

Daniela Björkenstam Stenbäck

Supporting Actors

Context, urban development, and plants

Master's thesis in Fine Art

Supervisor: Jacob Jessen

Co-supervisor: Alexandra Murray-Leslie

April 2022

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Abstract

This thesis contains an introduction to my master's project *Supporting Actors* as well as an exploration of the role of art in urban development and in public spaces. The purpose of the project is to initiate a discussion about gentrification in Trondheim, a Norwegian city in the middle of urban transformation, by placing houseplants in various outdoor public spaces.

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to provide an insight into my master's project *Supporting Actors* and to introduce some of the different topics relevant to the project and my practice. My intention is for the thesis to be accessible to everyone, regardless of previous knowledge in the mentioned fields. I use writing as a method of exploring different perspectives of the project, and I see the thesis as part of the project and a useful tool in the continuation of its development. The purpose of the project is to create awareness and discussion about gentrification, and the purpose of the thesis and the project is to explore what role art plays in urban development. How can we use art and artistic processes in city making and in public spaces as a way of raising important social, political, and economic issues and developing a new understanding of built environments? How can art and urban development contribute to more equal, inclusive, and democratic societies? To answer these questions, I will look at a couple of different art projects related to urban development and public spaces in order to see how they have addressed the issues. I'm also going to examine concepts such as urban development, gentrification, context specificity, time, and duration, and connect them to the project.

Art and urban development

Art is something we practice, a learning process, and it can be used as a way of contributing new perspectives on how different places are being created, who they are being created for and with, and finally why. To be able to do this, the artist must be allowed to be involved in the thinking and planning processes, and art and culture must be seen as a vital part of the development. The problem with art in urban development is that it often enters too late in the process to make a meaningful impact and it's often added towards the end and simply used to adorn a space. When it instead could be used as a tool to create something inclusive and unique. The artist's role is typically not to offer a practical solution to certain problems or to prove a point. The potential of art is in its sensitivity, co-creation, and possibility to create something that does not necessarily have to be defined in advance. Art in urban development can potentially induce change in an area by creating new narratives, connecting perspectives, or merging layers in a way that I believe no other disciplines can do. A place is about the people living and working there just as much as it is about its physical aspects, and through artistic interventions, the residents can be involved in the development of the area and be a part of creating its social infrastructure.

A successful example of this is the central old harbor area Bjørvika in Oslo, where the municipality has been working towards sustainable urban development for the past 20 years, in collaboration with artists, amongst others. The project *Losæter (2011 - ongoing)*, which is an area within Bjørvika, was initiated as an art project by the artist group Futurefarmers and has now evolved into a cultural institution and a green social meeting place with activities, communities, and sustainable urban agriculture practices. It's an open community that aims to invite and include all residents.¹

Common Lands (2009) is another Bjørvika project that uses the process of urban development to highlight certain issues related to urbanization, democracy, access, and distribution of power. The

¹ Losæter. (n.d.). Welcome to Losæter. <https://loseter.no/welcome/?lang=en>

intention of this project is to create a critical discussion about the use and development of public spaces and the promises being made about public access to these spaces.²

On the future grounds of the newly developed district of Bjørvika in Oslo's harbor area, the city gave a promise. It's the promise of free access to public space and communality connoted in the term allmenning, common lands.³

Between 0,5 to 1,5 percent of the budget in government-funded public construction projects in Norway is dedicated to art, the exact amount depends on what type of building it is, its availability and its degree of publicity.⁴ Bjørvika has decided to focus on both permanent and temporary artworks, as a way of creating variation and different expressions. Permanent works help create an identity for the area, whereas temporary works can contribute to change, events and happenings, and an active community.⁵ Art can in these contexts be a game-changer in the development of urban areas and an essential element in the strive to initiate conversations about the use of public spaces. Art is a way for people to appropriate the city and identify themselves in it⁶.

Gentrification

Gentrification as a term was first coined in London in the 1960s to describe the transformation of working-class neighborhoods into middle and upper-class neighborhoods. It's a complicated process of urban development where an area's social and economic status changes quickly over a short time. On the positive side, gentrification often revitalizes the neighborhood, attracts newcomers to boost the economy, improves public safety and helps increase property values. On the negative side, this leads to a situation where the residents who are already living and working in the area can no longer afford it because of higher rents and living costs.⁷ It also affects public spaces; they change over time to adhere to new expectations and to fit new needs and standards. Privatization of public spaces might occur, which could lead to less accessible and inclusive cities. Sociology professor Sharon Zukin talks about this process as "*domestication by cappuccino*" and highlights the fact that access to these new public spaces more often than not also comes with a requirement of consumption⁸.

