

# Urban Space as a work of Art

## Imaginary Realism.

Jan Hatt-Olsen  
poet and media – public artist.  
[www.urbanartscape.org](http://www.urbanartscape.org)

### Abstract

In this paper I will as poet / media – public artist through my work with urban space explore possibilities which have emerged today of enchanting and augmenting urban spaces. Make performative, porous and connected urban spaces, where all people are authors/artists, using their imagination and bodies in perception and re-creation of urban spaces in flux a magic realistic reality. It can be done by fusing the internet and physical urban space locally on a square, at city level or world wide by creating a world wide (urban) wiki, using urban spaces in themselves as screens. Another way is to literally transform large urban spaces into books, collections of poetry. The borderlines between art, technique, planning, anthropology, urbanism, activism and urban life in general are soft and fuzzy in urban spaces as works of art.

### 1. Introduction

In many ways I think that books which are collections of poetry or composed of patterns of many stories sometimes coherent sometimes fragmented are like urban spaces, are like cities.

What is so special of our times is that through new media or digital productions techniques you can transform large urban spaces in the outer physical reality into books/works of art where everyone can be both readers and poets/artists. If you chose the genre of poetry, you will pretty much only be constraint by imagination and political, cultural economical, technical limitations when it comes to the creation of urban spaces, which functions in daily life. Urban spaces will become re-enchanting, augmented and porous. Performative and narrative humanized spaces in flux, in-between zones which are always in the making by people's imaginations, bodies and use of urban spaces, living in, passing by, working with or thinking of them. The professional artist role is to create the necessary installation, interventions, necessary structures, infrastructure and catalyst in the process of transforming urban space into a work of art.

In 2004 I made downtown Værløse into a collection of poetry, which was in 2005 selected to be one of 30 examples of street creativity in Europe to be exhibited in City Living - Living City | the 6<sup>th</sup> European Biennial of Towns and Town Planners, the work was presented at Western Humanities Alliance (universities at west coast and western states in USA and Canada) conference What is a City? at the University of Calgary in 2006 (Hatt-Olsen, 2007)

This work strikes the keynote for my approach to art in urban environment. It shall not be an extension of art in museums and galleries, but in a sustainable way fuse with urban space as a whole, both in daily life and at an organizational and political level and at the same time be research of urban space through art and artistic practices.

Urban spaces as works of arts shall also transcend. How art can achieve this transcendence has been the subject of a recent publication (Isar 2009), where the art historian Nicoletta Isar in her chapter 'Vision and Performance: A Hierotopic Approach to Contemporary Art' have studied my work with downtown Værløse as a collection of poetry (urban space and street art) and works of Antero Alli and Jerzy Grotowsky (experimental theater) Marina Abramovic (body art) and Bill Viola (video performance). Her study is a part of the international research program Hierotopy, based in the Russian Academy of Arts. Hierotopy has its starting point in the study of the use of art in the making of sacred spaces in Byzanz and old Russia. The research project has now moved into comparative studies of art in different countries and historical times with regard to creating this transcendence, a chôra, an in-between zone.

In my works I explore different ways of giving people connected to urban spaces possibilities for participation. In my latest works I chose to create urban wiki's, interactive websites projected directly into urban squares, using urban space in itself as a screen, in which everyone could write, place paintings, photos and animations. In one of the works the squares were simultaneously filmed by web cams, and projected into each other. I chose to use the open source software Mediawiki (also used in Wikipedia). Wiki's created by this software has possibilities for a social dynamic very similar to what already exist in public urban squares in democratic societies today. (Hatt-Olsen 2007-2008; Hatt-Olsen 2008 a; Hatt-Olsen 2008 b)

In the following sections of this paper I will go more in detail with my work in urban space. Finally I will draw conclusions on certain aspects and outline possibilities and limitations for the approach of urban spaces and cities as works of art/poetry in being part of creating a new type of urban space and city.

