

“A True Public Place” or “By Invitation Only”?

Open Dialogues as a Mean to Redefine Cultural Space.

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Abstract

Is there a shift in the perception and usage of public spaces? Is the notion *by invitation only* relevant? Have different groups in society always had their *own* spaces for selling and buying, for social gatherings, leisure and culture? Otherwise, are mental gates around public spaces rather latter day phenomena?

This paper features mainly two possible scenarios: (i) *by invitation only* can to a certain point be addressed or (ii) *true public space*, which invites all, is an illusion: a wasted place.

Reporting from *Dynamic Dialogues*¹ held in the city of Helsingborg, Sweden, at two occasions in 2011, this paper will critically analyse how *human ways of being* are addressed when developing public environments. The spaces concerned in the project; cultural venues and their immediate public surroundings, are further investigated concerning the relevance of *by invitation only* and of *true public spaces*.

The first part of *Dynamic Dialogues* showed that *by invitation only* is a reality. The second and last evaluates the proposals for improvement, for example: (i) creating activity layers in public spaces, (ii) changing intimidating features of some public places, (iii) suggesting alternative public spaces and (iv) merging content and space to create a place for each public.

Background

This paper describes and makes a short analytical conclusion of an applied project, *Dynamic Dialogues*, DD, which took place in two parts: DD#1 in February/March and DD#2 in November 2011 in Helsingborg, Sweden².

Dynamic Dialogues is Clear Village's response to *Helsingborgs Stadsteaters* (*the city theatre of Helsingborg*) request to further develop the ongoing project: *Outreach*³ and suggest ways to

¹ www.clear-village.org, www.facebook.com/clearvillage

² The dialogues will continue throughout 2012 with DD#3 in Helsingborg as well as further applications in projects aiming at redefining cultural spaces throughout Sweden.

³ Investigates the theatre's audience: composition and attitudes.

extend and develop the invitation not merely to the theatre but to the culture on offer in the commune. The theatre itself, established 1921, had with healthy self-criticism, realised that they had not succeeded in attracting the wide audience, which particularly became their mission when the new theatre building was inaugurated 1976. When initiating the *Outreach* project, the theatre made it clear that its relation with the audience should also be viewed in context: as part of the entire cultural life in the city, including sports and other leisure events and activities. The project should also consider the relation between the actual buildings and their content; the actual programme. How does the physical and the mental fit together?

Clear Village is a UK-based non-profit organisation, specialising in sustainable regional and urban re-generation and development. I am a member of their Think Team and act as facilitator and advisor in projects where my competence concerning human decision making in relation to artefacts, environments and systems, is appropriate.

Helsingborg has almost 130 000 inhabitants, which places it as number 9 among Swedish town districts. It is situated in southern Sweden, 60 kilometres north of Malmö, which is the main regional city of Skåne. Helsingborg is linked to Denmark by regular ferry traffic while Malmö is connected to Copenhagen and Denmark by a 20 kilometres long bridge. Helsingborg has a history of shipping and commerce and is well reputed for its longstanding entrepreneurial spirit based on a traditional middle class value system embracing family and order. Campus Helsingborg, part of Lund University, was inaugurated 2001 and has today almost 4000 students. The emphasis is on food engineering and service management.

In 1999 the residential regeneration of Helsingborg's northern harbour was completed and inaugurated by the home exhibition H99. Currently ongoing is the regeneration of the southern harbour, H+, today characterised by heavy infrastructure and close to but still disconnected from the less affluent southern parts of the city. The master plan embraces not only residential development but also offices, commerce, culture and leisure. One important vision for the development of the southern harbour is to finally make Helsingborg *one* city where the activities and residences of the regenerated area form a bridge between the north and the south and contributes to a less segregated society.

Introduction.

Theatres, museums, concert halls, art galleries and libraries are all public places which represent a physical as well as a mental space: they offer cultural products in different forms. Accessibility to both spaces, the mental and the physical, must be well balanced not to be counterproductive for the one or the other. If the content, the mental space, is experienced as not inviting *me*, neither is the building and its surroundings. In the same way, the physical space may act as an obstacle as well as a facilitator when we wish to access the mental content.