² Bjørvika. (n.d.) Kunst i Bjørvika – Common Lands, Dellbrügge & de Moll.

<https://www.bjorvikautvikling.no/kunst-i-bjorvika-common-lands-dellbrugge-de-moll/>

³ Bjørvika. (n.d.) Kunst i Bjørvika – Common Lands, Dellbrügge & de Moll.

<https://www.bjorvikautvikling.no/kunst-i-bjorvika-common-lands-dellbrugge-de-moll/>

⁴ KORO. (n.d.) Kunst til statens nybygg. <https://koro.no/arbeidsomrade/statlige-bygg/>

⁵ Bjørvika. (n.d.) Strategisk satsing på kunst. <https://www.bjorvikautvikling.no/portfolio-item/strategisk-satsing-pa-kunst/>

⁶ M. Marchand (personal communication, March 18, 2022)

⁷ Miller, L. (2019). We Need to Change How We Think About Gentrification. *National Civic League, Vol. 107 (No. 4), p. 26*

⁸ Atkinson, R. (2003). Domestication by Cappuccino or a Revenge on Urban Space? Control and Empowerment in the Management of Public Spaces. *Urban Studies, Vol. 40 (No. 9), p. 1831*

Context specificity

My artistic practice is based on spatial and material experiments in relation to places and to context. I find it interesting how humans relate to physical environments and how we navigate different spaces. Spatiality, in my practice, is about offering the audience a physical rather than visual experience, evidently directed by me. I wish to give them an aesthetic experience that demands their attention and commitment, and through that offer a possibility to be part of the work. I've referred to most of my works over the past few years as being site-specific. I typically identify places with strong characteristics that I wish to highlight and reinforce, in as simple and efficient a way as possible, and even though the works usually are made for a specific place, they can be altered to fit a new yet culturally, socially, or geographically similar context. Artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Asher saw the potential of the place as a cultural framework and not just in physical and spatial terms as early as in the 1970s⁹, and they intended for the experience of the work to be "an unrepeatable and fleeting situation"¹⁰. The work can, in other words, never be the same as it once was because the context is never going to be the same, and a place never exists only in the present, it's always a combination of the past and the future. With this in mind, I discovered the concept of context-specificity and the importance of involving all or many of the specific aspects of the place and the artwork in the process. All artworks have a context and not just an aesthetic, social, political, or historical context but other features that might be influential in the planning and making of the work, such as when, where, and why it was made and by whom.

An example of this is a project called *Homebaked* (2010) by Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. In a close to abandoned area of Liverpool, the artist worked together with young residents as a way of rethinking the future of the neighborhood. They turned empty properties into affordable housing, created new social spaces, and renovated the old local bakery, which is now a meeting place for the entire community. It became a process where the residents themselves took part in deciding and creating the future of the area.¹¹ A place is just as much about the people living and working there as it is about its physical aspects, and compared to traditional site-specific works, such as Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974)¹² or *Circus – The Caribbean Orange* (1978)¹³, Heeswijk's project seeks to involve all aspects of the area. I find it important to investigate the balance between where art no longer necessarily needs to be identified as just art and separated from its environment but can instead be an integrated and expected part of society.

Time and duration

I see my projects as a process where the place, the viewer, and the duration of the exhibition, or likewise, depend on each other and together contribute to creating an aesthetic experience. An experience, according to philosopher John Dewey, is an interaction between organisms and their

⁹ Kwon, M. (1997). One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity. *OCTOBER*, Vol. 80, p. 87

¹⁰ Kwon, M. (1997). One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity. *OCTOBER*, Vol. 80, p. 91

¹¹ Arte Útil. (n.d.) *Homebaked*. <https://www.arte-util.org/projects/homebaked/>

¹² Matta-Clark, G. (1974) *Splitting* [Intervention]. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, United States. <https://whitney.org/collection/works/12740>

¹³ Matta-Clark, G. (1978) *Circus – The Caribbean Orange* [Intervention]. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, United States. <https://whitney.org/collection/works/43364>

environments¹⁴, the subject and the object. Our reactions to certain events or impressions differ from person to person and we all have a personal history, which defines how we act or react to different situations. Because of these different reactions, the individual experience of an artwork will always be unique but at the same time part of the collective, since it's something we all have experienced, and part of the work. In this way, the work becomes part of the context and a verb rather than an object, and an event the viewer can relate to and experience in a physical sense.