## 2. The City as a Colletion of Poetry Værløse Bymidte den 3. sept. – 12 sept. 2004 Lyrik – installation / Bog / Digtsamling

For a period of ten days downtown Værløse was transformed into a collection of poetry, with a little over 1 km of poetry roads by Jan Hatt-Olsen created with 141 stickers on the ground (1 m x 0.3 m) and 61 poems by Jan Hatt-Olsen printed on transparent plexiglass (2m x 0.3 m) placed on pillars, walls, hanging down from trees and placed in large pots filled with soil as small poetry trees at every square in the area.

People would together with the printed words see spaces in the making, reflected, on the other side, in front of them and shadows of the words. Perception of words and spaces would change through people movements, through the wind moving the plexiglass plates hanging down from trees and the sun moving the shadows of words during the day.

The poetry roads and plexiglass plates with poetry being catalysts in the process of making the whole urban space in to a work of art, a collection of poetry in which anything in urban space is a poem and anybody in urban space or relating to it are themselves poets and artists, authors of the City as a Collection of Poetry.

During the 10 days people were living - as poems and writers themselves - in a collection of poetry, a poeticized urban space.

A more full view of the installation/intervention and articles about it can be seen at the online catalogue [www.lyrik-installation.dk/Vaerloese](http://www.lyrik-installation.dk/Vaerloese) or the printed catalogue. (Hatt-Olsen, 2004 a)

I wanted to highlight my idea, that the city as a text, visual poetry and written poetry essentially is the same. The city as a collection of poetry is a hyper complex reality you can live in, leave or enter and at the same time it is a chôra a space in-between, even the smallest scratch in a wall, a person walking on a street or a written word is a gateway to poetical transcendence.

To achieve that in an urban space I thought it necessary, that the installation/intervention was an integrated part of the architecture and infrastructure in the whole area. If an art installation/intervention is restricted to special art zones in the city. It can be indoors like galleries, museums etc or outdoors. I think it loses much of its force with regard to change the perception, ontology and use of urban space. The work of art becomes too easy to ignore for anyone who isn't already into art, and even for people interested in art it becomes too easy to separate art from the perception, ontology and use of the urban space as a whole.

The same problem occurs with an art event, which can take place in the whole urban space but is constrained in time. Here there can easily develop a split between art times and daily life times unless of course art events are so frequent that they are present in daily life. You can hope 10 days where the whole downtown area of Værløse was transformed into a Collection of Poetry have this lasting effect in urban space. I think it needs a much longer timeframe. The poetry, media art, public art I am working with has to be closely connected with architecture, urban planning, urbanism and activism to be fully realized. There have to develop an equal cross-over between the mentioned disciplines.

The installation/intervention would have been extremely expensive without the new digital productions techniques and utopian to put through the political and fundraising process. The new digital techniques have made it possible to transform large urban spaces in the city to books. To transform the City into a Collection of Poetry, with all the implications it has for concepts of literature, the author/authors, the book and the urban space.

To make the whole downtown area into a collection of poetry had also a distinct juridical aspect. In an area of this kind there are lots of rules for what is allowed and what is not. To decide to accept them, oppose them, trying to change them is an integrated part of art in urban space, art which wants to transcend art for art's sake, art has also to be political inside the system or outside as activism which addresses political and economical agendas.



Photo 1, 2., 3, 4. Photo 1: Formal announcement of Downtown Værløse as a Poetry-installation / Book / Collection of Poetry, published by the experimental publisher Tiara. The plexiglass plate in the photo is placed on the second pillar when you arrive from the local train station. Printed on the plexiglass are title, isbn nr. (International standard book

number, 87 is the number for Denmark. 90739 is the official publisher code for Tiara. 09-4 is the is publication number ), authors (Jan Hatt-Olsen , the Municipality of Værløse, the business located in downtown Værløse, the cultural institutions which supported the project, the people who worked with the practical site of producing and placing stickers, plexiglass, print and all people who moved through, lived in or thought of downtown Værløse) and sponsors of the publication.. Photo 2: Reflections, stage pillar. Photo 3: Moving in the wind. Photo 4: Through a poetry tree at the stage square. Photos by Jan Hatt-Olsen.

