'Marking out a knowingly complex field of contemporary scholarship on “participation” in art and architecture, this volume is testament not only to the multiple valences of the term – artistic, social, political, civic, urban, economic, and more – and the distinct contexts in which participatory acts and forms of agency have appeared or been strategically mobilized, but also of the term’s rich and ongoing potential as a critical and artistic lens. Inviting us to continue to “think” through participation, it will be a welcome addition to contemporary debates on the ethical and political dimensions of art and architecture'.

Felicity D Scott, Associate Professor of Architecture and Director of the Program in Critical, Curatorial and Conceptual Practices in Architecture, Columbia University

'Intervening in vibrant debates on participation in the public sphere, Participation in Art and Architecture ranges widely over continents and cases: Sarajevo under siege, Sao Paulo between moving bodies and opened urbanism, the Acropolis and architectural erotics, Google Street View, Cairo, Mexico, and various European and American heterotopias. Tactics are examined in exhilarating historical detail, as theatrical and performative possession converts the spaces of the state into sites of contestation, and as design from the bottom up, immaterial labor, and theaters of memory are mobilized by users on the ground. This provocative collection hybridizes the disciplinary concerns of art and architecture, enriching them both'.

Caroline A. Jones, Professor of Art History, History Theory and Criticism of Architecture and Art Program, MIT School of Architecture and Planning
Editors: Martino Stierli and Mechtild Widrich

PARTICIPATION IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE
SPACES OF INTERACTION AND OCCUPATION

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The Infrastructure of Participation: Cultural Centres in Postwar Europe

Kenny Cupers

Participation is enjoying a peculiar resurgence in contemporary art and architecture. Although invigorated by political and aesthetic theories ranging from Henri Lefebvre's to Nicolas Bourriaud's, the current debate suffers from the type of forgetfulness that characterizes cultural revivals of many sorts. Whether they uphold participation as the motor of democratic politics or dismiss it as a surreptitious technique of domination, contemporary critics understand its rise primarily in light of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and the protests of May 1968. Thus, they tend to posit the politics of participation as a matter of resistance against dominant social structures and norms—a revolutionary moment that was co-opted in subsequent decades to become part of a machinery of institutionalised decision-making. Such a view reinforces a dialectical understanding of participation as situated between resistance and domination.

This chapter argues that the contemporary problematic of participation in the arts is based on a crucial misunderstanding of its historical development. Rather than excavating the reflections of radical politics in the cultural production of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of participation needs to be situated in a longer historical trajectory that encompasses not only the politics of empowerment and democratization but also the major forces with
which it was enmeshed. These forces are the bureaucratic development of the welfare state and a burgeoning culture of leisure and mass consumption through the twentieth century. Therefore, this essay analyses participation in the context of a set of government policies, architectural experiments, and social ambitions as they converged in the making of the 'cultural centre'. An ambiguous mix of arts, recreation, and community facilities, it was known in France and French-speaking regions as maison de la culture or centre culturel, in German-speaking countries as Kulturhaus or Freizeitzentrum, in the Netherlands and Flanders as cultureel centrum or outvoeringencentrum, and so forth. Such centres proliferated especially during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the cultural centre as a type of institution was long in the making, and its historical development is crucial to understanding why it became such a widespread vehicle for cultural participation in towns across postwar Europe.

Largely ignored by cultural critics today, the large-scale production of such facilities during this period amounts to a historical shift that fundamentally confounds distinctions between resistance and domination in the politics of participation. Rather than celebrating a postwar avant-garde of artists and architects and coming to the conclusion that their radical politics were not manifested in the world at large, or were corrupted in the interest of the powerful, this chapter provides today's critics with the possibility of an alternative historical outlook. It does so by taking a decidedly more pedestrian route. The first part places the cultural centre within the historical context of a variety of new social, cultural, and community facilities dating back to the late nineteenth century. Supported by a variety of social movements and political ideologies, these institutions gradually entered into the purview of the welfare state. During the postwar period, cultural centres proliferated as part of large-scale state-sponsored construction programmes on both sides of the Cold War divide. Although policy-makers tapped into nationally distinct traditions and harnessed the institution for a variety of political goals, they were surprisingly united in their emphasis on the cultural institution as a facilitator of participation, even if 'participation' was often understood in restricted terms. The second part of the chapter focuses on the architectural manifestations of these state-led ambitions. Although a variety of spatial and stylistic concepts had been employed to shape cultural institutions earlier in the century, postwar architects employed modernist forms to represent changing ideas of welfare, culture, and participation. Even more important than concerns with representation was the question how architecture could actively stimulate the participation of its users. How
should the cultural centre be designed to facilitate such participation? Could the infrastructure of participation actually be designed?

