

Restaging Urban Relationships: The Art of Inventing New Social Spaces in the City

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Abstract

What do textile fabrics, residential streets and urban dwellers have in common? They are all part of the “living room on your own doorstep” – the public urban and social space that can be shaped by people. This article examines three projects by the Viennese urban and cultural initiative “space and place” that strive to enable the co-creative exploration, reinterpretation, and invention of new urban spaces: First, “Stoff für's Grätzel” (“Fabric for the neighbourhood”, 2021/2022), honoured with an award by the Chamber of Commerce, uses the medium of fabric to shed light on a Viennese neighbourhood. Textiles like a pair of painter's trousers, a baby bodysuit or a tea towel from a pub are sewn together to form a “neighbourhood rug”, symbolically intertwining the community's diverse threads. Second, the project “Residential Street Culture”, initiated by “space and place” in 2018, explores residential streets as urban oases. It challenges car-centric views, redefining these areas as democratic spaces for people. Third, the award-winning project “We speak ...” (“Wir sprechen ...”, 2014-2023 – honoured by “SozialMarie”) celebrates the linguistic diversity of a city's inhabitants by showcasing language skills of local business employees through window displays. In language-sharing events, native speakers are teaching phrases in their first languages to interested neighbours. These projects employ various methods to activate local neighbourhoods and to support the redefinition of public spaces. This article discusses the role of art and culture in co-creating urban coexistence, questioning established social patterns such as mobility behaviour and throwaway culture. It highlights the potential of city dwellers to contribute to a redesign of urban life.

Keywords

urban transformation; tactical urbanism; placemaking; Residential Street Culture; social space; diversity.

1. Introduction

This article explores urban relationships and the co-creation of social spaces in everyday city life, focusing on three projects by the Viennese initiative “space and place.” As the founder of this culture and research organisation and as a social and cultural anthropologist engaged in participatory, co-creative urban work and research, I offer insights into the transformation of urban spaces through community-oriented activities as well as through art and cultural activities. I examine (1) the art project “Stoff für's Grätzel” (English: “Fabric for the neighbourhood” – 2021/2022)¹, which employed textiles to weave a narrative of community life; (2) the co-creation of “Residential Street Culture”²

(2018-ongoing), fostering so called “oases of well-being”; and (3) the “We speak ...”³ project (German: “Wir sprechen ...” 2014-2023), celebrating linguistic diversity in urban neighbourhoods. These activities demonstrate how public spaces can become extensions of our homes where urban relationships flourish across social divides.

The article discusses how these projects contribute to co-creating public spaces, outlining their objectives, the methods used, and underlying concepts and insights. I address structural challenges and highlight the role of art and culture in the co-creation of urban social spaces, as well as the limitations of participatory and co-creative

1 - See: <https://spaceandplace.at/stoff-fuers-graetzel/>, 04.10.2024.

2 - See: “Competence Centre for Residential Street Culture”, <https://www.spaceandplace.at/kompetenzzentrum-wohnstrassenkultur/>, 04.10.2024.

3 - See: <https://www.spaceandplace.at/wir-sprechen/>, 04.10.2024.

work. I raise the question: Who bears the responsibility for awakening the potential of public “living rooms” beyond our own homes?

2. Urban Relationships & Social Spaces - There is more to come!

Urban environments host an array of social spaces, each serving distinct purposes in fostering human interaction. These spaces can be categorised into the private, semi-public, and public realm. Private spaces, primarily homes, form the foundation of urban social life. Semi-public spaces include educational institutions and workplaces, where individuals spend significant portions of their time and develop social connections. Public spaces encompass a wide range of venues such as parks, cafes, cultural centres, and religious institutions, each catering to different demographics and interests. Access to these social spaces is often contingent on factors like group membership, consumption, or volunteering. Socioeconomic status, cultural background, and financial means further influence an individual's ability to engage with various social spaces.

While many urban dwellers are content within their established social circles, there is a growing desire among others to break out of these “bubbles” and connect with different societal groups. Recognising this trend, organisations like “space and place”⁴ work to create innovative social spaces that facilitate interactions across diverse demographics (Statistik Wien 2024). Through artistic interventions and disruptions of familiar settings, they aim to spark new perspectives and encourage active engagement in communal life among city residents.

