

A place for culture? Building an Alternative House of Culture in the context of the 2014 European Capital of Culture in Umeå, Sweden

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Abstract:

In the context of Umeå2014 as European Capital of Culture (ECOC) where the ideal of the inclusive co-creation of culture formed a central part of the programme, we explore the rise, fall and aftermath of an alternative house of culture – *Lokstallarna* (the Engine Sheds). In its ECOC bid, Umeå stressed its strong alternative, grassroots tradition and ‘Do-It-Yourself’ culture. However, these groups increasingly questioned the inclusiveness of the participatory process around the development and implementation of the programme for the ECOC year. We study one of these alternative movements which occupied disused engine sheds with the aim of turning them into a house of culture ‘for all’ as a counter to the Umeå2014 programme. The focus is on the narrative of *Lokstallarna* and the creation of an alternative house of culture both from the point of view of those actively involved in its creation and in the local media coverage. We have collected a variety of empirical materials, both on and offline. We approach *Lokstallarna* as a form of place-based resistance where meanings of activism, culture and the city are negotiated and contested. The ECOC Year in Umeå opened up the opportunity to negotiate both culture and place.

Keywords: co-creation, culture, European Capital of Culture, power relations, alternative grassroots culture, Umeå2014

Introduction

This study is located within the context of Umeå as the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) 2014 in which the ideal of co-creation, of creating culture together through broad participation and public involvement, formed a central part in the bid for ECOC and in the design of the whole programme year for Umeå2014. Umeå lies on the Gulf of Bothnia and is

the major city in the County of *Västerbotten* in the far north of Sweden with over 120 000 inhabitants. It has a tradition of portraying itself as a creative, open, tolerant and dynamic city where culture has an important role in developing the city as a good place to live. In the bid for ECOC 2014, Umeå stressed its strong alternative, grassroots cultural tradition, its history of radical citizen movements and its 'Do-It-Yourself' (DIY) culture as something special (Eriksson 2010). However, following the success of Umeå's bid, the inclusiveness of the participatory process around the development of the programme for the ECOC year, was increasingly questioned by grassroots cultural activists who had been involved in the formulation of the bid. Critical views on what participation and co-creation had come to mean within the framework of Umeå2014 were expressed (Hudson et al 2017). Here we focus on one of the alternative movements that questioned the inclusiveness of the co-creation process in Umeå. It concerns the occupation of disused engine sheds (*Lokstallarna*) with the aim of turning them into a house of culture 'for all'. We approach *Lokstallarna* as a form of place-based resistance where meanings of activism, culture and the city are negotiated and contested. We follow its rise, fall and aftermath and explore the tensions between Umeå2014 and this alternative house of culture. We study the way in which power was negotiated between different actors in its creation and demise. We also consider the wider consequences of these negotiations for the spaces for culture being created within the ECOC programme year in Umeå, and in its aftermath.

Theoretical framework - A spatial analytical approach

The city is a political space where the expression of a collective will is possible. It is a space for solidarity but also for conflict (Harvey 2009). It is not just a concrete physical structure, it is also an emotional space/place. Feelings of belonging are important for identity and for being able to participate in and influence the life, culture and governing processes of the city. The city through its social relations, its gendered and racialized activities (re)produces the structures of power in society. These can oppress and dominate not just through the distribution of material resources, but also through taken-for-granted assumptions and practices (Hudson & Rönnblom 2008). Certain groups are empowered and others are disempowered or marginalized and their right to the city and to transform themselves and (re)make the city is constrained. It affects who can possess a particular space, who is entitled to be present in, control and perform activities in that space (Hammond 2013). David Harvey (2008) describes it as:

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (Harvey 2008: 28)

Implementation of policy, urban development and participatory democracy are not practiced in the abstract but materially and discursively take place. They are part of the creation of spaces for culture. The politics of place concerns places' identities, how they are created and maintained. It is not just about the creation of a place but also the conditions for creating it, which can of course change. Thus space-time geometries become important – how activism is played out over time, and how the contexts and performance of social struggles are articulated in different ways and places (Panelli 2007), and how relations, configurations and practices are negotiated (Massey 2005). It can be understood as a politics of identity and difference in which space becomes a game between the factual and the imagined – between praxis and representation (Thörn & Holgersson 2014), in which shared spaces of radical democratic possibility can be created and alternatives imagined (Sparke 2013). As Pickerill & Krinsky (2012) argue focusing on space opens up for examining the strategic use and occupation of space as symbolic (see also Tilly 2000). This is important as '(l)ocations carry meanings, and those meanings can telegraph the message that the movement wants to convey' (Hammond 2013: 501).