Genealogies

The ideological and typological foundations for the modern cultural centre were laid at the turn of the twentieth century. Rather than as a univocal type, the cultural centre developed from a multitude of ambitions and initiatives. These centred first and foremost on the working class, at a time when rapid industrialization and urban growth set the main conditions for revolution and challenges for reform. Already by 1900, a new type of institution had crystallised in industrial cities across Europe: the ‘house of the people,’ known as maison du peuple in France and French-speaking regions, volkshuis in Dutch-speaking Belgium and the Netherlands, Volkshaus or sometimes Volksheim in Germany, and casa del popolo in Italy.¹

This new institution developed in large part from workers’ own initiatives.² In late nineteenth-century Italy, for instance, working-class people established consumer cooperatives and mutual aid societies in order to build spaces that would be free from the influence of church, industry, and state. These groups were supported by socialists, who aimed to expand working-class representation among the electorate. The casa del popolo offered space for a variety of activities, not all of which were explicitly political. Many contained newspaper reading rooms, libraries, and political discussion rooms. Yet they also facilitated recreation and socializing – especially through meeting rooms which allowed youth and women to gather around their own particular interests. In Belgium, the maison du peuple or volkshuis became an equally powerful institution for the development of socialism and a symbolic centre for working-class life and culture. Apart from meeting rooms and Socialist Party headquarters, they often included a restaurant, a café and bar, a library, various meeting rooms, and a theatre or auditorium space. As such they allowed for what Margaret Kohn describes as a ‘potentially subversive combination of drinking and debate, entertainment and education.’³ In Germany, the Volksheim of Dresden was one of the first such institutions to open in 1899; the Volkshaus of Leipzig opened in 1906. They hosted not just political meetings but also sports and recreational activities and cultural events.⁴ Similar institutions soon followed in other cities. Observers counted 80 Volkshäuser in Germany in 1914 and 127 in 1925.⁵ In Belgium, the number rose from 17 in 1890 to 149 in 1914 and 277 in 1935.⁶
Although 'houses of the people' were built in a variety of historicist styles across Europe, Victor Horta's exceptional design for the maison du peuple in Brussels employed the Art Nouveau to express the novelty of its political and cultural ambitions. The architect, sympathetic to socialist ideas, was commissioned for a new building to replace the existing maison du peuple, which had been run since 1881 as a cooperative associated with the Socialist Party. Horta adopted the basic programme of the older building – a café/restaurant on the ground floor and a large hall for meetings and parties above – but gave it new spatial qualities. The key innovation of the building, which opened in 1899, was its auditorium. Brightly lit through abundant glazing in the roof structure, it featured removable partitions, which allowed the space to be adjusted for different functions. This 'polyvalent space' avant la lettre could house a political gathering, but also music and theatre performances. Horta exploited the structural possibilities of iron and steel to give light, air, and space to the working class. He embraced the meanings of progress associated with exposed industrial materials, while expressing the ambitions of cultural reform in the vegetal motifs of his ornamentation.

The rise of the 'house of the people' as a new institution resulted in part from the horizontal political organization that characterized working-class movements at this time. Yet not all such institutions were the product of direct participation and self-management. Despite being linked with the rise of socialism, the 'houses of the people' developed as heterogeneous forms depending on local and national circumstances, and not always under the wing of labour unions or socialist parties. Their impact can thus not be limited to socialist politics alone. Christian charity and bourgeois reform organisations proliferated alongside socialism and, by focusing on urban poverty, offered a different answer to the problems of the working class. English settlement houses, such as Toynbee Hall and Oxford House in London's East End, aimed to offer betterment through a variety of social, cultural, and educational programs – from reading seminars to evening concerts. Settling middle-class reformers in poor neighbourhoods, such projects emphasize social integration instead of socialism or class conflict. Late nineteenth-century social reformers increasingly emphasised scientific and technical approaches to social betterment. Historians have demonstrated that, because of the kind of social scientific expertise and techniques of social control they developed, social reform institutions such as the Musée social in France played a crucial role in the development of the modern welfare state. The foundations of the postwar cultural centre are thus also to be found, at least in part, in social reform movements whose aim was not so much to empower working-class subjects as to weaken their ability to revolt.
The cultural centre can also be traced back to nineteenth-century political liberalism and to decidedly bourgeois traditions – particularly in Germany, where postwar cultural institutions adopted programmatic and typological elements of the Stadthalle. In the late nineteenth century, the upper middle class in cities like Krefeld, Mainz, and Wuppertal established grand civic institutions to facilitate large-scale cultural events and social gatherings. They generally contained large theatre or auditorium spaces without fixed seating to allow for a variety of events, concerts, lectures, exhibitions, and parties. Such municipal halls – not to be confused with city administration buildings – represented not only the economic achievements of the city’s elites who helped fund them, but also the city’s cultural status. Stadthallen thus expressed the cultural ideal of Bildung as much as bourgeois concerns with status. Their architecture was often monumental and historicist, employing Italian neo-Renaissance or Schinkel-esque classicism to express values of entrepreneurialism, civility, and cultural pride. Ornamentation hid the industrial materials needed to construct these large-scale spaces and complex programs. Although postwar cultural centres exhibited a radically different architectural expression, they adopted the basic modular program of the Stadthalle.

In late-nineteenth-century Germany, the bourgeois Stadthalle and the socialist Volksbühne were ideologically opposing institutions, both in class terms and political ambitions. Yet because they facilitated both social and cultural activities – albeit geared to entirely different classes – they would gradually be understood as closely related building types. In architectural terms, the opposition was often blurred since both institutions featured the same architectural styles and a comparable programmatic composition. The evolution of both institutions over the first half of the twentieth century mirrored shifting delineations of social class and the ambitions of social reform movements, whose work evolved to address larger segments of the population.