While working with social spaces these initiatives often address pressing urban issues such as the equitable distribution of public space or sustainable living practices. The endeavour for participation of various stakeholders can lead to enriching experiences, it can also present challenges when differing opinions clash. Ultimately, these activities contribute to a more inclusive urban environment by promoting exchanges between various social groups

and encouraging citizens to actively shape their social surroundings. Experiences from such exchanges are partly integrated into everyday life and can serve as catalysts for long-term change, opening new perspectives and revealing the potential for a more inclusive, vibrant urban community.

3. Sociocultural & Co-creative Projects in Focus

The Viennese urban and cultural initiative “space and place” has specialised on the implementation of various socio-cultural and co-creative projects⁵, three of which are discussed here. They were realised between 2014 and 2024 and focused primarily on the outer districts of Vienna (15-18) beyond the famous “Gürtel” ring road, whilst also including selected inner districts (6 and 8). These projects aimed to connect different groups of the population living in close proximity to each other through co-creative exploration and reinterpretation of urban spaces. Each project was tailored to the unique characteristics of its respective neighbourhood or “Grätzel”. For instance, the 15th district is known for its high population density, high proportion of immigrants, and limited green spaces, while the 18th district features more green areas and is generally home to wealthier residents. Inner districts, though often less green, tend to be trendier and more touristy. Despite these different characteristics, communities with varying preferences often live side by side without truly knowing each other. The “space and place” projects sought to address this gap by fostering engagement and reimagining public spaces, encouraging interaction between different social groups within these urban environments. In the following sections, I will describe the three selected projects in more detail before going into the underlying methods and specific challenges of participatory and co-creative cultural work.

3.1. Weaving a New Social Fabric: Intangible Threads of Community

“Stoff für's Grätzel” (“Fabric for the Neighbourhood”) was an art project implemented by “space and place” in Vienna's 15th district in 2021/2022. This project, honoured with an award by the Chamber of Commerce, used fabric as a medium to illustrate the diversity of life in the neighbourhood. The

4 - “space and place” is a Viennese urban and cultural initiative that is being active in the field of urban work and urban research for over 15 years. The organisation specialises in the implementation of various socio-cultural and participatory projects in urban districts as well as in the evaluation and co-creation of new urban spaces.

5 - For more information see: <https://www.spaceandplace.at/projekte>, 06.10.2024



Figure 1. Street music by “The Willow Three” at the public sewing session of “Stoff für’s Grätzel”. © Alissar Najjar, 2021.

initiative began with a call for fabric donations and with their collection in small businesses, advertised through posters and flyers around the neighbourhood. Residents donated various textiles, from painter’s trousers to abandoned baby bodysuits and tea towels, an Ikea blanket or a maternity dress – each with its own story. Donors could note their fabric’s significance on postcard-shaped flyers, initiating a reflective process among participants.

Project curators also collected “fabric” in a metaphorical sense, gathering word donations as they visited local businesses. These verbal contributions were later woven into a thought-provoking sound collage⁶. Fashion designer Julia Scharinger-Schöttel⁷ artfully stitched the collected

fabrics into a large “Grätzelteppich” (neighbourhood rug) during a public sewing session, symbolically intertwining the community’s diverse threads. Photographer Alissar Najjar⁸ documented the process, creating a visual narrative of the project’s evolution.

The project culminated in a public exhibition showcasing the neighbourhood rug, sound collages, and photographs. This multifaceted display represented the rich tapestry of local stories, views, and insights, highlighting the neighbourhood’s potential for ongoing community engagement and creativity. In addition to the indoor presentation, a public living room was built in front of the exhibition rooms at the residential street, where people could sit in deckchairs placed in

6 - For the Soundcollage see: <https://spaceandplace.at/soundcollage-stoff-fuers-graetzel/>, 04.10.2024.

7 - Julia Scharinger-Schöttel, Artist & Illustrator, <https://mindkitchen.info/>, 04.10.2024.

8 - Alissar Najjar, Photographer, <https://www.alissarnajjar.com/>, 04.10.2024.

parking spaces and listen to a live band. People from the neighbourhood, who had donated fabrics, local residents of all genders and ages mingled. A donor was moved to tears upon seeing her oft-mended favourite dress incorporated into the community, symbolising her commitment against throwaway culture.

