reckon with Germany's colonial past. While the institution presents itself as a site of intercultural dialogue and historical reflection, its reconstructed imperial architecture

- most notably the Prussian dome, lantern, and golden cross - signals continuity with imperial ideologies (DW, 2020; Klinkenberg, 2021). These design choices reinforce the symbolic authority of monarchy, Christianity, and European dominance, embedding colonial nostalgia into the very structure of the building. As a reconstruction of a royal palace, the Forum echoes the glorification of empire and colonialism, even as it purports to offer critical engagement with that history (Bommers, 2022; Stan, 2022; Dorgerloh, 2021; Grenier and Hucal, 2021; Pawlata, 2024; Stadtmuseum Berlin, 2024).

The institution's exhibitions and cultural programming position it as a space for confronting Germany's colonial past, yet many activists argue that the representation of non-Western perspectives remains marginal and insufficient (Larios, 2020). The Forum's curatorial language further reflects a Eurocentric worldview: although non-European artifacts are displayed, they are frequently framed through Western categories such as science, civilization, and progress - obscuring the violent colonial processes through which many objects were acquired. The Forum's neutral display of colonial-era objects including human remains seized during Germany's colonial rule obscures their violent origins which demonstrates a disconnect between its declared decolonial mission and actual curatorial practice (Heller and Pablo Nina, 2023). Attempts to introduce postcolonial critique - such as through selected contemporary artworks - often lack depth and integration, appearing tokenistic and ultimately reinforcing, rather than disrupting, dominant narratives (Stan, 2022). Additionally, the institution's naming after the Humboldt brothers - figures closely tied to imperial exploration - further entangles its identity with colonial epistemologies (Dege, 2021).

Although the institution claims to confront Germany's colonial history critically through its practices, opponents claim that building an imperial palace without sufficient historical context preserves colonial structures instead of deconstructing them. Activists point out based on Achille Mbembe and Walter Rodney's critiques that this architectural restoration functions beyond historical commemoration by continuing to uphold present-day colonial power systems (Mbembe, 2019; Rodney, 2018).4 The Humboldt Forum represents what Mbembe describes as the "postcolony," because it shows how colonial structures stay intact through rearticulation instead of being eliminated. Together, these elements construct a curated Secondspace that reproduces imperial memory under the guise of critical engagement, sustaining Eurocentric authority within an institution that claims decolonial intent.

"Both, Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument not only materialize imperial memory, but they also become dynamic arenas for decolonial activism."

The Bismarck Monument: Nationalism, Imperialism, and Absence of Context
In contrast, the Bismarck Monument stands as both a tribute to Otto von Bismarck's work in uniting Germany and as a representation of the expansionist ideologies that drove European imperialism toward the end of the 19th century. The statue celebrates militarism and nationalistic values through allegorical figures that emphasize Bismarck's military power and accomplishments in line with German imperial ambitions. The Landesdenkmalamt Berlin revealed that the monument became part of the National Socialist vision for an imperial "forum of the Empire" which highlighted its ideological connections to imperial and authoritarian state-building projects (Landesdenkmalamt 2021).

Unlike the Humboldt Forum, which has been reconstructed, the Bismarck Monument remains untouched and uncontextualized in curatorial terms. Today, the monument stands as an uncontested relic, with its grand size and imperial symbols buttressing the narratives of national unity and power. This showcases the longstanding and persistent connection between nationalist sentiment and military power, deeply embedded within colonial ideologies. The lack of explanatory signs or alternative historical narratives at the monument demonstrates the ongoing influence of symbolic power in Berlin's collective remembrance. Bismarck's representation as a perfect symbol of national power maintains imperial authority's glorification and state dominance.

Despite the relocation and partial modification over time, this did not result in any significant critical examination of the monument. This curatorial silence allows it to persist as a Secondspace that perpetuates nationalist and imperial ideals. The failure of institutions to respond to activist demands for contextual plaques and educational programming demonstrates how selective memory serves nationalist pride while ignoring colonial violence legacies. This Secondspace, therefore, functions to honor military power and national identity through imperial symbolism while deliberately ignoring the destructive aftermath of colonialism.

Comparative Analysis: The Persistent Ideology of Empire and Nationalism
Both the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument represent competing narratives of German national identity and history through their association with imperial power. The Secondspace of these sites plays a fundamental role in demonstrating how symbolic messages and national identity remain influenced by past imperial legacies. Despite its role as a critical space for analyzing colonial history the Humboldt Forum's architecture and exhibitions alongside its name reveal the ongoing impact of

imperial values. The Bismarck Monument remains a steadfast representation of imperial pride that perpetuates Germany's military and national glory in contemporary public awareness.

Humboldt Forum's programming aims to decolonize, yet fails institutionally to eliminate imperial narratives which proves how deep-rooted imperial ideologies still affect curatorial methods. On the other hand, the Bismarck Monument stands outside the scope of ongoing discussions and continues to celebrate imperial history without facing any critical scrutiny. Its 2021 restoration without any addition critical educational programming or reflective plaques is a clear example of that.

Ultimately, both sites demonstrate how national monuments function as influential means of ideological communication while preserving imperial and colonial symbols without enough critical examination. The Humboldt Forum's architectural symbolism and imperial imagery of the Bismarck Monument serve to sustain national identity while leaving colonial and imperial history complexities largely unexplored.

Thirdspace: Lived Resistance and Co-Creation

Monuments are often perceived as static structures, anchored in stone and ideology, representing a fixed version of the past. And yet, as Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace demonstrates, space is never neutral nor settled - it is constantly reshaped through lived experiences, symbolic contestations, and embodied practices (Soja, 1996). The same is applicable to the two cases discussed here. Both, Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument not only materialize imperial memory, but they also become dynamic arenas for decolonial activism. Activists, artists, and scholars have begun transforming these monuments into Thirdspaces: contested zones where dominant narratives are unsettled and plural memories are performed, inscribed, and negotiated.

This section explores how the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument function not merely as architectural remnants of empire, but as lived arenas of resistance and co-creation. Through artistic intervention, performance, satire, and counter-mapping, both sites are reimagined as spaces where history is not simply remembered - but re-authored.

Humboldt Forum: Co-Creating a Memoryscape-in-Motion

The Humboldt Forum positions itself as a space for cultural dialogue and critical reflection on Germany's colonial past, and it draws on the language of postcolonial engagement in its exhibitions and programming. However, its Baroque reconstruction of the Prussian palace - crowned with a golden cross and saturated with imperial symbolism - reinforces the spatial

authority of colonial nostalgia. In response, activist organizations have unified to dispute the Forum's self-portrayal and disrupt its hegemonic framing. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum (CCWAH), formed in 2013, directly opposed the Berlin Palace reconstruction, arguing that the project perpetuated imperialist ideologies (Bishara, 2022). Campaigns such as *"I Won't Participate Because…"* encouraged cultural workers to publicly refuse involvement with the Forum, signaling a widespread refusal of complicity. Around the same time, No Humboldt 21! drew explicit links between the Forum's establishment and Germany's colonial history, launching protests and informational campaigns to critique the institution's failure to reckon with its imperial entanglements (No Humboldt 21!, 2013). In 2021, Decolonize Berlin launched the 'Defund the Humboldt Forum!' campaign, demanding that public funding be redirected toward inclusive, community-led cultural spaces (Decolonize Berlin, 2021). These interventions map a critical Thirdspace - not curated by institutions, but co-created through dissent, multilingual slogans, satirical performances, and symbolic refusals.

From its construction phase to its grand opening, the Humboldt Forum became a target of persistent decolonial intervention (Küçük, 2020). Early activist campaigns - employing slogans, banners, and performances - transformed the space into a public stage of critique. This is where Thirdspace becomes palpable: the Forum's Secondspace imaginary, which sought to control meaning through architectural nostalgia and state-sanctioned narratives of "learning," was continually ruptured by Thirdspace practices that rejected this sanitized vision of empire. Posters declaring, *"677 million Euro contribution to the commodification of colonial history,"* or *"I won't participate because you don't listen,"* pierced the Forum's neutral self-image. Activists not only protested the building and its contents but actively subverted its institutional logic. They refused token participation, insisting instead on structural transformation.

This resistance was multilingual and transnational: slogans appeared in English (~65%) and German (~35%), signaling diasporic, BIPOC, and migrant solidarities. The movement was not merely reactive - it was co-creative. Performances included chants like *"What goes up must come down,"* referencing both the palace's reconstructed cross and the broader call to decenter imperial nostalgia. Satirical refusals - *"I won't participate because decolonial discourse happens elsewhere,"* or *"I'm tired of waiting for these collections to decolonize me"* - captured the emotional exhaustion of symbolic inclusion without justice.

Activists targeted multiple spatial and symbolic layers of the site in their interventions. The architecture of the Humboldt Forum - particularly its reconstructed Prussian façades and the golden cross atop the dome - was not viewed as neutral heritage, but rather as a spatial assertion of imperial dominance. Similarly, the collections housed within, including human remains, looted artifacts, and ethnographic displays, were critically reinterpreted through counter-tours and educational materials as instruments of colonial violence. Beyond the physical and curatorial dimensions, the institution itself became a focus of critique. Referencing Audre Lorde's assertion that *"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"* protesters highlighted the fundamental contradiction of attempting to achieve decolonial justice within an imperial framework.
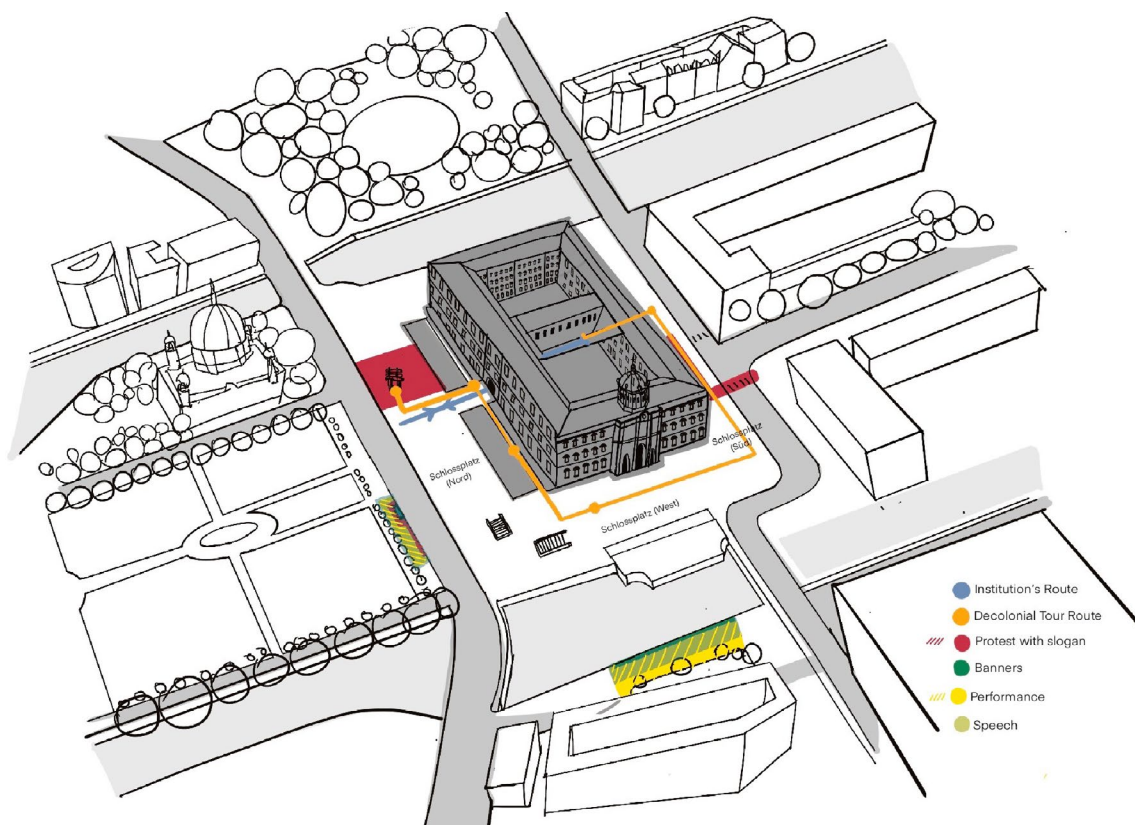
Figure 1. *Decolonial Activism Overlay Map of Humboldt Forum,* 2025.
Illustration by: Prarthana Narendra Hosadurga

Over time, resistance evolved from street-level interventions (before the opening of the Humboldt Forum) to distributed discursive practices: blogs, podcasts, and critical tours now guide visitors through counter-narratives. Today, the Dekoloniale Stadtführung (Decolonial City Tours) leads groups around the Forum, beginning at the Sanchi Stupa gate at the front, and continuing through spaces like Schloßplatz West and Schloßplatz Süd.

These routes resist the state-curated "visitor journey" and replace it with a decolonial choreography of memory (fig.1).

In this way, the Humboldt Forum becomes more than a museum - it becomes a memoryscape-in-motion, as activists re-script its spatial narrative through layered engagement. Rather than a static monument, it is now a site of contestation, refusal, and creative reimagining. Soja's Thirdspace is not just a conceptual model here; it is enacted through walking tours, performative refusal, embodied satire, and situated knowledge. The Forum is no longer a singular representation of imperial nostalgia - it is a polyphonic terrain where competing futures are performed, mourned, and co-authored.

These decolonial interventions thus co-created counter-narratives not only through protest but also through shared storytelling, multilingual dialogue, and public pedagogy. Participants ranged from artists and activists to teachers, students, cultural workers, and residents with migratory backgrounds - collectively reclaiming the Forum's imperial façade as a space of voiced resistance. Many artists themselves embodied multiple identities, blurring the lines between activist, migrant, and community member. Their presence was never solitary: they acted in concert with broader publics who, through their participation, helped shape a collective language of remembrance and critique. As one organizer noted, "*This is not just a protest. This is where we meet, remember, and imagine otherwise*". In these gatherings, the plaza became more than a site of opposition - it emerged as a shared platform where spatial and emotional belonging was actively forged through co-presence and exchange.

Community members held posters with messages like "*The voice of my ancestors is trapped inside the building!*" , voicing a powerful sense of intergenerational memory and affective connection. These were not abstract slogans or symbolic gestures alone - they arose from lived histories of displacement, marginalization, and inherited trauma. Here, resistance became a mode of belonging: a way to claim space, assert presence, and inscribe diasporic memory into the city's public sphere.

Bismarck Monument: Artistic Disruption and the Co-Production of Memory

The Bismarck Monument, Berlin's largest imperial statue' sheer scale and symbolic weight had for decades rendered it immune to public challenge. However, recent artistic interventions have reclaimed this monument not through direct protest alone, but through what Soja would recognize as deeply spatial, affective, and collaborative Thirdspace practices. Projects like 'Monumental Shadows' by Various & Gould, in collaboration with Colonial Neighbours of SAVVY Contemporary, transformed the mon-

ument from a static object into a processual, participatory site of critical memory (Savvy Contemporary, 2021). 'Shadow One' involved physically wrapping Bismarck's figure in a paper-mâché cast, disrupting the monument's aesthetic dominance and re-scripting its symbolism. This act was not simply about visual obstruction - it embodied artistic labor, emotional risk, and civic confrontation. Passersby reacted in varied ways - some with curiosity, others with hostility - highlighting the monument's contested place in Berlin's public consciousness5. These reactions are not incidental - they form part of the co-creative process, where memory is shaped through confrontation, dialogue, and emotional investment in public space.

The intervention extended beyond the statue's surface: artists performed on-site, worked on scaffolding, and engaged the public in spontaneous dialogue. The space surrounding the monument, typically structured to honor and elevate Bismarck, was instead populated by working bodies, defiant materials, and emotional expressions. Here, the monument became porous - a site where historical authority collided with ephemeral disruption. As one participant noted, the work involved confronting verbal slurs, institutional pushback, and the emotional toll of engaging in public critique. These tensions exemplify Thirdspace not as harmony, but as a fraught and fertile ground where new meanings are forged through encounter and friction.

Importantly, 'Monumental Shadows' resisted spatial and temporal closure. Following its first iteration at Großer Stern (Schmitt, 2021), subsequent 'shadows' unfolded across Berlin. 'Shadow Two' at Nettelbeckplatz involved live performances that reactivated the space through embodied engagement. 'Shadows Three and Four', hosted at SAVVY Contemporary, extended the intervention into discursive space through public workshops and panel discussions. 'Shadow Five' circulated the project digitally and in print through media coverage and interviews (Hosadurga, 2024).

This iterative mapping created a networked Thirdspace - an evolving geography of memory that expanded beyond the monument's physical site. Rather than a singular confrontation, the project became a distributed, relational, and dialogic reimagining of how public memory circulates in urban space. And these Shadows were not merely artist-led events but co-created platforms where participants from diasporic communities, passersby, and local residents contributed stories, gestures, and questions, shaping both the form and meaning of the intervention.

A parallel example is 'Demythologize That History and Put It to Rest', which brought together artists from Angola, Cameroon, Gabon, Iraq, Mozambique, and Portugal (Savvy Contemporary, 2018). At the Bismarck site,

Wathiq Gzar's visceral performance used his body as archive and medium, confronting the statue not with slogans but with presence - making the monument briefly responsive to histories it was never built to acknowledge. These acts were not only critiques; they were inhabitations of the monument - placing new narratives in its shadow, and revealing how Thirdspace opens up even within the most seemingly closed sites.