After World War I, the European Left saw a harbinger of such change further East, in post-revolutionary Russia. During the 1920s, the Soviets established a network of workers’ clubs, some of which were established by the workers themselves. Such clubs were instruments for political mobilisation but were also cast as vehicles for the dissolution of social class and the creation of a new proletarian culture. Even if workers’ own opinions were often dismissed as a sign of petit bourgeois ignorance, Soviet leaders seemed to understand that workers’ participation in art and culture was central to the new proletarian culture. The theatre in particular was vital to the ambition of fusing art and everyday life. In his designs for workers’ clubs, most famously the Rusakov club in Moscow, Konstantin
Melnikov articulated the building as a theatrical machine, featuring a sculptural exterior volume and a flexible interior layout that could facilitate different types of events.

In Weimar Germany, by contrast, the *Volkshaus* was less a vehicle for revolution than reform. Progressive architects and politicians sought to create an institution that could satisfy the interests of more than just the working class. They cast the *Volkshaus* as a means to foster community, in particular in newly built residential neighbourhoods and housing estates. Nevertheless, few projects were actually built in the 1920s. In 1924, Bruno Taut built a small cultural centre for the Garden City of Berlin-Falkenberg: it contained a multifunctional hall, some smaller club spaces, a library, restaurant, café, and administration rooms. In France, a landmark modernist project was the *maison du peuple* of Clichy in the working-class suburbs of Paris, built in 1935 by the young architects Jean Prouvé, Eugène Beaudouin, Marcel Lods, and Vladimir Bodiansky. The project further articulated the spatial themes already proposed by Horta but exploited the symbolism of the building as machine. Central to its design was a top-floor, multifunctional hall, which featured movable partitions to facilitate a variety of events and performances. Fascist regimes during the 1930s frequently disbanded the ‘houses of the people’, along with many other working-class institutions and movements. In some instances, however, they attempted to integrate them, where possible, into the framework of the totalitarian state. The Italian fascist organisation *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* co-opted existing institutions such as the *casa del popolo*, harnessing existing leisure and recreation cultures in an attempt to dissolve the country’s sharp social and economic conflicts. In Germany after the 1933 Nazi takeover, the regime replaced the *Volkshaus* with new institutions that could foster class-less German ‘communities’ as part of *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength Through Joy), a state-controlled leisure organization inspired by its Italian counterpart.

In 1930s Britain, the ambition to counter class conflict was also translated into an embrace of community — albeit with a very different political ideology. The ‘community centre movement’, which had evolved out of the settlement house movement, addressed a much broader constituency and aimed to transcend class-based interests. The movement grew rapidly during the 1930s with the construction of new community centres across Britain. These centres often included a multi-use hall for large gatherings and cultural events, as well as smaller rooms for various meetings and groups — from female pensioners’ clubs and gardening classes to the scouts.
and the local choir. State support for such centres came through the Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937, which extended the powers of local authorities and increased the amount of grant aid available to them and to other voluntary bodies. The wartime government further extended support for the construction of community centres with the Education Act of 1944, setting the course for the decades to come.

Throughout Europe the urgency of war legitimized the expansion of government into various domains of everyday life and thus helped set the course for the emergence of the modern welfare state during the postwar decades, when the engine of social welfare was transferred from private charity and civil society organizations to the centralized state. The postwar condition fundamentally affected an array of existing social and cultural institutions, from bourgeois theatres to working-class settlement houses. Most important, it fostered a convergence of institutional types previously considered to be distinct. The development of cultural centres from a variety of older institutions during the postwar decades was thus inscribed in a larger shift of welfare — from a collection of initiatives based in paternalism and self-organization to a bureaucratic regime of mass provision, consumption, and care. This shift affected a range of public facilities for which the state took responsibility in order to promote personal and community wellbeing and development. Whether extremely centralized as in France or more decentralized as in West Germany, Western European governments did not simply replace the existing civil society organizations concerned with social, cultural, or educational centres but instead took on an overarching role through coordination and regulation. That did not entail the disappearance of local associational life but rather its transformation as associations were inscribed in a new project, that of rebuilding the nation and restoring democracy after fascism.

Not only social welfare but also the arts came to be seen as a matter of concern and intervention for public authorities. For Germany, this meant continuing a long tradition of cities and towns supporting theatres and opera houses. In Britain, which did not share this tradition, intervention in the realm of the arts — with the exception of public libraries and museums — became generally accepted only after World War II. The establishment of the Arts Council in 1946, which sought 'to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public,' was an important achievement. Yet not until the 1960s was the political consensus — and, hence, public money — adequate to fund ambitious programmes such as the construction of cultural centres across the United Kingdom.
One factor in this growing acceptance was the sense that the arts held an explicitly social function. European policy-makers often connected a rich cultural life with individual and community wellbeing. Cultural policies during the 1960s thus came to revolve around the democratization of access to the arts and, more broadly, culture in general terms. As early as 1964, the European Community’s Council for Cultural Co-operation set as its main task to enable ‘the individual at all times and throughout his life to take advantage of the widest opportunities for cultural development and self-fulfilment.’ In France, cultural policy took off with the creation in 1959 of a Ministry of Cultural Affairs, whose first director was André Malraux. With a flair of Gaullist grandeur, he proclaimed that the goal of his cultural policy was ‘to make the most important works of humanity, and first of all of France, accessible to the largest possible number of Frenchmen.’ In his 1947 book, *Le musée imaginaire*, Malraux had already espoused the idea that the reproducibility of artworks allowed them to circulate beyond the walls of the museum and thus to directly affect people in their everyday lives. His ministerial policies during the 1960s were similarly intended to counter the institutional and highly centralized nature of French cultural life – the impression, shared by an entire generation of French politicians, that beyond Paris was only the ‘French desert,’ as François Gravier had written in 1947. Malraux focused his policy on the geographic distribution of ‘cultural infrastructure’, for which the construction program for *maisons de la culture* in towns across France was central. His cultural centres, built during the 1960s, were meant to encourage ‘social cohesion, under the most noble labels of knowledge and creation.’