The official Swedish political aim for improved equality is a mission with its roots almost 80 years back and includes that publicly financed culture should invite *all* citizens.

A growing emphasis on specialisation has inevitably created a gap between major parts of the audiences on one side and curators, theatre directors and art/music/literature professionals on the other. As recognised already by Dewey (1934), how we experience plays, art, music, poetry and prose is not static, it develops over time. Professionals in these areas have thus by default a totally different appreciation of what they offer than what encounters the amateurs who constitute the major part of their audience. The professionals are drawn between three poles: a public mission to educate and develop, gaining approval from their peers and achieving good visitor figures. Swedish media has over several years pointed to the often poor interest shown by the locals what concerns their nearby, sometimes extravagant cultural spaces, while exhibitions and performances get good reviews from critics, who of course often share the same professional maturity as those they are criticising.

Helsingborg is not an exception.

The main issues to be addressed in this paper are thus:

Is it at all possible for a town to have its main cultural institutions reach out to a major part of its citizens, to create a *true public place*, physically and mentally?

If public places mainly are *by invitation only*: how to prioritise and differentiate?
How to match the physical and mental space into a cultural place which make invitations appear relevant to several, individual target groups?

This paper is structured as follows:

Method - Application 1 and 2 - Analytical summary.

Method

Dynamic Dialogues are essentially real-place laboratories, Labs, preceded by a substantial communications drive involving direct outreach to potential participants as well as promotion through social media, press material and a dedicated web presence. At the Labs, key stakeholders and members of the local community are brought together for an intensive collaborative experience: round-table discussions focusing a common theme, which is defined both as a problem and an opportunity. Each table deals with one heading as part of the common theme. This heading is further structured through relevant keywords, see below.



Figure 1 shows how each table is focusing one heading structured by a number of relevant keywords.

The open invitation welcomes representatives of the target group, here residents in Helsingborg, to come and dialogue with cherry-picked professionals with relevant expertise, here representatives of as well the established cultural life and institutions as of the free and alternative cultural initiatives. The dialogues are supported by expert facilitators. The preceding communication warrants that the participants have an interest

and some experience within the field to be discussed, here the cultural activities on offer and the physical places which house them. The invitations state “first right of place” but also reserve the organisers the right to select, creating an as even mix as possible concerning age, gender and profession but also representation of different parts of the town district: centre, outskirts and nearby villages. Clear Village suggest that people representing the client also take part in the dialogues, ideally one in each group.

To ignite the discussion, each table is also given a number of questions related to their heading and adding more substance to the keywords. Group members are equal: all arguments and proposals are should initially be taken at face value and can only move from the periphery in direction of the centre, see coloured note papers in figure 1 above, as a result of several group members agreeing on its relevance. Each group is ideally made up of eight members.

Over the course of the dialogue sessions, the groups are held together. The discussion moves from the abstract to the concrete within each session as well as over the sessions: the heading for the first session thus invites the group to more abstract thinking while the headings of following sessions ask for certain concretisation.

The movement could be characterised as one from creative chaos to creative order. Each session lasts from one to one and a half hour. Each table has a facilitator/expert to call in for advice and clarification or to re-ignite the discussion.

During the final session, each group is to discuss how to present and motivate their ideas to the other groups.

The dynamic dialogues end with a concluding discussion where all ideas from the final session are posted on *a wall* using coloured note paper. Where relevant and to enhance communalities and common denominators these papers are made to physically overlap. The participants are all active in formulating a concrete proposal to the initiator/client.

This proposal is then refined and detailed by Clear Village before finally reported to the client.

The method is based on knowledge about the human condition, differentiated as human ways of being and living. It is further developed to consider also the difference: between lived and learned experience (Borjesson, 2006). Cultural events carry always immediate sensual experiences, which only at some events are followed by intellectual stimuli. For the Labs to be successful, they have to take place in a space and in a way which allow for sensual experiences (Pallasmaa, 2005). Human sensuality is part of our being and lived as opposed to learned. We can develop our senses but never learn how to sense. Our sense of being [in a place] is a lived experience, which cannot be learned (Sharr, 2007).