Importantly, the artistic strategies did not occur in peripheral locations (fig.2). They occupied the monument's front-facing forecourt - the same space designated for tourist admiration and national commemoration. This
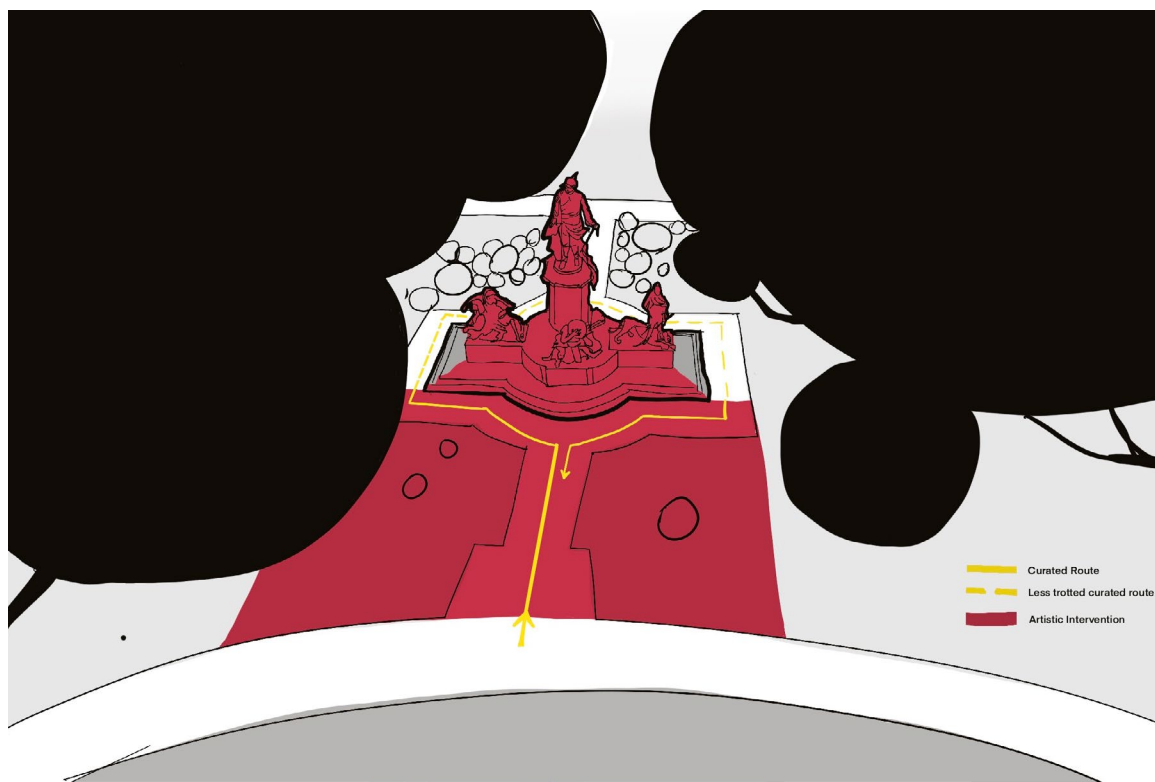
Figure 2. *Decolonial Activism Overlap Map of Bismarck Monument in Berlin,* 2025. Illustration by: Prarthana Narendra Hosadurga

spatial overlap creates what might be called critical friction: official and counter-spatial practices colliding within the same physical footprint. The monument's spatial authority is not erased, but rewritten - layered with contradictions, dialogues, and vulnerabilities.

Through these cumulative interventions, the Bismarck Monument is no longer a fixed relic of nationalist nostalgia. It becomes a living crucible of public affect, transnational critique, and collaborative memory. As Soja's Thirdspace implies, this is not about replacement, but coexistence - where permanence and protest, glorification and grief, are allowed to sit uncomfortably together.

Comparative Analysis: Divergent Forms, Shared Struggles

The Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument differ in architectural form, institutional role, and visibility - and their spatial politics reflect these differences. As a state-supported cultural institution the Humboldt Forum demonstrates an internal critique of colonialism but maintains its imperial architectural design. The building's dual nature provides activists with powerful opportunities to protest against inconsistencies between its progressive statements and its historical design. The Bismarck Monument, in contrast, stands physically unchanged yet symbolically exposed due to artistic interventions. While the Forum is contested through protest and discourse, the Monument is reimagined through embodied, ephemeral acts of art and performance.

Therefore, both sites operate as Thirdspaces, but they do so through distinct spatial grammars: the Forum as a dialogic battlefield of public dissent, counter-memory, and institutional critique; the Monument as a porous platform for transnational collaboration and artistic re-inscription. What unites them is the way they are inhabited - not just physically, but symbolically and emotionally - by communities seeking justice, remembrance, and spatial transformation. Together, they demonstrate how urban colonial remnants can be radically repurposed, not by removal alone, but by occupying their meanings and rewriting their futures through co-creative, lived resistance.

Both the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument reveal the transformative potential of Thirdspace to challenge, re-script, and pluralize spatial meaning. While their original forms - one as a reconstructed Prussian palace, the other as a towering nationalist statue - serve as physical embodiments of imperial authority, they have been reinhabited and reinterpreted in different rhythms and registers by marginalized voices through performative and artistic intervention. The Humboldt Forum has become a memoryscape-in-motion, where multilingual protests and critical tours expose the limits of institutional narratives. The Bismarck Monument, while less continuously engaged, has been reconfigured at key moments through artistic labor, embodied performance, and spatial co-presence into a collaborative archive of critique. In both cases, Thirdspace is not a metaphor but a lived methodology - enacted through satire, scaffolding, song, and storytelling. These spaces thus cease to be passive containers of colonial memory and instead become active stages of public imagination, where competing histories coexist and where the future of urban memory is being continuously renegotiated.

"The space surrounding the monument, typically structured to honor and elevate Bismarck, was instead populated by working bodies, defiant materials, and emotional expressions. Here, the monument became porous - a site where historical authority collided with ephemeral disruption."

Conclusion: Co-Creation as Decolonial Praxis in Contested Urban Memoryscapes

The Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument exemplify how co-creation, when mobilized by activists, artists, and scholars, can disrupt dominant narratives and challenge the spatial legacies of empire. Both sites are embedded in Berlin's colonial history, yet they have been transformed into arenas of critical engagement where historical memory is not passively received but actively renegotiated. While differing in their institutional status and spatial configuration, both have become dynamic sites of resistance and reimagination - Thirdspaces where collaborative interventions unsettle inherited truths and offer space for plural, evolving narratives.

This transformation is not incidental. It is the result of sustained, participatory efforts that collectively re-script urban space. At the Humboldt Forum, grassroots campaigns like No Humboldt 21!, public performances, and alternative tours such as the Dekoloniale Stadtführungen resist the Forum's attempt to aestheticize empire under the guise of intercultural dialogue. Despite its institutional framing as a site of global engagement, the Forum reproduces Eurocentric curatorial practices that marginalize non-Western epistemologies. In response, artists and activists reclaim its forecourt, façades, and exhibition narratives through symbolic refusals, poetic subversions, and dialogic tours - reframing historical narratives and opening the Forum to new perspectives that reflect the experiences of marginalized communities. Projects like 'Schlossaneignung'6 show that co-creation is not merely additive; it fundamentally reorients who gets to author public memory and how that memory is spatially expressed.

Meanwhile, the Bismarck Monument - though lacking formal curatorial engagement - has been similarly transformed through artistic occupation. Projects such as 'Monumental Shadows' and 'Demythologize That History and Put It to Rest' have activated this static symbol of imperial nationalism as a collaborative stage for critique, performance, and reinterpretation. Interventions like wrapping the statue in papier-mâché, staging bodily performances, or developing parallel exhibitions operate as tactile and affective counter-narratives. These are not simply acts of protest but forms of public pedagogy - transforming the monument from a relic of imperial power into a Thirdspace of collaborative re-signification, rooted in shared labor and artistic imagination.

Though these forms of decolonial activism - protests, performances, scholarship, and spatial practices - differ in form and scale, they are not isolated. They interact in complementary, relational ways, generating layered geographies of resistance. Artistic interventions shape sensory and sym-

bolic worlds; grassroots actions maintain political urgency; academic critique informs strategic frameworks. Together, they constitute a co-created ecosystem of decolonial engagement that destabilizes the fixity of imperial memory and opens space for more equitable and plural historical narratives.

Co-creation is not simply about protest or artistic reconfiguration - it encompasses participatory practices that challenge top-down narratives of history. These include ephemeral acts, like performances or the creation of counter-monuments, as well as everyday spatial practices such as gathering, resting, or performing in historically exclusionary spaces. These acts of resistance regardless of their formality, function as strong means to rewrite public memory while cultivating spaces of inclusion for populations who have lived or inherited experiences of colonization.

In this sense, Co-creation supports collective mourning and resistance as well as solidarity among diasporic and immigrant communities whose colonization experiences have been ignored in historical accounts. These areas where resistance takes place become places of belonging because they create a shared purpose and feeling of home within the urban settings. These participatory interventions promote democratic public history by actively celebrating and reclaiming marginalized groups' stories instead of erasing them.

Co-creation serves as both a central theme and an approach to regain control over space, voice and narrative authority. It recasts public monuments and institutions as contested terrains, where power is not only critiqued but redistributed through collaborative meaning-making. In the context of Berlin's colonial memoryscape, co-creation operates as a form of spatial justice: an invitation for those historically excluded to become co-authors of collective memory.

Ultimately, the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument are no longer inert symbols of empire - they are living arenas of co-produced resistance, mourning, and imagination. Through participatory transformation, they shift from Firstspaces of authority and Secondspaces of symbolic control into Thirdspaces where memory is unsettled, multiplicity embraced, and futures collectively envisioned.

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End Notes

1 According to Quijano and Mignolo decoloniality functions as an epistemological effort to break down colonial power structures and restore marginalized ways of thinking and living that Western dominance has suppressed. Decoloniality extends past political decolonization to confront and dismantle the knowledge and power systems that uphold colonial legacies. According to Mignolo decoloniality requires "undoing and redoing" which demands separation from Western knowledge systems along with the formation of new epistemic frameworks. This framework sets out to build spaces that recognize multiple knowledge systems and encourage intercultural respect and teamwork while addressing Eurocentric biases within modern institutions and thinking.

2 While some public discourse and scholarship continues to describe sites like the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument as only indirectly or ambiguously tied to colonialism, such framings risk overlooking their deep symbolic and historical enmeshment with imperial ideology, racial hierarchies, and epistemic violence. The emotional and generational tolls of these spaces - particularly for those descended from formerly colonized communities - underscore their significance within decolonial struggle. This article takes seriously the ways in which communities experience these monuments not as neutral or peripheral, but as persistent agents of colonial memory and trauma.

3 "Bismarck Monument" is interchangeably called "Bismarck Memorial". However, in this article I have intentionally favored "Bismarck Monument," as "memorial" implies a commemorative function that could lend undue legitimacy to the site. Given its contested nature, "monument" more accurately reflects its role as a focal point of critique and decolonial activism.

4 Mbembe views colonial architecture as a materialization of necropolitics, reinforcing exclusion and domination, while Rodney sees it as a means of sustaining economic and ideological control over formerly colonized societies.

5 The analysis draws on interviews conducted with artists and curator Various & Gould of Monumental Shadows and Lynhan Balatbat Helbock of SAVVY Contemporary involved in the intervention.

6 In 2024 the Schlossaneignung Initiative composed of artists and academics presented a petition to the Bundestag to demand better recognition of suppressed histories at the Forum (Rieger, 2024).

Co-Creating Cities: Dynamic Citizenship and its Foundation in Collaborative Argumentation

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Abstract

This paper integrates research on citizenship education and argumentation studies, positing that argumentative dialogue holds the potential to foster dynamic citizenship, which is essential in the co-creation of cities. Our contribution has a dual purpose. Firstly, we discuss the theoretical interrelation between argumentation studies and dynamic citizenship, focusing on the concept of 'collaborative argumentation', and taking the Toolkit for Educating to a Dynamic Citizenship project (TEDYC), addressed to young people aged 12 to 18, as an exemplar of this interrelation. Second, based on qualitative results from a test phase of the TEDYC project, we identify empirically what aspects related to argumentation emerge as prominently important for dynamic citizenship. Based on our findings, we discuss the importance of two aspects: promoting 'inventio' (discovering arguments) and reflecting on the delicate role of non-canonical third participants in argumentative discussions on the co-construction of cities.

Introduction

Beyond any aspects relating to the urban environment, co-creating a city means co-constructing 'citizenship'. Citizenship encompasses participation in a community, based on argumentative discussion (for an elaboration of this concept, see van Eemeren 2018), or argumentative dialogue, which may be defined by the pursuit of reasonableness and respect for all the interlocutors. Just as argumentation spaces cannot be taken for granted but are the result of dialogue spaces being designed (Greco 2018), so too do citizens' communities require co-construction. This demands an effort to "*educate to dynamic citizenship*" (Lupatini 2018). Against this background, the goal of this paper is twofold. Firstly, at the theoretical level, we investigate the connection between argumentation and dynamic citizenship; then, having outlined a theoretical integration of these areas, we present the principles that inspired the design of an ongoing collaborative project entitled Toolkit for Educating to a Dynamic Citizenship (henceforth: TEDYC, www.dynamic-citizenship.ch)1, which is devoted to fostering dynamic citizenship in young pupils aged between 12 and 18. Secondly, at an empirical level, we consider the following research question: based on an initial test phase of the TEDYC project, what are the aspects related to argumentation that emerge as prominently important for dynamic citizenship? To answer this question, in this paper we discuss some qualitative aspects taken from the preliminary findings of the test phase of the project carried out in 2024.

Theoretical framework: Dynamic citizenship and argumentation

The reflection we present in this paper originated in view of two converging streams of research. On the one hand, argumentation competences play a role in the development of dynamic citizenship. On the other hand, from their very beginning, argumentation studies have always focused on the close connection between argumentation and civic participation. These two research streams are discussed in this section.

Citizenship is a polysemic concept, as it can be understood both as a consequence of status and as a matter of choice in terms of one's participation in public life (Audigier 2002, 21; Staeheli 2011, 394). In the latter case, citizenship operates at multiple levels and is constantly evolving (Mouffe 1993, 66; Staeheli 2011, 396). It can therefore be regarded as dynamic, in contrast to the more static conception associated with its status-based definition. When citizenship is conceived as dynamic, citizenship education emphasizes competencies - such as argumentation skills, critical thinking, and decentration - rather than mere factual civic knowledge regarding, for example, the functioning of the political system in a given country. Con-

troversial issues, ambiguous, complex or wicked problems, and socially or politically significant matters, all of which represent distinct but interrelated aspects of open-ended, multi-perspective, and socially constructed challenges, play a crucial role in fostering these competencies (Lupatini 2021).

As Fabre (2022, 8–14) notes, public policy, particularly in the fields of architectural design and urban planning, has provided fertile ground for open-ended and multi-perspective problems. Building on the legacy of the City Beautiful Movement and within the framework of Lyndon Johnson's *Great Society* program, urban planning, especially with regard to public spaces, has evolved into a domain that requires negotiation between multiple stakeholders, including authorities, experts, and citizens, to discuss issues and find common solutions. These issues thus become subjects of public debate, requiring expertise grounded in reasoned argumentation and communicable knowledge. Thus, we might say, the conception of urban planning has been evolving from a strictly Cartesian science to a more Kafkaesque approach to reality.

Argumentation as the reasonable management of disagreement over how to think about public spaces and how to build them is at the center of the co-construction of dynamic citizenship because public space, as Arendt (2003, 96) writes, is the space of the 'Allseitigkeit' (En. 'allsideness'), where it is possible to observe the same social object from different perspectives. Public space is the place where different systems of thought, visions, and ideologies about the functioning and goals of communal life appear and interact (Bedorf & Röttgers 2010; Marchart 2010; Mouffe 2005; Weißeno et al. 2010), including not only experts' recommendations but also citizens' perspectives. It can therefore be considered as the space of the political (Lévy 2013). We claim that the city, and specifically urban public space, is a privileged space for building coexistence, co-production and cooperation; activities which need participants to consider different points of view through argumentation.

In fact, as early as in Aristotle's reflections, at the beginning of the tradition of argumentation studies that originated in ancient Greece, argumentation and the construction of the city were closely linked. Piazza (2015, 9ff) observes that, for Aristotle, the 'logos' (reason and discourse - in a word, argumentation) is intrinsically linked to the social life made possible in the 'polis', i.e. the city, which was the typical form of organization of social life in ancient Greece. Argumentation, thus, makes the organization of the city possible; conversely, citizens learn how to use argumentation through participation in the life of the polis, learning how to live according to values, distinguishing for example between good and bad, or right and wrong, through the use of argumentation (Piazza 2015, 10). Hence, argumentation and the city are inextricably linked.

"Thus, we might say, the conception of urban planning has been evolving from a strictly Cartesian science to a more Kafkaesque approach to reality."

Even though the Aristotelian concept of argumentation has evolved over the centuries, argumentation studies have remained connected to the construction of public debate in the political and public sphere. A clear connection between argumentation and the construction of a public space exists in the 'debate tradition', which is flourishing in different countries. In the English-speaking literature in particular, the tradition of argumentation studies fed into several debate handbooks (Ziegelmuller & Kay 1997), which discuss how to construct issues and what kind of argument schemes can be applied in public debate (see the discussion in Rigotti & Greco 2019, 182-185). Often, debate is seen as a means of fostering a very important aspect of argumentation, namely 'inventio'. In the tradition of rhetoric and argumentation, 'inventio' refers to the capacity to discover appropriate arguments, creatively reflecting and taking into account possible worlds, as well as considering the appropriateness of arguments in relation to other participants in the discussion (Greco & Mazzali-Lurati 2023).

Nowadays, the practice of debating is often conceived of as an exercise for students (for example, high school students), sometimes being used in relation to disciplines or subjects associated with education to citizenship as we have defined it in the preceding section. The existing practice in debate clubs in various countries may sometimes be organized in an adversarial fashion, though not always to the same degree, being organized as competitions, in which only some of the teams can win, while the others lose. The adversarial nature of debate practices, together with their clear organization, can motivate students to engage to the best of their ability. At the same time, however, if the competitive aspect is made too prominent, it risks promoting an idea of argumentation that is exclusively related to a win-lose disputation. While situations of win-lose argumentation do exist in society (for example, in some political contexts, if a candidate wins, the other one will lose), they are not the only form of argumentative discussion that is relevant to social and political life.

In our view, further important insights into the connection between argumentation and life in the political community of a city can be derived from the concept of 'collaborative argumentation', also called 'deliberative argumentation' (Schwarz & Baker 2017), i.e. an argumentative discussion in which different individuals discuss a contested issue in order to find a shared and, ideally, reasonable solution to a common problem on which they disagree. This process also requires them to take into account the social dimension and the emotive components that any relationship inevitably includes. Collaborative argumentation is widespread in the context of public life, including many instances that have to do with collaborative

decision-making in a city; in such contexts, arguers do not normally have the goal of defeating their opponents but of finding a reasonable solution with them. Imagine, for example, an argumentative dialogue between some local associations promoting different interests but working together to improve life in a certain neighborhood; or discussions within a municipality, in which politicians from different parties need to find concrete solutions to improve the life of its citizens. Problem-solving and conflict-resolution mechanisms based on argumentation and established at the community level, such as conflict mediation, are also examples of collaborative argumentation. In all these cases, it is not the adversarial idea of winning one's case that is prominent, but a kind of argumentative dialogue that is oriented towards problem-solving and the building of a reasonable consensus (Greco 2020). It has been argued that argumentative dialogue is often not a given but requires an explicit effort of designing a dialogue space (Greco 2018), sometimes with the help of neutral third parties, who can be formal or informal mediators (Greco 2018; van Bijnen 2020).