In other countries as well, calls for cultural democratization directly informed large-scale programs for the construction of cultural centres. Such distributive policies were intimately linked to rapid (sub)urbanization, the baby boom, and the spectacular economic growth of postwar Europe. In European countries where urban development generally took the form of government-sponsored collective housing – France in particular, but also Britain, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands – cultural policy was directly shaped by such government intervention in the built environment. In the immediate postwar period, an acute housing shortage legitimized the rapid provision of standardised housing units, but policy-makers soon determined that such housing ought to be complemented by social and cultural facilities. Whether through organicist design or the concept of the neighbourhood unit, the ideal of ‘community’ was a guiding principle. In other European countries, Belgium most conspicuously, the process of suburbanization was equally rapid, but rather than being dominated by government-sponsored
collective housing, it was based on single-family home ownership in the form of often self-built suburban homes. Despite this distinct pattern of development, the Belgian government also enacted a policy of welfare provision, which entailed new community facilities from swimming pools and sports facilities to arts centres. Because these facilities were planned as the basic infrastructure of expanding metropolitan areas, they were understood as being fundamentally interrelated. The view of planners aligned conveniently with those of many social workers and community development experts, who had long argued that culture inevitably had a social basis — and that social work and community development should thus encompass the domain of culture.

During the 1960s, cultural policy comprised a similar approach as it aimed to ‘reconcile quality with mass participation’. That meant first of all that cultural centres had ‘to reach out beyond the small minorities who have traditionally appreciated “highbrow” activities like serious music, theatre and the fine arts, to the broad mass of the population’. Consequently, multi-purpose, publicly owned cultural centres would need to facilitate not just theatre, opera, musical concerts, and the fine arts but also recreational activities and community events. As such, they were to combine various types of institutions: not just the theatre or the Stadthalle with its multi-use hall but also the ‘house of the people’. The cultural centre was thus a new type only insofar as it combined elements from former bourgeois as well as working-class institutions and expressed the commitment of the welfare state to elicit the participation of the citizenry at large.

The combination of these traditions soon prompted fundamental questions about the nature and definition of ‘culture’ that should guide government policy. The definition of participation as the democratization of access to existing forms of cultural production was under increasing attack during the 1960s, not least under the growing influence of social movements that questioned the validity of all kinds of accepted norms. The more fundamental critiques of universalism were still far removed from the concerns of bureaucrats and policy-makers, at least before 1968. Yet the ‘culture’ of cultural policy gradually shifted from the highbrow arts to a much broader, anthropological definition, encompassing the variety of ways of life in a society or social group. In 1960s Britain, such ideas reverberated in political debates between those who accepted the highbrow definition and others who argued that ‘all men are artists by nature’. The questioning of the hierarchy between high and popular cultures had clear repercussions for the conception of cultural centres, which should — as was argued especially on the political Left — become sites of cultural production.
and not just passive consumption. Participation was thus understood not only in cultural or social terms but increasingly in political terms. This turn was not unprecedented; it was a return of sorts to the ideology of turn-of-the-century working-class Volkshäuser.

Nevertheless, after the workers’ and student protests of 1968 across Europe, the term ‘participation’ cut to the core of political consciousness. That shift was quickly registered in cultural policy, as a Council of Europe report noted in 1972: ‘Socio-cultural animation means cultural liberation—an emancipation which is necessary before masses of our peoples can participate in a genuine cultural democracy.’ Yet, unlike the 1968 protests that had brought an unprecedented mass of ‘participants’ to the streets in spite of government, in the following years those same governments set as their task to incite people to participate. In a follow-up report in 1973, the council lamented the ‘gross under-usage of the freedom to engage in social and cultural democracy.’ People needed to be made participants, and architecture was called upon to achieve that ambition.

Forms

The question of how architecture could facilitate the participation and interaction of its users preoccupied many architects over the course of the twentieth century, well before 1968. Spatial flexibility was already a concern in turn-of-the-century Volkshaus and Stadthalle designs and was central to Horta’s maison du peuple in Brussels, as well as that of Clichy. Yet the primary concern of interwar modernists was with the design of the dwelling unit. To encourage inhabitants to shape their own interior spaces, they employed movable elements, spatial fluidity, and formal transparency. In the postwar period, such strategies found renewed application in the design of public and collective institutions, particularly the cultural centre. As cultural policies during the 1950s and 1960s became increasingly focused on engaging citizens across class and ideological divides, the commissioners and architects of cultural centres harnessed these strategies in an attempt to increase citizen participation.