Following Massey (1994, 2005), we see place as 'woven together out of on-going stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space, and as in process as unfinished business' (Massey 2005:131). She suggests what is special about place is its 'thrown togetherness' – something that demands negotiation. Place is a space people have made meaningful; something to which, in one way or another, they have attached specific significance. Places are located, they are material settings for social relations (locale) and there is a sense of place - the subjective and emotional attachments people have for a place (Agnew 1987). 'Places are constructed by people doing things and in that sense are never "finished", but constantly being performed' (Cresswell 2004:37). Thus 'individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialise, to claim spaces, to include some and exclude others from particular areas' (Massey 1998: 126) and that these claims are social constructions. This territorialisation of space may have different motivations; for example, to gain control and to protect interests, or for reasons connected to the social production of identities. Indeed, Langevang (2008) argues that strategies of claiming and controlling place are closely connected with the social construction of identities. Places are very much in process, and produced in everyday practices.

The politics of place is a central analytical point of entry in this paper. *Lokstallarna* (the engine sheds) need to be understood in terms of the factual and the imagined, between the practical (how things were done, who participated) and representation (the presentation of a narrative, the interviews given and the activists' conscious media strategy). Here we are interested in the strategy of those involved in creating the alternative house of culture and the municipality's reactions, but also what we as outsiders in the process see in the material. Hence, we need to understand *Lokstallarna* as a place for

culture produced and in process within the context of Umeå2014. This is discussed more in the methodological section.

Methodological considerations

In our study, we use a variety of materials to get a thick description of the development of the *Lokstallarna*. We are interested in studying the narrative of the engine sheds and the creation of an alternative house of culture both from the point of view of those actively involved in its creation and the coverage of events in the local media. We have collected a variety of empirical materials, both on and offline. Methodologically the project is structured around the analysis of: a) official documents concerning Umeå as European Capital of Culture 2014, b) media representations published in Swedish newspapers focusing on *Kulturhuset/Lokstallarna*; and c) 'internal material' comprising semi-structured interviews with people engaged in the establishment of *Lokstallarna* as a cultural centre and information produced and coordinated by the *Lokstallarna* organization (a non-profit association) that was set up (i.e. its Facebook page and the Umeå Kulturhus/Lokstallarna Wiki).

We began by examining Umeå city's strategy in the making of the European Capital of Culture year in relation to co-creation of culture and material produced on and by Umeå2014. This was followed by an analysis of articles published in Swedish newspapers describing the claim for a space for culture in Umeå. These were identified and collected from searches of the *Mediearkivet* database, which provides access to the majority of Swedish daily and evening newspapers' articles. We used the search words *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* (House of culture, the engine sheds) AND *Umeå* and searched for articles published in the Swedish newspapers and two local newspapers *Västerbottenskuriren* (VK) and *Västerbottens Folkblad* (VF) in particular. Our analysis identifies 206 hits, out of these 107 articles were selected as they had a clear focus on the events concerning the history, aims, spirit and activities around *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna*. In analysing the articles, attention was paid to how the media chose to represent the *Lokstallarna*, the activities carried out and the people engaged in these activities.

Deep interviews were carried out with nine activists who were identified through a snow-balling process. Initially it was difficult to find activists who were willing to talk to us as the demise of the *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* project had been a painful process for many. Luckily we came into contact with a key actor who was willing to be interviewed and suggested a couple of other people who might also consent to be interviewed and, in turn, they suggested other names. In this way, we were able to interview a further eight activists. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 60 - 90 minutes. The interview questions focused on *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna*'s history, its importance in and for Umeå's cultural life as well more overarching questions concerning the opportunities for participating in creating culture in relation to Umeå2014. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and subsequently transcribed. They were carried out in

two periods, June 2016 and November 2017. For the sake of those who participated and talked to us about their experiences, we have chosen not to write anything that connects a quote to a specific person, for example, we do not disclose the age or the names of the interviewees. We are thereby not connecting our analysis and the illustrative quotes to an individual person. Our desire to retain anonymity also led us to consider the interviews, together with the news reports and online material as a collective material. We analysed the web material produced during the duration of the *Lokstallarna* as a cultural centre, including its Facebook pages and Wiki. *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* was responsible for these Internet pages and they are thus part of a strategic story of the cultural centre.

The official documents, newspaper articles, interview transcripts, and *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna's* facebook pages were (re)read in close detail to familiarize ourselves with the data and initial ideas and comments were noted. All knowledge is produced in specific circumstances which shape that knowledge, at least in some way (Rose 1997). Accordingly, 'the researcher's relationship to online data cannot be seen as one-way (i.e. the researcher is 'taking' data from online spaces that function like archives of discourse)' (Morrow et al 2015: 533). Here we do not regard our on-line material as simply an archive in which we can identify discourses neither in our analysis of newspaper articles nor of Facebook pages. In a similar way with our interview material, we do not 'discover' narratives, but rather participate in their creation (Reissman 2008). By asking the questions we do, both in interviews and to newspaper articles, we see ourselves as actors rather than observers in the research process.