In situations of collaborative argumentation, some characteristics of argumentative dialogue become significant personal competencies: for example, the capacity to 'decentrate' and learn that there might be a plurality of equally admissible positions on a given topic; or, again, the capacity to submit one's standpoint to critical scrutiny, offering arguments but also being able to listen and change one's mind (Muller Mirza et al., 2009; Greco, 2020). Notably, other studies that extend beyond the domain of argumentation emphasize the importance of skills that are close to collaborative argumentation, such as the ability to value otherness in all its forms, in an increasingly multicultural and interconnected world, as well as the capacity to tolerate positions considered ambiguous, that is, the ability to face situations, ideas and contexts characterized by uncertainty, complexity or a lack of unambiguous information, without reacting with anxiety, rigidity or rejection (Council of Europe 2018). Taking all this into account, we have considered the concept of collaborative argumentation and its relation to education to citizenship as the core of the project that we are going to discuss in the next sections.

Before moving forward, however, it is important to mention that some recent developments in argumentation studies have considered the fact that increasingly public space can include forms of interaction that are digitalized. Hence, some scholars and organizations have proposed online platforms with the aim of fostering the co-construction of a city in online discussions. Among many existing platforms for enabling democratic debate (for example, Decidim - decidim.org, see Leal García, Calleja-López &

Linares-Lanzman 2023), some have been explicitly inspired by principles of argumentation. A prime example of a platform specifically inspired by argumentation is the deliberative democracy platform Bcause, designed for groups to "*co-create solutions to complex problems by openly discussing them with others*" (bcause.app/, see Anastasiou & De Liddo 2023; see also developments within the ongoing European consortium ORBIS www.orbis-project.eu). Another example of a platform explicitly oriented towards collaborative argumentation and compromise, but designed to be used in educational contexts, is Middle Ground (middleground.nl), designed from an idea by Jan Albert van Laar from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands (van Laar 2021). Our project, which is also intended to be used in educational settings, also features an online platform, although the simulation games can be played in face-to-face interaction as well, depending on the educators' goals.

Principles guiding the simulation games in the TEDYC project
Having outlined the proposed integration of argumentation and dynamic citizenship, which underpins the TEDYC project, we will now discuss how this theoretical basis has guided the construction of the activities within our project. From the very beginning, argumentation studies have comprised both a component of analysis and evaluation of argumentation and a component of construction of good argumentation. Our project clearly sits within the construction element, in line with the concept of dynamic citizenship presented above, and makes use of simulation games, available in both an online and offline version, to foster collaborative argumentation. In general, simulation games are used in citizenship education because they strengthen teamwork and improve compromise skills (Raiser & Warkalla 2011).

In this project, we have proposed two fields of application for our simulations, related to fields that can easily be applied to the students' experience; both cases involve contested issues. The first contested issue is the introduction of a dress code in a school, which requires discussion and a decision-making procedure. The second contested issue is set in the context of a city council discussion, which aims to make a decision on an entrepreneur's plan to convert an abandoned industrial building into holiday apartments. In different ways, both contested issues have to do with communities, with the second simulation being directly related to a city context. Both fall within the domains outlined in the previous section, in which collaborative argumentation is important.

Multiple positions and multiple players are foreseen in each simulation, distinguishing them clearly from one-to-one debates and characterizing our

simulations as clearly 'polylogical' argumentative discussions (Lewiński & Aakhus 2023), i.e. discussions in which "*multiple positions are debated by various players across a number of places*" (Lewiński & Aakhus 2023, viii). Notably, discussions to co-construct life in cities realistically tend to be poly-logues. In the pursuit of collaborative argumentation, students are asked to find a common solution to the contested issue and a moderator (or a small team playing the role of a moderator), selected from among the students, is given the task of attempting to steer the discussion towards reasonable agreement, while encouraging everyone's argumentative contributions.

Methods used to respond to the empirical research question

We now turn to a discussion of the methods adopted to respond to the empirical research question presented in the introduction, namely: what are the aspects of argumentation that emerge as important in dynamic citizenship education? Following a test phase of the games which took place in spring 2024 among lower and upper secondary II levels in certain schools in the Swiss Canton of Ticino, a self-assessment of the simulations was conducted among the pupils and teachers who had participated in the games, using surveys, interviews and focus groups. The results of this test phase, which aimed to verify the appropriateness of the simulation games in relation to the goal of fostering dynamic citizenship, have been presented in previous work (Lupatini & Plata, 2024; Lupatini et al., in press). Subsequently, and based on the results of the test phase, we proposed a second, smaller scale test phase in November 2024; this included a simulation with university students enrolled in an argumentation course, in which we considered the main points that emerged in the test phase.

    At the time of writing this paper (May 2025), the project is about to be finalized and has been proposed to a broader group of teachers and interested educators including the local population, for use in the coming school years. In the next section, we will focus on some prominent qualitative aspects that emerged from the self-assessment. In particular, having introduced the theoretical importance of collaborative argumentation in the intersection between argumentation studies and dynamic citizenship, our research goal in the following section is to identify what aspects of the proposed simulations emerge as being most directly relevant to fostering dynamic citizens through collaborative discussions. Methodologically, these aspects have been identified by means of a qualitative analysis, developed through looking at recurring themes in interviews and focus groups based on a thematic discourse analysis inspired by Bokarova (2016); we also considered open questions which were posed in a survey distributed to the university students who had participated in the simulation.

"Argumentation, thus, makes the organization of the city possible."

Qualitative results from the test phase and current developments:
A platform for building dynamic cities

The results of the test phase, based on self-assessments, generally indicate that the project platform is seen by the participants as a positive tool for reaching the intended goals of learning argumentation to foster an attitude of participation and dynamic citizenship. Given our focus on collaborative argumentation and its importance for building cities, in this section we leave aside the quantitative evaluation, which was discussed in previous work (Lupatini & Plata, 2024; Lupatini et al., in press), and focus instead in particular on two qualitative aspects that emerged prominently in the test phase: namely, the delicate fostering of the capacity of 'inventio' (that is, discovering arguments) in educational simulation games and the crucial role of moderators in collaborative argumentation. Both aspects, in our view, are closely related to the construction of a community in the city as a public space.

The first qualitative focus that emerged is the promotion of participants' capacity to develop their own arguments when thinking about a contested issue, i.e. the concept of inventio, already discussed above as a central notion for the theory and practice of argumentation. This point is particularly important in educational contexts, which are the situations primarily considered in our project. Cities, in fact, are also built by prospective citizens, such as young pupils who may not yet have voting rights. During the test phase, we tried two different versions of the simulations. One included a basic list of arguments for each position, while the other version was issued without arguments having been identified or with a single argument presented as an example. Our results from the test phase indicated that participants tended to prefer the version in which arguments were not already proposed.

Apparently, the suggestions of possible arguments were not seen as a starting point for developing further argumentation but as a replacement of one own's inventio - to the point that one participant said that the simulation became like a theater performance, as everybody knew what to say. Teachers were of a similar opinion. This led us to change the simulation games, prominently proposing the version without arguments. In addition, teachers could be given a blueprint of arguments to suggest to students where necessary. A first emergent result of our project, thus, is the importance of leaving room for students' inventio, which can be seen as part of the process of familiarizing them with dynamic citizenship.

A second qualitative focus that emerged from our test and self-assessment phase is the important role of moderators, who are somehow explicitly given the role of pushing the discussion towards collaborative argumentation.

Moderators do not have a specific cause to defend in the simulations; their task is to bring the group to a common solution. The role of moderators is reminiscent of non-canonical participants in argumentative discussions taking the role of neutral thirds, such as dispute mediators or other informal mediators who play the role of architects of others' argumentative dialogue (Greco 2018), as mentioned in the theoretical discussion above. What emerges from interviews, focus groups and also from the feedback discussions with university students, is that students have noticed the delicate nature as well as the importance of the role of moderators.

Some students who played the role of moderators noticed that ideal argumentative discussions do not necessarily emerge spontaneously, for example because some people do not participate. As one student said: *"It was difficult to make them talk, often they looked at you and remained silent and it was always the same ones who talked"*;[2] another noted that moderators cannot say what they want, arguably because their role is different.[3] Some students enjoyed the role of moderators, as one student noted, highlighting the fact that the role was engaging and placed moderators on a different level to the others:

> *"Well nothing, I've done that, I've been a moderator. I felt more engaged than usual, that is I felt one floor above the others, it was something different anyway. It was an experience that made you think like an adult with smaller kids. Someone who commands in that moment".[4]*

In our view, the metaphors used by this latter student (being "*above the others*" and "*commanding*") do not refer to a position of power; after all, moderators cannot impose a decision on the other participants. These metaphors might be interpreted as referring to non-canonical third party roles: architects of dialogue, in fact, can be seen as "*above*" the others in the sense that they are in charge of managing the discussion process.

Conclusions

This paper has fulfilled two purposes. On the one hand, at the theoretical level, we have discussed the convergence between argumentation studies and the concept of educating for dynamic citizenship, focusing in particular on the importance of collaborative argumentation, to be considered alongside more adversarial forms of debate in the co-construction of social life. On the other hand, we have shown a case study derived from the Toolkit for Educating to a Dynamic Citizenship (TEDYC) project in which these

principles have been put into practice. In this regard, in order to respond to our empirical question about what aspects of argumentation emerge as significant for dynamic citizenship, we discussed some qualitative results derived from a preliminary phase of test and evaluation.

Two prominent aspects emerge as part of collaborative argumentation in the co-construction of dynamic citizenship: the importance of fostering participants' inventio, leaving them free to think about their own arguments, and the delicacy and importance of the role of moderators in the construction of the discussion space. Notably, these results refer us to the basic principles of public deliberation as indicated by Fuji Johnson (2015), namely: inclusion (the involvement of all participants), equality, access to information, reasoning based on factual justifications, the search for consensus, respect, and the guarantee of the integrity of the process (in this case, ideally assured by the moderator). These quality criteria for public deliberation could also be seen as forming part of the guiding principles for argumentative processes such as those created in this case through simulation games.

In particular, more reflection on the role of moderators and other non-canonical third participants in argumentative discussions proved to be one of the key findings of our project in relation to the construction of cities through argumentation. This invites us to reflect on the fact that collaborative argumentation in the construction of a public space is not a given, as we do not always experience collaborative argumentation spontaneously when given room for discussion; the discussion, in fact, can degenerate or develop in directions that are far removed from a reasonable management of disagreement. Such degeneration is even more likely in the context of a polylogue, which discussion in the city necessarily is, because common ground between multiple parties and in multiple venues is more difficult to establish in polylogues (Lewiński and Aakhus 2014, 180).

Hence, the role of a non-canonical third participant who is a sort of 'guardian' of the discussion space (see Perret-Clermont 2015) is as delicate as it is important. Teachers are aware of this delicacy and importance, and often comment on their choice of the students they have selected as moderators, sometimes expressing a preoccupation with the attribution of the moderator role.5 While the role of moderators was not our primary concern when preparing the games, its importance has emerged prominently from the results of the test phase. Arguably, this is due to the polylogical nature of discussions to co-construct the city, which require careful work in designing a dialogue space for argumentation that will unfold according to principles of reasonableness and decentration, as discussed in our theoretical section.

This latter point brings us to a concluding reflection: it might be useful to introduce training for teachers and other educators about the role of non-canonical third participants in a discussion. In this way, any worries or anxiety can be turned into an explicit consideration of the opportunities that such a role offers for public life in the city. This point might be at the center of further reflection, including teachers' and other educators' training sessions relating to dynamic citizenship, to increase awareness about the special role of third persons in co-constructing dialogue spaces in the city.

"What emerges from interviews, focus groups and also from the feedback discussions with university students, is that students have noticed the delicate nature as well as the importance of the role of moderators."

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Endnotes

1   The project TEDYC is funded by Movetia International Program (2022-2025), see Acknowledgement. Project partners are: SUPSI-DFA/ASP (Locarno, Switzerland), USI (Lugano, Switzerland) and planpolitik (Berlin, Germany).

2   Original Italian: 'Era difficile farli parlare, spesso ti guardavano e stavano zitti e parlavano sempre gli stessi'.

3   Original Italian: 'Come moderatrice mi sono trovata in difficoltà perché non potevo dire quello che pensavo'.

4   Original Italian: 'Niente, l'ho fatto il moderatore. Mi sono sentito più convolto del solito, cioè mi sentivo un piano sopra gli altri, era comunque una cosa diversa. C'era un'esperienza che ti portava a pensare come un adulto con dei ragazzi più piccoli. Qualcuno che nel momento comanda'.

5   Original Italian: 'Un ruolo in particolare mi è sembrato un po complicato, eh, quello del moderatore o dei moderatori'.

Graffiti and Heritage: Co-Creating Stories for Inclusive Cities. Example of the Zilvermeeuw in Amsterdam

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Abstract

In 2015, the Zilvermeeuw metro in Amsterdam had its last ride and was taken out of circulation. Two wagons of this metro set have been restored and conserved to become an A-status heritage object. In the restoration process, the graffiti that covered the wagons was removed and the project to make graffiti a part of the Zilvermeeuw's story failed. In line with research considering graffiti as cultural (intangible) heritage and focusing on the meaningful relationship between graffiti and the urban fabric, this paper uses the case of the Zilvermeeuw to illustrate the tensions between heritage authorities and a counterculture such as graffiti. Showing that heritage is about creating a narrative, the paper uses graffiti as a case to emphasise the need for community involvement to achieve fair co-creation of the city.

Introduction[1]

During the Second World War, US soldiers started drawing a small character, its nose peeking on top of a fence or wall, with the writing 'Kilroy was here'. This small graffiti spread with the advancement of the Allies and was helping the troops' morale, as they could see that allied soldiers had been there before. Today, this 'Kilroy was here' graffiti is famous worldwide and is a piece of history. It is engraved on the World War II Memorial in Washington DC, as it now embodies all the US soldiers who served during this war (see Figure 1). This is a good example of how graffiti can become heritage as it holds cultural and historical significance.

Figure 1. *Kilroy Was Here. Engraving on the Washington DC WWII Memorial*: Washington DC 2006. Photograph by: Luis Rubio, via Wikimedia Commons.

Since its modern origins in the 1960s USA (though it goes way back, see Armstrong 2019; Lemoine 2012; MacDowall 2006; Pereira 2005), graffiti (here understood as any painted, sprayed, or written illegal inscription on the urban fabric) is the expression of people from low-class neighbourhoods, who often paint the city walls to escape boredom and to affirm their presence in the cityscape as a marginalised and rebellious population in a time of crisis (Evans 2014; Lemoine 2012). In the Netherlands, graffiti boomed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainly alongside the punk and squatting movements (Dutch Graffiti Library 2019; Middel 2016). In these times characterised by the nuclear threat, economic crisis, and a 'no

future' spirit, "*writing was freedom*" (Middel 2016). On the outside walls of the squats, one could find political slogans, as writing was also a way to make your presence and protest visible in the public space. Indeed, graffiti emerged first in city centres, where "*the message tegen de gevestigde orde*" [translation: *"against the established order"*] could be best seen (Imagine IC et al. 2020, 146). So, marginalised groups such as squatters, feminists, or hooligans took on the graffiti culture to spread their ideas and mark their presence in the streets.

With the growth of the movement throughout the world, different styles appeared, codes and symbols developed, and graffiti became a culture with its own references, social codes, and communities (Evans 2014; Forster et al. 2012; Merrill 2015; Snyder 2006). The places where writers (or 'graffiti writers', people who do graffiti) painted gradually became spaces where their knowledge was exchanged. At the same time, they developed a special relationship with the urban fabric, 'owning' it by writing their names on it. Graffiti writers are both challenged by the urban fabric and challenge it, looking for original locations to spray to get peer recognition. This can also be seen in the extreme case of urban climbing in the practice of 'pixação' in Brazil (for example in Campos and Leal 2021; Lamazares 2017; Larruscahim 2014; TX NOW 2014).

In the context of the dynamic relationship between graffiti and the urban space, this paper is interested in the tensions between graffiti and urban heritage policies. Focusing on the importance of graffiti in socio-cultural urban contexts, including the metro network, this contribution wishes to fuel the debate about the place of non-traditional forms of cultural heritage in current heritage-making processes. Specifically, the article focuses on the co-creation of heritage and the city, understood as a lasting and meaningful collaboration of actors and the involvement of citizens, inviting them to create their city and its historical narrative together. The case of the Zilvermeeuw metro in Amsterdam crystallises the tensions between traditional and non-traditional forms of heritage while triggering a discussion on the role of the heritage expert (as either a person or an institution). Drawing on heritage and urban studies, this analysis aims to understand the extent to which graffiti is cultural heritage, and how it can contribute to a more just co-creation of the city.

Theoretical framework
Heritage and discourse on heritage
The conceptualisation of 'heritage' in the present paper owes to Smith and her pivotal work *Uses of Heritage* (2006). Smith argues that what we

call heritage are actually discourses about heritage (2006). They have a self-realising role because our discourses shape heritage, which in turn shapes our discourses about heritage. Among these discourses, she notably identifies a hegemonic, dominant 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD), meaning that some types of heritages are privileged over others. The AHD takes root in 19th-century national narratives that sustain and legitimise the nation-state; consequently, it focuses on national and elitist heritage at the expense of local and working-class heritage. As such, the AHD is intertwined with identity issues.