A particularly successful initiative was the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham, established in 1962 by Birmingham councillor Frank Price, playwright and theatre director John English, and English’s wife Alicia Randle. Their goal was to create an environment in which local youth could actively participate in artistic production. With the city council providing the land and partial funding, the centre was established as a private trust, which in turn raised additional funding from various public
and private sources. The centre grew incrementally over the following decades to encompass more than a dozen buildings, including a theatre, outdoor arena, concert hall, art gallery, exhibition hall, film theatre, pottery workshop, library, coffee shop, and restaurants. The Ardencote Arts Club, designed by the architects Jackson & Edmonds and completed in 1966 as the second building of the growing complex, expressed the centre's philosophy on a modest scale. At its core was a multi-use studio space, a simple square with an overhead technical stage grid. The space lacked fixed seating or a conventional stage; instead, two sets of insulated screens allowed it to be divided into workshop space. In addition to providing "an extremely flexible space for different techniques of theatre, cinema, and television", this arrangement allowed direct spatial and functional relationships between artistic production and consumption. The coffee shop, part of the entrance and foyer area, was slightly raised to offer views into the other parts of the building and bring art and informal recreation together. The incremental construction of the complex over time, with some buildings built by youths themselves as part of international summer programmes, fostered a participatory culture that represented the ideas of the centre's Left-leaning directors. These included Mike Leigh, whose youth theatre gained national prominence during the 1960s (Fig. 1.1).

Appearing around the same time as these semi-private, incrementally planned centres were mega-projects such as Billingham Forum. First
conceived in 1962 and opened in 1967, this centre provided Billingham, a
town of 35,000 people in North East England, with a wide-ranging array of
sports, recreation, and arts facilities.\textsuperscript{39} Designed by Elder, Lester & Partners
for the Billingham Urban District Council, the sprawling complex was
meant to be the community’s central meeting place. Architecture critics
described it as Billingham’s ‘living room’, suggesting that the gigantic centre
was simply an extension of people’s private dwelling space.\textsuperscript{40} Having every-
thing under one roof would not only save costs, so the architects claimed,
but would have a greater social impact by stimulating the participation of
visitors in a wide variety of sports and cultural activities. A few years after its
opening, the \textit{Architects’ Journal} reported that the centre, with a weekly visitor
rate of around 20,000, ‘is used very much as intended – as a family recreation
centre. Mothers drop their children into the crèche – the charge for which
is 2s [two shilling] – before shopping in the town centre precinct next
door and then have morning coffee or afternoon tea in one of the upstairs
refreshment rooms overlooking the ice-rink or swimming pool.’\textsuperscript{41} The
restaurant/bar was designed as a crossroads where everyone would meet and
from which all the other facilities could be viewed. Although architects and
critics considered ‘participation’ as central to Billingham Forum’s design,
they understood it in a vague and limiting sense: users were invited to
participate in the spectacle of mass consumption and recreation. The theatre
itself, run by a charitable trust subsidised by the city government and the
British Arts Council, took up only a small corner of the massive project.\textsuperscript{42}
Similar complexes were built across Britain in the following decade, a sign
that policy-makers and architects understood participation predominantly
as an aspect of leisure rather than political empowerment (Fig. 1.2).\textsuperscript{43}

Similar multi-functional complexes arose in Continental Europe at this
time. One of the most exemplary was the Agora in the Dutch town of
Dronter, designed by the architect Frank Van Klingerent.\textsuperscript{44} Opened in
1966, it featured a large open hall, transparent towards the outside and
covered by a space-frame roof. The only permanently specified functions
were a theatre, a restaurant, and office space. The hall itself could be used
for a wide range of cultural and sports activities, games and events. Just
like at Billingham, the project was guided by the belief that design could
actively facilitate participation. Yet the design strategy itself was the opposite
of Billingham: instead of bringing together a range of programmatically
defined spaces, Van Klingerent allowed for a loose correlation between
program and space. As such, he adopted the cybernetic approach to program
which Cedric Price had developed for his unbuilt Fun Palace: the building
as a machine operated by creative users who participated in the continual
transformation of its various atmospheres. Van Klingerens's architecture similarly oscillated between control and freedom. Although the free space of the Agora facilitated participation strictly in the realm of recreation, as did complexes like the Billingham Forum, it effectively minimized the threshold between the street and the institution. By drawing in the local community, the project meant to break down social boundaries. Since its opening, the Agora has drawn many crowds, but whether its events produced social integration remains an unanswered question (Fig. 1.3).

The construction of maisons de la culture in 1960s France was motivated by similar social ambitions. The new generation of cultural centres built under the leadership of Malraux was assessed on the extent to which they were able to attract a wider audience beyond the cultural elite – in particular, working-class families. Despite the celebrated modern architecture of some
of the new centres and Malraux's lofty ambitions to democratize culture through geographic distribution, critics generally dismissed the centres as socially ineffective.\textsuperscript{46} By the end of the decade, cultural policies were refocused on architectural strategies that would allow visitors to participate not only in passive consumption but in active production.\textsuperscript{47}

Participation had been a concern in French architecture and urban policy circles since the 1950s and was generally understood to be part of a social project – even if it was simply to provide popular public services such as mass recreation facilities. The social movements and protests of May 1968 renewed its political meaning: participation was now synonymous with empowerment. A young generation of radically politicized architects, critical of their elders, cast participation in architecture as vital to a new revolutionary spatial practice. The architect Ionel Schein attempted to channel the energy of 1968 into a new type of participatory space, which he termed \textit{espace global polyvalent}. In his publication by the same name, he explained that the need for this new type of space was a direct consequence of the controls of a functionalist and bureaucratic consumer society.\textsuperscript{48} Inspired by the Situationist International, he argued that culture and social
life were to be integrated and diffused at the same time, and architecture needed to work in support of these goals by offering spaces that were totally flexible and free to use.