With regard to *Lokstallarna*, we are studying what happened in retrospect after the occupation ended. We would, most certainly, have got other stories if we had carried out this study while the occupation was on-going. However, at the end of September 2016, the non-profit association responsible for creating, organizing and running the Umeå House of Culture - *Lokstallarna* was disbanded. The story told becomes tinged by remembrances of what might have been, dashed hopes and lost dreams – it becomes a representation of an empty space and perhaps even a lost space.

In order to understand the politics of place in relation to *Lokstallarna*, we will discuss what happened in terms of three different themes that illustrate the rise and fall of this alternative house of culture. In each part, we look at the contested meanings of places for culture and co-creation. These themes are about negotiations of what the place should be (c.f. Massey 2005).

1. Claiming place, making space for culture: activists identify an 'empty' space, and work to transform it into a place for culture. Here the meaning of *Lokstallarna* is renegotiated from a disused engine shed to a place for everyone in which culture can be created and experienced through co-creational processes. We examine how *Lokstallarna* were filled with meaning, and the function of the narrative of *Lokstallarna* in the context of Umeå2014.

2. The struggle for place: here we look at the struggle over a place in broader terms of the clash between an alternative cultural movement and a city's institutionalized cultural policies and procedures. What does the rise and fall of *Lokstallarna* say about city identity and the room for co-creation in the city both within and beyond Umeå2014?

3. A lost space: this theme is about the crushing of hopes and the demise of a place as the meaning of *Lokstallarna* is renegotiated. It is also about remembering *Lokstallarna* as the alternative house of culture. Its creation as a memory – a legacy of the project and its existence as an experiment in co-creation for all. Here we focus on how the memories of *Lokstallarna* are narrated and on narratorial memory as part of the negotiation of place.

Setting the scene: Umeå European Capital of Culture 2014 and co-created culture

The desire to create self-governing cultural and social meeting places runs like a thread through Umeå's history. (Article in local newspaper, *Västerbottenskuriren*, 2015-10-21)

It is important to contextualize the grassroots cultural movement that resulted in the occupation and creation of an alternative house of culture in *Lokstallarna* in relation to the investments in culture being made as part of the bid for and implementation of the 2014 European Capital of Culture. Co-creation - the idea of creating culture together - was presented as central to Umeå's bid for ECOC 2014 and considerable effort was put into initiating citizen participation with the aim of creating a sustainable and better city for all (Umeå Municipality 2008). City officials and municipal leaders described the application and the subsequent design of the Umeå2014 programme as having had an ambition to achieve broad participation and public involvement and to have been successful in this respect. There were recurrent calls for inhabitants to 'get involved' in order to achieve empowerment at different levels: the empowerment of people, the city, culture and of the Northern region as a whole (Umeå Municipality, 2008). In the application '*Curiosity and Passion – the Art of Co-Creation*', it was the concept of co-creation that was highlighted (and promoted) as the strength and uniqueness of Umeå's proposal. During the process of putting together the ECOC bid, there was broad participation by local cultural actors/practitioners including larger established organizations and smaller more norm-critical fringe groups. This extensive process of participation was seen by Umeå municipality as giving legitimacy to the project. The event was thus constructed as an inclusive rather than an elite project as was reflected by the following on the webpage for the ECOC Umeå2014:

Culture is an important motor for growth and success. Culture – that spans over everything from scenery and cuisine to art and democracy – promotes entrepreneurship, employment and competitiveness. And best of all: Everyone can contribute to the cultural growth. (14-12-2012 <http://Umea2014.se/en/about-Umea2014/growth-through-culture>)

However, this view of the successfulness of the participation process was not shared by all, Umeå2014 was also a highly contested project (Hudson et al 2017). What happened during the development and implementation of the Umeå2014 programme year was criticized by local cultural actors/practitioners who felt excluded and neglected. In a local newspaper, a critic described it as proof 'of the great institution's advantage over small associations in the effective use and achievement of a value-added culture of money' (VK 2014-12-12, Meidell¹) reflecting that it was the established cultural organizations' projects that were, to a large extent, accepted and financed as part of the programme for Umeå2014. Many small cultural associations and cultural actors had given their time and been actively involved in the planning of and the bid for ECOC 2014 without any form of remuneration. They had thought that they would be 'compensated' in terms of resources to support and present their own creative productions, but this largely did not materialize and there was bitter disappointment. Disillusionment with co-creation led to tensions becoming increasingly visible between grassroots attempts to create culture from below through alternative collective activities and the city's established cultural policy, as exemplified by more commercial joint enterprises with business concerns such as *Väven* (the city's new cultural centre). There was growing dissatisfaction amongst grassroots cultural organizations and groups who felt that Umeå's role as 'the capital of counterculture'² and the spirit of 'do-it-yourself' considered to be highly important in Umeå's local identity were being squeezed out and too much emphasis was being placed on culture's role in generating economic growth and city development. This feeling is summed up in an article in a local paper by a musician and organizer active within *Verket* an independent concert hall for alternative music in Umeå:

We're not doing what we do to generate growth. We're doing it because we must, and because culture has an unshakable intrinsic value. We create, consciously and/or unconsciously influenced by the city in which we live, its cultural heritage, and contribute together with the building blocks that shape its distinctive character. This distinctiveness made Umeå interesting as a contender for the title of Capital of Culture. Umeå wouldn't have become Capital of Culture without us. (Swanström, VK 2014-04-14 *Den smutsiga sanningen om kulturhuvudstaden - The dirty truth about the Capital of Culture*)

This criticism became part of a public narrative about Umeå2014's process and demonstrates not only grassroots cultural organizations' growing dissatisfaction with the

opportunities to participate and be involved in the ECOC year, but it also illustrates the unequal power relations within co-creation where some voices were heard and others silenced (Hudson et al 2017).

Claiming and making a place for culture - co-creating culture

The Umeå ECOC year formed a cultural-political context generating discontent amongst those engaged in the city's grassroots culture movements that led, amongst other things, to the establishment of an alternative House of Culture (*Lokstallarna*). The story of *Lokstallarna* is about creating a strategic narrative, made and communicated within a European Capital of Culture context. Old disused buildings (former engine sheds) that had been standing vacant since 2010 were selected as somewhere to create an alternative house of culture. The sheds were owned by the municipality and in this sense could be claimed as belonging to 'the people'. A group of activists got together and decided to occupy the buildings. The timing of the occupation was strategically chosen, a general election was only a few weeks away and Umeå2014 was mid-year i.e. six months into its programme. It began with a symbolic manifestation on 8th August 2014, made into a media event, to walk together and claim the space – to claim the place:

Friday 8th August 19.00 we will assemble in Rådhusorget [*the city square*] and walk together to our new collective cultural centre. (Announcement on *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna's* Facebook site and webpage August 2014)

The spatial strategy of occupation was initially very geographically grounded – in the claiming and making of a particular space, the physical place was appropriated. Hammond (2013) argues 'all social movements are organized in space, but some movements are about space: who possesses particular space, who is entitled to be present in, control and perform what kind of activities in those spaces' (Hammond 2013:501). This is important, as Sparke (2013) suggests in his study of Occupy Wall Street activism, creating a fixed spatial focus for protest can give the protestors staying power. In claiming *Lokstallarna*, the focus was not on individual activists claiming place but rather on the need for a place for culture that was open to everyone, somewhere that was part of the local community and for those disenfranchised from the main Umeå2014 programme. The grassroots association formed around *Lokstallarna* sought to convert the old, abandoned engine sheds into a vibrant cultural centre that would be created by and for all and where people could meet and co-create culture together. As a symbolic geography (Tilly 2000), the choice of the location carried meaning, and a message that the movement wanted to convey as is shown in this extract from *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna's* webpages:

Doing culture needs space! Free, open and encouraging space is what is needed if culture is to be just these things. A place where people can meet

and be inspired, create and perform, dream and let others see things from new perspectives. In such a space, culture is always the reason, the means and the goal. Umeå Kulturhus [*Lokstallarna*] aims to be just such a place, a house open for all regardless of interest, age and background. (Webpage, Umeå Kulturhus/Lokstallarna³).

This can be seen as a movement about space through claiming a specific place (Langevang 2008). The occupation became a mobilization for a symbolic place with an ambition to initiate a space for culture that would be an accessible space for all. It can be seen as an effort to change the city, to exercise the right to the city (Harvey 2008, 2009).