The AHD also emphasises the work of experts, such as historians, archaeologists, and state heritage institutions, who are the only ones who could decide what is heritage and how they will handle it (Smith 2006). Heritage, therefore, illustrates Foucault's power/knowledge nexus. This fatally results in dismissing types of heritage that do not fit the experts' perspectives. We also can find this at the international level, as UNESCO has been criticised as a European-centred institution, relying on Western preconceptions of what heritage is and how it should be handled (Boer 2023; Smith 2006). This creates inequalities such as the fact that a lot of UNESCO world heritage sites are found in the Western world – giving the impression that the Global South don't have heritage or an own history. To counter this biased and outdated conceptualisation, experts should share authority in the spirit of a public approach to history and heritage, which acknowledges that everyone has a word to say, that "*everyone [is] a historian*" (Rosenzweig 1998, 177; also see Cauvin 2022; Thelen 1998). This can be done through collaboration and participation practices that give a voice to marginalised communities – and therefore a place for them in history. Through collaboration, the experts acknowledge that their knowledge is situated and not holistic, and that people not traditionally considered as experts may have expertise on specific topics. The role of the experts is still valuable, as they bring contextualisation and share knowledge and skills (Rizzo 2021). However, in the spirit of sharing authority, the experts must also acknowledge that their set of skills should be adapted, specifically when dealing with non-traditional (meaning: outside of the AHD) forms of heritage, such as graffiti. Furthermore, experts and communities together can reflect on what heritage is: not only monuments and sites, but also intangible rituals – like dances or festivals, for example. The focus on intangible heritage since the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage accounts for a wider definition of heritage and, therefore, a fairer and more complete discourse on heritage, including dissonant perspectives.

"Experts should share authority in the spirit of a public approach to history and heritage, which acknowledges that everyone has a to say, that '*everyone [is] a historian*.'"

Consequently, co-creation appears as an effective tool to implement participative and collaborative practices, including in the field of heritage. Understood as a collaboration between different stakeholders entailing participatory processes and practices (Eckhardt et al. 2021), I view co-creation as a powerful practice to move from a top-down approach to a bottom-up approach in the heritage field, questioning the role of the expert and aiming at creating a 'just city' (Fainstein 2010). Co-creating heritage by collaborating with non-expert historians enables a more diverse and richer understanding of the past while questioning and challenging mainstream and dominant narratives (Ward and Pente 2017). Creating a historical narrative (and therefore heritage) of the city defines its identity, which should reflect as many perspectives as possible. Consequently, co-creating urban heritage is a way to build the identity of a city in a collaborative way. In the following, I argue that graffiti is cultural heritage, notably drawing on Merrill's analysis of graffiti as intangible heritage (2015).

Graffiti as intangible heritage
Studying the possibility to integrate graffiti into tangible and/or intangible heritage, Merrill considered several elements as constitutive of graffiti culture: illegality, illegibility, anti-commercialism, and transience. These intangible elements contribute to establishing the cultural significance of graffiti, but also to recognising it as intangible heritage. Illegality, he says, is the 'backbone' of graffiti culture (Merrill 2015). It implies that the practitioners are social outsiders because the practice of their art is outside the frame of the law. Some writers indeed consider that if "*it's not illegal – it's not graffiti*" (Ferrell 2016, xxxiv).2 Graffiti writers are also seen as outsiders because of the illegibility of their work, constituted by cultural codes only they can understand (Merrill 2015). This can be, for example, the stylised writings or the specific vocabulary to describe graffiti. All of this contributes to creating a "*superior, secret, and silent society*" of graffiti writers (Merrill 2015, 371).

These two factors (illegality and illegibility), Merrill says, are linked to the anti-commercial stance of graffiti, which has been an important feature of the culture since its origins (2015). Graffiti is a resistance to the artistic, aesthetic, and cultural institutions, although the question of its commercialisation is an ongoing debate. The commercialisation of graffiti also threatens another important dimension, its transience. This aspect is linked to the ephemerality of graffiti, itself related to the structure of the urban environment. Environmental factors and city policies shape the practice of graffiti, but they also trigger expression, dialogue, and competition between writers (Merrill 2015). This ongoing and constant dialogue

entails that graffiti works remain ephemeral, meaning they can fade away or be covered. This dynamic is at the core of this cultural movement, as it creates a competition between writers or crews, painting over each other's work (for example, this is very common in hooligan culture; in the graffiti scene, see Banksy *vs* King Robbo in Merrill 2015). Therefore, it can be argued that trying to conserve graffiti through heritage policies would directly clash with its ephemerality (transience) and would freeze the dialogue both between writers and with the urban fabric. Indeed, the relation between writers and the city also stands central in graffiti culture, as it is a practice of space appropriation.

Space appropriation and living the city
Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of space appropriation as an answer to feelings of domination, scholars argue that graffiti is a spatial practice that resists the dominant spatial order, battling for space occupation and territorial control (Evans 2014; Maudlin and Vellinga 2014). Evans defines graffiti as "*a socio-spatial political act*" and studies the emergence of this culture in the context of modernist architecture that started in New York City (NYC) as early as the 1920s (2014, 185). He argues that this modernist renewal split neighbourhoods and displaced people, leading to a loss of identity. Consequently, the production of urban identity is a core element of graffiti writing. For example, a lot of pioneers' pseudonyms are made up from a name followed by the number of the street they lived in (such as Taki 183 or Barbara 62 and Eva 62). Lamazares also argues that 'pixação' (a specific form of graffiti from São Paulo, Brazil) developed as an answer to Brazilian modernism, combining aggressive writing styles and dangerous climbing to respond to the city's verticality (2017).

Moreover, Evans claims that graffiti writing is a "*production of social space […] creat[ing] a new space and spatial identity*", putting new values into the urban space (2014, 193). In that sense, graffiti writing contributes to the creation of the city. Lefebvre's insights into urban space are fundamental here: he argues that space is produced by people, making it inherently social. To better grasp this idea, Lefebvre conceptualised the spatial triad: every space is conceived, perceived, and lived, and the intersecting dynamics of these three aspects make it a social space (Brown 2020). 'Conceived space' designates the representations of space created by planners or architects. This is the dominant space, thought to be 'true'. 'Perceived space' designates how we practice the space in our daily routines. Finally, 'lived space' refers to the representational space, the subjective experience of space, shaped by our experiences and emotions. It is the dominated di-

mension of space (Lefebvre 2000). In the case of the metro, it is conceived as a transportation means with technical properties and practiced as such in daily routines. For graffiti writers, it is not only a means of transportation but also a canvas for their art, a network to navigate and paint. They mould the metro space to make it their own, according to how they live it. Doing so, writers subvert the planned use of the space, going against the power relations underlying in spatial planning. In other words, they change the space into a 'counterspace' (Lefebvre 2000). Opposing hegemonic representations of space, counterspaces are a struggle against dominant state-space (Altun 2018). Drawing on this concept, I'll argue that covering the metro network with graffiti is a rebellious act against the planning power of the state or of the metro authority, making evident spatial power relations.

Subway graffiti: a specific way to appropriate the city
Subway graffiti became a major movement within the graffiti culture in the 1970s and 1980s. The iconic 1984 photographic book by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art,* contributed to the widespread fame of and enthusiasm for metro graffiti. However, the enthusiasm was not shared by the city of New York and the Metropolitan Transport Agency (MTA), who started in 1972 a 'war on graffiti'. The MTA developed strategies to ensure that no painted car would circulate, making the metro a less interesting canvas for writers (Lemoine 2012; Snyder 2006; Weide 2016). Indeed, the main point of tagging metro was the possibility to acquire a 'citywide' fame and recognition from other writers, to get a "*subcultural status*" (Ferrell 1998, 594; Lemoine 2012). So, writers turned to other media (such as freight trains) to keep their art growing, which allowed them to 'go nationwide', spreading their names, styles, techniques, and aesthetics further from their hometown (Ferrell 1998; Weide 2016). In both cases, graffiti is a way for writers, who often come from marginalised neighbourhoods, to travel beyond the borders of their lived space and 'invade' other parts of the city (Evans 2014).

Furthermore, subway or train graffiti does not stop at the cars. The pieces that can be seen in the surroundings of the railways also constitute a part of subway or train graffiti. Indeed, in terms of infrastructure, railways, bridges, and tunnels are part of the rail network (Nieweg 2022). Consequently, graffiti on this kind of infrastructure can also be considered rail art. The painted walls along the railways offer to the passenger a sort of open gallery. In opposition to train graffiti, it is not the canvas that is moving, but the 'visitor'.

"For graffiti writers, it is not only a means of transportation but also a canvas for their art, a network to navigate and paint. They mould the metro space to make it their own, according to how they live it. Doing so, writers subvert the planned use of the space, going against the power relations underlying in spatial planning."

Subway graffiti and graffiti on buildings both illustrate an engagement with the urban fabric. Similarly, successive crises have shaped the evolution of graffiti culture. In this sense, I argue that graffiti constitutes a central element of cities' sociocultural heritage. The case-study of the Zilvermeeuw will illustrate well how graffiti is related to the city's history but will also show the hesitations to give graffiti a place in heritage-making. Through this case-study, I'll argue for more collaboration with the (local) graffiti community, fostering a co-creation of urban heritage narratives.

Sources and Methods

For this contribution, I conducted on-site research, including participant observation at different events. The launching of the Zilvermeeuw website and a tour of the National Transport Museum were insightful in analysing how this piece of heritage was handled by the municipality and the different actors involved in its restoration. A local city tour with the Street Art Museum Amsterdam (SAMA) during the European STAR project in May 2022 proved useful in understanding how the district of Amsterdam-West integrated street art and graffiti, making it an open-air street museum. A tour with the Alternative Groningen Tour as part of 'The Tag Conference Groningen: Framing Graffiti Heritage' in November 2024 provided more insights into how graffiti and its history can be integrated into the history and heritage of the city.

In addition, I organised semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the restoration of the Zilvermeeuw and the graffiti and heritage scene in Amsterdam to unfold the conflicts surrounding it. To get insights into how the Zilvermeeuw was seen by people from official heritage institutions, how its restoration was planned and how graffiti fits (or not) into these, I talked with Jaap Nieweg. He is the Director of External Relations at the Museum Stoomtram Hoorn-Medemblik, and he is the one who originally proposed to make the Zilvermeeuw a piece of heritage. As such, he participated in the discussions about its renovation and its conservation, including the graffiti issue.

To better explore and understand the links between graffiti and heritage, I had a discussion with Aileen Middel. She is both a graffiti writer and a member of official heritage institutions collaborating with museums. Also known as Mickey or Mick La Rock, Aileen Middel is involved in heritage and museum projects about graffiti in Amsterdam. She is one of the first women who became famous for her graffiti in Europe, writing mainly in Groningen, Amsterdam, and New York during the 1980s-2000s. She co-curated the 2015 exhibition 'Graffiti. New York Meets the Dam' with Annemarie de

Wildt, curator at the Amsterdam Museum. Aileen Middel was also a member of the Stadscuratorium of Amsterdam between 2019 and 2022.

I also looked for insights into how the community handled graffiti conservation through time, and how it could collaborate with official heritage institutions. I could discuss with Richard van Tiggelen, whose expertise on graffiti archiving and history provided precious inputs. He is a former graffiti writer, co-founder of and conservator at the Dutch Graffiti Library (DGL), where he participates in creating and organising a Dutch graffiti archive.

Analysis

The Zilvermeeuw: Competing narratives, competing heritage

Introduction: The Zilvermeeuw metro

The first metro line in Amsterdam was completed in 1977, connecting the Zuidoost district (also called the Bijlmer) to the rest of the city (line 53). Its nickname, 'Zilvermeeuw', comes from its colours, reminiscent of the European herring gull. However, it quickly became one of the main canvases for (local) graffiti writers, who painted the metro trains at their stocking area because it was quiet (Imagine IC et al. 2020). Graffiti on the Amsterdam metro rapidly grew and became an attraction for graffiti artists and writers all over the world (ibid).

Upon the renewal of the metro set in 2015, two wagons were conserved (23A and 23B) to become A-status heritage objects (the highest status). The set is registered within the *Mobiele Collectie Nederland*, which justifies this A-status by putting forward the role of this metro in relation to the rest of the city, its inscription in a troubled social context, and its technical aspects (Stichting Mobiele Collectie Nederland, n.d.). Graffiti is mentioned in the 'History' part of the notice as a symbol of the troubled years of the Bijlmer. Graffiti writers are presented as vandals, next to "*junks, dealers, zakkenrollers en dronkenlappen*" [translation: "*junkies, dealers, pickpockets and drunks*"] (ibid). This notice is a good example of the AHD in action. The metro is remembered as a piece of technology that opened the Bijlmer to the rest of Amsterdam and brought economic growth, while there is little consideration for dissonant narratives (such as the protests against its construction).

The competing narratives on the Zilvermeeuw

The AHD around the Zilvermeeuw is also evident when looking at the conserved set, the metro set 23. Indeed, the narrative built around the metro reflects the national history more than the local one. First, the conserved

set is the one where Princess Beatrix and Prince Claus stepped in in 1977 to inaugurate the opening of the metro line. This refers to the birth of the Amsterdam metro, supported by the Dutch royal family, which later led to the development of Zuidoost and the city in general. At the same time, the social movements opposing the metro plans during the 1970s are harshly described in the 'History' part of the notice, suggesting that these protests were against the progress and growth that the metro provided. In fact, people were against their displacement and the destruction of their homes in the context of a housing crisis. So, if the metro later brought prosperity, it was not without a few sacrifices along the way, nuancing the triumphant story that the online notice suggests.

In addition, the whole restoration process further enhances the AHD and traditional heritage-making frameworks. For its last ride in 2015, the metro was cleaned up, then stored on a Gemeentelijk Vervoerbedrijf Amsterdam (GVBA) yard in Diemen where it was covered in graffiti again and *"ernstig beschadigd"* [translation: *"seriously damaged"*] (Nieweg 2022; Zilvermeeuw Amsterdam 2022). The removal of graffiti for the last ride of the metro before it was exhibited in a museum makes it clear that it is rather associated with vandalism, delinquency and insecurity (Nieweg 2022). The Zilvermeeuw case well exemplifies the influence of the AHD on heritage practices: a material, concrete artefact has been chosen to be passed onto future generations because it is seen as important mainly regarding the national and economic history.

Furthermore, the restoration of the set in its 'former glory' (including the insides of the wagons) illustrates the AHD in that it focuses on its aesthetic aspect, a fantasised clean and pristine state, and less on the authenticity that a used metro set (with used seats, footprints on the ground, and of course, graffiti) could bring forward. The restoration makes the metro an immutable piece of heritage that does not reflect its life and its use. It refers to a traditional conception of heritage, where the monumental is the norm, and overlooks intangible aspects, showing the still important place given to monuments and artefacts in the making of heritage.

As Nieweg explained, the strict anti-graffiti policy that the GVBA implemented over the years also drove the restoration policy (2022). The experts (in metro, in restoration, in conservation, in heritage) decided to tell their part of the story, without taking other parts into account, creating an AHD around the Zilvermeeuw. They did not try to challenge the existing frameworks of heritage-making, in part because of the controversial nature of graffiti. Regarding the GVBA position, the 'war on graffiti' led against writers also played a role in dismissing the cultural (and aesthetic)

value of graffiti. The role of decision-maker that the GVBA had here is also important to highlight. As the owner of the Zilvermeeuw (until it became a piece of heritage), the GVBA had the power to orient the restoration in a way that would suit it. In turn, this influenced the experts in their handling of the Zilvermeeuw and of the graffiti.

Overlooking the importance of graffiti on the Zilvermeeuw reveals a disinterest in local history. Indeed, the Bijlmer is a dynamic and central place for graffiti in the Netherlands and was notably visited and lauded by 'graffiti kings' from NYC in 1983. Planned in the early 1960s to resolve the post-war housing crisis, the Bijlmer district was heavily influenced by modernist ideas, promoting functional ideals and the separation of living and working places (Wassenberg 2006). But when the whole new district came onto the market at the end of the same decade, modernist planning was under harsh criticism. The middle-class population, expected to live in the Bijlmer, was looking for a different type of housing than what the modernist district had to offer. Consequently, the Bijlmer attracted lower-class populations, notably immigrants from Suriname (Wassenberg 2006; Zahirovic and Sterk 2007). This social (and racial) exclusion, coupled with the spatial isolation of the district, made the Bijlmer a poor, Black neighbourhood, sometimes referred to as "*the first and only Dutch ghetto*" (Zahirovic and Sterk 2007).

It is then no surprise that graffiti developed in the Bijlmer during the 1970s, integrating elements of the local identity and adapting to the local architecture. In their collaborative book *Graffiti in de Kempering* (2020), Imagine IC, the Dutch Graffiti Library, and Mick La Rock offer an overview of graffiti in the Bijlmer and a focus on the Kempering parking garage, which has been an important spot for graffiti since the 1980s. Indeed, parking garages were essential parts of the development plan of the 1960s, symbolising the car utopia of these times and later became graffiti hotspots ('counterspaces'). Similarly, graffiti writers took over the transport infrastructure, such as the underground metro and its surroundings. Specifically, the high metro tracks (see Figure 2) constitute both an identity marker of the Bijlmer and among the graffiti scene, as they remind of the world-famous NYC metro, as noted by both Dutch and US graffiti writers (Imagine IC et al. 2020).

Figure 2. Left: *Metro trains during test runs in the Bijlmer, Ganzenhoef station*: Amsterdam 1977. Photograph by: Hans Peters for Anefo, via Wikimedia Commons. Right: *GVB metro train set 174 on line 53 near metro station Kraaiennest*: Amsterdam 2014. Photograph by: Erik Swierstra, via Wikimedia Commons.

The local history of graffiti writing and urban development of the Bijlmer makes graffiti culturally significant within the district's history. That is why the debate on the final location of the Zilvermeeuw is also of importance in making the metro a piece of heritage. The initial decision to exhibit it at the National Transport Museum can be considered as a further embedding of the Zilvermeeuw in national history, driving the narrative away from its local significance. Some people think it should be back in Amsterdam Zuidoost, highlighting the importance of the metro for the Bijlmer (Meershoek 2022). But graffiti still holds a controversial place in this story. Indeed, placing the Zilvermeeuw as a monument in the open space would attract graffiti writers, as Middel explained:

> *"There is this whole movement, culture, that really likes to paint on trains, and it would be an act of heroism: who is the first one to paint the Zilvermeeuw in Amsterdam Zuidoost!"* (Middel 2022).