Since its creation, the rug has become a symbol of diversity in the neighbourhood, often displayed at local events like the annual “Day of the Residential Street”⁹. The rug was intentionally designed to match the dimensions of a parking space – a fact that shows that “space and place” tries to build synergies between its various projects, as a look at the next project example shows.

3.2. Streets as Social Spaces: Pioneering Residential Street Culture¹⁰

The project “Residential Street Culture” aimed at initiating a Residential Street Culture and at developing the tool #residentialstreetlife (German: #wohnstrassenleben)¹¹. It began in 2018, when “space and place” – together with cooperation partners like “geht-doch.wien”¹² and “Kollektiv Raumstation”¹³ – started exploring the potential uses of residential streets while respecting the existing traffic regulations and highlighting the function of residential streets as urban climate oases and spaces of well-being. With over 225 residential streets in Vienna, this previously underutilised public space offers interesting possibilities for social interaction.

According to Austrian road traffic regulations¹⁴, cars may only enter and exit these streets at walking pace and may not drive through. Cyclists can travel in both directions, while pedestrians are allowed to use the road and play if they ensure not to deliberately obstruct permitted traffic. The concept of residential streets, imported from the

Netherlands (Kraay 1968; Guttenberg 1981) to Austria about 40 years ago, was designed to prioritise pedestrians and community life. However, in practice, these spaces have often been misused, with cars frequently driving through without authorisation.

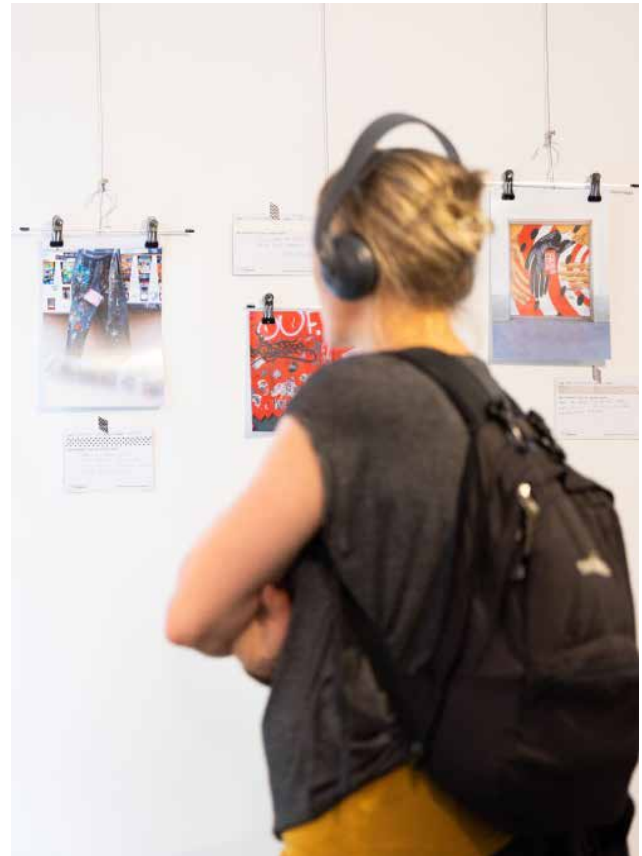


Figure 2. Vernissage of ‘Stoff für’s Grätzel’ with neighbourhood rug, photo exhibition, and sound collage. © Alissar Najjar, 2022.

9 - See: <https://spaceandplace.at/tag-der-wohnstrasse-3>, 04.10.2024.

10 - For further perspectives on the topic of the “Residential Street Culture” and more information on the tool #residentialstreetlife, see also Vettori 2024 & Slingerland, Mikusch, Tappert, Vettori, Tellioglu 2024.

11 - See: <https://spaceandplace.at/wohnstrassenleben/> & <https://spaceandplace.at/wohnstrassenleben-rueckblick/>, 04.10.2024.

12 - See: <https://geht-doch.wien/>, 04.10.2024.

13 - See: <https://raumstation.org/>, 04.10.2024.