The reaction of the viewer is most likely going to be different depending on when in the process of exhibiting they are exposed to it. This means that the duration of the exhibition changes the perception of the work. Both duration and the viewers' contribution are inevitable in determining what happens in the creation of the experience. Whether the contribution of the viewer is their thoughts and reactions to the work or something more concrete and physical depends on the work. Examples of this time-based perspective from my own practice are *The Bishop's Spine (2019)*¹⁵ where lemons placed on the walls to highlight the aesthetics and movement of the building went moldy during the duration of the exhibition, or *I wish to communicate with you (2020)*¹⁶ where the wind, and the weather in general, had a significant impact on the work. In it, formations of colorful cotton ribbons were created and stretched between trees on a hill in the forest to communicate between humans and nature, land and sea, and the past and the present. The philosopher Henri Bergson explains the duration as follows:

Duration is the stuff out of which conscious existence is made; for a conscious being, to exist is to change and to change is to endure.¹⁷ To endure means to pass on to the absolutely new and to do this in a manner that is, by its very nature, unforeseeable.¹⁸

Unforeseeable in relation to my work means that I'm not trying to control them. I leave them to their own devices for a certain, predetermined, amount of time with an openness that something unexpected might happen to them, or not. I use time as a material to create transformations and duration as a method of allowing the work to have independence.

Supporting Actors

Background

Looking around, you will see that plants are starting to inhabit the space. Some are standing alone as sculptures whilst others have been purposefully placed in response to the space and in relation to other exhibited works. The space is an old storage space from the 1960s located in an industrial area on the outskirts of central Trondheim. The spread out slightly misplaced houseplants are trying to show you what the future of this area might look like.

¹⁴ Dewey, J. (1980). *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, p. 246

¹⁵ See Appendix C

¹⁶ See Appendix C

¹⁷ Watts Cunningham, G. (2014). Bergson's Conception of Duration. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 23, (No. 5) p. 526

¹⁸ Watts Cunningham, G. (2014). Bergson's Conception of Duration. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 23, (No. 5) p. 528

The project *Supporting Actors* was first exhibited as part of the exhibition *SHED* at Skur 53, Nyhavna, Trondheim. Nyhavna is a post-industrial area facing the changes that are expected to occur in most central industrial areas in most cities eventually. The exhibited work consisted of ten houseplants placed throughout the venue. Plants are a central part of making an area more vibrant and inviting, and an important element in the gentrification process. Because of this, they symbolize transition and change; social, economic, and cultural. The plants also represent the human aspect of gentrification. Houseplants are not something one would normally see in these industrial areas; they usually arrive first when people move into the area. When the old buildings are being demolished, new private apartment complexes are built and the people who used to live and work there, most likely, no longer can afford to do so. The plants, therefore, function as supporting actors in the development of the urban areas. The exhibited plants consisted of a combination of borrowed plants, plants from my own home, and rescue plants from a local garden center that had been retrieved from waste containers and then taken into care. A rescue plant is a sick or dying plant that typically can be retrieved or purchased for a very low price at garden centers.

Method

As the project continues to take shape, I've come to realize that I'm in a completely different situation now than I was when I first started working on the project. Therefore, I have a completely different approach to the formulation of the work than I've ever had before. Normally, I create a work based on a place and I approach, observe, try to get to know and understand them before I create something as a reaction to that. The reactions usually result in a form that either responds to or opposes these observations and creates an extension of the pre-existing potentials. In this iteration, I already have the content and it needs to be assigned to a new place in a similar yet larger context.

Present

I've located two areas in central Trondheim that possess the qualities I'm looking for to continue developing this project. Nyhavna is still relevant and therefore one of these areas. The other one is Brattøra, a harbor area situated on an island next to Nyhavna that's also in the middle of a massive transformation. A revitalization program for Brattøra was initiated in the late 1990s and since then the area has transformed from simply accommodating the harbor, railway, and central station to being an urban waterfront area with a focus on cultural and recreational activities. Brattøra has the possibility to, if effectively used, re-establish the contact between the fjord and the city, and offer the citizens a chance to connect to the ocean. Like Nyhavna, this area is facing the challenges that come with living and working close to the ocean, such as the consequences of harbor usage, contamination, and climate change.¹⁹ This needs to be addressed and considered and I believe that art could be a way of doing that.