Indeed, it is easily imaginable that the strong metro graffiti culture, coupled with the cultural significance of the Zilvermeeuw for the Bijlmer, would attract writers. This clashes with the perspective of the restoration team, who do not want to see their cleaning efforts go to waste. The discussion seems rather limited, and the case should serve as a call for more attention to potential (intangible) heritage outside the boundaries of the AHD. I argue that this case also illustrates the need to think of heritage outside of traditional frameworks (defined by the AHD) right from the start. Including relevant actors from the graffiti scene from the beginning of the processus

to make the Zilvermeeuw a piece of heritage would have contributed to put into question the AHD while giving power to the community in taking care of their own heritage.

Co-creating the city: graffiti heritage and the community's role
Looking at the conservation and restoration plan, it is stated that "*Bij de afwegingen van de restauratie-uitgangspunten is besloten de graffiti te verwijderen, maar wel op foto vast te leggen*" [translation: "*When considering the restoration principles, it was decided to remove the graffiti, but to record it on photographs*"] (Stichting Beheer Collectie Amsterdam Vervoer Museum [SBCAVM] 2022, 5). If the decision to remove graffiti was driven by the GVBA, the choice to record graffiti on photographs reveals a certain awareness of the cultural significance of graffiti. Indeed, back in 2022, the SBCAVM and Imagine IC were working on this project, accentuating that "*[...] de verschillende graffiti-uitingen mede bijdroegen tot de wisselende verschijningsvorm van de metrotreinstellen van het "Zilvermeeuw"-type*" [translation: "*[...] the various graffiti expressions contributed to the changing appearance of the "Zilvermeeuw"-type metro trains"]* (SBCAVM 2022, 5). This project testifies that graffiti is an important element to remember in the history of the metro. The restoration plan states:

> "*Gedurende het project zal in samenwerking met Imagine IC worden getracht een meer compleet beeld uit die periode voor het restauratie dossier van het project samen te stellen, waarbij bijdragen vanuit de bevolking de veelzijdigheid zullen vergroten.*" [translation: "*During the project, in cooperation with Imagine IC, an attempt will be made to compile a more complete picture from that period for the restoration file of the project, in which contributions from the population will increase the versatility"].* (SBCAVM 2022, 6).

This participatory initiative emphasising the community's stories around the Zilvermeeuw would have accentuated the cultural and social importance of the metro. Nevertheless, as Nieweg had indicated in our interview, it was a "*fragile project*" lacking strong involvement from the SBCAVM (2022). As of today, it seems that this project never came into existence and never will (Nieweg 2024), showing a failed attempt at co-creating the heritage of the Zilvermeeuw. The project, fragile and unsure from the beginning, has not been given the consideration needed for its success. It appeared to me that there was no significant discussion, nor any further

questions, about how to engage with graffiti heritage. In addition, graffiti seemed to have been handled as a separate part of the metro, as a side-story, rather than as an element of the whole story.

Yet, there might still be options to make space for graffiti and the community in the story about the Zilvermeeuw. Indeed, during our discussion, Van Tiggelen proposed to "*give [graffiti] a place in that storyline*" by "*[doing] some curation about who is painting that car*", in the case where it should return to the Bijlmer (2022). That way, graffiti would have a place in the heritage narrative of the Zilvermeeuw. But at the same time, it would be contained within the borders of curation, which graffiti usually transcends, and that could lead to new frictions. For example, who has the authority to decide which artist(s) should be commissioned? In light of their expertise and the principle of co-creation, the community should have the greater decision-making power in this matter. But how to reach such a closed community? Maybe an institution such as the Dutch Graffiti Library could represent them, even though they obviously cannot speak for everyone in the community. However, they know graffiti history and its relationship with the metro, and they are part of the scene, which is important given the illegibility of the graffiti society (Merrill 2015). The DGL could also organise the making of a collaborative graffiti piece for the Zilvermeeuw, gathering local writers who have a connection to this metro to emphasise the connection between graffiti and the Zilvermeeuw and bring forward this side of the story.

The nature of the graffiti could also come into question, as some writers make a difference between illegal and legal graffiti (this last one usually falling into the 'street art' category). Consequently, would it be really giving a place to graffiti or only to a certain type of (legal, official, curated) graffiti? Would that adequately represent the story between graffiti and the Zilvermeeuw? Here also lies a reflection on what is actually being narrativized: the graffiti in itself or the graffiti culture? Curated graffiti falls more into the 'street art' category because it is legal. Graffiti and street art are often opposed, though more and more graffiti artists also earn money with curated or commissioned street art (Campos & Leal 2021). Nevertheless, the approach is different, and the intangible elements of graffiti culture are not present when doing street art. Consequently, the cultural underpinnings of curated graffiti differ from those of graffiti. In that sense, I argue that allowing curated graffiti on the restored Zilvermeeuw would distort the historical entanglements of graffiti and the Zilvermeeuw, as metro graffiti was always illegal and ephemeral. It would be giving a place to a different type of graffiti than the one that is historically and culturally linked to the

"Overlooking the importance of graffiti on the Zilvermeeuw reveals a disinterest in local history."

Zilvermeeuw metro. It would be more about the graffiti in its materiality and less about the culture. But that's not to suggest that it would necessarily be a bad thing. The general discussion around graffiti and heritage is ongoing, and I am not trying to argue that there is a single 'right answer', but rather to emphasise the multiple historical, cultural, social, and political elements that should be considered in this discussion.

The question of the institutionalisation of graffiti heritage can also be redundant, as the community has been archiving, recording and preserving their own work since the beginning of the movement. Since the late 1980s, pictures became a widespread way among writers to keep a trace of their work (Snyder 2006). Other material and immaterial elements are part of the graffiti archive, such as testimonies or sketch books. With the development of the Internet, writers got the possibility to diffuse their art on a global scale but also share techniques and knowledge. This led to a wide movement of the culture's documentation by the doers themselves.

Both Middel and Van Tiggelen are (former) graffiti writers who want to collect, preserve, and share the graffiti culture – each in their own way. They both stressed that graffiti heritage is community-driven, as shown by the preparation of the exhibition 'New York Meets the Dam' for the Amsterdam Museum:

> *"[...] all the materials in the Amsterdam part of the exhibition came from that community. So, you can see that the community is building and has a heart for their own heritage and stuff". (Van Tiggelen 2022).*

Solidarity among members of the writers' community is also an important part of graffiti heritage, as Middel put it:

> *"[...] we have this huge network of graffiti writers who are always very helpful towards each other. So, when I was looking for something that I couldn't find myself, Richard stepped in, helped me out with either photo materials, stories, publications, etc.". (Middel 2022).*

In this exhibition, the initiative and willingness to present and democratise graffiti culture came from within the community. This community-driven conservation is also a way to claim ownership of the movement and keep control of what is done with it. Here, the experts are the graffiti writers, who make the history and build the heritage of their movement from within.

They have knowledge that heritage professionals may not have and will bring valuable insights into the handling of graffiti as heritage.

Conclusions

Shifting from the 'authorised heritage discourse' which implies that only tangible, old, Western monuments merit to be heritage, more attention to intangible heritage enables a wider meaning of 'heritage' to also include immaterial elements. In that context, it has been argued that graffiti is intangible heritage. The techniques, dynamics, and core elements of this culture make it culturally significant in an urban environment, contributing to creating the identity of the city. The case-study of the Zilvermeeuw shows that these intangible – but also the tangible – elements of graffiti are not always thought of as potential heritage despite the cultural, social, and historical significance of graffiti. The narrative on which official heritage institutions focused emphasises the authorised discourse on heritage – highlighting the material, elitist, national aspects.

And yet, even as a part of the AHD, the Zilvermeeuw seems today somewhat abandoned. The website dedicated to it that was inaugurated at the Stadsloket Zuidoost in 2022 is now unavailable; the future of the metro piece is unsure, as the National Transport Museum, where it was exhibited until then, has been closed since March 2023 and is looking for a new location. This illustrates that traditional heritage frameworks must also be put into question because they are more subjected to market laws, which, *in fine*, have the power to make heritage and culture.

On the other hand, I think that involving the community in the creation of heritage builds a stronger relationship between heritage and the citizens, arguably leading to more engagement with heritage and its management, resulting in heritage-making by and for the community. In that sense, co-creation can also be a way to bypass neo-liberal policies that are at work in the cultural sector, with destructive consequences for culture in general. Making space for communities in cultural discussions would create community spaces where the locals work towards a sustainable and meaningful heritage narrative. Graffiti is specifically relevant in that case, as a culture developing outside institutional frameworks where stories and archives – and, therefore, heritage – are created by and for the writers' community. From a heritage scholarship perspective, this approach contributes to the decentring of expert knowledge and fosters community participation, working towards the democratisation of heritage.

There are, however, some limitations to graffiti heritage.3 In the first place, some of the intangible elements of the culture defined by Merrill

(2015) could be endangered by graffiti's conservation, and notably the transience. Moreover, should graffiti be recognised by heritage institutions, the question of its (il)legality would be more nuanced and potentially lost. Such discussion is ongoing, and there might be no single 'correct answer'. However, I hope that this paper underscores that a good practice would be to work in collaboration with people from the writers' community. Similarly, there are challenges to participatory practices. For example, the community might not want to collaborate with heritage authorities. This would entail discussions and compromises, which leads to another challenge of co-creation: it is time-consuming. This means that without strong engagement and concrete means (e.g., in money, time, location, relations), such co-creative projects cannot go on – and that's what happened in the case of the Zilvermeeuw's graffiti conservation project.

This paper therefore calls for more involvement of institutional actors in alternative forms of heritage and for collaboration with local communities. Recognising that graffiti is a part of urban identity and, as such, deserves to be included in heritage discussions, can only lead to more nuanced, more interesting stories about cities. Sharing authority enables a more democratic process of heritage-making, and numeric tools, for instance, could help favour community involvement for a better co-creation of the city's heritage and history.

"Moreover, should graffiti be recognised by heritage institutions, the question of its (il)legality would be more nuanced and potentially lost."

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Endnotes

1   This paper draws on research done during my internship at the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed in 2022. However, it has been done and reworked independently and reflects only the perspectives of the author. I'd like to thank Arjen, Gio, Jozina, Maarten, Nina, Tesse, and Yann for their precious comments.

2   Ferrell quotes Haze in Workhorse and PAC 2012.

3   Difficulties in making graffiti heritage or conserving it are well illustrated by the case of Melbourne, Australia in MacDowall (2006) and Merrill (2015).

Toko Mokum 2023

Toko Mokum (2023) was part of Collecting the City #3 and featured the stories of toko's in Amsterdam. The word 'toko' is Malaysian for 'shop'. In Dutch, the word refers to a shop that sells items that are used in households (partly) connected to foreign countries. Most tokos in the Netherlands have Indian, Indonesian, Surinamese, Vietnamese, or Chinese roots. This is partly connected to the Netherlands' colonial presence in Asia and South America. Mokum is an informal nickname for Amsterdam, which comes from Yiddish. The exhibition Toko Mokum was made in co-creation with Riboet Verhalen-kunst [translation: 'Riboet Storytelling Art'], an artist collective with ties to Indonesia and the Moluccas. Their concern is that tokos are slowly disappearing from the city. As part of the exhibition, recipes were collected and the interior of a toko was recreated.

The Polyphonic Object

Cas Versluijs
Museum Educator

Cas Versluijs is a museum educator working at the Amsterdam Museum since 2024. In their practice, they focus on developing new forms of co-creation with children within the museum. They work closely with young communities, empowering children to tell their own stories and claim their place in the world.

Isabelle Pidcock
Museum Studies

Isabelle Pidcock, Museum Studies masters graduate and exhibitions assistant at the Jewish Museum, Amsterdam, is interested in the museum as a place where we can find connection and build community. She works with low/no-technology interactivity and playfulness as the mediums through which to do this.

Bram Sizoo
Clinial Psychology

Bram Sizoo (1961) worked for four years as a tropical doctor in Malawi. Upon return to the Netherlands, he became a psychiatrist in 2008 and is specialized in developmental disorders. Currently he is a professor at the University of Amsterdam where his research focuses on the clinical psychology of radicalization.

Mirjam Marks
Documentary Maker

After her bachelor in Theater Studies at the University of Utrecht, Mirjam Marks worked at VPRO to make youth television programs. The series Ruilen Internationaal brought her to Suriname in 1997, where she and her family lived and worked on and off for over six years. In 2009 she founded the children's museum Villa Zapakara. Back in the Netherlands Mirjam continues her work as an independent documentary filmmaker.

Polarisaampie!

In 'The Polyphonic Object' four analyses by experts from different perspectives and (academic) fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their (educational, museological, psychological, and cinematic) analyses, they uncover the different stories behind *Polarisaampie!*, an artwork made by Anouschka Boswijk in co-creation with five children in 2023. *Polarisaampie!* adsresses questions about connections and divisions and children's views on worldy matters.

Anouschka van Boswijk and Lara, Malena, Sabae, Uma, and Viktor
Polarisaampie!, 2023
Amsterdam Museum

Since 2023, the Amsterdam Museum organizes the Amsterdam Museum Camp. The camp takes place twice a year and lasts five days. During the camp, children between the ages 9 and 11 work in close collaboration with an artist to make a collective (of) artwork(s). In the process, children are treated as artists. In 2023, child artists Lara, Malena, Sabae, Uma, and Viktor co-created with visual artist Anouschka Boswijk to make *Polarisaampie!* The result is a sculpture featuring a diverse group of people demonstrating on the Dam Square in Amsterdam; *Polarisaampie!* represents what children find important and pressing matters.

Cas Versluijs (Museum Educator)

The concepts of education and co-creation can appear contradictory. Education is a teleological practice, explicitly built around pre-set learning outcomes. Learning – the transfer of knowledge, skills and ideas from a person (i.e. an adult) who possesses them to someone who does not (i.e. a child) – is the end goal. There is an inequality inherent to this concept: the process of education is built around the relatively fixed roles of teacher and student, where, as Gert Biesta puts it, *"the voice of the student and the voice of the teacher are very different voices that come with different responsibilities and expectations"* (Biesta 2015, 83). Co-creation, on the other hand, is based on equity and reciprocity, where *"each participating party is equal to the others when it comes to the decision-making process and reaching a verdict"* (Nikkessen, Yalçıner, & Bijnen 2023, 10). It is explicitly non-teleological, as the process does not set up its end goals in advance, letting the end product take shape throughout the co-creation process. How, then, to co-create with children, treating them as equal partners, without sacrificing their educational needs? I

believe that *Polarisaampie!* shows us the way forward, as not only an attractive artwork, but also as a representative of the cutting edge of arts education, where co-creation, education and creative practice can go hand-in-hand.

The creation of *Polarisaampie!*, as part of the ELJA Kindermuseumlab project by the Amsterdam Museum, was based on the Wicked Arts Assignments methodology by Emiel Heijnen and Melissa Bremmer. As they argue, centering a well-designed arts assignment as the core of an open creation process can bridge the worlds of education, arts practice and society, affording unbridled creativity within a dynamic framework (Bremmer, Heijnen, & Haanstra 2024, 11). They approach this concept of the arts assignment not exclusively from an educational perspective, but also from the perspective of art history , taking inspiration from do-it-yourself artworks by artists such as Yoko Ono and John Baldessari (Heijnen & Bremmer 2020, 11–20). Their artworks, which originated in artistic practice rather than arts education, broke through the binary division of artist and audience. In my opinion, by extending this concept of the arts

assignment as artistic practice to arts education, the Wicked Arts Assignments methodology also manages to break through the hierarchy of teacher and student, recontextualizing these roles as what I will call the 'setter' and 'performer'.

There is no hierarchy present in a well-set Wicked Arts Assignment: the setter and performer of the assignment fulfil complementary roles. There is room for unfettered creative expression in both, albeit in different ways. The setter experiences freedom in the design of the assignment, while the performer is stimulated by what Heijnen and Bremmer call 'enabling constraints': *"a set of limiting conditions that paradoxically open possibilities by narrowing down choices"* (Heijnen and Bremmer 2020a). Although this may imply that the setter does in fact constrain the creativity of the performer, it is within these constraints that creativity can flourish, as counterintuitively, creativity without constraints can leave one uninspired. Unlimited options often lead to limited results, as many have experienced when staring at a blank sheet of paper. Instead, Heijnen and Bremmer argue, and I agree, that by constraining our creativity we can truly allow ourselves to be creative, whether we are putting these constraints on ourselves or, in this case, on others. The Wicked Arts Assignments methodology therefore lets the setter creatively design a framework within which the creativity of the performers can flourish. Neither can work without the other in the process of creation, and neither has the final say: it is a truly collaborative process.

I believe that this methodology forms an excellent basis for co-creation with children within the museum. By setting a well-formed Wicked Arts Assignment, the setter, which in this case would be a professional artist, and the performers, in this case the children, can work on an artwork together without falling back into the traditional teacher-student hierarchy. The setter does not have education as their end goal – there are no stated curricular goals present in the process of creation. Instead, setter and performer make the artwork together. Learning outcomes do arise, but they have not been set up in advance: they have arisen naturally from the co-creation process.

Polarisaampie! is an excellent example of the power of this methodology in action. Artist Anouschka Boswijk set the assignment to *"make a 3D scene, where all sorts of figures fighting for various forms of freedom walk in the same direction"* [translation by the author], accompanied by several images of real-world protests and various artworks that could serve as inspiration (Boswijk 2023, 2). The only other constraint put upon the kids was the medium of papier-mâché. All other aspects of the work were left up to the children, who developed this concept together with the artist. The concept of showing polarization in today's society was strengthened throughout the process, while also engaging the children in these debates on current affairs. I believe that the result of this process is not only an attractive artwork, but also provides invaluable insight into how children view these societal issues, expressed in an artistic form that has been developed by the children and the artist in true co-creation.

It must be noted that the Wicked Arts Assignments methodology alone may not be enough to ensure successful co-creation in the museum space. While, when applied well, it can lead toa co-created artwork, the museum itself is not a neutral participant in this process, and the choices it makes in exhibiting the artwork could reintroduce a hierarchy in which the children are reduced to the role of audience or student. The Amsterdam Museum has taken steps to rectify this with the introduction of a children's sounding board,

but these new forms of curatorial practice will have to be developed further to truly co-create with children as a museum. Nevertheless, *Polarisaampie!* stands as a powerful example of the potential of eschewing the hierarchy of teacher and student, and letting children tell their own stories.