Application 1 – Routes to Cultural Change in Helsingborg, Dynamic Dialogues#1 in 5 acts

Dynamic Dialogue #1 took place February 28 and March 1, 2011 gathering 51 participants representing ages ranging from 17 to 69 years and divided evenly men and women. Other criteria: demographic, professional and social were met by the organiser’s selection for a final confirmation of invitation.

The participants were not paid to come but were of course offered lunch and refreshments both days.

Participants were encouraged to let the organisers know if they could only be partially present. This allowed for other people to stand in. Through Clear Village’s web page, the

participants could prepare themselves, fill in a participants form and also communicate with the organisers on matters related to the event⁴.

The participant form was aimed less at being a bureaucratic tool than a way to reinforce the participants' engagement and inspire them to start reflecting on the theme in advance. When they arrived for the dialogues, they were personally greeted by organisers and given a name badge, which stated their name and workplace plus three words describing their reason for taking part. These words were brought to the organisers via the participant form.

The route from wishful thinking to real opportunities, from abstraction to concretisation.

The following account is not aimed at detailing the sessions but at giving a clear idea of the movement: from certain *chaos* with an open heading presented with 12 different keywords, positively or negatively related to the cultural situation in Helsingborg, to *creative order* and in many cases even to *detailed proposals*.

Each session was opened by an inspirational talk which varied from philosophical thoughts to best practice initiatives.

The five acts or sessions in headings:

Day One, act 1; Desirable culture, act 2; Inherent capacity and inspiring initiatives, act 3; Perspective on culture.

Day Two, act 4; Design your theatre (Helsingborgs Stadsteater) – body: architecture and building, act 5; Design your theatre (Helsingborgs Stadsteater) – soul: creative direction and programme content.

Day One.

The outcome of the discussions can roughly be divided into two categories:

- a. *Strategies* for cultural change in general and specifically in relation to the city theatre.
- b. *Direct proposals* and listing of possible initiatives.

Strategies.

1. Openness, participation and spontaneity.
2. Collaboration, balancing high and popular culture, inviting amateurs.
3. Identify different audiences, invite them and remove existing thresholds: financial, design/physical, communication.
4. "Get out of your *palaces*". Investigate alternative spaces and places – without compromising quality.

Cultural institutions are often limited by their static organisational form and official mission, which is only rarely questioned or at least too often regarded as something given and thus difficult to change.

Institutions in general and here the theatre ought to put its role as initiators of change on the agenda and investigate i) their inherent dynamic and ii) which type of change their organisational form and mission allows. The discussion concluded that the theatre should: open up physically as well as mentally, recognise their capacity as a meeting place and react faster to signs and impulses coming from the outside. Reaction is *a* response, an answer does not have to be perfect and new initiatives have to be given a fair chance: temporary does not necessarily mean a few occasions but could well be one entire season – and repeated. The entire town ought to be seen as a *house of culture*, with the different rooms spread evenly. All rooms should to start with be physically welcoming, easy to

⁴ www.clear-village.org/dynamiska-dialoger

enter, literally *open doors*. The content, not merely theatre, of each *room* should regard the area where it is located: the mix of locals and the dominant activities. Not to construct physical thresholds, the *room* could use existing but little used buildings as well as public spaces which are potential places but have failed to attract the public – (*wasted places*, *author's note*)

Direct proposals.

1. Advisory umbrella organisation for cultural issues.
2. Society embedded system to identify cultural opportunities as well as to give feedback: so called *Cultural Pilots*.
3. The creation of a *Green House*, hosted by the theatre: nourishing talents.
4. Special funding for active local cultural workers.
5. Make culture a reason for celebration: *Cultural Sundays* to introduce change.
6. The strategy: *Get out of your palaces*, was also transformed into a concrete proposal to investigate the inherent capacity of different parts of the city and create local *scenes*.

The discussions admitted that the creation of yet another organisation, risks adding to bureaucracy rather than to increased dynamic. The challenge is to create a body which is democratic, transparent, has got influence and esteem without being part of an established system, like the municipality. Neither should it be too closely linked to commercial interests and/or risk becoming a tool for interest groups with their own agenda. It will need some funding without having to spend resources on lengthy applications.

