

Art, City and Social Bonding: Street Gallery

Ipek Çankaya,

Initiating Director and Principal Researcher halka sanat projesi – Istanbul/Bodrum, Turkey

Member of Artship Foundation Associate Scholars Core Group – San Francisco, USA

i2cankaya@gmail.com

Abstract

This work is a discussion on the impact, challenges and ambiguities of artists and makers presence in a community. The purpose is to raise questions on levels of possible, realistic community engagement from passers-by, active makers and sharing partners in the formation of spontaneous, enhanced identity in local neighbourhoods. The art in the street as by-product of care and meaningful engagement, without strong labels or pre-designed, carrier motivated collaborations between artists and communities are the focus.

The case study is the Flagpoles Project (1986 – 1991) initiated by Slobodan Dan Paich which consists of a great number of semi-permanent sculptures built for and with residents of the Golden Gate, Oakland, USA.

Reflecting on Flagpoles Project enables this paper to re-ask the artist's role in a community setting, and how do the artistic sensibilities, vision and cohesive visual language remain while the creative process is shared with community. The paper also focuses on an enquiry on the ambiguities on how a public art project can create a positive impact on diverse segments of a difficult neighbourhood and how can bonding through art transform the meaning of public space in urban context.

In general, the methodology starts from expressive inception, community context and its development. In this example it is based on interviews, testimonials, also on printed and digital materials concluding with related literature about social inclusion and role of the art in everyday setting.

Keywords

Street art; social bonding; community engagement; urban creativity

Introduction

As a response to the *Art in the Street* 2021-Issue 7 this essay is based on 2019 exhibition *Community Poles Project – Street as Gallery* held at *halka sanat projesi* in Istanbul, Turkey. The author of this essay was a co-curator in this exhibition. The material exhibited were visuals, texts and other documentation illustrating the journey of the project (“Community Poles Project – Street as Gallery”, 2019). The starting point and case study here are the Vertical Street Sculptures called The Flagpoles Project. The purpose of the essay is to raise questions on possible, realistic community engagement in local neighbourhoods and the role of the artist in a community setting.

Origins of the Project

The Flagpoles Project is an example of the impact, challenges and ambiguities of artists and makers presence in a community. Initiated by artist and architect Slobodan Dan Paich in 1986 the project continued for five years until 1991 in the Golden Gate district of Oakland, city in the San Francisco Bay Area, USA. The project consists of the collective making and display of significant number semi-permanent sculptures in the neighbourhood of the medium and low-income community for and with residents. The vertical sculptures are made of poles constructed from recycled, discarded objects such as retired fan belt, amputated chair leg, ribbons, crochets, doilies stiffen with paint, and many similar items.



Figure A. (1-2-3): Vertical Street Sculptures Samples from the Flagpoles Project

In her article in San Francisco Chronicle, Guttman describes the sculptures as *Totems of the Neighbourhood - East Bay community 'expresses itself'* with the title and subtitle. She interprets the project as a specific communal expression and Paich as the Father of the Flagpoles, an architect who started up the sculpture project with a windmill and some ribbons (San Francisco Chronicle, June 24, 1990).

Paich's multiple background inadvertently set the tone the project. In the claustrophobia of the Post-World War II Yugoslavia, Slobodan Dan Paich found his escape as a child in trusting his instinct to explore in several forms of expression. In a family of translators, the cultural history was a part of life. At age four he could tell the difference between Botticelli and Leonardo and at age seven between Mozart and Haydn. He began as a child soloist in the Radio Belgrade Children's Chorus. He also became a child actor and at 13 played a leading role in a major national film while he perpetually drew without imitating any trends or masters. He did them all at the same time in a way that what is considered today as interdisciplinary.

In the personal correspondence with the author of this paper he describes the world of his childhood as "a highly specialised and divided world where there was a tremen-

dous disciplinary chauvinism and fundamentalism in the 19th and early 20th C. western education and cultural values. Interdisciplinary was considered something amateur, a sign of weakness, a trait of people who could not make their mind and not as a trait of people who follow their instinct to explore and embrace and to find" (Paich, personal communication, October 15, 2021.)