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Isabelle Pidcock (Museum Studies)

We are perhaps never more immersed in co-creation than we are as children. It is a crucial part of the very fabric of childhood; inviting others into the imaginary worlds we have built and then expanding and enlivening them together. It is fitting then, that the polyphonic object to celebrate and discuss co-creation has been made by Anouschka Boswijk in collaboration with five children named Lara, Malena, Sabae, Uma, and Viktor.

I approach the polyphonic object from a museum studies background, with a particular interest in museum education and a research focus on the museum as a Third Place (Oldenburg, 1989) which can ease loneliness and build community. In much of my research and my own working practice I eschew technology and investigate the ways in which we can return to childishness and play in the museum context. *Polarisaampie!* spoke to me as an object that encapsulated this effort, and celebrated what it means to be, to know, to work with, and to respect children.

Co-creation is the practice of inviting alternate voices to collaborate with the museum, not merely as participants or helpers, but as equals (Barnes & McPherson, 2019). Often co-creation has focused on centering voices that have been silenced or made to feel unwelcome in the museum, and enabling those voices to speak to the audience the museum commands, with the authority the museum commands. What then, does it mean to co-create with children? Children are certainly welcome in museum spaces, and in fact museums often design exhibitions for children, with spaces and interactives expressly purposed for their use. But rarely do museums design with children. Too rarely are children seen as an entity to take seriously as collaborators, with insights and talents of their own that are as valuable as those of the adults in the room. *Polarisaampie!* is a fabulous example of what co-creating with children can and should look like. From the materials used, to the topics and themes centered: everything about this object takes children seriously.

Firstly, the use of papier maché, a material and art practice fundamental to childhood, signals to children that their working practices don't need changing, and that they can speak in their own language and be whol-

ly understood. For the viewer, papier maché evokes memories of sticky hands and school art classrooms, enabling them to feel close to their own childhoods again. The figures are playful and take on different shapes, sizes, and forms. They all stand on a textured, rolling surface that is identified as the Dam. Cheeky details such as pigeons and a small skateboard ramp bring texture and reality to this rendering. The figures hold signs, each protesting or celebrating different things. One figure, covered in bug bites, says that 'all mosquitoes should die', whilst another argues that 'every animal, even mosquitoes, has the right to life.' This brings us to the central themes of this piece; polarisation   and unity.

As the object text states; *"people march for freedom, celebrate freedom, and protest the lack of freedom."* And indeed, each sign and each person is unique, yet the people walk together, united by the commonality of their shared city and their shared passion, albeit about vastly different things! Society today is increasingly polarised, and it is essential to involve children in these discussions. It is essential too, to understand what issues feel important to them, what they perceive as polarising topics, and how they view the world around them. What I find most moving about *Polarisaampie!,* is how it captures the futility and farce of polarisation. Each protest sign has a directly opposing sign, and so there is comedy and levity in these larger, real-world disagreements. Whilst one marcher says 'give me sunshine' another says 'thank you for the rain.' One argues that 'life is a competition' whilst another declares that 'health is more important than reputation.' And to combat the marcher who declares that 'dancing is noisy and dangerous' there is a figure in a disco ball top claiming that 'the best parties start after 10pm.' For each opinion, there is an equal and opposite opinion, and thus with the clear-eyed gaze of childhood, *Polarisaamp-*

ie! invites us all to take ourselves a little less seriously. We are called to lean in to play, and to reclaim childishness - not as something to be avoided, but instead something to be celebrated.

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Bram Sizoo
(Clinial Psychology)

Why are they there?

The 3D-artwork *Polarisaampie!* (2023) shows a mixed group of people demonstrating for a wide variety of causes on the Dam Square in Amsterdam. Interestingly, they move with their placards roughly in the same direction and appear to be reasonably at ease. The exclamation mark indicates that the scene should be carefully taken note of. Indeed, it would be special if polarized views could be jointly expressed in good harmony. The reality, however, is often different. The question 'Why are they there?' contains three elements: motivation, collectiveness and location.

Individuals are motivated to leave home for public demonstrations when important personal values are at stake, such as safety, justice, health, or leisure. These values are reflected in the texts of their placards: 'all mosquitos must die', 'black is the new white', 'health is more important than reputation', and 'more skateparks'. However, not every personal value is the same. There is a difference between ordinary values (e.g., a television program or a pizza), and sacred values (e.g., one's faith or child) (Atran & Gómez, 2018). The distinction between these is that when sacred values are challenged, the motivation to use violence increases, in contrast to endangered ordinary values. Yet, what makes a value sacred or ordinary is very personal and cannot be automatically deduced from a text on a placard. Therefore, everyone in *Polarisaampie!* is subjectively motivated, with an associated readiness to defend their cause.

The title of *Polarisaampie!* (2023) combines polarization ('polari'), with togetherness ('saampie'). Polarization refers to opposing positions, for example in politics. Mild forms of polarization serve a useful purpose in healthy democracies because arguments can be brought to the attention of others by activists, which, in time, may shape public opinion in favour of their ideas. Whereas activism is defined as "*the readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political action*", radicalism is "*the readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action*" (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). Activism can present with different degrees of polarization but stays within legal boundaries. Due to its proneness to unlawful or violent means, radicalism is more likely to

occur in conditions of strong polarization, when the positions have drifted too far apart. In the case of two opposing, strongly polarized individuals or groups there is clearly no togetherness between the opposing parties. However, togetherness can in that case, paradoxically still be very pronounced within groups. This is because political polarization is associated with group dynamics in which individuals are drawn to a group positioned at an extreme end of the spectrum, draining the center of moderate opinions (Jost et al., 2022). This can result in affective polarization, where a strong 'us versus them' sentiment leads to the idea that anything to do with 'them' is a direct threat to 'us' and must be avoided. This personal identification with a group is referred to as identify fusion. The groups' values become sacred personal values, with an associated readiness to use violence against the perceived threat from 'them'. The togetherness ('saampi') in the title, in combination with polarization ('polari') could therefore, in theory, refer to a tightly bound, affectively polarized group. However, the cheerful faces and the obvious disparity of expressed ideas, suggests otherwise. So, how can polarised people be together in this harmonious way?

The third element of the question 'why are they there?' provides an answer to the puzzle. *Polarisaampie!* is located on Dam square, in Dutch not just any dam, but 'de Dam' (the Dam). The Dam is an open space enclosed by symbolic structures: a church signifying faith, a palace associated with civil authority, and the remembrance monument projecting historical conscience. Dam square is not merely the oldest geographical center of Amsterdam; it is also the functional centre. Around 1275 the Dam connected two settlements, which up to then had been separated by the river. Later, from different directions important streets led to the central position of the Dam, linking people from different towns,

villages and communities. In addition, the Dam has accommodated all sorts of activities throughout history: fish markets, revolutions, fairs, trials, and demonstrations. In addition to its character as geographical and functional centre, it is also a symbolic center, offering space for expressing all opinions, no matter how different, even at the same time, in the same place. In other words, because the Dam has had these roles for so many years, demonstrations for every imaginable cause are always welcome, without anyone having to fear that the Dam will thereby lose its robust centre-position.

Why are they there? The answer is that this harmonious exchange of different ideas by a group of very diverse people, in the same place is made possible by each actor's activist, instead of radical, intent, and by the virtue of a healthy democracy offering the moderate center of society as a safe, protective stage. That is what makes *Polarisaampie!* so special.

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Mirjam Marks (Documentary Maker)

It is May 2018. Thousands of children, some of them with parents or teachers, walk singing and shouting through the center of Utrecht. They color the streets of the city with their voices and banners. The message on the banners and protest signs is heavier than the energy and the mood of the crowd: *"We are already cool, now it' s the climate' s turn"; "Do you care about our future?"; "Help! the earth is hotter than me"; "I have a message from the animals: Stop cutting down trees!"; "There is noPLANet B!"* I walk among these young activists and feel a very positive force.

Image I. Jovanna at the protest, May 2018. Her sign reads: "*We are already cool, now it's the climate's turn.*" Author's translation and photo.

As in the work *Polarisaampie!*, the children and youngsters in this climate protest make their voices heard for an urgent goal that concerns their own future and actual life. They celebrate it together, all pulling in the same direction, and choose their own words to express their feelings.

In *Polarisaampie!* I feel the freedom both in the theme and in the choice of the young makers of the content because it expresses their interpretation, feelings, and perspectives about the theme. The accompanying artist has given the children space and not directed them and therefore she has taken the children seriously.

Polarisaampie! conveys two important themes. First, you can have a different, even opposite opinion on a certain subject and still move in the same direction. And secondly, if you give children the space to make their voices be heard a surprising, disarming, sharp, and therefore meaningful view on a subject arises.

In *Polarisaampie!*, I recognize a lot of my own method of working with children. I am a documentary filmmaker with a focus on youth films. For me, children are the most important,

open, unspoiled, and honest people in the world. That's why I like working with them. My main motivation to make documentaries about, for, and with children is to give them a platform; a place to be heard and seen. My films are 'feel good' documentaries. I don't want to deny the seriousness or sadness of a particular situation, but I also don't want to present children as pathetic or victimize them. On the contrary, I aim to show the power and flexibility of children, despite or thanks to the situation they are in. In my workshops, I give children all over the world tools to tell their own stories in their own way. I want to allow them to be themselves and by expressing themselves they become my teachers. Sharing stories is essential in getting to know and understand one another and fostering mutual respect, especially now.

Back to the demonstration in Utrecht. In 2018, I made *JovannaForFuture*, a short youth documentary about the 12-year-old Jovanna. Jovanna, inspired by the Swedish Greta Thunberg,went on strike every Friday to express her concerns about the future due to climate change. In Jovanna's words: *"As a child you can't vote and then striking is the only way to express your opinion."* During the research, I attended several demonstrations. The presence of the children in combination with the light, open, and friendly atmosphere impressed me. In the early days of the climate marches, children and youngster were the

Image II. ClimateClips. Author photo.

main activists. Their slogans and drawings were colorful, creative, and straight from their hearts. This gave them the ammunition to get to the heart of the problem.

According to a 2022 report by Kidsrights, the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been brought to a new era (Dyers & Giroux 2022). The CRC shows that children, too, have rights. Today, this is being recognized more and more, as is the importance of enabling children to participate in policy making and other decisions that affect them. The logic and the wording of children's thoughts often represent accurate observations of a situation that adults no longer think about. During my development as a documentary filmmaker, I have increasingly given the voice of children a place in the form and/or the storyline of my films. For example, I trained a group of children to interview the leading candidates of the political parties prior to the national elections in 2002. The way children ask questions is completely different from adults. As stated in the KidsRights report, children are taken more and more seriously and their opinions are increasingly taken into account when making important decisions and policies about issues that concern them. Various organizations are working hard to achieve this.

The Missing Chapter Foundation is one of those organizations. The founder, Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands once said: *"It is actually completely obvious. Who uses the word 'why' the most? Who is really good at asking that question? Exactly: children. The true voice that makes us look again at the essence of what we are doing."* (Missing Chapter Foundation, 2025)

When making *JovannaForFuture*, I realized that I needed to include the voices of as many children as possible, because climate change concerns children from all over the world. In order to do so, I gave several chil-

dren from a range of countries the same film assignment. This encouraged them to express their feelings about the way their environment is changing and how this impacts their lives. The videos that resulted became part of the documentary. In addition, the 60 videos from over 30 countries were made into short ClimateClips and can be viewed online.

This way of co-creating resembles *Polarisaampie!*. When assisted by the lived experience and knowledge of adults, children's visions and opinions become the fundament of unique and candid art works.

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Women of Zuidoost 2024

The neighborhood exhibition *Women of Zuidoost* (2024) featured a variety of women's groups in the southeast of Amsterdam; Amsterdam Zuidoost. It was hosted by Open Space Contemporary Art Museum (OSCAM), which is located in the heart of Zuidoost. Amsterdam Zuidoost is home to people with 181 different national backgrounds and women's groups have been essential in promoting the social cohesion in this area. Solidarity is the common denominator of the different women's groups, and this often translates into informal networks of care. Although their work is often invisible to Amsterdammers that are not closely connected to Amsterdam Zuidoost, their voluntary work is indispensable for the wellbeing of residents in these neighborhoods. During the exhibition-making process, the women's groups were photographed and encouraged to tell their (hi) stories during workshop sessions. The exhibition featured these photographs, portraits of participants, a timeline of the borough's history, and personal objects that represented the women's commitments.

The
Polylogue

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is an author and actor specialized in dramatizations in non-theatrical spaces (museums, art galleries, villas, squares, parks). He is also artistic director of Genius Loci Performance, an artistic collective with years of experience in producing immersive, participatory, and multidisciplinary performances focused on the relationship between the body, urban space, live music, and ritual.

Linde Lamboo

is a program manager at BOOST Amsterdam where she enjoys bringing people with different ideas together to co-create projects that really matter, and is passionate about community-driven work. BOOST is a home base for newcomers with a refugee background and local volunteers.

Thaniel Owusu Agyemang

Thaniel Owusu Agyemang is a multidisciplinary artist and founder of Sankofa Archives, a platform for archiving and sharing underrepresented stories through art and culture. At Kazerne Reigersbos, he develops and curates the artistic programming in collaboration with the local community.

A Polylogue on Co-creating Community

In this roundtable, our guest editors come together with practitioners from community spaces to discuss the complexities of co-creation, power dynamics, and impact in their work. Drawing from their diverse experiences, the participants reflect on how ownership, trust, and equity shape collaborative spaces, and how roles and responsibilities can be navigated transparently. They examine the tension between ideal horizontal collaboration and the realities of creating space and distributing resources. In the conversation, Imogen Mills (editor of the Polylogue) and Jari Lemmers (editorial support) invited the speakers to explore a broad range of themes: alternative ways of researching impact, centering personal growth, the processes of co-creation, and the connections between people, makers, and institutions while challenging models that prioritize visitor numbers and the bottom line. Their conversation highlights how community co-creation can foster autonomy, build relationships, and offer new ways of valuing collective work.

Defining Community

VVN: Before we can start to understand the processes of co-creating with communities, we need to define what we understand communities to be. From an anthropological viewpoint I think the word 'community' is often used too loosely within the cultural sector. The danger is that it reduces people to one aspect of their identity, such as living in a certain neighborhood or having a migrant background.

LL: Yes, Vanessa, I think it is crucial to recognize that people often belong to multiple communities simultaneously. Depending on the context, different aspects of their identity may come to the forefront, while others might be downplayed—either consciously or subconsciously—to connect, to be accepted, or to maintain harmony within a group. This highlights how fluid and situational identity can be, and how important it is that we hold space for that complexity when we talk about 'community'.

TOA: Picking up on what Vanessa raised, I also have a difficult relationship with the word community. As a cultural center and creative breeding ground, Kazerne Reigersbos (Kazerne) is open to anyone who wants to co-create with us. Of course, we engage closely with our immediate neighborhood, but it is not a predefined or fixed community. We welcome people of all ages and backgrounds. In my view, community is something that comes out of what we do at Kazerne.

What makes it especially valuable is how it brings together diverse perspectives. Over the years, we have facilitated international exchanges, connecting people who might share the same demographic or neighborhood, but hold very different worldviews. It is powerful to offer a space where they can share ideas, engage in dialogue, exchange knowledge, and gain mutual respect.

For me, that is what community is: welcoming people into a shared space, offering common ground, and creating together.

LL: For me too, the strength of a community comes from its diversity and the ability to challenge your own assumptions. Welcoming different ideas and beliefs is especially important when building a community together. At BOOST we focus on people with a refugee background. But, as Vanessa says, that is already such a diverse community. The people we meet here speak a large variety of languages, have diverging ideas about the world, and different skillsets.

Everyone brings their own perspective on the world and how they want to live in it.

Like Thaniel said, that is where community comes in. The people here at BOOST connect to people who are similar in the language they speak or their experiences, but they also meet people who have grown up in vastly different places or might be at a different place in their life. We see how this allows people to expand their network and build their community in the ways that best suit them.

GLH: So, hearing from all you, I think we can agree community can be understood as a collective interested in a particular goal. For me, community is about an active process—it is not simply enough to identify with a community (though identification can be an active process). I think identity needs to be manifested through action.

Defining Co-creation

VVN: As GL notes, community is an active process. And so is co-creation. Building relationships is the starting point of the co-creation method we developed within the Amsterdam Museum.

So, what does that look like? Our first step is inviting people in. We then proceed by asking our co-creation partners: what do you need? That seems like such a simple question, but it helps promote awareness of having predefined ideas of how the process and the outcome of a project 'should' be, from a museum point of view. We do not want to start from the institute, because often the institute needs a product or some form of output. Rather we start with the needs of the partner. What does this process look like for you?

GLH: Communities can form naturally, and co-creation often plays a role in strengthening or defining them. The act of working together toward shared goals can solidify bonds and foster a sense of belonging. As Vanessa says, for me, community is an active process—it is not simply enough to identify with a community. I think identity needs to be manifested through action. And the platforms like the ones we are talking about today make communities more visible or structured.

LL: While co-creation holds value across a wide range of contexts, I believe it is particularly vital in spaces marked by diversity, so like GL says, it relates in part to identity and community. It has the potential to bring so much more richness to the ways we can connect to others, what we can learn from each other, how we can support people, and hold space for different perspectives, ideas, and possibilities. This is especially important in public or community spaces where individuals are navigating questions of belonging, identity, or access. In fields such as migration, education, public health, and housing—domains that tend to be top-down systems—co-creation provides a way to center lived experience and local knowledge. By inviting co-creation, these sectors can become more responsive, inclusive and effective.

FG: This resonates with me because at Genius Loci Performance we constantly work with different people and in different locations. Because we reach people through an open call, we never know who we are working with. It always attracts a diverse cast, which is very engaging. Then all our performances are co-created with the participants over a period of eight months.

"[Co-creation] is especially important in public or community spaces where individuals are navigating questions of belonging, identity, or access."

Linde Lamboo

LL: So, in that sense, and this is something that I relate to from my own context as well, would you say that co-creation in your case is about working and co-creating with different communities? And very often not just with one community alone? Because you are working with people who are performing, the audience and institutions. At BOOST we have a similar work process. We work with people with a refugee background, the neighborhood, volunteers, the municipality, and different partner organizations.

FG: Absolutely. It is quite the same. We have no specific target audience, but the people must be willing to do it. They must be committed. Another integral part of our performances are the locations. The performances are held in public spaces. In a sense, the work we do is for the citizens in these public spaces. The goal is to create a mirror of society, in society.