¹⁹ NTNU. (2014). CITY LAB Trondheim Brattøra "City meets fjord" – from harbor and goods yard to urban waterfront. https://www.ntnu.no/documents/10310/701164975/Small_+CityLab-Brattora_Hoeger.pdf/2c4ce3dd-ee2a-43a6-bab5-77fc95f12fd7

These two similar areas face the same challenges as well as the same possibilities, and this is something that I, in this project, would like to emphasize and create awareness around. A living city is always changing and developing, it's a positive sign of its vitality, but the processes of transformation and gentrification also come at a cost for the city and its residents. It's likely that gentrification eventually will lead to two homogenous areas with overpriced housing, shops, and restaurants where there's no room for diversity or the less conventional. What will then happen to the people already inhabiting these areas? Do they have a say in this? For instance, what will happen to Norsk Stål AS, a steel producing company located in Transittgata, Nyhavna, for the past 23 years, or the boat repair company Tor Båtservice AS, located in Vestre Kanalkai, Brattøra for 13 years? When the city center expands, the industries are being pushed further out of the city. So will most likely the secondhand shop BrukOm, which is just across the street from Norsk Stål, and the creative collective around the corner, consisting of artists and musicians. At the same time, these two areas have a lot of potential, and they could if correctly done, be great examples of an inclusive urban development where industries, shops, restaurants, and apartments share the same spaces. I believe that keeping some of the old premises and characteristics is an efficient way of making the area more alive and interesting for everyone.

For the continuation of this project, I'm once again going to place houseplants in a new context. This time I'm going to place them outside on the streets, in relation to the above-mentioned places Transittgata and Vestre Kanalkai. A houseplant comes with a certain type of expectations. It's a controlled and domesticized piece of nature, adapted for growing indoors and created over time to fit our current lifestyles, and we expect to see them in contexts such as private homes, offices, institutions, etc. I will consistently use Monstera plants to demonstrate this expected monoculture, since it's one of the most common house plants, easily relatable, and not something you would expect to see in public outdoor spaces in Norway. The possibility of creating a reaction and an interest thus increases. The Monstera plant is the starting point and core of the creation of a new potential space within an already existing space. The object itself symbolizes a specific environment and atmosphere and it's a physical representation of a possible future reality. I believe that bringing this plant into an unexpected context will offer the audience a visualization of the area's new context as well as create a relatable narrative – this is the future home of this plant.

The future of the project

The project is still ongoing, and some of the plants from the exhibition have been installed in offices at Trondheim Municipality. The idea is that they will continue to exist in a relevant context by being installed in the offices where decisions about the area are made. In this way, they will continue to thrive while simultaneously serving as a reminder of conscious urban development. The project is going to be introduced to the residents who are being affected by these decisions to start conversations about their opinions on the transformation, and their chances of influencing the development. One way of starting this process is to also offer the residents a possibility to take care of the plants and be part of the project. In order to include all different perspectives on this matter a conversation with architects, city planners, and local planning authorities, as well as other artists, needs to be initiated. The focus should be to have a nuanced discussion about the different sides of gentrification and to learn if these specific groups have similar views on art and urban development, or if they differ.

There is a potential for this project to be installed in various places and contexts, and the narrative I've created through the plants can be used to highlight the gentrification process in cities all over the world. A continued exploration of this concept, the gentrification process through plants, could take place in other cities than Trondheim and it would be an interesting next step and development of the project.

Conclusion

The artist's role in urban development is not to offer a practical solution to certain problems or to prove a point. Art can instead be a useful and unpretentious element in the creation of inclusive societies where the residents have an influence on the future of their neighborhoods, examples of this are the projects *Bjørsvika* in Oslo and *Homebaked* in Liverpool. It's important to be aware of the effects of urban development, such as gentrification, and to create a discussion and critical awareness around it. In my project *Supporting Actors*, I use Monstera plants as physical representations of a possible future reality for the areas Nyhavna and Brattøra, both in the middle of a transformation and gentrification process.

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Appendix A

Map of Trondheim that demonstrates where the two areas Brattøra and Nyhavna are located.

