



1. Exploring the Context

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Community in context

Arts projects in the community generally operate within that community's particular context. The meaning of 'context' includes where the project's participants live, the community's particular history, age-group or socio-economic situation. Most often it is a combination of all of these elements. The circumstances of the artist also come into play - was the project a direct commission, or did it come about because of the artist's links with the community?

Exploring a community's and a project's context means looking at all the elements of a project, to see how all these elements work together successfully. Understanding the

context often means that artists and others, including members of communities, feel the need to engage with problems they perceive in that context. For this reason, a 'successful' marriage of different elements in a specific context is not necessarily a harmonious relationship; at times, it is deliberately provocative or aims for significant change.

Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar worked with the community of Skoghall in 2000. In response to the community's lack of a cultural space, he erected a temporary paper museum (with material from the local paper mill) to emphasise the importance of having access to a cultural space. Once the space was completed and used for a period of time, it was intentionally burnt down, to cause the residents to reflect on the new absence of the cultural space.
www.alfredojaar.net/projects/2000/the-skoghall-konsthall

Sometimes an artist will research and choose to work with a particular community; other times, the connection may be made by someone else. Sometimes the artist's own family and family history can create a link with a local community.

In the Handa Gote project Mraky (Clouds) (2011 - 2014), artist Veronika Švábová worked with her own personal archives to sift through the history of her family, and relate the archive, compiled from photos, diaries, videos and a recipe, to the wider community.
www.handagote.com/en/portfolio/mraky

Whatever the case, research on the context of the community where the project is being carried out represents an important stage in any project and should be grounded in context-specific questions posed by artists and other stakeholders, like:

- Why should one choose this particular context for an artistic project?
- Who inhabits this context?
- How is public space negotiated in it?
- How do people entertain themselves and interact with each other in this place?
- What kinds of labour relations exist in this place?
- How do people express themselves, their needs and concerns?
- Which buildings or areas represent communal spaces?
- What do different individuals feel is lacking in this context?
- What sources of knowledge and memories exist?
- What rituals do people use to define themselves?

Histories and community memories can provide a common subject from where a project

can be developed. At other times, a particular element of pride or a particular challenge within the community can give rise to a collaborative project. Researching the community will also allow the artist to identify available 'tools' - maybe the community's particular talents and traditions can feed into the project, or maybe some individuals within the community will contribute particularly strongly to the project.

The long-term project Arrevuoto (2006 - present) works with children from Naples and its suburbs for six months of every year, bringing together young people, schools, organisations and neighbourhoods. Thus, a community has been constructed, made up of people - in particular thousands of young participants - from different parts of the city and from different backgrounds.

www.arrevuoto.org

They can relate to well-being, skills-transfer or changing perceptions, or can address issues such as infrastructure in a town, or local policy relating to a particular community.

The community project Nimxu Mixja (Let's Take a Walk), (2018 – 2019,) worked with schoolchildren in Malta to engage directly and creatively with the urban environment, allowing the children to express their desire for less traffic and construction and more open spaces. The project is also part of a wider initiative, putting pressure on local authorities to take account of pedestrians' needs in a heavily urbanised area.
www.gabrielcaruanafoundation.org/events/1009

A project's aims can also be developed with the community members themselves, and can be discussed in the context of broader questions, such as the importance of creativity to that community. Some examples of the aims of socially-engaged projects are:

- **Trust-building** - this could be between different groups that host a conflict between them (ethnic, ideological, migrational), or within a particular community;
- **Challenging stereotypes** - that is, showing participants or an audience the value and worth of a culture or group of people, or allowing a community to 'rewrite' how it is seen on its own terms;
- **Working through emotional challenges** - for example, working with people who have experienced trauma, or simply working with teenagers going through changes in their lives;

Knowing the project's aims

The project's aims will be its guiding principle throughout its development and implementation. When the practical, conceptual and emotional aspects of a project's implementation come into play, clear aims will allow the artist to continue working towards a definite goal, by asking if decisions made will contribute to the project's aims.

A project's aims can be diverse and can address more than one challenge in the community; for example, a project could aim to empower participants, but also influence policy-making or funding for similar projects in the area. A project's aims can address small groups of participants or entire communities.

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- **Skills-based** - passing on certain skills which will empower community members, and allowing them to continue using these skills in the future;
- **Autonomy** - allowing a community more control over its environment through work with urban planning or local planning authorities, or by empowering participants to make their voices heard by authorities;
- **Educational** - promoting education and career development among children, as well as other members of the community;
- **Motivational** - working with young people to fulfil their ambitions, possibly reducing early school leaving, and keeping teens away from negative environments;
- **Lobbying** - influencing people in power to take certain decisions relating to a community - in this case, documentation and suitable communication is vital.

'Context' can mean different things, depending on research aims and participants. An understanding of demographic data, cultural interests, organisational structures and other contexts permits researchers to delve deeper into their area of focus, select appropriate research methods and analyse data more effectively.

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