So, there are two distinct processes: co-creation with the cast and engagement with society. Because we work this way we are always dealing with different experiences and perspectives on life. The community grows from there.

TOA: I have a question for you, Francesco. You work with people of all ages. Do you experience any complications when working with different generations? How do you ensure they connect?

FG: Good question! We work a lot with our bodies. So, we use a very universal means. Everyone can do body movement on his or her own level, so it is not performative per se. You do not have to match a standard. The body, the music, the pre-expressive methods of acting, create a field for healthy relationships.

We do not talk a lot during the workshops, that comes afterwards. I am a bit suspicious of language. So, the focus is on the body and the music.

Balancing Voices

GLH: Language, like Francesco says, can raise differences. We have discussed how community and co-creation center around interactions between people. And how we are all looking to create room for diverse voices. But interaction can lead to differences, and when differences occur, there is also the potential for conflict. It makes me wonder how others reconcile differences in people's perspectives of how to live life.

LL: When there is conflict, sitting down together is the starting point for me. Realistically, we will encounter conflict and friction. We see that on a national level, in the way certain groups are spoken about, and we see it on a personal level, in the way people treat each other. People will approach conflict in various ways, for all the same reasons we spoke about how differences have the potential to create a community. When this occurs, we respond in the moment and open up dialogue. Where is everyone coming from? Where can we find common ground?

We can facilitate this by opening the space we have for people to find each other in a very humane way. A low threshold and suspending our expectations allow us to open up these conversations. In a very practical way, we do this by inviting people to sit next to each other and speak. It really comes down to being curious about the other person.

TOA: I agree with Linde. The most helpful thing we can do is to open our doors and retain a low threshold for entering. For us, this means every Wednesday we host a market. You can come into our space for a cup of coffee or tea, visit the market, and meet people from the neighborhood. By now everyone in the neighborhood knows you can come to Kazerne every Wednesday. This makes it easier for us to invite people in on other days, because they are familiar with us. Once you have reached that point, you can start building relationships. It starts with opening the space up.

GLH: I believe it also helps to remember that a perfect conversation is never going to happen. The idea is to move forward. The invitation or the low threshold being the first step and then developing as a heuristic process, a process that is imperfect but nevertheless worth the effort. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. But there is also something to be said for setting this intention, putting this energy out there, and doing the kind of work that is necessary.

"Communities can form naturally, and co-creation often plays a role in strengthening or defining them. The act of working together toward shared goals can solidify bonds and foster a sense of belonging."

GL Hernandez

Balancing Power

GLH: I want to take a look at another dynamic at play here. Because when we talk about balancing voices we are also talking about balancing power. I am thinking about organizations and various stakeholder engagements. How we can think of, for example, core stakeholders, people who are very much involved in institutions, versus periphery stakeholders, who are affected by the process of organization but are impartial to the organization. So, I am wondering when we have stakeholders with potentially contentious relationships: how do we reconcile those relationships? How do we move forward in a compassionate way when that is not the way of all stakeholders involved?

LL: This is an interesting point, GL. In my own work, I still see a clear power imbalance. For example, when someone approaches me wanting to get involved, maybe by organizing a class or an activity or a workshop, my role is to support them. I help them get started, and from there, they take ownership of the activity.

But even then, they still rely on the organization for certain things: we buy the materials needed and help promote the activity. If there is another event happening and the space is needed, we might ask them to move their activity. I am also the one who decides that their class needs to be moved.

So, in the end, we still hold the reins. And sometimes I struggle with that power imbalance. Because while I genuinely want to create a space of equity, in reality that can be a lot harder to achieve.

FG: I think, Linde, that what you are highlighting is a contradiction inherent to co-creation. Because when working with institutions, municipalities, and individuals there is always a power imbalance. Even if the discourse is around egalitarianism. I see the contradiction and I consider it useful.

For example, working in public spaces, for us, it is essential to have the support of institutions, so that we can operate legally. Our very existence is a sign that we still live in a democracy, because we can freely engage with and critique the society we live in. That said, we have never done anything opportunistically, to support the parties in power or to respond to external requests to obtain funding. For our latest performance, we asked the mayor of Lucignano, a town in Tuscany, to allow us to use the entire town as the stage for the performance. Without her support, our work would not even be conceivable.

"Excessive lack of power means the whole process will struggle. Whereas a power imbalance means there is at least power to begin with."

Francesco Gori

Excessive lack of power means the whole process will struggle. Whereas a power imbalance means there is at least power to begin with. I believe community work involves working with the real world, not the ideal world. And this friction allows for empowerment.

GLH: There is a lot to explore around power, especially in this context. Some positive aspects of power imbalance include resources and responsibilities being allocated to those deemed appropriate. However, it is crucial to question how those people came to be considered appropriate—what qualifications they have, which communities they belong to, and how they conceptualize their role. Responsibility is key in power dynamics. Leadership should not be about having power over others but being responsible for those with less experience or overview. The negative aspects are evident in global political spheres—many difficulties arise when those in power lack a sense of responsibility toward those they lead.

VVN: I agree, and that is also a reason why starting from the perspective of the needs of all the stakeholders in a co-creation project can be helpful. Different stakeholders have different needs. From a museum point of view, we usually need something we can share with our visitors in a public program or exhibition. We do not expect other parties in a co-creation process to have similar expertise, but we do work on it together. One of the core values of our co-creation projects is equity, meaning we want everyone to feel valued, heard, and seen, but we are not expecting everyone to contribute exactly the same.

LL: In the end, it comes down to the fact that not everyone involved can contribute the same amount of time, talents, experiences, and levels of commitment are distributed differently. From that perspective, I fully agree that we cannot expect people to give and receive in the same ways.

TOA: I want to add something to that. I have experienced both aspects of this at Kazerne. I first came to Kazerne because I had an idea and was looking for a place to work on it. I met the then program manager who encouraged me to pursue my idea. More than that, he worked with me as a partner. This collaboration gave me more than a space to work in, it also gave me a structure to work in. This structure is important because when you have that initial idea you are filled with energy, and that needs to be channeled into something fruitful. In an ideal world, everything would be fully horizontal, but real empowerment and growth often require someone to use their power to help you build your own.

Building Community

VVN: Empowerment is one of the four core values of co-creation that we work with at the Amsterdam Museum. And as Thaniel says, it is an intended output of co-creation. Before that, we focus first on equity, then reciprocity, and finally empowerment and belonging. We choose equity over equality precisely because of the power imbalances we have discussed. From experience, I would now say it is important to be explicit about roles. When roles are left unspoken, they can create false expectations. So, it is best to clarify them at the start of any co-creation process. Equity matters: it means working together as partners, while recognizing that we hold different positions and responsibilities. The second value is reciprocity: understanding that what we exchange will not always be the same, since we each bring different talents and resources. Empowerment and belonging are the outcomes that hopefully follow from centering equity and reciprocity.

TOA: At Kazerne we work similarly. Community co-creation means creating from lived experiences. Whether it is an exhibition, a public talk, or a workshop, we always need to ask: who is shaping this and who feels seen in the result?   That is what co-creation means in terms of communi-ty. Everyone is coming to this from their own experiences, and while we share a mission in co-creating, we also need to honor both the mission of those we are creating with and our own. It is a balance between creating it and living through it.

LL: Something you said really resonates with me, that the essence of co-creation is creating with people, not for them. You engage in conversation from the very start. It is about honestly listening to people's needs, seeing how they envision those needs being fulfilled, and understanding where they want to step into the process. Not everyone has the capacity or energy to be involved in every step, so it is about recognizing when and where people want to contribute.

FG: For us too, it is about working with people and not making assumptions about what people are looking for. What comes after is interesting. The audience consists of citizens and people known to the participants. So, the project spreads outward, sometimes into the city, sometimes into nature. While we co-create with participants, the ultimate aim is to share the work with a wider public. What often emerges are new communities that evolve beyond our involvement. More people join, others move on and

"Community co-creation means creating from lived experiences. Whether it is an exhibition, a public talk, or a workshop, we always need to ask: who is shaping this and who feels seen in the result?"

Thaniel Owusu Agyemang

start their own projects, staying con-
nected in different ways. They go on to
build something of their own.

We have been doing this for six years
now, hosting these workshops annually,
and over time, the broader community
has continued to grow.

LL: Yes, this is an important aspect of build-
ing a community: the way it empow-
ers people outside of the community
boundaries. At BOOST we feel this when
people move on from this space. We
go through this process with them, and
while we are continually building this
community it changes and evolves. This
means people are leaving too. But hope-
fully this is a sign it has had its intended
effect. People have had the chance
to try something out, to contribute to
something, and now they will continue
doing this in other communities, as
Francesco says.

Understanding Impact

GLH: The communities that develop because of the work we do brings up another point, and that is impact. This question of impact is so integral. I am curious about examples from the field, especially in relation to how we define the field itself. Is there a way to redefine the capitalist, neoliberal structures we operate within to emphasize other forms of impact? I am thinking of the kinds of impact you have observed in your work, like meaningful connections or alternative ways of conceptualizing impact. I am interested in this because, while talking the talk is one thing, we are all striving for tangible, material outcomes. We are all trying to make the world a better place. What might help facilitate that?

FG: It is interesting that you bring up the impact we have in relation to bigger societal structures. We have the political choice to not simply rely on numbers, counting participants, for example. Instead, we intentionally move away from the dictatorship of the algorithm that always pushes us to quantify everything. Rather, we choose to recognize and give value to personal growth. By doing this we honor that the work we do is very personal because it operates on an individual level. When we assess impact, we focus on valuing the growth of each person involved. Practically, this means we conduct interviews and maintain an archive of these conversations with individual participants. We also interview the audience.

LL: This is something we think about as well, and in recent years we have taken steps to measure our impact. For us, this means looking at indicators of integration as a framework. But often the impact we have is so soft and individual, a very personal process. We can see the impact we have in our own spaces; we can feel it in the fabric of our community. But it is hard to translate that to a report or to invite the municipality in every time we see it occur. So, we come back to the question: how do we understand the impact we have?

VVN: For us, researching impact has meant developing a method that matches the flexibility and unpredictability of the co-creation process. In open-ended processes, the act of creating together is often equally or even more important than the outcome. So how do you assess whether impact has been achieved? To make this both researchable and manageable, over the past few years we have developed a mixed methods approach which focusses on

"For us, researching impact has meant developing a method that matches the flexibility and unpredictability of the co-creation process. In open-ended processes, the act of creating together is often equally or even more important than the outcome.

Vanessa Vroon-Najem

productive interaction in light of our four core values for co-creation projects — equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging. Through individual and group interviews, through an online survey tool we developed with DoDiversity, and by having many informal observations and conversations at various stages of the process, we try to assess before, during, and after the co-creation process whether these values were indeed realized. Did participants learn something new or discover a talent? Did they meet new people? Did they feel respected, seen, and heard? Was their input reflected in the outcome? Did they gain something they can carry into the future? Has their engagement enhanced their self-esteem? With such questions, and, importantly, by inviting critical feedback, we aim to capture insights about the impact of co-creation projects on various stakeholders. It is still a work in progress, but this is the framework we have been working on to be able to approach the question of the impact of our efforts.

TOA: The way we measure impact has also evolved over the past year. We organized a small festival in Amsterdam, working across different locations and co-creating with local residents to understand what the neighborhood needed and what people were willing to contribute. We collaborated with the municipality, and although the innovation team we worked with is no longer active, it was a valuable partnership. They were deeply focused on measuring and gathering data.

In contrast, we focus more on stories as a measure of impact. Through workshops, we help people explore new opportunities and spaces. They return to share their stories, which we then incorporate into our programs. As a creative space, we witness people doing incredible things; many of them start making art or engaging in other creative projects through us. Right now, we are working on breaking down the barrier between older and younger generations. We ask: how do we reach and connect these groups? Once we engage them, we can begin to assess the impact.

We also aim to meet people where they are. For example, we have noticed older residents like to share their life stories, so we have started offering a biography-writing workshop. This allows us to preserve and archive those stories for future generations and future impact. So, again, we invite people in and create from lived experiences. This is what community co-creation is all about.

Endnotes

1   Pre-expressive acting, a term coined by Eugenio
    Barba, refers to the actor's training and preparation
    before engaging with the specific script or
    performance. For more information see:
    tandfonline.com/doi/
    pdf/10.1080/10486809708568443

2   The Amsterdam Museum has developed a toolkit
    for co-creation. The toolkit is accessible through:
    amsterdammuseum.nl/en/publications/publi/5195

3   DoDiversity is a Dutch company that helps companies
    implement and follow through on diversity, inclusion,
    and impact. For more information visit: dodiversity.
    com/

Stories of arrival: AZC Willinklaan 2024

Stories of arrival is a project through which the Amsterdam Museum collaborates with people working and living at locations for Amsterdam's newest residents, such as asylum seeker center (AZC) Willinklaan. Together with artist Anouschka Boswijk, they co-created a mural, representing various historical 'stories of arrival' in Amsterdam. During co-creation sessions and workshops, MA students Applied Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam Museum staff engaged with the project's participants – residents and social workers - and noted their personal stories, focusing on what had compelled them to leave their country of origin and their current life in the city, and what is like to work at this center. Short versions of these interviews, together with photographed objects that these stories featured were part of the exhibition. The stories also became part of the museum collection. This co-creation with residents and employees of AZC Willinklaan was the first edition of Stories of Arrival. The mural that was created is still part of the interior of the center's classrooms.

About the Contributors
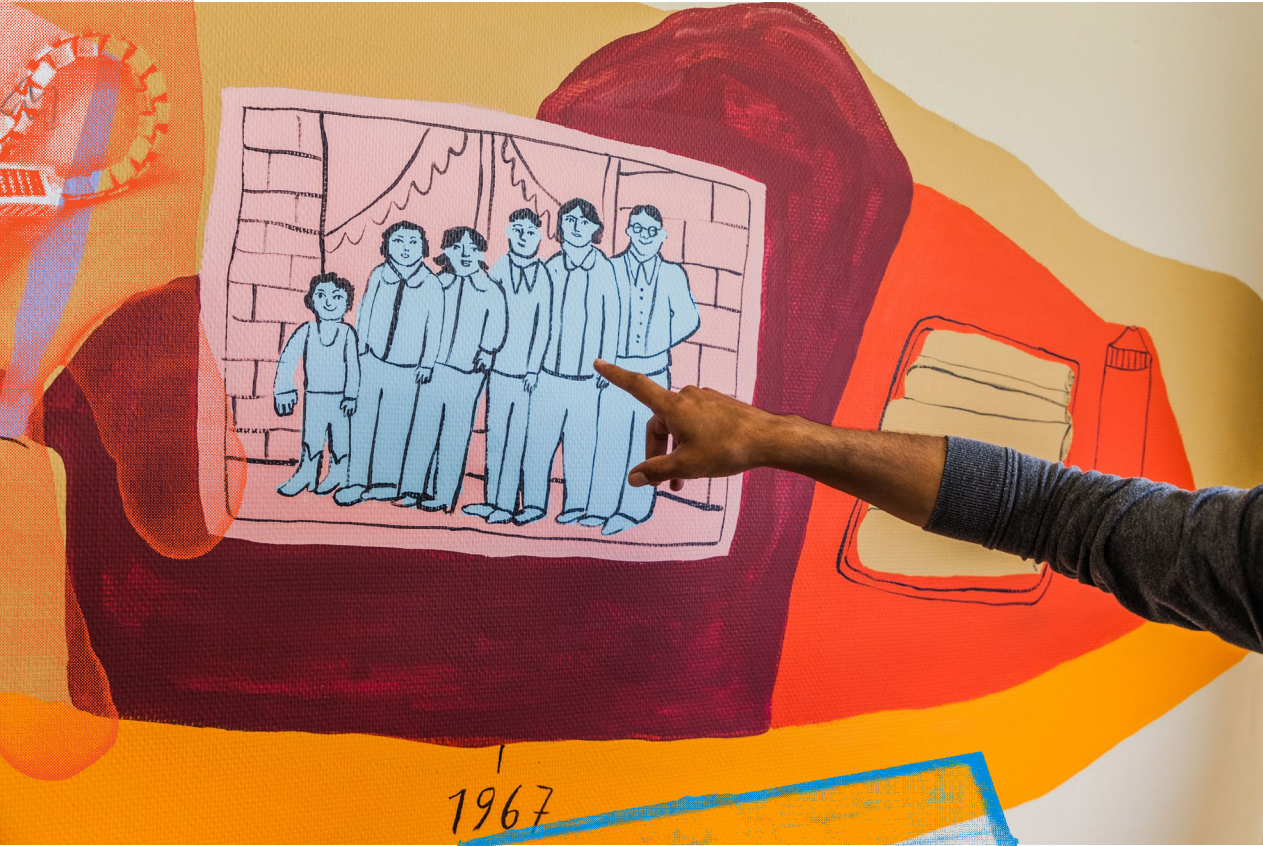
Justine Allasia
With a background in Spatial Planning and Cultural History and Heritage, Justine Allasia is an independent scholar digging into various areas of interest including rap music, (post)colonial memories, urban graffiti, cultural heritage, and queer history. They are also a volunteer at Queer U Stories.

Markus Balkenhol
Markus Balkenhol is a senior researcher at the Meertens Institute. He is a social anthropologist working on colonial heritage and memory in the Netherlands. He has been on various committees, advisory boards and working groups related to slavery and the colonial past.

Thaniel Owusu Agyemang
Thaniel Owusu Agyemang is a multidisciplinary artist and founder of Sankofa Archives, a platform for archiving and sharing underrepresented stories through art and culture. At Kazerne Reigersbos, he develops and curates the artistic programming in collaboration with the local community.