14 - Austrian road traffic regulations §76b, Legal information from the federal government, see: <https://ris.bka.gv.at/eli/bgbl/1960/159/P76b/NOR40245690>, 04.10.2024



Figure 3. The team of 'space and place' enjoys the neighbourhood rug at the 6th Day of the Residential Street; © Renee Del Missier, 2023.

"space and place" investigated how residential streets could be woken up from their slumber. The group began to reimagine these spaces by placing tables and deckchairs in parking spaces – also in coordination with the police – and by providing games for playing in the streets. This simple but effective method of tactical urbanism (Finn, 2014; Lydon, Garcia 2015) created immediate disruption, with furniture suddenly occupying spaces usually reserved for cars.

A crucial part of the work also involved communicating the applicable rules for residential streets. "space and place" disseminated information on their own website (for example, by creating a residential street map for Vienna¹⁵

or a residential street quiz¹⁶), through social media and PR work. Many residents were unaware that playing, relaxing, or even dining was permitted in free parking spaces. The team organised picnics on the street and an obstacle course for pensioners with walkers on a residential street in front of a retirement home; they organised a cloth swap¹⁷ and engaged in sports.

The impact of these interventions was remarkable. During the annual "Day of the Residential Street", which has been initiated by "space and place" in 2018, residents began implementing ideas independently, placing their own furniture on the street and organising communal activities. In

15 - See: <https://spaceandplace.at/wohnstrassenkarte>, 04.10.2024.

16 - See: <https://spaceandplace.at/wohnstrassen-quiz/>, 04.10.2024 & Carvajal Bermúdez, König, 2021.

17 - See: <https://raum-im-raum.info/raum-fuer-gemeinschaft/projekt-garderobe/>, 06.10.2024



Figure 4. Residential street 'Zinckgasse' in Vienna's 15th district - a street for cars. © Heidi Pein, 2018.

some streets, permanent changes were made, e.g., parklets and flower beds were created and are since maintained by residents.¹⁸ All of these activities have contributed to the development of the #residentialstreetlife format, which – in contrast to “events” that require registration – stands for activities that anyone can carry out on residential streets without any further registration, provided certain rules are respected (e.g., not being too loud, not obstructing cars). In its simple application, the format promotes the legal use and democratic appropriation of the public space “residential street” by its residents.

To awaken and propagate Residential Street Culture, “space and place” has used the format #residentialstreetlife over 80 times to activate residential streets. Media coverage¹⁹ has also helped to convey the excitement of questioning established patterns of street use and utilising residential streets as equitable social spaces. In 2020, two heavily trafficked residential streets were decorated with a flower pattern²⁰, and in 2023 – in coordination with the district council – the one-way street was reversed to prevent further unauthorised use as a shortcut by drivers (Mein Bezirk 2022). The transferability of the tool #residentialstreetlife in other countries, along with Art Installations (Alain Tisserand) and other methods for negotiating diverse interests in

18 - See, e.g.: “Goldschlag 33” or “Residential Street Kollmayergasse” 2024.

19 - Media reports space and place, see: <https://spaceandplace.at/presse> & <https://spaceandplace.at/medienberichte-archiv>, 04.10.2024.

20 - Painting of residential streets, 2020, <https://spaceandplace.at/strassenbemalung>, 04.10.2024.



Figure 5. Alternative residential street signs from “space and place” to activate residential streets for humans.
© Alissar Najjar, 2021.

transforming (residential) streets into spaces for people, is further being investigated in the EU research project “StreetForum”²¹ since 2023 with partners from Brussels, Istanbul, Stockholm and Vienna.

3.3. Celebrating Diversity

The award-winning project “We speak ...” (“Wir sprechen ...” – 2014-2023; honoured by “SozialMarie”) focused on highlighting the often-overlooked linguistic diversity of a city’s inhabitants. Initiated by “space and place” in 2014, the project began on “Kalvarienberggasse”, a long street connecting Vienna’s 16th and 18th districts, lined with shops and small businesses.

The aim of “We speak ...” was to showcase and celebrate the potential of linguistic diversity. Business owners were asked about their employees’ language skills and invited to display this information on posters in shop windows. On “Kalvarienberggasse”, approximately 70 languages were spoken in 80 small businesses, ranging from Arabic and German to Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, and even sign language.