Apart from his formal education, because of his curiosity and inquiries, he got a training in the theatre crafts, folkloric singing without notation which helped him develop an oral memory and multiple skills. In politically turbulent times, after his education being interrupted in the Painting Academy in Belgrade he studied under the utmost difficult conditions at Royal College of Art, London, where he got the Master of Fine Arts degree in 1983.

Through his teaching career, he taught art, and history of art and ideas, architecture, design theories and landscape design in England until he was invited to teach architecture at Berkley CA. in 1986. Once that he was in Berkley - Oakland - San Francisco area, the originating idea for the flagpoles project is conceived as a response to a neighbour's request of making a big piece of sculpture for the community. Instead of delivering the request, the artist leant towards

something more “whimsical, commemorative and totemistic” (Guttman, *ibid.*).

Process and Neighbourhood

The project has developed in two places hence in two phases: First in Paich’s garden with no fence and open to the street where children came spontaneously, then in a donated corner of a local parking lot workshop every Saturday for five years. It encouraged an unforced process of offering skills and working with volunteers on the making of unique pieces based on participation of the future owners of the sculptures.

North Oakland where the Flagpoles Project took place between 1986 and 1991 was a diverse neighbourhood. The demographic of the residence was and is thirty years later mixture of White, African American, Asian, and Latino populations.

These demographics showed themselves directly in the making of the Flagpoles as active participants and later indirectly when Paich did his future projects. The multi-culture of the neighbourhood kept reflecting itself in dealing with people living in more than one culture, the immigrants, indigenous people, and people of mix demographics that lived in Oakland. In that sense the artist’s engagement with the neighbourhood and the local people from diverse backgrounds complemented each other as well as the making of the project.

The Flagpoles project developed when Paich stated to work with voluntary local children whose families began to request for another flagpole for their garden and kept coming to help for the neighbouring gardens. Initiated in an intimate way in a private garden open to local curious children who are spontaneously included in the collective making and sharing, the Flagpoles Project has turned into a completely public project, especially with its second phase.

Street as Gallery

As described in Guttman’s article this “drive-by open gallery with gewgaws” has required no admission fee for par-

ticipation and has unlimited hours to visit. Guttman sees the project’s purpose to “plant art directly into the community, and for it to grow as tall and wild as the people want. Art on the street, out of galleries and museums, out of spotless glass cases and roped-off spaces. Art that is for the neighbourhood. Art that is the neighbourhood.” Guttman points out that the results are considered “art that is of, by and for the people”

According to Paich, The Flagpoles Project was created in a time when recycling was not particularly a great interest. However, all the materials used in the making of the Flagpoles were recycled including the long pieces of woods used were offcuts donation from the local wood yard. Crochets were hand-made specially for the project by elderly ladies from the old people’s home nearby. The local people donated all other materials. (Paich, personal communication, October 15, 2021)

Looking at the aesthetic side of the project one notices that although diverse in materials and shapes, the common feature of the poles is all being white. The following statement sheds light on the ways in which artistic sensibilities and care for cohesive visual expression remain while the creative process is shared with community:

“The decision to make them white was because many layers of white paint integrated disparate elements into coherent sculptural form responding to light as visual unit; but we were not dogmatic. We tried many things different... We went back to painting them white with few colourful ribbons dancing in the wind and that was not obscuring the sculptural form” (Paich, personal communication, July 15, 2021).

The sculptures were never haphazard collages, the practice was always making it into a pole. The white paint which was applied for six layers was the key that integrated all the materials and gave the poles their sculptural finishing. Not only putting many layers of paint visually united the sculptures, but also the gesture of repeatedly putting the paint layers on became the sharing point: People were

helping each other. The visual unification, something which was an aesthetic decision to unite all the pieces without any ideology just because it looked so much better when they were together, created also as a by-product of the process of sharing and unity.