The second proposal could be regarded as an alternative to the first: the creation of a system where the organisation is solely the people engaged, the cultural pilots, who act as moveable units, each dedicated to a special area where they pick up initiatives and assist in realising them.

Several groups agreed that motor for change is spreading out existing capacity and competence as well as identifying and nourishing hidden capacity and promising talent in the town district.

Day Two.

Added to the inspirational talk which starts all sessions, day 2 also offered a tour of the theatre with opportunities to meet people working behind the scene. This was of course a way to make the participants embrace and feel ownership of the place more profoundly than as merely theatre goers.

The discussions and outcome day 2 could, as day 1, be divided into

- a. *Strategies*: mostly about the soul of the theatre.
- b. *Direct proposals (or Recommendations)*: mostly about the body of the theatre.

The participants realised that the division body-soul is not as artificial for a theatre as for humans but the connection is still very evident: a public place ought to be physically and mentally accessible, if not, it is a *wasted place*.

Strategies.

1. Grounded in society
2. Integrated in community
3. A public place is an open space filled with content
4. Clear identity/strong brand well communicated

There ought to be a strong link between the theatre and the town: its soul should state: "I am not *a city theatre* but *the city's theatre*" and as such an arena for more than plays and shows: a meeting and exhibition place for important events in and outside the city.⁵ This would give the society a place in the theatre which balances the theatres place in society.

⁵ Compare the diverse use of the lobby in Royal Festival Hall in London, not least the annual World Photo Exhibition, informal concerts, presentations etc.

The theatre must present in the mind of the citizens through social and interactive as well as traditional media for them to come. Once there, their presence ought not to go unnoticed: it is not merely about making them come but also about being there to welcome them.

The word *open* was the most frequently heard over both dialogue days. Open does not mean “void” but “inviting to something you recognise”. The lobby could well be re-designed for multi-activity: from café with children’s corner in one end to a lunch-bar with business facilities in the other. The current space between the theatre and the concert hall close by is another wasted place as is the square in front: these spaces are merely waiting to be inhabited and/or activated: worth a visit. To open up would give the theatre an excellent opportunity to strengthen its brand, to let the lobby and the square introduce the visitors to the creativity, which is part of theatre life: among other things more informal events like *lunch/soup theatre* and book recitals.

That *open* in itself is not enough was underlined by the participants. “Open does not matter if people do not know how to get there, if the route has no contour and does not indicate what is waiting in the other end. By cooperation between the cultural institutions the route from the main station to the theatre, the concert hall and the new cultural house, Dunkers, could be marked by posters, installations, temporary sculptures and more to lead the way and prepare for a new experience: *a cultural route*.”

Recommendations.

The input from the groups when it came to *design your own theatre - body* was extensive and detailed. It ranged from “the welcome at the entrance” to lighting, from art to overall layout, from cloak-rooms to exhibition space. Listening to the discussion around the tables, hesitant, opening comments like: “I would like to change the atmosphere in here but I do not know how” was slowly processed and finally well concretised. The theatre was totally *recoded* and the recommendations clear enough for the theatre to pick and choose from after priority:

1. Entrance and crossing over: a welcoming door.
2. Food and community: create an atmosphere.
3. Show and explore: express the local.
4. Lounge and library: change perspective. A local viewpoint of the global
5. On and behind the scenes: a liberating experience including experiments, improvisations, debates and dialogues, provocations, *open-end* plays.

A common denominator for these recommendations was *flexibility*: a transformable body.

Conclusion Dynamic Dialogues #1

When all the strategies, proposals and recommendations were presented and literally posted on *the wall* (read: screens) an overview was made on place to recognise overlapping and coinciding and to sort the keywords related to the strategies and proposals.

This overview showed four main directions as ways to achieve cultural change: there must be (i) a point of reference, best practise examples and driving unit but also (ii) a body which in itself stands for change and have the authority and independence, not to be overruled or quickly expropriated by existing decision and policymakers.

(iii) In addition immediate action must be taken to show the citizens that the process has started while details are still to be decided and (iv) x a cultural vision to which all cultural institutions and interest groups agree. Has to be agreed and formulated.