Such calls were driven by the idea of radical deinstitutionalization, which was called for in many domains after 1968. To change the existing power structures, the dominant social institutions needed to be dismantled and rebuilt from the ground up. And that meant that the street was to be society’s place of action. At least this is what the editors of and contributors to the Architecture d’aujourd’hui theme issue ‘Les lieux du spectacle’ argued in 1970. They dismissed conventional theatre as a historically normalized and institutionalized space that upheld social hierarchy and inequality. Critical of the fact that the notion of participation was becoming a mere slogan ‘used every time we worry about the audience’s well-being’, Anne-Marie Gourdon denounced theatre as ‘a place of exclusion and division’. The solution was to bring the theatre into the spaces of everyday life; first and foremost, the street. The contributors explored different ways in which public space served as theatre – from traditional processions, market fairs, protests, and the circus to nineteenth-century itinerant theatre, inflatables, and activist street theatre groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe. For the editors of the theme issue, these myriad practices dissolved the opposition between exterior public space and internal institutional space and, therefore, the opposition between cultural producers and consumers (Fig. 1.4).

Over the following years, the architects and government planners in charge of building new cultural institutions picked up on such calls, even if their response stayed within the limits of a basic paradox – that of eliciting the bottom-up by means of the top-down. Rather than doing away with the cultural centre as an institution altogether, they harnessed existing strategies of spatial flexibility, polyvalence, and integration for a new generation of ambitious architectural projects. The meaning of participation in architecture was expanded to include not just the flexibility of spaces, adjustable by their users or the functional integration of different programmatic elements; participation would now foster social and neighbourhood integration. As such, the cultural centre was to have an effect far beyond its own walls and would ‘encourage not only the participation of the population in artistic creation, but also (and especially) the participation in real community life.’ The concept of équipement intégré or integrated facilities gathered these ambitions and shaped social and cultural policies in France during the 1970s. For the architecture of collective facilities to be truly integrated into the everyday lives of users and inhabitants, it needed to be ‘molten in its surroundings’ and ‘in osmosis with the animation of the street.’

27
SCÉNOGRAPHIE EN ESPACE OUVERT

La ville moderne, reconstituant spontanément des espaces à certaines heures du spectacle : elle peut jouer et le « temps mort », la rue, etc. Cette reconstitution spontanée doit s'opposer aux arrêtés qui ne sont que le souvenir de la ville. Elle apparaît comme le maillon de la cité, dédiée à la sphère publique, et surtout, la partie du temps qui donne la dimension d'un lieu de libération. Les espaces ouverts, tous publics ou privés (étangs, jardins) sont progressivement disposés dans le temps, dans les moments de détente ou de loisirs, créant des spectacles diversifiés. Les espaces ainsi délimités sont devenus les espaces de la ville moderne, pour se contraster à l’ordre de la société traditionnelle. La ville préfère maintenant l’image de sa rue et se donne pour le soin même du progrès. Cette discipline implique la disparition du spectacle qui est le spectateur typiquement urbain. Concrètement, elle consiste à vaincre le spectacle pour reconstituer l’ordre même de la ville en une figure exceptionnelle.

Ainsi, et surtout, nous dirons ici que nous avons des spectacles d’aujourd’hui qui ne ressemblent aux autres que par le fait que, en effet, prévalent ces spectacles de leur emprise et de leur pouvoir. Ils ne sont alors guère utilisables que par ceux qui, habitués, ont vu sur la ville un regard d’exotisme.

Sous démarche ne consiste pas à imposer le spectacle d’une cité archaïque sans défense au spectacle, mais seulement à rappeler cette fonction indispensable.

la place et la rue

La place est l’espace de la circulation. D’abord visible, elle ne trouve sa fonction que dans le rassasiment. Elle est l’espace de l’ordre. La ville est-elle construite pour la place, ou la place est-elle construite dans la ville ? Finalement, l’arrière, après, forum, champ de foire ou grand parc, ovale, carré, et même, estime, elle fut longtemps le lieu privilégié du rassemblement. Sous espaces qui sont l’espace de la perméabilité totale, cela est l’espace parfait de l’espace transformable.

La rue est un espace urbain. On y circule, on s’y dirige vers une issue et elle n’est jamais qu’un lieu de passage. Les spectacles qu’elle expose doivent se contenter à son allure et la jouer dans la musique.