The webpage dedicated to the Flagpoles Project emphasizes the vision of the visual element in the sculptures as follows:

“When we tried to paint the sculptures entirely black or brown, they became camouflaged, and their immediacy and presence were lost. When we tried to paint just one or a few of the elements that also broke and diluted the form. When we added larger, more recognizable household elements, they made the sculptures appear cluttered and junky. When we added beautiful, specially embroidered, painted, or silk-screened fabrics, they wrapped themselves around the sculptures and smothered them, so that neither the sculptures nor the materials were recognizable. In the end we returned to the basic sculptural score that emerged through the simple acts of people “doing and making” together at the outset of the project (Ferriols, 2020).

This dynamic showed delicate tentative relationship between artistic concepts coming from experienced professional and community. It has its place for the coherence and sharable identity. The initiatives without curatorial skills have huge community value in them self. Also, if curatorial skills have promotional agenda, they compromise social bonding of art in the street and community. Unintentionally Flagpoles Project found a balance because it came from within community the artist was a genuine part of it.

Community Engagement

In this case study, the social bonding in the form of community involvement is unpretentious and natural. In the interview Paich explains the process as such:

“When the original pole was installed, one neighbouring family whose children work on the first pole asked for a “thing” (sculpture?) installation on their house, and then one other family did the same. After five or six installed initially the second phase in the nearby parking lot contin-

ued. Having sculptures on their own houses, fences, patios, balconies some of the neighbours volunteered to help with installations for others. Putting them up was always spontaneous little ceremony of doing watching and admiring. Without fuss over the five-year project’s activities, a considerable number of people were involved.” (Paich, personal communication, July 15, 2021)

The involvement of the neighbourhood in the project is one its key features that makes the Flagpoles a community project. Aside from giving the name “flagpoles” and working in the making of the poles, as a side effect slowly over time the process inspired the neighbours to gather by themselves and save local library and organize spontaneously to ask City to support after school and homework programmes. Unknown to the artist the neighbours also applied for several grants and competitions which resulted in winning three awards and grants in two years. In 1990 Municipal Community Development Grant of City Oakland was given to the Flagpoles Project. Slobodan Dan Paich is granted with two awards: In 1990 Regenerating America – Social Invention Award and in 1991 the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce’s Business Arts Award “OBA” in the Individual Artist category for the “Poles Project.”

This project became the seed of further engagements for the artist, and the above-mentioned initiatives that the community took in applying in several grants and competitions ended up in further developments concerning the revitalisation of Oakland. The Chamber of Commerce invited Paich to join the Committee of Arts and Culture where he developed many projects which were also awarded and largely celebrated (Appendix).

Conclusion:

Among many factors that enhance a positive impact in the lives of people and places there is evidently art and artists. Aside from discourses interested in the [so-called popularity or] value of urban environments, if not career motivated, artists and makers are usually and naturally interested in engaging with the physical and social architecture of places and responding to communities that help shaping that specific urban texture and its singular character.

This natural engagement of the artists can be exemplified in Dođu Çankaya's statement. As an artist in close collaboration with *halka art project*-İstanbul and the co-initiator of Art Halicarnassus-Bodrum with the author of this paper, he describes his relationship to art as follows:

"Art is something done by those who suffer from its absence, and not by those are happy with its existence." (Çankaya, 2012)

According to Paich this statement expresses "deeply the lifelong practices, since childhood of people who just have to draw, play an instrument, write or dance. These individuals are vitality molecules of primordial human social bonding and sharing need. The spontaneous sacrifice they make is hours of practice and work so the talismans of humans can be actualized" (Çankaya, 2021).

Care and commitment as two human traits are the essence of many expressive initiations which start from individual acts of a maker and resonate in communities which may carry from time to time their own challenges and promises. The Flagpoles Project reflects the art in the street as by-product of care and meaningful engagement, without strong labels or pre-designed, carrier motivated collaboration between the artist and the community.

It also has a singular quality which enhances the realistic community engagement and social bonding from passers-by, active makers and sharing partners in the formation of spontaneous, enhanced identity in the local neighbourhood.

In his book *The Community: A Critical Response*, psychologist Gusfield defines two dimensions of community as territorial and relational. According to him, to form a community, humans need to create existential relations among themselves because simply sharing a territory or being physically close to each other is not enough to call a group of people a community (1975:29).