The preliminary action plan followed these directions:

The theatre agreed being a role model for change by starting to immediately implement some of the recommendations and act as a driving force for the continued process.

The body was assigned the working title *Kulturtinget* (Cultural Cabinet) and is to be discussed in depth in a second dynamic dialogue, DD#2, inviting cultural workers and re-inviting volunteers from DD#1.

The cultural vision will be the theme of a third dynamic dialogue (DD#3), inviting decision makers.

Application 2 – Initiating of *Kulturtinget* (the Cultural Cabinet), Dynamic Dialogues#2 in 5 acts

Dynamic Dialogues #2 took place November 18, 2011, gathering 50 participants. The age range 25-35 years had increased whilst the range 35-50 had decreased in comparison with DD#1. The gender range showed a female domination 3-2. More than half of the participants had attended DD#1. Helsingborgs Stadsteater was again hosting the dialogues.

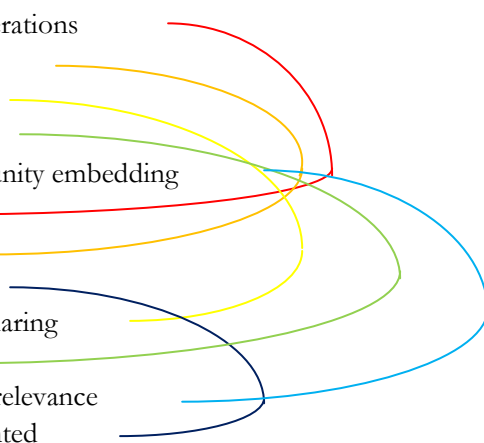
The aim of DD#2 was to evaluate and if found relevant, formalise the concept of a *Kulturtinget* by (i) comparing it once more with the alternatives discussed during DD#1 and by (ii) analysing it by possible characteristics and missions, all linked to either criteria for success, possible threats, existing opportunities or obstacles.

All participants were like for DD#1, sent a special pack in advance and also encouraged to look at the website where they would find inspirational cases and have an update of DD#1.

The day started with a short recapitulation of DD#1, not least to bring the overall goal for a *Kulturtinget* on the agenda: to be a motor for a process, not a project, of cultural change. The differentiation between process and project is crucial as the former is ongoing but the latter has a start and an end. As a motor, *Kulturtinget* should be characterised by openness, flexibility and independence and be guided by a clear vision which includes realistic goals but also emphasises diversity. As the objective for this one-day dialogue was to arrive at a clear structure and action frame for *Kulturtinget*, the room lay-out contained a central table to illustrate that all tables should finally become one, representing an organisation for the community to vote against or for. A *for* would also imply ownership: engagement and responsibility.

The route from the ideal to the realistic, from loose ends to structure.

The first (1) act saw the participants work in 12 groups, formed round individual tables and each discussing a possible characteristic or mission for *Kulturtinget* (hereafter written as *Kt*), see below.

- Hands-on operations
 - Responsibility
 - Education
 - Leadership
 - Local/community embedding
 - Vision
 - Flexibility
 - Non-profit
 - Knowledge sharing
 - Values
 - International relevance
 - Business oriented
- 

When presented to individual groups, each characteristic or mission was accompanied with keywords and a short text to better explain the actual meaning and bring associations to mind.

Half way into the first act, the respective groups joined their adversary: the group which had discussed a characteristic or mission, which might be viewed as counteractive or in opposition to theirs, see the coloured lines in figure above. Finally, each group presented the essence of their discussion verbally and on coloured note papers put onto the central table.

During the second (2) act, emphasis was for each group to agree on the characteristics which should frame and be the structure of Kt. The participants were encouraged to go back to their discussions during act 1 and also study the coloured notes placed on the central table.

This act showed a high degree of consensus between the groups and the overlapping ideas made it possible to define Kt by six characteristics:

1. Hands-on organisation
2. Flexible
3. Locally well embedded but also updated on the world around
4. Listener
5. Consensus oriented
6. Pragmatic

The third (3) act saw seven specially invited artists or representatives present, a cultural event or an idea beyond the more established cultural expressions. The presentations were aimed as contrasts to the theoretical discussions and to create images: what might cultural change mean?