Fig. 1.4 ‘Scénographie en espace ouvert’, page spread of ‘Les lieux du spectacle’, a theme issue of Architecture d’aujourd’hui 40/152 (October–November 1970), pp.18–19.
The urban centre for the New Town of Evry in Paris's south east suburbs became a key testing ground for these theories. Planners cast the project's complex programmatic mix in response to what they saw as a dire need for urbanity in the suburbs. At the core of the new centre were a large shopping mall and a state-sponsored complex of social, cultural, sports, and
recreation facilities. The complex was baptized the ‘Agora,’ referring not only to Van Kligeren’s inspiring design for Dronthe but to the project’s larger political ambitions. Equally ambitious in scale, the Agora of Evry offered the surrounding suburbanites a large mix of activities under a single roof – from a church and a kindergarten to a bowling hall and a nightclub. These functions were organized around a central interior atrium, designed as a free space that could be easily appropriated by users for a wide range of events and unexpected activities. And yet, although planners conceived of the Agora as a modernist translation of a historic urban core with its central plaza, the project did not achieve the urban integration they had intended. The Agora remained a monstrous complex of disorienting spaces that many users found hard to navigate. Many other megastructures of this period similarly failed to create the kind of user-driven urban atmosphere suggested in Cedric Price’s Fun Palace.\(^5\)

The concept of integrated facilities also held sway outside France, dominating European cultural policies during the early 1970s both as a social goal and an architectural strategy. In order to attract not just cultural elites but the community at large, planners and policy-makers proposed to integrate arts centres with recreational and sports facilities.\(^6\) In many European towns and cities, such integrated ‘socio-cultural facilities’ were envisioned as a way of bringing the expanding social welfare system closer to citizens of all classes and backgrounds.

This strategy is apparent in the planning of cultural centres in Flanders during the late 1960s and early 1970s under the impetus of Ministers of Dutch Culture Renaat Van Elslande and Frans Van Mechelen.\(^7\) Mirroring cultural policy abroad, their goal was not just to distribute cultural infrastructure across the suburbanized territory of Flanders but to transform the institution of the cultural centre itself. Instead of arts palaces for the elite, architects were to design places for the ‘culture of the people’. Many new cultural centres were labelled *ontmoetingscentra*, or centres for ‘encounter’. This idea inspired designs such as that of Alfons Hoppenbrouwers for the cultural centre of Dilbeek.\(^8\) The architect harnessed the well-known modernist concept of the interior street – derived from Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’habitation* in Marseille – to tie together the centre’s diverse cultural and recreational programs and facilitate informal contact between various social groups and their activities. The Dilbeek cultural centre essentially performed the job of Billingham Forum but with the angular and curved geometries of Hans Scharoun’s Berlin Philharmonic.\(^9\)

Meanwhile, on the other side of the language border, in predominantly French-speaking Brussels, cultural politics and architectural design was
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Meanwhile, on the other side of the language border, in predominantly French-speaking Brussels, cultural politics and architectural design was
focused on the Palais des Beaux-Arts. In May 1968, this stately art museum designed by Victor Horta in 1928 became a target for youthful protesters, who occupied the museum’s grand central hall and used it to stage protests, performances, and ‘happenings’ over the course of the following months. The hall was originally designed to house large sculpture exhibitions but had for decades functioned merely as a circulation space between entrance and exhibition rooms. The protesters’ occupation of the hall was motivated in part by French-Dutch language politics, but their primary goal was to offer a fundamental critique of dominant social and cultural institutions. Among the initiators of the protests was the artist Marcel Broodthaers, whose project Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXème Siècle, established a museum at his Brussels home (also in 1968), fomenting further institutional critiques in the arts over the following decades (Fig. 1.5a).

The occupation prompted a fundamental rethinking of the hall’s function. Suggestions for its adaptation, however, had already been formulated earlier that year by the director, Hervé Thys. In a letter of 7 May, Thys described the idea of a tubular three-dimensional scaffolding, a large-scale sculpture that would facilitate a variety of cultural events. The protesters that took over the hall later that month built a tubular structure that looked and performed remarkably similarly. Over the following years, various plans for the hall were developed, but the installation design by Lucien Jacques Baucher that was eventually built resembled both Thys’s suggestions and the temporary construction of the 1968 protests. Baucher’s design featured an all-encompassing space-frame structure of metal tubes and a landscape of mobile, variously sized, modular blocks covered in carpet. Placed on the marble floor of the grand hall, these blocks created new floor levels, public stages, and seating areas, subverting the hall’s intended use of gently strolling and passively contemplating art. The furniture units could be freely moved and reconfigured by the public, which now allegedly became empowered as active participants and creative agents of the hall’s spatial atmosphere. Despite the design’s technological image, it was also intended to recreate the function of an ancient forum. Coincided ‘Animation Hall’ when it opened in March 1972, such allusions were not coincidental: for the architect and the museum’s directors, the museum was to be radically deinstitutionalized in order to become a central public space for Brussels—a panacea for the ‘dead city’ that cultural critics claimed the city centre had become (Figs. 1.5b, 1.5c).

The design of the ‘Animation Hall’ was contested from the start. Reporters denounced it as a violation of the museum’s historical and architectural significance. Proponents argued that the new hall finally
Fig. 1.5a (top) May 1968 protests in the marble hall of the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, with, amongst others, Marcel Broodthaers, Hugo Claus, and Roger Somville. Fig. 1.5b (bottom) View of the ‘Animatiehal’ designed by the architects Baucher, Draps, and Libois, after construction in 1972.
Fig. 1.5c Inauguration of the hall by the director Paul Willems on 22 March 1972. Source: Brussels, Centre for Fine Arts, Archives Centre for Fine Arts, Photo Collection 1928–2001.
achieved the social ambitions of Victor Horta’s *maison du peuple*, which was located only a few streets away but had been demolished a few years earlier despite strong international protests. Nevertheless, with the growing dismissal of architectural modernism and embrace of historic urbanism during the following decade, the work of Horta was revalued and the atrium eventually restored to its original condition in the 1980s. Rather than counter-culture, the hall now facilitated glamorous receptions and art openings, true to the new era of the corporate museum.