Testimonials and research of this essay reveal and indicate that the Flagpoles Project has generated genuine co-habitation interactions for different segments of the neighbourhood and enhanced the sense of community both in territorial and relational ways. Keeping the expressive, sharable intensions in a subtle yet present manner that also enhanced with its visual sense the identity of the neighbourhood.

The Flagpoles Project was not created with any pre-meditated intensions or followed any global trends. It was a response to the situation. Now, looking back to it in retrospective one sees that its immediacy, sincere engagement, and genuine methods become some of the main global trends in our days where almost every project aims at some aspect of 'regeneration', 'recycling', 'community involvement', 'multiculturalism' and 'interdisciplinary practice'. The Flagpoles Project is a pioneering example of all these intensions, already achieved in the mid-1980s. In that respect, it is a global project and its current relevancy in any geography has the potential of making researchers, educators and curators highly interested in revisiting it in the form of an exhibition as mentioned in the introduction or an article as this one. Hence, the process and the journey of the project provide material to further reflect upon impact and diversity of presence of art in the contemporary urban context that include streets.



Figure B: Constructing vertical sculptures

References:

Text:

Çankaya, D. (2021). *Doğru Çankaya: Reflections from Tintin* [Exhibition catalogue]. Istanbul, Turkey: halka sanat projesi

Gusfield, J.R. (1975). *The Community: A Critical Response*, New York: Harper Colophon

Guttman, L. (1990, June 24). Totems of the neighbourhood, bay area 'expresses itself', *San Francisco Chronicle*


Web Link:

Community Poles Project – Street as Gallery. (2019, October 18). Retrieved from: <http://www.halkaartproject.net/sergiler.html?id=2417>

Çankaya, D. (2012, December 5). Interview by A.G. Hakyemez [Tape Recording]. Art is something done by those who suffer from its absence, and not by those are happy with its existence. *Bir Başka İstanbul (Another Istanbul)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aysegulayhakyemez.com/2012/12/dogu-cankaya-sanat-varligindan-degil-de-yoklugundan-muzdarip-olan-insanlarin-yaptigi-bir-sey.html>

Ferriols, A. (June 2020). *Vertical Sculptural Poles Project*, Slobodan Dan Paich Web CV: http://www.designspektrum.com/slobodandanpaich/sdp_cv/flagpoleproject.html

Appendix
Office of the Mayor Proclamation



Office of the Mayor

Proclamation

O A K L A N D , C A L I F O R N I A

WHEREAS, Slobodan Dan Paich, born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, now a long time resident of the East Bay, is an internationally exhibited architect, sculptor, and now Director of an Oakland-based dance company, Augustino Dance Company, has initiated many arts related projects in the City of Oakland; and

WHEREAS, Dan Paich has demonstrated an outstanding dedication and contribution of time and energy to the Oakland arts community having been involved in several projects for neighborhoods and business districts which enhance the aesthetic appeal of the area and beautification of the streets; and

WHEREAS, This Eastbay artist combines the issues surrounding community and pure aesthetics to demonstrate that art can exist for its own sake as well as for the benefit of the urban society; and

WHEREAS, Dan Paich was the sole coordinator of the "Windows on the Waterfront" entire exhibition involving the assembly of hundreds of pieces of art, crafts, memorabilia, props, costumes and printed materials from different outstanding Oakland artists and arts organizations, who are nominees for the 1992 Oakland Business Arts Awards. The exhibition being on display in the 23 windows in Jack London Square's Water Street formerly vacant building spaces; and

WHEREAS, I applaud Dan Paich for his continuous commitment to the citizens of the City of Oakland through his ongoing projects in and with the arts community; and


WHEREAS, Slobodan Dan Paich has received an award from the Oakland Chamber of Commerce Business Arts Awards committee for his work, receiving the high number of 19 nominations for this prestigious award;

THEREFORE, I, ELIHU M. HARRIS, as Mayor of the City of Oakland, do hereby proclaim, October 1, 1992,

"SLOBODAN DAN PAICH DAY"

in the City of Oakland, and urge its recognition, participation and support by all citizens.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the Office of the Mayor to be affixed.



ELIHU M. HARRIS
MAYOR

