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Enjoying Public Space in Swiss Cities

Beat Brunner

Abstract

From transforming fire-hydrants, to public snow-sculpting, to growing "mini-gardens," Swiss cities and towns are undertaking initiatives to re-imagine the urban experience, in order to make it more pleasant, memorable, and relevant, for its residents. Here, I share several art projects that I have been involved in first-hand over the past several years, starting in the 1980s in the town of St. Gallen and in the village Braunwald, Switzerland, demonstrating how: a) through the re-painting of fire-hydrants as dwarfs, fairytales come alive in urban places, which re-energizes public places in rather unpredictable ways; b) through public snow-sculpting using scratched ice from a local ice-rink, discarded material is put into new, creative, and decorative use; and c. through guerilla gardening in public places, locals take care for a "mini-garden" set by the council in a wooden frame, creating a shared experience that will culminate in having a meal together, cooked from the vegetables grown in the mini-garden, and shared on the street, where the mini-garden is located.

My company, *Sculptura*, founded on January 1, 1989 and based in the town of St. Gallen, Switzerland (with a population of 78,000) focuses on creating public art activities for both children and adults, regardless of their prior art experience. These activities take place either outdoors or indoors and are short-term or seasonal (or repeatedly seasonal, that is, they have become a tradition (for instance, the annual public snow-sculpting competition in Rorschach by Lake Constance, which gathers over 50 participants and over 1500 viewers). Often carried out with the cooperation of the local authorities, or even on a very low budget, these public art activities have no political agenda. Their sole purpose is the enjoyment of all who participate in them, as they give rise to temporary communities bound by the artistic experience.

Here, I offer a glimpse into three popular public art activities that *Sculptura* has initiated over the years: snow-sculpting, mural painting, and gardening:

Public Snow-sculpting (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) takes place either when real snow accumulates or at an ice rink, where scraped ice can be used. But the event is not bound to winter: we have conducted ice sculpting in the summer: the event is way shorter then, up to 2 hours. In the winter time, the event can last for a whole day. It is essential to prepare some heaps of snow, the size depending on the amount of snow available. Participants work in small groups, families participate. Setting a theme is important, such as “Fantasy creatures,” or “Nature,” as is setting the time-frame for the activity, by considering the temperatures. Optional is to run the event as a small fun-competition, awarding points to the most liked, or most popular sculptures, that get a small prize or free hot chocolate to the winner.

Mural painting takes place in a public place, as a public event as such it may require permission. A wall or a large canvas (or a few smaller canvases) and acrylic paints are necessary for this activity to take place. A pre-design, main theme, appropriate space for the painting artists, paintbrushes and water, are also important (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 show the extra-large painting project in Braunwald; Fig. 5 and Fig. 6: communal mural painting at New York University and communal painting project in PS 770 in Brooklyn, New York)

Another public painting, but more so related to the scope of the project not its size, is the painting of fire hydrants, which gives them an additional sense of life (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). For this activity, it is highly recommended to get permission from the Fire Department. Hydrants are important yet ignored by the general population. Aside from preparing a visualization, using a good primer, high quality acryl paints (fe LASCAUX studio), and good varnish, it is important to create a story with the painted characters (hydrants), or even suggest a different walk through the city as a result of following the story that the newly painted hydrants tell.

Finally, urban gardening (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10) —it is nothing new (there are hot-spots of urban gardening all over the world, as seen in the master thesis of Jasmin Zweifel PHSG), but always good for building community and a shared sense of responsibility. This is a good project for long-term participation. In 2015, the City of St. Gallen prepared the planting pots and pre-planted young

vegetables in them. They placed them all over town: people cared about them for months, and then had a final meal together, in the city street, with vegetables from these urban gardens.

Thus, enjoying public space together, the Swiss way is most often done with the cooperation of local authorities and sponsors, whenever available, and is carried out in a friendly way with all partners and participants. In fact, it follows the “Fondue” principle: “... to sit together and join into one pot of melted cheese with your piece of bread and have satisfaction for body and soul.” We try to introduce this self-growing enthusiasm for community and public space in city streets, schools, and various public gatherings.



Fig. 1: Snowcastle, Engstilgenalp, 2008. Photo credit: Sculptura.



Fig. 2: Summerdream. Snowsculpting event with students. Herisau 30th June, 2015. St. Gallen. Photo credit: Sculptura.



Fig. 3: Public painting XXXL ... Summer 2014, Braunwald, Switzerland (350sqm). Photo credit: Beat Brunner.



Fig. 4: Public painting XXXL, Summer 2014, Braunwald, Switzerland (350sqm). Photo credit: Beat Brunner.



Fig. 5: New York City-themed communal painting, Canvas, 2x3 meters. New York University, November 2, 2015. Photo credit: Beat Brunner.



Fig. 6: "Heart Values" 6-piece painting, PS 770, Brooklyn, New York, November 5, 2015. Six canvas frames, sizes 60x80cm. Photo credit: Beat Brunner.



Fig. 7: Hydrant painting. Zosia Brunner painting. Braunwald. 2014. Photo credit: Beat Brunner.



Fig. 8: Finished Hydrants, Braunwald, 2014. Photo credit: Beat Brunner.



Fig. 9: An alternative planting pot. St. Gallen Project, Summer 2015. Source: Jasmine Zweifel, St. Gallen, master thesis.



Fig. 10: In front of the Volkerkundermuseum, St. Gallen Project, Summer 2015. Photo credit: St. Gallen Tagblatt.

About the author

Beat Brunner is an artist and art educator, based in St. Gallen, Switzerland. In 1989, he founded the snow-sculpting company Sculptura. Since 1999, he has been teaching art, hand-crafts, and creative projects in public high schools. In 2015, he led a large canvas public painting project at New York University; oversaw an art drawing project at an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York; and presented some of his work in the Urban Culture Area of the Annual Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association (MAPACA) Conference in Philadelphia. Email: beat@brunki.ch