**Conclusion**

Despite the architectural experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s, the ideal of a completely free, participatory space remained a promise more than a practice. Although many cultural centre projects across Europe at this time aimed to radically dissolve the distinctions between institution and public space, the resulting architecture often remained in tension between the desire for total freedom and flexibility, on the one hand, and the will to exert a certain symbolism and monumentality on the other. Most importantly, and despite architects’ laudable efforts to foster social integration, many of these projects would turn out to be strongly defined by their context and by larger socio-economic forces. By the second half of the 1970s, European policy-makers seemed to resign themselves to the conclusion that ‘the better educated and higher occupational groups consistently participate more in cultural life.’

Even Birmingham’s Midlands Arts Centre, considered one of the most successful in terms of its social and cultural goals, had failed in this regard, as policy-makers reported: ‘the centre’s membership consists largely of the already interested and to a certain extent catered-for children of professional people – very rarely of children from a working-class background, new to the arts.’ Despite the directors’ efforts to attract immigrant organizations and families and thus to counter segregation, ‘only about four or five West Indian families have joined, and there are no Indian or Pakistani family members.’ Moreover, cultural centres remained unequally distributed, their construction dependent not only on centralised government but on local funding and initiative. The motivating idea—that if cultural centres were brought to the people, the people would come to culture—simply did not hold.

Can the cultural centre, as a social project of participation, be readily dismissed as a failure? The answer depends on exactly what notion of participation is under discussion. If we take the views espoused by theorists...
such as Guy Debord or architects such as Lionel Schein at face value and understand participation as a revolutionary practice, then cultural centres have rarely, if ever, met such radical criteria. Yet, when approached through the lens of its actual history across the twentieth century, participation appears as an institutional and procedural instrument more than a vehicle of instant revolution. When evaluated in such terms, cultural centres in European towns small and large did succeed in fostering a gradual but significant process of mass democratization, both socially and culturally. They also created a panoply of concrete spaces in which cultural production and consumption could be mixed and experimented with by a variety of people.

The question of success or failure is not only a matter of the goals articulated by policy-makers and architects; it is first and foremost coloured by our contemporary definition of ‘participation’. Rather than casting participation as a revolution of political, social, and cultural life, we should recognise the slippery historical work of this ideal and the gradually changing practices it spawned. Participation was a pragmatic and highly productive answer to institutional reform during an era of mass consumer culture and the expansion of the welfare state. The massive construction of cultural centres across Europe is thus a crucial episode in the history of participation. As the accompanying participatory models have given way to today’s global culture of biennales and art festivals, a critical analysis of this institutional legacy might contribute to re-imagining the contemporary stakes of participatory politics in art, architecture, and, hopefully, beyond.

Notes
7 Delhaye, Jean, La Maison du peuple de Victor Horta (Brussels: Atelier Vokaer, 1987).
12 For example, van der Rohe, Mies, Bruno Taut and Hans Scharoun were members of the Deutscher Volksbund, established in 1917 from several older organizations.
19 This is illustrated by the case del popolo in postwar Italy. See Hornbake, Laura J., Community, Place, and Cultural Battles: Associational Life in Central Italy, 1945–1968 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2013).
With Labour elected to government in 1964, Britain saw substantial increase in government funding for the arts. See Green and Wilding: *Cultural policy*, p.11.


Dubois and Poirrier: *La Politique culturelle*, p.15.


Green and Wilding: *Cultural policy in Great Britain*, p.11.


‘Arts Club in Birmingham,’ p.17.


42 'Building revisited: Billingham Forum,' p.533.
43 Examples include the Basildon Arts Centre, the Crowtree Leisure Centre, and National Recreation Centre at Crystal Palace.
46 See Dubois and Poirrier: La Politique culturelle.
50 See 'Les lieux du spectacle' theme issue of Architecture d’aujourd’hui, 40/152 (October–November 1970).
52 Chartier: Les équipements intégrés, p.44.
54 Chartier: Les équipements intégrés, p.70.
56 See Managing Facilities for Cultural Democracy.
59 See Vermeulen: 'Cultural Centres: A Journey through the Nebular City.'
60 See 'L’occupation du palais des Beaux-Arts,' Le Soir (1 June 1968); 'Les travailleurs culturels quitteront le palais des Beaux-Arts pour le 15 septembre' Le Soir (14 August 1968).
61 See 'Remarques Hervé Thys sur le projet Hall / Hall d’acc. (7 mai 1968),' Archives of the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels.
62 See 'Dossier Hartung,' Archives of the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels.
63 'La dénaturation du palais de Beaux-Arts se poursuit allègrement à Bruxelles' Le Soir (20 February 1972).
64 'Le 'hall' du palais des Beaux-Arts,' *Le Soir* (7 April 1972).
66 Mennell: *Cultural policy in towns*, p.46.
67 Green and Wilding: *Cultural policy in Great Britain*, pp.52–53.