21 - See: <https://streetforum.eu/> & <https://spaceandplace.at/streetforum/>, 04.10.2024.



Figure 6. A local resident thanked 'space and place' for the street painting on his doorstep by giving the organisation this picture as a gift. © Reinhard Glössl, 2020.



Figure 7. #residentialstreetlife with “umbrella blossoms” by Alain Tisserand in the “StreetForum” project.
© Ákos Burg, 2023.

The process sparked lively discussions, revealing previously unknown linguistic and cultural backgrounds of staff members. Customers showed new interest in the businesses, unrelated to the products or services sold. The linguistic diversity of the neighbourhood became a topic of discussion and celebration. Occasionally, the embarrassment about speaking only German prompted the inclusion of Austrian dialects, adding a light-hearted aspect to the project.

“space and place” then organised “language islands” where native speakers offered short courses in their mother tongues. The joy of sharing language skills was evident, with interested parties coming to listen to different languages and learn a few words. The project was later expanded to Vienna’s 15th district, including local markets.

“We speak ...” created visibility and conveyed appreciation of linguistic diversity. It promoted talent and fostered dialogue through the topic of language. However, it also revealed societal challenges, e.g., when some businesses removed language posters due to fears of alienating certain customer groups or facing discrimination. The project reversed social roles: sellers became experts in previously invisible skills, offering not only goods but spaces for informal exchange. This led to more personal interactions in the neighbourhood, breaking up stereotypes and enhancing mutual understanding.



Figure 8. Entrepreneurs hang a poster with their language skills in their show window. © space and place 2022.



Figure 9. A local resident teaches Hungarian at the “language islands” flash courses. © Alissar Najjar 2022.



Figure 10. Turkish was also taught in the ‘We speak ...’ project. © Ákos Burg, 2023.

4. Reframing Urban Relationships: Methodological Approaches

“space and place” employs a structured, participatory approach to restaging urban relationships through a four-phase process:

Phase 1: Preparatory Assessment

Curators conduct on-site observations, assessing the qualities and challenges of a particular place and its population. This anthropological approach informs the design of interventions aimed at bringing together different social groups.

Phase 2: Participatory Engagement

This phase focuses on active community involvement. Residents take part in activities that spark experiences and strengthen interpersonal relationships – often leading to serendipitous outcomes, such as residents finding childcare solutions, forming language exchange partnerships, or joining cooking classes with neighbours they have met during street activities.

Phase 3: Collaborative Reflection

This step involves a collective reappraisal of the intervention through public exhibitions, collaborative art projects, or negotiations with authorities regarding public space use. It also involves sharing outcomes via the media, encouraging wider participation, and inspiring similar initiatives.

Phase 4: Organisational Evaluation

“space and place” – sometimes involving local actors – evaluates the project, identifying lessons learnt that can inform future interventions. The development of the project and its interventions benefit from the diverse, interdisciplinary “space and place” team and the involvement of its partners. Drawing from fields like anthropology, art, urban planning, social work, PR, graphic design as well as technology, the organisation brings in multiple perspectives to confront urban challenges.

Key methods used in the examples described above include:

1. **Creative Placemaking** (Friedmann 2010, Placemaking Europe 2024): This method integrates art and culture into urban planning, creating meaningful spaces that reflect local identity. Examples include a playback theatre group engaging with challenges of a local community or adorning streets with “umbrella blossoms” in order to transform public spaces and to spark community dialogue.
2. **Tactical Urbanism** (Lydon & Garcia 2015, Finn, 2014): The approach uses small, temporary measures to bring about long-term change. It was exemplified in the co-creation of “Residential Street Culture”, where actions prompted discussions about urban space utilisation. Drawing inspiration from Jane Jacobs’ (Jacobs 1961) urban vitality concepts and Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968; Mullis 2017; Eynaud, Juan, Mourey 2018) the project challenges car-centric urban planning paradigms (Knoflacher, 2013; Knoflacher, Freya, Letha, 2018) and explores alternative public space uses.
3. **Participatory Design** (Manzini, Rizzo 2011; Foth, 2017): This method involves residents in creating community projects, as exemplified by “Stoff für’s Grätzel”. Individual stories are woven into a collective narrative, giving voice to diverse experiences within the community and challenging dominant throwaway culture.
4. **Linguistic Landscape Exploration** (El Ayadi, N., 2021; Hu, 2022): The approach uses language to reveal and celebrate urban diversity. It transcends language barriers, inspiring discussions about hidden potentials within the community, promotes intercultural understanding and a more inclusive urban environment.