### 3. Augmenting urban space with new media as democratic art

Urban space can be augmented with new media, by digital graffiti or with a guerilla style like street art creating a counter agenda like I did together with the Icelandic artist Ásta Olga Magnúsdóttir in Metropolis laboratory 2007 in Urban Alchemist in the Night (Hatt-Olsen, Magnúsdóttir 2007), but can it be done in a way where everybody can participate with their own projections in a permanent augmented urban space, which is generally accepted by all people related to it? One of the ways to govern urban space is direct local democracy. It's not obvious that urban space as a work of art can function in this way. Here it is important to make a distinction between urban spaces which are in-between zones and urban spaces which are fully developed.

In-between zones in the city has often been given possibilities for allowing or at least to different degrees accepting different sub-cultures and individuals to make their own changes in the space, to contribute with their own creativity. In fully developed urban spaces the situation is very different. To make or remove physical structures and decoration in urban space is in a fully developed urban space very costly and often time consuming. In present days democratic society it is accepted by the majority, that there is a very top down governing of urban space. Is it possible to maintain the openness, flux and creativity possible in in-between zone in fully developed urban spaces, and with the conditions that applies to daily life in public urban spaces today, no necessity of searching for permission in forehand for what you are doing, but only reactions from locals, by passers and authorities? Can the rules of behavior, the culture or cultures connected to the by new media augmented urban space, with its enhanced possibility for people to be part of the creation of the urban space with their own creativity with their own imagination, be established in the same way as how people can dress, walk and talk, in a public space in today's Denmark?

The materials light, shadows, sound and silence being at the same time very strong and soft interventions in an urban space. Using new media to create spaces of magical flux like in Urban Alchemist in the Night would for many probably create a too anarchistic urban space if more than a selected few were allowed to do it or just did it and the interventions were not too frequently.

I looked for spaces which actually functions with a high degree of allowing different sub-cultures and individuals in daily life to express their own creativity and found that the internet has this possibility, precisely because it demands much less resources and that it is much faster to make and change things on the internet than in today's physical urban spaces.

The flexibility and flux of the internet facilitated by laptops, netbooks, iphones, ipods and mobile phones are already in urban spaces, by the help of pervasive techniques of communication. At the same time physical urban space is being brought into the digital world by digital cameras and recorders, which are placed in mobile phones etc, web-cam and surveillance equipment. There is an immense complicated technique and technical development behind this, but for the users it's quite simple to use, the problem is the splitting up of spaces. People are in three different spaces when walking in urban space, the outer physical reality, the media spaces and inner mental spaces. The objection towards this is that people in a given physical urban space never has been more detached from each other, but at the same time you can argue that they had never before been more connected with people which are in other physical urban spaces.

What is so unique over the situation today is that it is actually quite simple to fuse the physical urban space with the internet. The only thing that is needed is an infrastructure of large screens in urban space and use of physical urban space in itself as a screen. Examples of screens integrated in architecture are Federation Square in Melbourne and the new headquarter of the Danish Broadcasting in Copenhagen

The wireless broadband is spreading and people using laptops, iphones and mobile phones have access to it. In a city like Copenhagen almost everybody in urban space or in any way relating to it has access to fast internet connections.