Conclusion Dynamic Dialogues #2

After the presentations the groups reformed in the groups from act 1 to conclude act 4. A framework for Kt was now in place. How to transform these outlines into a concept for a functioning organisation or body?

When the groups gathered for a final presentation, the six different proposals showed great congruence:

Kulturtinget is a steer group whose composition mirrors society at large and works on a non-profit, idealistic base. It must reserve the right to select and prioritise among incoming ideas following the principle of a multi-storey building where each storey represents different levels of interest without offending any group due to gender, race or handicap. Ideas and proposals should mainly come via Kulturtingets Open Source pages, which must apply two-way communication to function in its role.

Each of the six proposals also contained other ideas from which Kt might benefit. All were well reported and explained: it is now up to the municipality together with the engaged community to further develop these ideas and come up with a finite form for the organisation, *Kulturtinget*, which emerges from today's consensus and also includes the best of each proposal. The role of the theatre and Clear Village is now on of support.

To underline the operational capacity Kt should have, a first constitutional meeting was scheduled to January 2012 and three of the proposed events could already be put on the agenda for the period December 2011-February 2012.

Analytical Summary.

The aim of this project was to formulate a strategy for cultural change which conditioned community participation. Very early in the first dialogues, DD#1, it became evident that there is a close link between a cultural event and the space where it happens: the mind and the body of culture must together form a unity to arrive at its goal: attract and invite the targeted audience. This is important to keep in mind throughout the summary.

The summary focuses three dimensions of the project:

Relevance of method, Stringency of application, Reliability of outcome.

Relevance of method.

Dynamic Dialogues is, as already mentioned a variety of a laboratory: people are taking part in orchestrated scenarios located to one venue. A traditional alternative involving the community would have been surveys, which can be performed with much more research rigor by ensuring statistically verified numbers and demographic data. A likewise traditional method would have been to invite the community to a moderated panel discussion with opportunity to pose questions. An approach not involving the community would have been workshops and conferences inviting merely professionals.

This latter method would have risked widening the existing gap between professionals/specialists and the audience they are to meet, as is already mentioned in the introduction of this paper. The two former methods would not allow participants sufficiently to associate and experience the subject matter; cultural place and hence make honest contributions.

Community participation is desirable but need to be very well orchestrated to ensure a quality outcome. There are many obstacles to overcome and built in counter forces to eliminate.

How to bring peoples' experiences to conscious mind without distorting what they mean? (Damasio, 2012)

When asked for suggestions people often talk in metaphors and it has been observed in many studies and also confirmed by research that saying and doing are not one: we say what we think is right but do what we feel is right. (Nylander, 1999, Damasio, 1995, 2000, 2012)

People who are not specifically trained in the actual field have difficulties with abstractions. Many of us will have an opinion concerning what is wrong, without knowing what would be right, as expressed by Dewey (1934/1980) many years ago but never to my knowledge yet contested.

A space is not a place until we experience it: "Accordingly, spaces receive their being from places, not from *space*" (Heidegger in Sharr, 2007, p. 55). It is thus difficult to have informed views about a place; space and content, when not being there physically.

The choice of the theatre as a venue is thus very much in line with what is often called "bodily identification" (Pallasmaa, 2005): to make people come up with their *true* opinions are thus more likely to succeed in this environment as we cannot "detach the image of the self from its spatial and situational existence". "I am the space where I am"⁶ (p. 64, Pallasmaa as above)

The decision to structure the dialogues with carefully selected headings and keywords follows the semantic theory of association, recognition, understanding and exploring. (Pöppel, 2007, Oakley, 2007)

When confronted with a word - or an object, we try immediately to make associations to something which enables us to create meaning (Gärdenfors, 2006, Krippendorff, 2006). For example, if we cannot associate *daring* with *desirable culture*, we sort it out. It does not make sense.

⁶ Quote dedicated to Noël Arnaud by Pallasmaa (2005)

Stringency of application.