These diverse and interconnected methodologies form a comprehensive framework, enabling “space and place” to create meaningful urban interventions, strengthening neighbourhood connectivity and fostering inclusive urban environments.

5. Organisational Hurdles in Participatory Urban Projects

Organisations like “space and place” face significant challenges in their work despite their innovative ideas. While they successfully address working with heterogeneous audiences, fostering mutual interest rather than division, the greatest challenge lies in sustaining long-term projects without financial security. Participatory and co-creative methods are labour-intensive, incurring substantial personnel costs. In the arts and culture sector, such projects are often undervalued and inadequately compensated, despite growing advocacy for “Fair Pay”²² principles. This lack of resources often prevents further development of potentials in neighbourhoods.

A related challenge is the structure of funding. Projects combining several aspects (e.g., art, research, participation and greening) often do not fall into a single funding department. “space and place” responds to this challenge by targeting project funding around cross-cutting themes. This allows different aspects of a project to be covered to a certain extent within different funding programs. “space and place” also seeks to obtain research funding for further analysis, as in the case of the StreetForum project.

Bureaucratic fragmentation presents another hurdle. In Vienna, numerous municipal departments are responsible for various aspects of one and the same public space, making swift innovation challenging. In order to proceed, projects sometimes operate in legal grey areas, which puts cultural workers and activists in precarious situations. The slow pace of institutional change also contrasts with the rapid implementation of tactical urbanism solutions, highlighting the need for more flexible regulatory frameworks.

Another challenge is how cultural organisations deal with gentrification (Franz 2015; Kadi, Verlic 2019), because successful neighbourhood and transformation projects can also increase the attractiveness of an area – thus also the rents in a neighbourhood can increase. Cultural organisations face these and other challenges when they contribute to the transformation of neglected urban areas into vibrant, inclusive spaces.

22 - “Fair Pay for culture”, see: <http://www.fairpaykultur.at/>, 04.10.2024.

6. Conclusion

The projects and methodologies employed by “space and place” demonstrate the transformative power of artistic, socio-cultural as well as participatory urban interventions. By reimagining public spaces and fostering new social connections, these initiatives reveal the latent potential of cities and their inhabitants. Key strengths of these projects lie in their ability to empower citizens and to make individuals visible in the larger urban context. They sharpen residents’ perception of new social spaces, challenging internalised patterns of urban behaviour and space usage. By providing easily accessible opportunities for engagement, “space and place” enables people to become active participants in shaping urban environments.

The projects described here facilitate new connections across social boundaries, leading to reflections on the multicultural fabric of the community. They create low-threshold entry points for involvement, fostering a sense of joy in community interaction without obligation. Business owners, for instance, engaged with their employees and customers on new levels, recognising and appreciating the diverse skills and cultural backgrounds in their establishments. Neighbours exchanged ideas about the transformation of streets and made new connections.

While not all interventions lead to permanent change, the synergistic approach employed has catalysed numerous lasting impacts. The projects underscore the importance of viewing city dwellers as active creators of their environment, not only as passive consumers. They show that small, localised interventions can trigger significant shifts in perception and behaviour, potentially leading to broader urban transformations.

The responsibility for creating, negotiating, and maintaining these “living rooms” in urban residential communities is shared among multiple stakeholders, including city administrations, arts and cultural organisations, local residents, businesses, academic institutions, and funding bodies. The key to success lies in respectful dialogue with and between these target groups, coupled with fostering collaboration among stakeholders whilst ensuring the

sustainability of individual organisations. Looking ahead, the experiences and methodologies developed by “space and place” offer valuable models for participatory urban development, pointing towards a future where cities are co-created by their inhabitants, fostering more inclusive, sustainable, and vibrant urban communities.

Conflict of Interests and Ethics

The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author(s) also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects, anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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