

Dirk Seghers, Deriving energy from the city

“We are inspired by the city and we make objects and projects to inspire it again”

Can you tell me about Recyclart and its function?

We started when Brussels was chosen as the EU cultural capital in 2000. We function with a mixture of employment and cultural projects as a catalysator in the neighborhood. The cultural aspect is the art center, which I am responsible for. Besides that we have a project for social economy, which provides training for the long-term unemployed: either in the restaurant kitchen or in our wood and metal workshop, [Fabrik](#).

It's the combination of culture and employment that makes us unique. Plus the setting: We work and live in a train station that is still being used. It is still a station during the day and when it's closed at night we use the space for cultural events (parties, conferences, concerts and so on). The restaurant is open during the day.

Recyclart has been around for 15 years, how has it changed since then?

The initial mission statement hasn't changed but other changes are more practical. We started out 2 years with a European grant and after that we have found our own means of living and that's why we evolved towards a bi-communautarian art center. This means that both the French and Flemish speaking communities recognize us. Two years ago, we were forced to move the factory due to possible danger of an explosion. But essentially the initial purpose is still the same.

What is your role in engaging the residents with the two different neighborhoods you are near?

We are still in the center of Brussels in a popular neighborhood. Traditionally and historically, this neighborhood has always been residents of immigrant backgrounds since the 12th century. This is the neighborhood they were expelled to from the city center. After WWII, different migration waves came here.

How do we work with the neighborhood? Well it's essential to develop a relationship with your neighborhood because it's impossible, like in the 19th century, to bring culture from an ivory tower. We have events specifically with and for the neighborhood and then events aiming at a broader audience: the larger area of Brussels and even at the national level.

Most of the neighborhood events are more or less based around photography. My colleague is a photographer and he develops many different formats to work with the neighborhood. For instance he developed a project to involved specific urban subcultures. He did long term work with homeless people and drug addicts addicted for more than 10 years to hard drugs. He gives them disposable cameras to photograph their daily life. It's easily said, but not easily done. To meet up, explain and receive a response with the photos from people (already struggling with basic daily tasks). However, it's very much worth it when the exhibited photos have been taken from someone within the subculture so you don't feel like a voyeur. There is a sense of ownership with the image; they show us what they want to show us and that's why the images are always very powerful.

Other formats and means to work with the neighborhood: For 6 years in the summer we have a public bread oven in the open space outside. People can come participate in workshops to bake bread or even bake their own bread for free.

Once a month we have an event revolving around one person from the neighborhood. In "Neighbors Evening," 20 -100 people come

to listen about one local's life. The idea is every human being – however humble she or he may be – has a story and a past. We curate one night concerning her or his life, hobbies, and interests. It can be with music, food, fashion – as long it has a link with the person's life. Instead of booking expensive artist talent we look to see what the city has to offer us – around the corner.

How do you choose them?

It is long-term work to gain the trust of people; it takes years. He gets to know them very well before organizing a program on them.

Our most popular night with the neighborhood is “Ugly Night,” where everything is ugly. 200 people attend and we only play ugly music, take ugly photos, have an ugly dress code. At the end the night we choose the winners for the ugliest man and woman of the night. It's a way to laugh at the situation. It's funny and fun.

For 4 years now we have a local TV station: [TV MAROL](#) (name of the neighborhood). Its run by 40-50 local resident. They make a mini documentary about resident's daily life or banality (on their dog, sister, butcher, neighbor) and 3 times per year we show these movies to a live audience.

On a more popular level, the wider public knows us for the electronic music parties we hold that attract thousands of people (we are the only place in the center that can stay open till 5am twice a month – which is rare for Brussels)

Do you think the residents are open to the events?

Some are curious, some come to bake bread, some come to listen to concerts and some don't come. Many people come that don't live the neighborhood, which provides a good mixture.

How do you interact with the neighborhood on a more spatial

level?

The train station is public space. We have a large open space in front, which is ideal in summer. We use it for the bread oven, screen-printing, haircuts, tattoos and small interactive workshops. The interactions outside tend to be very active.

This year we work thematically with the phenomena of popular cafes. These cafes are common in the neighborhood and are used as a sort of living rooms. It's interesting to illustrate that the phenomena of cultural cafes is something that constantly changes. Its true, old cafes from the 1950s are disappearing. Cities are dynamic. African and Turkish cafes with live music are the new popular cafes. We want to illustrate that you don't have to be nostalgic, new cafes are always arriving. It's interesting to compare and interact with a different group: people that never come to Recyclart because they are not affiliated with our organization.

How did the construction of the benches come about?

The Fabrik creates objects for individuals, social institutions and municipalities. They make objects for public space like benches and bicycle garages. One of the larger projects was the skate park.

We are inspired by the city and we make objects and projects to inspire it again.

How does the employment situation work?

We have the art center, [the restaurant](#) and Fabrik: 25 people total. The restaurant and Fabrik are labor intensive. Often the employees are illiterate so they need much coaching. However, when they stay the whole two years of the program, they have a 70% success rate of finding a job.

What are some of the outcomes you have noticed?

They know who we are. Others disappear because it is also a

transient population on the move.

An achievement like TV Marol would have been impossible to realize 10 years ago because people would not have enough trust.

We have an incredible amount of Facebook fans. Even more than huge cultural institutions. It shows that our audience is interactive and closely follows what we do.

What is Recyclart's interaction with the urban issues?

We have conferences and lectures about urbanism, architecture, photography and graphic design. We work together with local architecture schools to provide workshops. We have a series of lectures where we invite architects from all over the world. We held talks and events for 2 months for the [Public School of Architecture](#), which the idea stemmed from Brooklyn. The idea is to provide classes accessible for everyone to attend and anyone to teach to be open to various ways of perceiving and solving problems. These classes provide inclusivity and a mixture of audience for fruitful discussions.

How do you see your part in the redevelopment of the area?

The neighborhood is changing; you can feel slow gentrification. The city will make efforts to renovate the neighborhood and I'm anxious to see how it will change. Change and gentrification is inevitable. As soon as it does happen, new subcultures will emerge. It's constantly changing over periods of 20-30 years and this is how the city works. It's constantly fascinating.

What inspires you to do what you do?

It's difficult because it's cold and loud here and you can get tired of the many problems the city offers. What inspires me the most is when you organize a concert and the ticket is the

hottest ticket in town with 500 inside and 500 outside – you have the whole energy of the city with you. This gives you energy to confront the vampire of the city. These are the moments when the city gives you energy instead of taking it away.

What are some things taking place in Brussels you find interesting?

The huge space near a former custom's office, Tours & Taxis, but it will only last 2 years.

Smaller organizations like Cinema Nova are nice.

They make the city go ~

Who should I talk to next?

Seb Bassleer of the DJ collective Rebel up!

[link all'articolo](#)