It's possible to create democratic augmented, magical realistic urban spaces for shared encounters, urban space as works of art where everyone can participate as an artist. It can be done by creating an urban wiki, an interactive web pages which everyone can edit in their browser and which can be seen on a large screens in the urban spaces or be projected directly into urban space, using urban space in itself as a screen as I did in the media – public art work Urban Artscape – Furesø



*Photo 5.6. From the urban intervention Urban Alchemist in the Night, a part of the Metropolis Laboratory 2007. The photos are taken at Sankt Hans Torv in Nørrebro Copenhagen. Photos by Jan Hatt-Olsen and Ásta Olga Magnúsdóttir.*

### **3.1 Urban Artscape – Furesø | introduction of the urban wiki**

Urban Artscape – Furesø took place at two squares Kulturtorvet in Værløse and Kulturpladsen in Farum in November, December 2007 and January 2008 connecting and augmenting the central squares in the two towns, by creating an urban wiki. The term urban wiki has been used before to describe wiki's on the internet which dealt with urban conditions, but in the present context it's something substantially different, being a wiki which is both an internet media and a locative media for shared encounters in given urban spaces, by using urban space in itself as a projection screen.

To create this wiki I used the open source software MediaWiki (also used in Wikipedia). This software has the same characteristics as a network of squares in a city. Each square having a community of people connected to it, by passers, different authorities with responsibility for the function of the square and acceptable behavior, but with no pre censorship, like the conditions for daily life in public squares in Denmark. How pages in Mediawiki or squares in physical urban space are actually used is a process of interaction and negation between people engaged in the square.

The wiki projected into the squares created augmented urban spaces. The physical urban spaces with their possibilities and limitations became augmented with possibilities and limitations in wiki pages on the net. Possibilities on the internet usually accessed through laptops, iphones, mobile phones etc isolated in small private spheres, isolated in small capsules, could now be an open part of urban space for anyone to interact with and participate in shared encounters, some even partied in the wiki projections.

The system was interactive both on the net and in physical urban space. It was achieved by having the laptops which governs the projections to reload the interactive wiki page every minute. If someone placed a photo of a person he or she was thinking of. It would in max a minute be projected into the square. The same if a poem or painting was made, everyone both on the squares in physical urban space and on the internet could go into or just observe a dialogue or make expressions in urban space with photos with writing and painting (only limited by what can be created on a laptop, netbook, iphone, mobile phone etc.). But because it is a large projection in public urban squares, people could also go into dialogues or make expressions by interacting with the poems, animations, paintings and photos with their bodies, dance in them, play with their shadows.

At the same time there would be created echoes or reflections of the squares in each other by web-cam projections.

The cultural department placed some graphics of networking in the municipality in the urban wiki, but people mostly placed paintings, photos and poems. There were no problems with offensive material of any kind.

A survey conducted by the cultural department at the second last day of the urban wiki projections, showed that 50% of the men and 27% of the women thought Urban Artscape – Furesø had been a significant experience for them, viewed not by sex but by be age group the result was that in age group 51+ 25%, in age group 31-50 39% and in the group of young people age 18-30 75% thought Urban Artscape – Furesø had been of significance for them as citizens in Furesø Municipality





Photo 7,8,9,10. From wiki projections and web-cams projections in Urban Artscape – Furesø. Photo 7 and 10 are from Kulturtorvet in Værløse. Photo 8 and 9 are from Kulturpladsen in Farum. Photos by Jan Hatt-Olsen.

### 3.2 The urban wiki project | fusing the internet and physical urban space

In connection with the metropolis laboratory 2008 and the sound and light project in Copenhagen which was initiated not as part of laboratory but in dialogue with it. I proposed the start of a much broader urban wiki project, which in principal could develop into urban wiki's being installed in many urban spaces in a region, in principle it could be anywhere in the world, where there is access to internet in urban space, creating a world wide (urban) wiki.

In Furesø it was at two places. In April 2008 curated by the light and media art gallery Illumenarts I made an urban wiki in Vollsmose, with projections strong enough to be seen in daylight, here it was only at one place. It is just a question of time, organization and resources to expand where the internet fuses with urban space. This would have significant implications for the aesthetics and function of urban spaces and cities. Some lighting in our cities are already in the process of being smart light, some of this could be wiki light in urban wiki's.

A cooperation between art, planning, architecture, engineering, computer science, media science, urbanism and the society as a whole would be necessary, to make a sustainable fuse between the internet and physical urban spaces. It would be a process over a long time you can't make a world wide (urban) wiki, you can't fuse the internet and physical

urban space in a short timeframe. But the new media – public art work Urban Artscape – Furesø is a start in this process and shows that it's quite realistic.