When the space was initially occupied and claimed, there were public announcements about planned activities or reports about recent cultural activities. These both described how the house of culture was built, filled with cultural activities in a co-creational process. *Lokstallarna* came to be represented as an example of Umeå's strong DIY spirit, and the media reports ran headlines such as 'Protect Umeå's independent cultural centre', 'Build culture strong – keep the engine sheds (*Lokstallarna*)', 'Grassroots' culture must be allowed to flourish'. It became represented as a utopian space (Sparke 2013) where alternatives could be imagined as is illustrated by an article in the local paper VK:

Umeå's new house of culture is an inspirational and colourful place in the heart of Umeå where the doors are open for all who want to visit. (VF 2014-09-12, *Mitt Umeå blir bättre med lite olydnad, My Umeå is better with a little disobedience*)

These inform a narrative representation of how the building was made into a collective project, emerging and progressing into what could be described as a shared space. This was a space in which shared spaces of radical democratic possibility could be created, that reaffirm 'the shared meanings of place for citizen conversations rather than the consumption demanded by capital' (Sparke 2013: 399). Through the work on restoring the building, planning and developing a place for culture the grassroots cultural movement also expressed the hope for, a vision for, a space in which people could coexist, co-create and share experiences (*cf.* Thörn & Holgersson 2014).

In the interviews, the respondents describe the work with making a space for culture as a collective process that began through the initiation of a culture house festival (Kulturhusfestivalen). This is reflected in a newspaper report from the time:

The sound of hammers and saws echoes from all the rooms, but there is no sign of a boss anywhere. All who are there are working freely and many voluntary organizations have come together to create the festival. Activities are coordinated via the social media and general meetings. (VF 2014-08-29,

Nytt kulturhus växer fram i gamla lokstallarna -The old engine sheds become a new house of culture)

And on the *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* activist group's own Facebook pages⁴ that stressed the importance of collectively planning and organizing an on-going cultural festival that would be open to all and never ending.

The ambition or the hope for a culture house festival that might never end symbolizes not only the long term goals for the mobilization of an alternative place for cultural but also a political demand to transform the city into something radical different from the Umeå2014 programme.. The work was launched as a democratic process and there was a strong impetus for creating a participatory democratic spirit in the organization and running of the alternative house of culture. Decisions were debated in regular Stormöten – meetings were anyone and everyone could participate and working groups were established that were responsible for different aspects. According to those interviewed, these meetings were to be as open as possible and all those who were present got to be included and make decisions:

Naturally, it was those who were most engaged who were there. But they tried to make it as democratic a process as possible. Obviously many decisions, the big decisions about how ... how it should continue to be run and what the goals should be and that sort of thing, they were taken in meetings with everyone together. And those meetings were often quite long ... long drawn-out discussions or lengthy discussions. Which was good but could also be a bit tiring. (Interview with activist November 2017)

As Marcuse (2012: 16) argues '(w)hen space is occupied by the movement, it gives it a physical presence, a locational identity, a place that can be identified with the movement that visitors can come to, and where adherents can meet. It also has a second function: it is an opportunity to try out different forms of self-governance, the management of a space'. Those engaged in this grassroots movement in Umeå were making a shared space by co-creating culture. The organization of those involved was characterized by a loose structure and the place/space being created was under constant negotiation with about 300 people involved to different degrees.⁵ Several of those interviewed emphasized the lack of hierarchical structures and that people were free to choose what, where and how they contributed. It could be, for example, an artistic contribution or something more practical like helping to build a stage or paint a mural.

The occupation of the *Lokstallarna* was made possible because of pro-active discussions about culture in the city by local artists and representatives of grassroots cultural movements and the emphasis on the importance of co-creation in Umeå's bid for ECOC 2014. This provided a rationale for the basis of the project to support broad participation in the creation of culture and made it difficult for the municipality (both the

city councillors and local government officers) to obstruct the establishment of an alternative house of culture as was borne out in press and social media comments/interviews at this time. For example, by the head of the Umeå Municipal Cultural Administration:

It's great when people get involved. A free, unfettered house of culture should be governed on these principles. (From interview reported in Landets Fria. 2015-08-05, Umeås fria kulturhus får bygglov. *Umeå's independent House of Culture gets planning permission*).

And by the leader of the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) in Umeå City Council:

The Left Party is in favour of the cultural activities being organized in the old engine sheds in Haga. This bottom-up initiative is an example of the grassroots culture that has made Umeå the city of culture that it is. (VK. 2015-11-04, *Gräsrotskulturen måste få frodas. Grassroots culture must be allowed to thrive*)

The occupation can be understood as a critical intervention meant to challenge political discourse surrounding the city's cultural policy and Umeå2014 programme and stimulating democratic broader artistic ownership and co-creation within the year. It became, in Sparke's (2013) terms, a space in which alternatives could be imagined and illustrates how circumstances in time and space involve both powerful discourses, material structures and policy practice (Massey 2005). The Capital of Culture year provided an opening to promote 'grassroots culture'. The sentiment of the bid and the programme for Umeå2014 provided a non-conflictual understanding of the need for culture, in which culture was described as something unquestionably good. However, despite the potential of the ECOC year in Umeå to act as a catalyst encouraging a broad conception of culture and enabling grassroots cultural alternatives to be promoted, in its implementation it frequently, in effect, extinguished them:

We were only trying to create a space for those people who had been neglected during 2014, despite the fact that they'd been promised they'd get a place [*in the programme*]. And also partly because the municipality in one sense couldn't act against us, because then they'd pull the rug out from under their own feet. At the same time also because the municipality got the opportunity to actually get [...] positive goodwill in some sense in that they could say – 'yes we let them be here because we're an open city of culture and all forms of cultural expression deserve to have somewhere they can take place'. (Interview with activist June 2016)

The 'alternative' cultural project was presented as something complementary to the Umeå2014 programme. The use of the time-space perspective seems to offer potential to 'enable studies of how activism is received, since other power relations and perspectives will be occurring in the same time-space geometry (because of the different views held about that time-space)' (Panelli 2007:62). Thus time-space geometry involves an ongoing process, a reformulation of positions:

In some cities occupations can be negative, but in Umeå, those occupying a few old engine sheds can say that they are not creating a new cultural centre as a way of being against something not even Väven [*the city's new cultural centre*]. They only want everyone's best. The municipality responds saying that it's an excellent idea, but then a local government officer turns up and starts talking about the difficulties of getting planning permission. (VK. 2014-12-31, *Arrangemagen vi minns från kulturåret 2014, Events we remember from ECOC 2014*).

In relation to the alternative house of culture, *Lokstallarna*, it can be understood as a vision to actually transform culture and the co-creation of culture in the city into something radically different, something that brought together in a democratic form: young, old, men, women, and transgender, old and new inhabitants of the city etc. Our analysis of the media reports concerning the public discourse on *Lokstallarna* and the *Kulturhusfestival*, showed that there was a relatively widely shared consensus that what happened was something positive. No one was, in the initial phase, 'against' the idea. The activists' use of the rhetoric of co-creation also made it difficult to question the establishment of an alternative house of culture in *Lokstallarna* during the ongoing Capital of Culture Year:

All are co-creators. All who will can, on the basis of their prerequisites, contribute in dialogue with others to Kulturhusfestivalen's design and programme by playing, singing, dancing, creating, painting, buildings and so on. (<https://kulturhusfestivalen.se/> accessed 2016-09-03)

By initiating inclusive participation in the creation of a cultural festival, the activists were exemplifying the spirit of co-creation that was meant to be central to Umeå2014. However, this raises questions about how such initiatives are maintained. We discuss this in the next section.

The struggle for place: DIY culture meets municipal bureaucratic wet blanket

The physical occupation of *Lokstallarna* and the initiation of the cultural festival stimulated a wider debate about the need for an alternative cultural centre within a broader discussion about the city and its cultural offer. The issue of the right to be there was raised and there were press headlines which debated: 'Should they be allowed to stay or not?'

The *Lokstallarna* organizers placed their hopes in a positive response from the municipality:

We have had such great hopes for these old engine sheds. They are worn-out old buildings with masses of flaws, but we love them. We know that if we just had time and the security of being able to stay, then we could transform them into an ebullient place for Umeå's cultural life. A place where culture itself is allowed to explore what is possible. Only the municipality can offer the long-sightedness that culture requires to be able to work without anxiety. (Press release. Umeå Kulturhus 2015-10-19, https://wiki.umeakulturhuskva.se/p/Pressmeddelande_20151019)

These hopes were, however, short lived. After the culture house festival, the activists were offered a tenancy agreement by the municipality and the nature of the movement changed:

... it became a sort of institutionalization [...] of our collective because, what happened was, we were forced to build an association in order to be a legal entity that could draw up an agreement and sign a contract. [...] The first thing the municipality did, once the contract was signed, was to say that in order to carry out activities in the building we had to apply for planning permission and that was going to be costly [...] That's what happened and so basically it was a back-lash against our movement which made everything suddenly very unwieldy. It was like a wet bureaucratic blanket was placed over a freer, creative spirit. It was never the same after that. (Interview with activist June 2016)

The activists involved in *Lokstallarna* described how signing the contract meant that they had in effect also accepted the municipality's ground rules and were forced to conform to them. They found themselves drawn more and more into the municipality's bureaucratic processes, and were, for example, forced to apply for planning permission to use the building for cultural activities. These procedures became increasingly protracted making it difficult for the movement to maintain its momentum. As one activist we interviewed explained:

It turned into a fairly difficult phase after that [*when the future of the engine sheds became uncertain*] for various reasons it was difficult to get planning permission. It became a long-drawn-out process. There were fewer people who were active ... yes, it began to be hard to actually do all the fairly big exciting things we wanted to do ... so there wasn't much done there. After a while when you came there, there was perhaps a group who sort of cleared up, tidied up. There was also a bit of a problem with vandalism. But there was still

a sort of hope for the future. [...] But in the end, it just wasn't possible any longer. [...] there's easily a sort of domino effect – people stop coming and it feels sad that people aren't there and then you don't go there yourself. I wasn't one of the very last who threw things in containers when everything had to be cleared up but I stayed to close to the end. (Interview with activist November 2017)

As the use of *Lokstallarna* as an alternative house of culture turned into political issue, the initial euphoria over the occupation began to ebb out. Uncertainty grew over the building's future and what the local politicians wanted to do with it, for example, whether or not it would be sold for other uses. Matters came to a head when a decision was made in the city council to sell the building. Responsibility was given to *Umeå C Utveckling i Umeå AB* (a municipally owned company) to finalize the sale of the old engine sheds in compliance with the agreed municipal tendering process (Umeå City Council Minutes 2015-12-21). Prior to this city council meeting, representatives for *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* had issued a debate article. In this they challenged the municipal councillors to live up to the representations of Umeå that had been emphasized in relation to the ECOC year:

Imagine if all the fine words from 2014 still applied. In the Capital of Culture application, it says that: 'An inclusionary, dynamic and democratic city must dare to see conflicts, respect different interpretations and create space for those who are seldom heard.' [...] When the municipality chose in 2015 to consciously sabotage a cultural project which, ironically, manifests the whole rhetoric of the bid for Capital of Culture, the politicians showed their true face. (VK 2015-12-21, *Kom igen Umeå, upp till bevis! Come on Umeå, show your mettle!* Tobias Andersson, Victor Lindgren, Simon Einemo for Umeå *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna*)

This is articulated in a sort of post-Umeå2014 context. The activists argue that there has been a shift in the political rhetoric. Hence, the time-space encompassed in the 'doing' of *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* needs to be understood in a broader perspective regarding cultural policies and activities in the city. The municipality stressed the importance of the cultural economy in generating sustainable economic growth and improving the city's competitive position (Florida 2002, 2005). However, culture was promoted not only for achieving economic growth and urban regeneration, but also social cohesion and inclusion. These two aims are not necessarily complementary and, as we saw in the struggle over *Lokstallarna* as an alternative house of culture, they can come into conflict with each other. Thus the discussions about the occupation and the municipality's responses and discussions, to sell or not, illustrate how the politics of place (time-space) were negotiated and ended up as an empty space. As the local paper reports:

The cultural activities in the engine sheds have ebbed out. The building is currently abandoned, inside there is only rubbish and during the summer the place was vandalized. (VK 2016-09-0, *The energy has drained from kulturhuset*)

The narrative of *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* illustrates how when an alternative grassroots cultural movement comes into confrontation with a city's institutionalized cultural policies and procedures it becomes difficult to sustain. The shared space of radical democratic possibility (Sparke 2013) that the culture house activists had sought to create was stifled. The rise and fall of *Lokstallarna* suggests that city's projected image as a haven for DIY culture and radical citizen movements is more shadow than substance and the room for co-creation in a deeper sense was limited within and possibly beyond Umeå2014

Thus the story ends and *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* becomes a lost space. This is encapsulated in the following announcement on the *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna's* Facebook page:

Umeå Kulturhus as an organization no longer exists. The members of the board have resigned, the contract for the building has been terminated and our individual and collective hopes continue elsewhere. [...] We never asked for a lot of money. We just wanted to be left in peace to build up something from the ground. Umeå Kulturhus no longer exists. All that is left are loads of experiences about what we won't do next time. Until we meet again. (<https://www.facebook.com/Umeakulturhus/posts/1049050585208135:0>)

In order to understand what it came to mean that a group of individuals assumed the right to transform their city and claim a place for culture as a counter to the Umeå2014 programme, it is also important to understand the emotions involved in the creation of the place and in the negotiations over its meaning. These are well expressed by one of the activists we interviewed:

I think that this was one of the best things I've ever done – perhaps the best. And I think that it feels great, as if it has really taken a place in my heart – this place and this experience perhaps in combination. [...] I found something very new and amazing by being involved in this culture house project. I discovered that I could do all these things, that we could do something so good together and when you've discovered something that is so incredibly amazing then you really long to share it with others. (Interview with activist November 2017)

When the engine sheds (*Lokstallarna*) were being turned into a cultural centre, it was described in terms of creating somewhere open for all, a place where people could meet who shared an interest in the project. It was a place that was experienced as inclusive,

welcoming and something that during the first phase felt in some way natural. A place where those we interviewed spent much of their time:

For a while it was almost so that I spent all my free time there as it was the most enjoyable thing I knew to do. [...] I discovered that I could do so many things I'd never done before. Practical things like learning to use an electric screwdriver for the first time and to help screw together a stage or that type of thing and also to learn to ... be in perhaps a new sort of social situation ... to be in a new type of project with a lot of people you didn't necessarily know previously. It was really cool for me and as well as the personal experience just to see the whole project sort of grow as much the whole time and it sort of took on new highs the whole time and almost every time you went there there'd happened something new and exciting (Interview with activist November 2017)

This meant that there became a void, a sense of loss when everything ended. Looking back, when time has passed and *Lokstallarna* have become a closed chapter, those we have interviewed have had time to reflect over what happened. In the interviews, they express feelings of sadness that it ended, but also above all they recall the good memories, the experiences, what they themselves learnt, how they developed in the process, how rewarding it had been, and their feelings of being part of a nurturing collective.

Concluding discussion

The narrative of *Lokstallarna* shows how this particular place was represented and negotiated and can perhaps be interpreted in hindsight in terms of searching for a more utopian space that generates possibilities for imagining different futures (cf. Sargisson 1996). It involves moving beyond the confining and limiting boundaries of the past and the present. The potentially disruptive and transgressive qualities of utopian spaces (Pinder 2005; Sargisson 1996) can challenge dominant understandings and representations of the city and its existing unequal, discriminatory power relations.

As Massey (2005) argues each place is unique and constantly being (re)produced and (re)negotiated: 'it is the unique, the emergence of the conflictual new, which throws up the necessity for the political' (Massey 2005: 162). The alternative house of culture *Lokstallarna* can be understood as a specific time-space and according to Panelli (2007:54) 'attention to time-space geometries enables a reading of the specificity of particular context, flows of meaning and resource, and strategies as they occur within a wider continua of time and space'. The Culture Capital Year in Umeå opened up the opportunity to negotiate both culture and space. What happened with *Lokstallarna* seems to be at odds with the values of inclusiveness and voluntary participation promoted both in the bid and the programme for ECOC 2014 (Hudson et al 2017). These documents stressed that Umeå2014 was a collective project co-created by a wide range of organizations in accordance with the 'Umeå-spirit' of

tolerance and openness. The occupation of *Lokstallarna* may not have been a spectacular or ground-breaking struggle, nevertheless, it can be understood as means of resistance to the way culture was being conducted in the city, to its commercialization and the challenge this presented to the grassroots cultural tradition in Umeå. Here we see parallels with Pickerill and Krinsky's (2012) analysis of the Occupy movement as it 'puts the issue of space at the core of its agenda: by using spatial strategies of disruption (marching and camping in unpermitted places); by articulating the symbolic significance of particular spaces and by challenging the privatization of our cities, and thus its reinvigoration of the 'right to the city' debates' (*ibid* 2012:280). In a similar way the place – the engine sheds – was occupied through a symbolic march. The place was articulated in terms of its symbolic importance with regard to the need for a place for 'free', non-commercialized, non-institutionalized culture during the Capital of Culture year.

What happened also shows how the right to the city for some and their vision of transforming culture and the co-creation of culture into something radically different, something that brought together in a democratic form, young, old, men, women, transgender, old and new inhabitants of the city and so forth was thwarted. However, somewhat paradoxically, the politicians' reactions to the alternative house of culture also contributed to emphasizing Umeå's identity as being about the small scale, do-it-yourself culture. As a consequence of how they reacted, they strengthened exactly what they had used to sell Umeå in the bid for the ECOC 2014 - its strong, alternative, grassroots cultural tradition. Thus although distrust for politicians and polarization increased, so did also what is seen as the 'Umeå spirit'. The making of *Lokstallarna* into a house for culture became a sort of DIY urbanism, and part of a negotiation over the use-value of culture and something that was challenged and changed through struggle over space.

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Notes:

¹ Article in *Västerbottenskuriren* by Culture editor Sara Meidell 2014-12-12 'Towards the new life beyond the logo'.

² Article in newspaper *Aftonbladet*, Motkulturens huvudstad, (the capital of counterculture) 2014-01-31 Martin Aagård.

³ <https://www.Umeakulturhus.se/about.html> accessed 2016-08-16

⁴ From *Kulturhuset Lokstallarna* activist group's own Facebook pages, facebook.com/Umeåkulturhus, August 2014.

⁵ Umeå Kulturhus läggs ner (Umeå house of culture abandoned), accessed 2016-09-27, https://www.facebook.com/pg/Umeakulturhus/posts/?ref=page_internal.