Jessica Dikmoet
Jessica Dikmoet is a journalist and producer focusing on Dutch slavery history. She was on the Ferrier Committee preparing the National Slavery Museum. As a community coordinator, she connects with diverse and underrepresented groups. She also advises the June 30–July 1 Amsterdam Committee, which organizes remembrance events at Surinameplein.
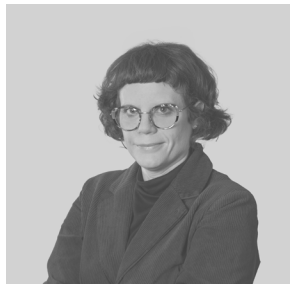
Sara Greco
Sara Greco (Ph.D. 2009) is full professor of argumentation at USI Università della Svizzera italiana and director of the Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics. Her theoretical and empirical research mainly focuses on argumentation as an alternative to the escalation of conflict in interpersonal relationships and public controversies.
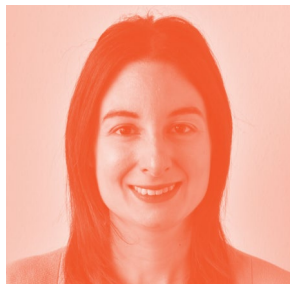
Chiara Jermini
Chiara Jermini has a linguistics and literature background and she holds a PhD in Communication sciences (2021) obtained at USI Università della Svizzera italiana, where she works as post-

doc researcher. Among her research interests are the role of argumentation in conflict resolution and the connection between emotions and argumentation.

Danielle Kuijten
Danielle Kuijten is director and co-curator at Imagine IC, here she develops democratic heritage practices with her team. As a freelancer she advises on ways of participatory collecting, ethics of participatory work and rethinking the museum as an inclusive space.

Marco Lupatini
Marco Lupatini holds a Ph.D. in Geography and is a lecturer and senior researcher in Geography Education at the Department of Training and Learning/University of Teacher Education of SUPSI in Locarno. His research focuses on the links between geography education and citizenship education.

Mirjam Marks
After her bachelor in Theater Studies at the University of Utrecht, Mirjam Marks worked at VPRO to make youth

television programs. The series Ruilen Internationaal brought her to Suriname in 1997, where she and her family lived and worked on and off for over six years. In 2009 she founded the children's museum Villa Zapakara. Back in the Netherlands Mirjam continues her work as an independent documentary filmmaker.

Dominika Mikołajczyk
Dominika Mikołajczyk is a writer and editor whose research interests lie in memory politics and the post-socialist transformation. A graduate of the Cultural Analysis Research Master's at the University of Amsterdam, she works at Sonic Acts and *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*. Her work was presented at the 2022 Rural Imaginations conference and will feature in *Thamyris/Intersecting* (July 2025).

Prarthana Narendra Hosadurga
Prarthana Narendra Hosadurga is an architect, heritage practitioner, and researcher exploring contested heritage, decolonial activism, and spatial transformation. Her work examines how monuments and public spaces evolve as sites of memory and resistance. Her recent publication includes "Recasting Bismarck" in Public Art Dialogue. She also sketches - sometimes buildings, sometimes ideas.

Marysa Otte
Marysa Otte is a Collections Advisor at the Amsterdam Museum. Previously, she worked as an advisor on collection management and preventive conservation for museums in the Dutch province of Gelderland. Her current research focuses on how co-creation intersects with decision-making processes related to the valuation, use, care, and conservation of museum collections.never leaves her.

Isabelle Pidcock
Isabelle Pidcock, Museum Studies masters graduate and exhibitions assistant at the Jewish Museum, Amsterdam, is interested in the museum as a place where we can find connection and build community. She works with low/no-technology interactivity and playfulness as the mediums through which to do this.
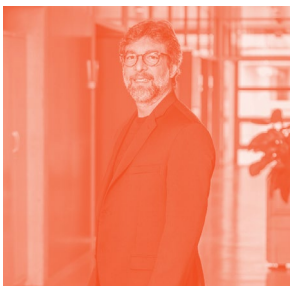
Andrea Plata
Andrea Plata studied political sciences. He is a senior lecturer and researcher at the Department of Training and Learning/University of Teacher

Education of SUPSI in Locarno. His work focuses on democracy and citizenship education, participatory research methodologies, and the monitoring of education systems.

Sarah Postema-Toews
Sarah Postema-Toews's research focuses on the intersection between the aesthetics of the everyday, political resistance, and affect theory. She holds a Research Master's in Cultural Analysis from the University of Amsterdam. Her thesis explored activist aesthetics through everyday objects. Her research was presented at the 2024 Exploring Aesthetic Practices conference.

Jules Rijssen
Jules Rijssen is an andragogue and writer and works as a network collector at Imagine IC. He is also affiliated with NL-Lab as an expert in residence on cultural heritage and inclusivity. Here he works on inclusive networking and advises on diversity and cross-institutional research.

Emily Schneider
Emily Schneider completed her bachelor's degree in Arts and Culture Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen in 2021. She then obtained two master's degrees, one in European Studies and one in Cultural Analysis, at the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include border studies, relationality, identity construction, and plant studies.

Linde Lamboo
Linde Lamboo is a programme manager at BOOST Amsterdam where she enjoys bringing people with different ideas together to co-create projects that really matter, and is passionate about community-driven work. BOOST is a home base for newcomers with a refugee background and local volunteers.
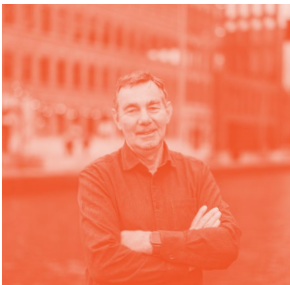
Bram Sizoo
Bram Sizoo worked for four years as a tropical doctor in Malawi. Upon return to the Netherlands, he became a psychiatrist in 2008 and is specialized in developmental disorders. Currently he is professor at the University of Amsterdam where his research focuses on the clinical psychology of radicalisation. *Photo: Kirsten van Santen*

Cas Versluijs
Cas Versluijs is a museum educator working at the Amsterdam Museum since 2024. In their practice, they focus on developing new forms of co-creation with children within the museum. They work closely with young communities, empowering children to tell their own stories and claim their place in the world.

Lieve Wijman
Lieve Wijman holds a bachelor's degree in Philosophy from the University of Amsterdam and a master's degree in Conflict Studies and Human Rights from Utrecht University. As a freelance investigative journalist, she focuses on migration, cultural diversity, and social justice. Lieve has lived in Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan.

Francesco Gori
Francesco Gori is an author and actor specialized in dramatizations in non-theatrical spaces (museums, art galleries, villas, squares, parks). He is also artistic director of Genius Loci Performance, an artistic collective with years of experience in producing immersive, participatory, and multidisciplinary performances focused on the relationship between the body, urban space, live music, and ritual.

Editorial Board

GL Hernandez
Who was an invaluable guest editor. He was able to provide insightful critical feedback on the multidisciplinary contributions, which have made this special edition truly special.

Vanessa Vroon-Najem
Who as our in-house specialist on co-creation was an essential ingredient of this edition. Simply put, without her expertise AMJournal Edition #4 Co-creating our Cities would not have been possible.

Imogen Mills
Who as the permanent editor of 'The Polylogue' continues to prove her value. Her ability to manage multiple projects and people at the same time only underlines this.

Sigi Samwel
Who as the permanent visual editor of AMJournal has demonstrated, once again, her keen eye for detail and talent for critical thinking.

Jari Lemmers
Who as the lead editorial support for this issue has shown his talent for editorial work. His critical feedback and dedication to author- and content management was examplary.

Lola Abbas
Who helped set up this edition of AMJournal and played a key role in its set-up.

Jules Rosier
Who in the final stages of the journal helped smooth over the rough edges by copy-editing this edition.

Isabelle Vaverka
Who continues to be the creative force behind every edition of AMJournal. She is ever flexible, clever and innovative. On top of that she is a joy to work with.

Patrick de Bruin
Who has provided valuable input on the overal look and feel of all AMJournal editions. He works dillegently and always seems to make an edition look even better than what we could have imagined.

Katharina Klockau
Who managed our budget and always makes herself available when needed.

Finally, the internal board of editors would like to thank the external board of editors for their continued support and involvement in this special thematic journal:

External Board of Editors
Pablo Ampuero Ruiz; Rowan Arundel; Sruti Bala; Markus Balkenhol; Ellinoor Bergvelt; Sophie Berrebi; Stephan Besser; Carolyn Birdsall; Cristobal Bonelli; Pepijn Brandon; Benedetta Bronzini; Petra Brouwer; Fabiola Camuti; Thorsten Carstensen; Chiara de Cesari; Debbie Cole; Leonie Cornips; Annet Dekker; Christine Delhaye; Brian Doornenbal; Menno Dudok Heel; David Duindam; Jorge Duran Solorzano; Karwan Fatah-Black; Maaike Feitsma; Mark Fenemore; Gaston Franssen; Maartje van Gelder; Wouter van Gent; Marike Geurts; Javier Gimeno Martinez; Sara Greco; Suzette van Haaren; Laura van Hasselt; GL Hernandez; Danielle van den Heuvel; Hilde Heynen; Pim Huijnen; Katy Hull; Julian Isenia; Steve Oswald; Paul Knevel; Linda Kopitz; Gregor Langfeld; Mia Lerm-Hayes; Geertje Mak; Virginie Mamadouh; Michiel van Meeteren; Miguel Mira; Anna Nikolaeva; Julia Noordegraaf; Suleiman Osman; Asli Özgen; Marrigje Paijmans; Manon Parry; Esther Peeren; Shialoh Phillips; Bob Pierik; Fenne Pinkster; Gertjan Plets; Pieter du Plessis; Menno Reijven; Jan Rock; Noa Roei; Bert van de Roemer; Aafje de Roest; Margriet Schavemaker; Dorine Schellens; Michael Scherer-Rath; Britta Schilling;

Unknown Zeedijk 2024

Unknown Zeedijk (2024) was part of *Collecting the City #4* and revolved around the street called 'Zeedijk', located in the oldest part of Amsterdam's city center. The Zeedijk is a street where many ethnic and cultural backgrounds are represented, such as Chinese, Surinamese, and Jewish communities, queer and jazz scenes, creative young entrepreneurs, and more. While these communities differ, they are all closely connected to this street and the surrounding area. During the Covid pandemic (2020-2022), the absence of the usual tourist crowds highlighted the rich variety of entrepreneurs which is fundamental to the current incarnation of the Zeedijk. To capture these stories of present-day Zeedijk, the municipality of Amsterdam together with the Amsterdam Museum initiated Ongekend Zeedijk [translation: 'Unknown Zeedijk']. The exhibition, first in shop windows at Zeedijk itself, and second at the Amsterdam Museum, included works by artists Eveline Renaud, Susan Kooi, Neil Fortune, and Tja Ling. They collaborated with residents and entrepreneurs in the area to represent their historical as well as contemporary stories and experiences.

For more on...

Kala Cité & Sankofa Archives

For more on the work of Thaniel Owusu Agyemang, participant of 'The Polylogue', see his work as multidisciplinary artist Kala Cité. As Kala Cité, he blends photography, filmmaking, music and visual arts. Noteworthy is his recent film debut with the film *Home, Where it All Begins*, a personal account of his first trip to Ghana. Agyemang is also the founder of *Sankofa Archives*, a platform for young creatives to showcase their talents and a focus on lesser-seen aspects of Dutch society.

Genius Loci Performances

For more on Francesco Gori's Genius Loci Performance, as mentioned in 'The Polylogue', read the essay 'Site-specific Performances and Community Activation: Participative Theatre in Florence beyond Overtourism and Gentrification' by Benedetta Bronzini in AMJournal #2 – Deconstructing Gentrification. Bronzini shows how Genius Loci Performances brings local Florentines back into the city center with their performances and creates a new perspective on urban space in the process. The essay also features excerpts from an interview of Bronzini with Gori. Also see their website geniuslociperformance. com for upcoming projects and performances.

We are here – A shared past, moslims tell

For more on Vanessa Vroon's work, see her current collaboration with Moslimarchief in the context of their exhibition *Wij zijn hier –Een gedeeld verleden, moslims vertellen [translation: We are here – A shared past, moslims tell]* on view at OBA Oosterdok, Amsterdam until September 6, 2025. In this context, Vroon is currently working on three co-creations about zakaat and sadaqa (giving and sharing) with Maqam/JP Vision, S.P.E.A.K. and Imagine IC. The results of these co-creations will be presented on August 30th 2025 at OBA Oosterdok. See Geven & Delen: Verhalen van Amsterdamse Moslims for more information or if you want to pay these co-creations a visit.

Collecting the City

For more on Amsterdam Museum's Collecting the City and co-creation from a museology perspective, as mentioned in Marysa Otte's 'The Role of the Artist Interview' and the Interventions, see the Amsterdam Museum Co-Creation Tool Kit Collecting the City. Co-creation: A work in progress. Based on Amsterdam Museum's experience with co-creating exhibitions, the toolkit aims to develop 'a common language and set of tools for co-creation for and with partner museums'. The toolkit formulates four core values of co-creation (Equality, Reciprocity, Empowerment and Belonging) and outlines a fifteen-step plan for AM's method of co-creation. It can be found online in its entirety at amsterdammuseum.nl/en/publications/publi/5195.

Food and co-creation

For more on the role of food and restaurants in co-creating community, see Elizabeth Buettner, '" Going for an Indian": South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain', published in The Journal on Modern History, vol. 80, 2008. in which she investigates the history of England's curry-tradition and argues that the acceptance of South Asian cuisine in the UK did not necessarily lead to the acceptance of South Asian people or turn their restaurants into melting pots. Also see Susanne Wessendorf and James Farrer, 'Commonplace and out-of-place diversities in London and Tokyo: migrant-run eateries as intercultural third places', published in Comparative Migration Studies, vol. 9, 2021, for an explanation as to why migrant-run food spots turn into intercultural third places or not.

Style Wars

For more on graffiti culture as discussed in Justine's Allasia's paper 'Graffiti and Heritage: the case of the Zilvermeeuw Metro', see the 1983 documentary *Style Wars* (directed by Tony Silver). The film documents the rise of subway graffiti in New York and hip hop and the efforts that the municipality undertook to curtail graffiti. It does so through the perspective of the writers and is praised for its authentic and raw depiction of the scene. *Style Wars* can be seen on YouTube in its entirety. Another insight into today's graffiti scene are 'train bombing' videos on YouTube, in which writers film themselves as they tag new trains and places. See the YouTube channel *Tags and Throws* for example.

ELJA Kindermuseum-lab

For more on co-created children's art such as the Polyphonic Object *Polarisaampie!*, see the ELJA Kindermuseumlab. At these workshops children aged 9-12 from all districts of Amsterdam work in co-creation with professional artists to create their own artworks using Wicked Arts Assignments -as discussed in Cas Versluijs' contribution to The Polyphonic Object. Every year the children create art on a theme that is relevant for that year's exhibition at the Amsterdam Museum. The resulting artworks are exhibited in co-curation with the museum's children's sounding board group in the museum every year. Their latest exhibition, on the future of Amsterdam, will be on view in early 2026.

Stories of Arrival

For more on Linde Lamboo's work at BOOST foundation, as discussed in the Polylogue, see their upcoming exhibition Stories of Arrival opening at BOOST, Amsterdam in October 2025. Made in co-creation with the newcomers at BOOST, Amsterdam Museum and the artist Fransix Tenda Lomba, the exhibition will showcase different stories of arrival and follow up on the first edition of Stories of Arrival, which was on view in 2024. If you want to know more about the rest of BOOST's programme and events or sign up as a volunteer, please see their website boostamsterdam.nl

Kazerne Reigersbos

For more on Kazerne Reigersbos, as discussed in the Polylogue and highlighted in the Interventions, check out their social media pages and website for more information on upcoming events and projects. Kazerne Reigersbos provides artist studios, co-working spaces, a gymnasium, kitchen and more for the residents of the Reigersbos neighborhood. It also offers workshops, sports classes, organizes exhibitions, neighborhood markets, pop-up events and more. In the process, Kazerne Reigersbos often co-creates with other organizations and initiatives and plays a big role in shaping the local community.

RoXY

For more on co-creation and community forming in urban environments, dive into the history of RoXY, the legendary Amsterdam club located on the Singel from 1987 till 1999. *Het RoXY archief* by photographer Cleo Campert consists of more than 700 pictures detailing the numerous unique performers, guests, and DJs which impacted (inter)national conceptions of (club) culture. The Club Roxy video series on the Amsterdam Museum YouTube page includes interviews with prominent figures, and portrays a more personal picture of the scene.

Volkstuinen

To explore more on natural co-creation in the urban atmosphere, visit one of Amsterdam's community gardens. Known as *volkstuinen*, the 41 gardens allow residents to share and obtain information on the natural environment, communally work on the spaces, and enjoy them recreationally. Historically, *volkstuinen* were remarkably valuable to Amsterdam: the first gardens were created in 1909, after which they were an important source of food during the First and Second World War.

Co-creating community in San Fransisco

For more on co-creation and community forming in urban environments, dive into the cultural movements that invigorated San Francisco in the mid to late-20th century. Jamie Russell's *The Beat Generation* gives an overview of the writers, literature and events that led to the creation of the famous literary movement which originated in the city. *Gay by the Bay* (Susan Stryker and Jim van Buskirk) provides a historical record of San Francisco's gay community forming, in which the letters, posters and other artifacts display a physical (re) collection of co-creation. Books like Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* argue that the alternative information network that arose during the many (counter)cultural movements led to the technology infrastructure we currently associate with San Francisco.

Upcoming Editions

AMJournal #5: Women and Cities
Guest edited by Margriet Schavemaker.
The stories of cities are often told through the men that help(ed) make them, literally and metaphorically. However, men did not, and do not, inhabit or make the cities by themselves. Even now, the influence and presence of women in our urban spaces is still underrepresented. This issue will focus on how women have shaped cities, in the past, the present and future, whether in politics or architecture. And, in turn, how cities have shaped what it means to live as/be a woman. From power to spirituality, from intersectionality to biology, from science to resistance, from sex to economy: All urban aspects that shape women and have been shaped by women will be explored. Guest edited by Margriet Schavemaker.
To be published in Winter 2025

AMJournal #6: Our Future Cities
Call for Abstracts opens in September 2025
Looking back at a city's history to learn from it and create a better present is a common narrative, especially in museums. But the necessity to imagine a future is not limited to cultural institutions. How will we inhabit urban spaces in the future? What does it mean to look at the future? What role does religion play? What does looking at the past tell us about the future? What can we learn from science fiction? What will city economies look like? Will there be more green or more concrete? What will the differences be between, for example, Norway versus Nigeria? AMJournal #5 will feature investigations into the possibilities and struggles of our future urban spaces, including projections, prognoses, hypotheses, as well as hopes and fears.
To be published in Summer 2026

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