*Photo 11, 12, 13,14.. wiki projections 11, 14 in the common entrance at the culture house, library, media house and commercial center in Vollsmose, Odense and 12, 13 Kulturtorvet in Værløese, Furesø Municipality, Greater Copenhagen area. Photos by Jan Hatt-Olsen*

## 4. Conclusions.

My research through art and artistic practices in my media - public art works indicates that it is possible with the help of new digital production techniques and new media to make the borderlines between fiction/imagination and the outer physical reality, the private and public and between different physical urban spaces soft, fuzzy and porous and thereby making a new kind of urban space, with a new kind of urban life.

You can transform a daily life urban space to a *chôra* a space in the making, a space in-between, by making the urban space into a collection of poetry everyone can enter, live in or work with as poets and readers. You can create urban alchemy, write and paint with light and urban wiki's (fuse the internet and physical urban space) where people with their imagination and bodies in shared encounter can create dialogues and expression in augmented and connected urban spaces. Urban spaces as works of art, where everyone participating are artist themselves.

With an essential cooperation between the different groups who uses, visit, work in or work with urban space, this could be applied to whole cities, examples could be the creation of a world wide (urban) wiki and the fuse of the book/collection of poetry and urban spaces in many parts of cities and cities around the globe. It seems pretentious but it's not when you take the new technical possibilities into account.

Constraints are at the present more social and cultural than technical and economical. With the complex technical development and shifting economical situations, it can of course be different tomorrow. In many ways urban space and life is in flux is in the making today.

It's essential with a much longer timeframe and larger physical space that media art – public art usually are given. Politics, economics and activism is of great importance in this process and the borderlines are blurred between media art, media studies, architecture, planning, engineering, computer science and urbanism. An interesting fuse between these disciplines could be the mediacity concept. The international mediacity project based at Bauhaus University, Weimar has been a promising approach. I got the opportunity to participate with Urban Artscape – Furesø in the final publication from the project and know it quite well, other promising approaches I know of are Urban Screens project, Metropolis and now Architecture and Stages in the Experience City, based at Ålborg University. It's a new field which is developing fast. I am looking forward to what I am going to meet in urban space and in research into life and construction of it. Urban space and the cities in the world are in flux today.

## References

.Jan Hatt-Olsen, 2004. *Værløse Bymidte den 3. sept – 12. sept. 2004 | Lyrik – installation / Bog / Digtsamling*, Tiara, Copenhagen

Jan Hatt-Olsen, 2007. The City as an Expression of Poetry In: *Western Humanities Review. Fall 2007, Western Humanities Alliance Special Issue: What is a City* (Wayne McCready. (Ed))., pp. 88 - 99 University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

Jan Hatt-Olsen 2007, 2008. *Furesø Wiki* [Internet] Available from [www.urbanwiki.net](http://www.urbanwiki.net) [Accessed April 11 2009]

Jan Hatt-Olsen, 2008 a. *WikiVollmose* [Internet] Available from [www.wikivollsmose.net](http://www.wikivollsmose.net) [Accessed April 11 2009]

Jan Hatt-Olsen, 2008 b. Urban Artscape Furesø In: *Mediacity – Situations, practices and encounters* (Frank Eckardt et al. (Eds.)), pp. 263 – 283. Frank & Timme, Berlin.

Jan Hatt-Olsen, Ásta Olga Magnúsdóttir, 2008. Urban Alchemist in the Night In: *Changing Metropolis* pp. 110 – 111. (Ida Vesterdal, Christian Pagh (Eds))., Viadesign, Copenhagen.

Nicoletta Isar, 2009. Vision and Performance. A Hierotopic Approach to Contemporary Art, in *Hierotopy Comparative Studies* pp. 328 – 362 (A Lidov (Ed))., Radunica, Moscow