To make the outcome of these types of dialogues reliable, it is important to balance stringency with flexibility (figure 2). If too severely structured, they become biased in the same respect as leading questions in an interview or investigation. The table-tops, see examples in figure 3 and 4 below, therefore played a key role with their well accentuated focal point and clear periphery.



Figure 2 shows the flexible way the workshops went along.



Figure 3 shows a table top for the session assessing threats, success, opportunities and obstacles of Kt.

Of interest here is the notion of factual relationship. This was introduced in discussions about architecture by Zumthor (2009), but possible to relate to other types of constructions: all parts of importance for a construction have to be identified and put into a factual relationship to each other. The table tops and the way they are applied are very

useful in this sense: comments are written directly on the top or on coloured note papers which may easily be moved around and interrelated.

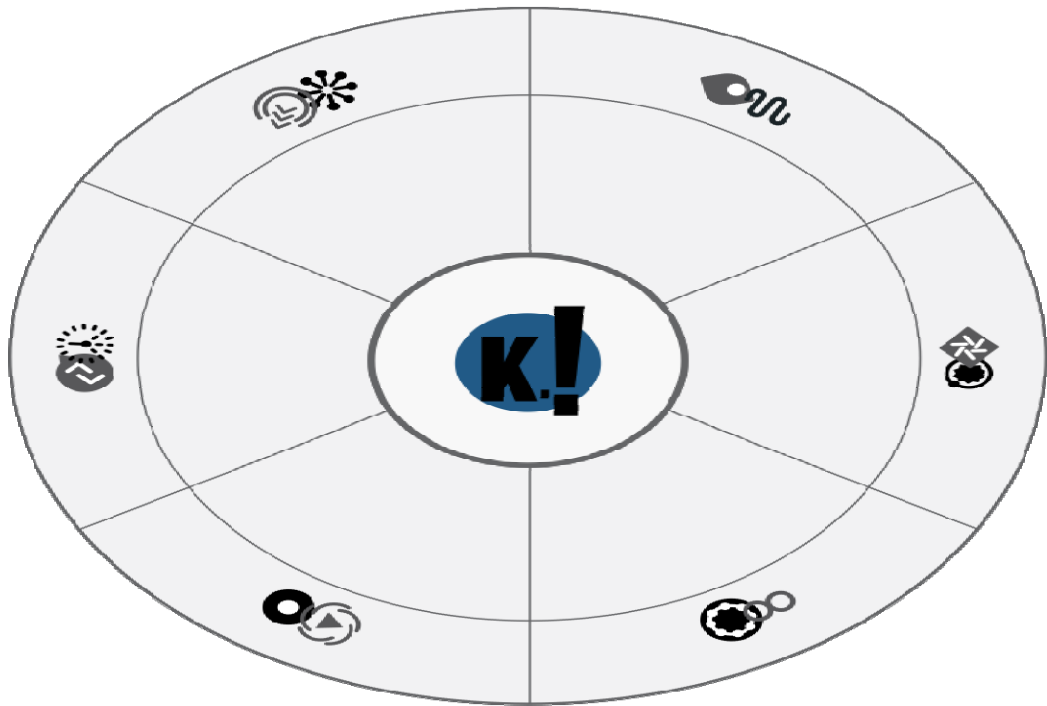


Figure 4 shows a schematic image - text is replaced by symbols - of a table top illustrates the basic idea: accentuated focal point – the final construction, the clear periphery – the factual structure.

Reliability of outcome.

The strength of this project and the method applied is that the outcome of the study can be referred to more profound human layers, our ways of being, and less to temporary lifestyles and short lived trends (Borjesson, 2006, Borjesson & Walldin, 2009). This increases the chance that resulting measures will be sustainable.

Furthermore: the result puts in doubt as ill founded:

- i) The notion of the true public place and also confirms that any space is a void, waiting for its content.
- ii) Some political and professional presumptions concerning human decision making.

“The conviction that it is possible to create a new and better human with the help of social engineering has ended in some of history’s most appalling deeds.” (Pinker, 2002 – *author’s translation from Swedish*)

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Notes:

1. The author's role in the described project was as facilitator/specialist advisor.
2. All images in this paper are the property of Clear Village, London. Use outside the context of this paper is not permitted without prior agreement.