

Community Art Lab

Outline of idea • July 2008

How can art and culture be used in community building? How can creative processes be a resource for changes and new thinking? How can students and professors within artistic and cultural training centres and universities be part of a broader discussion of the role of art, artistic integrity, cultural and creative thinking?

Many cities and communities struggle with how to start renewal processes according to a globalized society. In Europe the outlines in the Lisbon Agenda focuses on creative industries, which is becoming more and more important. In 2009 a year is dedicated by the European Commission to focus on innovation and creativity. Specifically small cities around Europe struggle with how to keep inhabitants, attract tourists, make businesses establish offices, and how to sustain or develop a vivid cultural life. The creative industries is shown to be important for economy, attraction of work force, business, and for well being. The creative thinking and ability of working in creative processes used by artists has proved to be an interesting way of tackling these sort of problems and has been used by cities and regions to reach change. At the same time the art universities around Europe need to discuss the role of art and culture in the 21st century. What is the role of an artist today? What is included in the artistic field, and what is not? How can the area of work for an artist be enlarged, without endangering the artistic integrity? How can an artist's knowledge of creative processes be important for society and community building? The challenge for many cities in Europe is to find solutions to their specific problem, which is dependent on situation, inhabitants, surroundings and traditional market. Niche solutions based on a specific local context is necessary.

The Community Art Lab is an art project with the aim to focus on real problems or challenges in a city or community, using the competence of artists and students of art programmes to find niche solutions. Projects where artists work with a community have been done before. One example is the very small town of Skoghall in Sweden, where the artist Jörgen Svensson (look at Public Safety, jorgensvensson.com) worked together with other artists such as Alfredo Jaar, Esther Shalev-Gerz and Paco Cao to put focus on the specific situation in Skoghall. In cooperation with the city council and politicians, the artists worked with different artistic projects, which in the long run has led to changes in attitude and hope, and also a discussion of the role of art in the city.

This project aims to focus on community building and renewal, with the help of art universities, their students and professors, to accomplish two things:

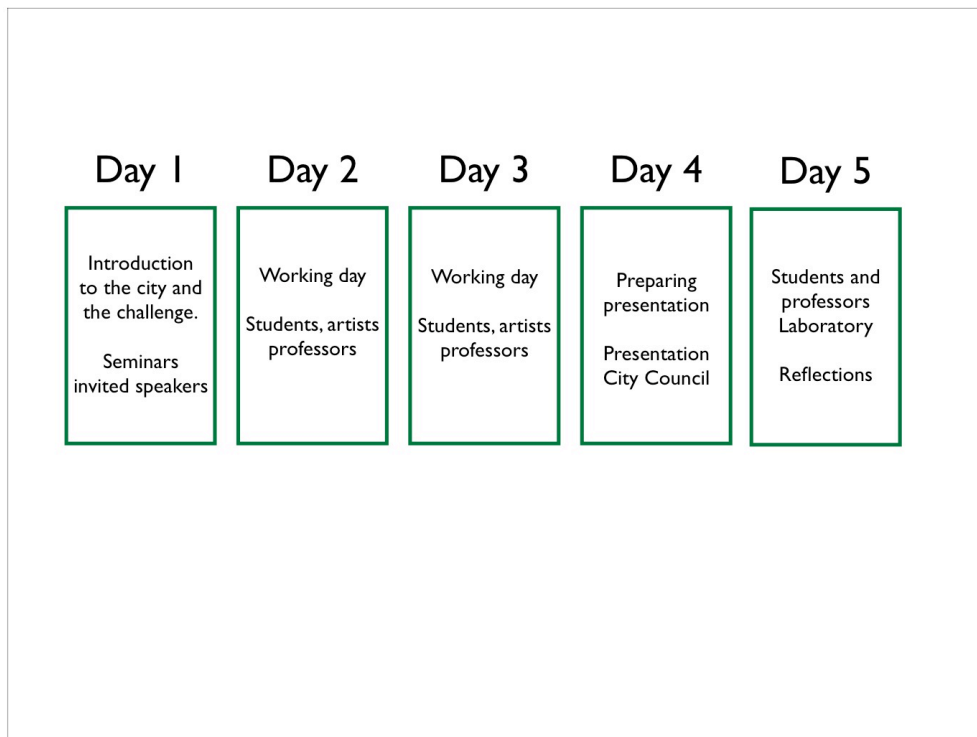
- 1) Work with a real problem or challenge that a city is facing and to propose solutions as of work processes, present an art project or put forward a creative process that can lead to necessary actions in the city. The work is done in cooperation with the city council. If successful, the city and the local art university will build a relationship that can lead to interesting cooperation in the future.
- 2) To start a discussion of the role of art and culture, the role of the artist in 21st century, of creative industries and its positive and negative sides at the universities and among artists. What do they consider being part of the art market and what is not? For universities and institutions the question is what this means for teaching methods, schedule planning and pedagogical ideas.