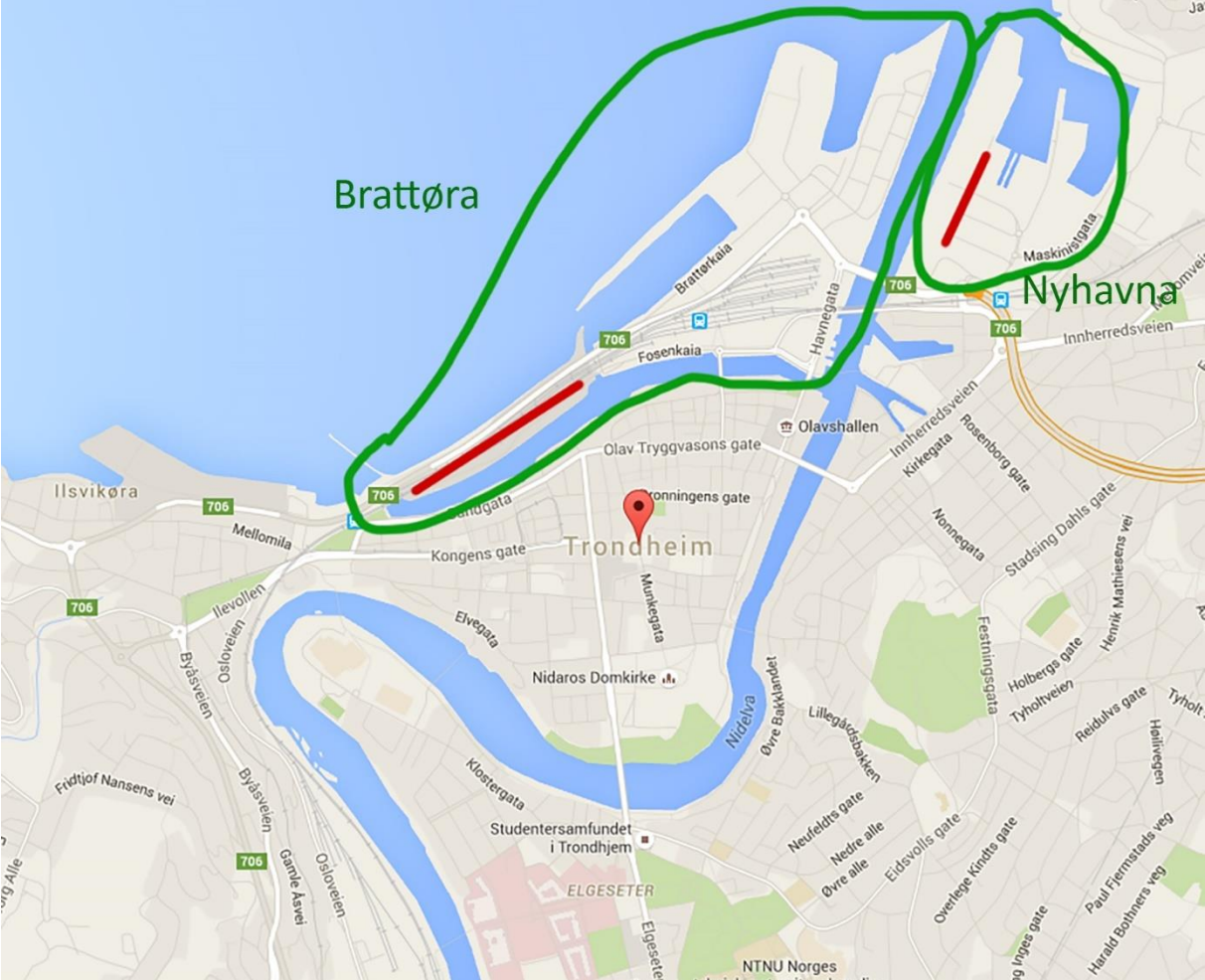


Figure 1NTNU. (2018). Trondheim map. Google. <https://www.ntnu.edu/healthforum/trondheim-map>

Brattøra

Vestre Kanalkai today.



Figure 2Beagle84. (2010). Vestre kanalhavn in Trondheim. Wikimedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vestre_kanalhavn_in_Trondheim_01.jpg

Vestre Kanalkai 2050.



Figure 3Pir II. (2019). Vestre kanalkai [Photograph]. Adressaavisen. <https://www.adressa.no/pluss/2019/03/25/Slik-kan-det-se-ut-i-Trondheim-i-2050-18719201.ece?rs7986771648797277961&t=2>

Nyhavna

Transittgata today.



Figure 4 Transittgata (2022) © Daniela Björkenstam Stenbäck

Nyhavna 2030.



*Figure 5 Pir II. (2016). Illustration Nyhavna 2030 [Photograph]. Trondheim2030.
<https://trondheim2030.no/2016/06/20/nyhavna-styrke-trondheims-posisjon-storby-2/>*

Appendix B

Plants from the installation *SHED* at Skur 53, Nyhavna.



Figure 6 Installation shot (2021) © August Valentin



Figure 7 Installation shot (2021) © Michael Miller

Appendix C

The Bishops Spine (2019)

Installation

Trondhjems Kunstforening, Trondheim



Figure 8 Installation shot @ Daniela Björkenstam Stenbäck (2019)



Figure 9 Installation shot @ Daniela Björkenstam Stenbäck (2019)

I wish to communicate with you (2020)

Site-specific installation

Ladehammeren, Trondheim



Figure 10 Installation shot @ Daniela Björkenstam Stenbäck (2020)