The Community Art Lab is formed by partnership between selected European art universities or training institutions (2-3 students from each university participate in the Lab, from one selected art programme), 1-2 professors or lecturers from the same programme. 1-2 artists lead the Lab. The Lab works in close cooperation to the local city or community.

The project organisation is set up with a project working group, a reference group and partners in form of city councils or communities. The project-working group has 1-2 project managers and 1-2 artists with the responsibility of managing the project, collect suggestions from cities, plan the working process together with local partners. The working process is open and should allow for a wide variety of models and methods. It might also be important to invite inspiring speakers and expertise. The artists lead the Lab, and will do inputs, overview and ignite the creative process. Its participants, i.e. professors at the universities or training institutions, form the reference group. It might also be useful to have expertise on art, creative industries, cultural organisations or renewal processes in this group.

The Lab consists of a working week of 4-5 days in the city that has been chosen for the project. The working process will be formed in cooperation with local partners depending on the state of the problem. The Lab is planned for 2-3 years, with the first year being a pilot of two selected cities. After each Lab an evaluation is done, which is taken into account the second and third year. The second and third year the plan is to have four Labs at four different cities.

Example of working week for the Lab:



On Day 1 the city council has an introduction for the Lab of the specific situation in the local area. In the afternoon it might be expertise or inspiring seminars, as part of the introduction. Day 2-4 is days for the Lab to discuss and work with the city or community problem. The ways of working vary in methods, models, such as also the result. Day 4 the Lab present their views on the problem and a proposal for solution that could be a proposal for a project, an artistic project, proposal of creative work process or a written document. On Day 5 professors, students and the project artists discuss the experiences from the days together and use time to reflect on the artists' role in a wider context. What is the role of art today? What is artistic training today? How can artists find new working areas? How do Universities deal with creative processes and innovative thinking? What is the role of the artists – what do the artists think, and what do the professors think? It might also be useful to let students and professors each reflect on their specific issues. The students need to reflect on their role in society, how an alternative art market can be created and their situation when they leave the University. The professors need to reflect on training of artists and what tools they use to educate in creative processes.

The outcomes of the Community Art Lab are several and on different levels.

- 1) It will start a discussion of the role of art in Europe on art universities and city councils

- 2) It will allow students at artistic universities to practice their role as artists on real problems in society and reflect on themselves as artists
- 3) It will put focus on creative processes rather than the artistic product. Art objects are very important, but in this project the focus is on process and how this can be used as a competence in renewal processes
- 4) Smaller cities in Europe that take part of this project will have the possibility to get professionals and students from around Europe to look into their specific problem and to find creative niche solutions to this.
- 5) The solutions can be a proposal of working processes, a realistic project idea or an artistic project that can be used in public to show the city's possibilities.
- 6) Smaller cities get a chance to find their own niche and have the opportunity to use the Lab event for marketing, start discussions among civil servants and politicians, start new collaborations and start necessary renewal processes.
- 7) A stronger collaboration between universities and their local city council is built, which might lead to future projects.
- 8) If successful, the outcome in the European context is a discussion of creative processes, the role of art training and artists in 21st century, and the relation between economy, creative industries and artistic integrity, something that is necessary if we are to succeed in building a sustainable cultural life.