

Tiers Lieux And Wijkhubs: infrastructures for a “Situating Democracy” ?

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Abstract

To accelerate the transitions needed to alter current economic and cultural destructive patterns, our social, organisational and democratic structures have to be adapted, which includes a more profound collaboration between public institutions, private actors and citizens. French national and territorial institutions in Marseille and municipal councils in Rotterdam are, each in their own way, introducing and empowering new physical spaces (Tier Lieux and Wijkhub) with the intention to facilitate conditions that enhance active citizenship. In this research we critically analyse both attempts in order to see if these initiatives can be regarded as a form of “external and contextual” Situating Democracy; These places should have the potential to make a contribution towards new forms of situated citizenship, truly transformative based on its multi-scalarity, involving a specific *mixité* of publics and communities and accessible to the majority.

Full text

SITUATING DEMOCRACY - POLITICAL MATERIALITY - TIERS LIEUX - WIJKHUB

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the article : how to realise the “Situating Democracy”?

In the face of *climate emergency*, there is a need for institutional and collective citizen engagement to be able to realise the multiple transitions that are needed to reach a more sustainable and just world. At the same time, we see a generalised and global representative-democracy crisis, where distrust between citizens and institutions is growing and democratic participation is dwindling (Lardeux 2019, Bertolone and Winock 2015, Gallo 2021).

Reinterpreting the Situating Knowledge (Haraway 1988) and Actor-network (Latour 2005) theories’ principles, we can say that cultural contexts may provide a different way to frame and express needs in lifestyle changing. At the same time, in a globalised world, these are related and dependent on each other. A multi-scalar perspective towards problem definitions is fundamental to realise sustainable and just transitions. This vision of transitions makes explicit that participation of every “visible” or “invisible” actor and public is essential, making the contemporary “right to the city” principle mandatory for the transition paradigm (Lefebvre 1968).

Scholars and practitioners advocate that this shift regards a different way to both relate to Earth and to each other; a relationship based on reciprocity and empathetic understanding (Boella 2006). We are conscious that especially in this Anthropocene era that we as human beings need to rethink our relationship with Earth in order to survive as a species (Crutzen 2006).

However, for transitions to accelerate, an effective re-democratising of our societal organisation that includes collective citizen involvement (in the form of ‘publics’ or communities) plays a significant role (Horizon Europe ...).

This article analyses the role that places can fulfil in contributing to exactly this societal organisation gap in practice, considering and giving consistency to the diversity of publics and communities of a defined context.

Places represent the tangible and local dimension for ‘transition management’ to materialise (Wittmayer 2016). In addition, the notion of ‘*places of social innovation*’ (POSI) can be described as places where the planning of both physical and social public infrastructure take place (Ardill 2021). In order to be able to measure and understand the transformative social impact of such places of social innovation with transformative power, we should also evaluate the *situated* and contextual dimension of places, as externalised social and ecological assemblages as the building blocks of democratic and just transitions (Haraway 1989). The concept of “Situating Democracy” links both ‘place’ with ‘reimagining and reforming democratic structures’ and has therefore the potential to contribute to analysing this transformative potential of places. These places of ‘situated democracy’ are “specific urban spaces, at a neither public nor private use, that looks specifically for concretising inhabitants aspirations in their own *cadre de vie fabric*”. They are localised, but have at the same time the ambition to influence their own urban scale fabric (Besson et Al 2022).

In Marseille we can detect a number of emergent places of “Situating Democracy”. These places are localised, but have at the same time the ambition to influence their own urban scale. This concept wants to stress the importance of an “internal” place where an initiative is set (not only their public space dimension as it is the case for protests) and where people experience “other ways of *faire la ville, faire société*” in order to build new common values. In other words, the democratic contribution to the urban fabric of places of situated democracy is being “A community of practice, capable of transforming the representation of the problem and constructing the procedural rules likely to solve it. This represents the first stage of the process of empowering actors/publics” (Besson et Al 2022).

This corresponds to the tangible and local “democratic” dimension that is needed for a transformative transitions management perspective (Wittmayer 2016), as an internal practical experience to be linked to complex transitions. The “situated and contextual” notions are in this respect related to an external and diffuse dimension of the local initiative, to how it enters in relation with the complexity of the urban fabric.

The original concept of “Situating Democracy” explains the “internal” democratic contribution of places (the tangible and local dimension), but not the “external” one (the situated and contextual), which is essential in re-imagining democratic structures.

Taking this original concept of “Situating Democracy” as a starting point, we want to add the definitions of “external and contextual” dimensions by deepening the following point:

Places of “Situating Democracy” are close to *Espaces Communs de Proximité - ECP* (Vignes 2021) ou *Communs de capacités* (Lafontaine 2019), two visions of places inspired by J. Dewey and A. Sen theories. These places multiply occasions of meeting and practising activities with different people, stimulating cognitive *capabilities*. As a consequence, *mixité* (the variety of different social groups in a same area) should be a fundamental defining characteristic of places of “Situating Democracy”.

This article analyses how two European situated contexts and places, “Tiers Lieux” in Marseille and Wijkhubs-network in Rotterdam, foster transformative citizen’ engagement and imagination (“basic” situated democracy), but also to evaluate their kind of *mixité*, expanding the concept of “Situating Democracy” to its “external and contextual” multi-level dimension. “Tiers Lieux” have hybrid forms of institutionalisation, Wijkhubs at the other side, are an institutional infrastructure. How do the two typologies of places attract a variety of social groups? How does their (inter)dependency on institutional infrastructure influence this? And

to what degree do these places contribute to a Situated Democracy and, in other words, contribute towards a re-imagining of democratic structures?

This research argues that for these places to really realise this re-imagining of democratic structures, and in order to be able to initiate and sustain these places as places that function as essential building blocks in transitions to a sustainable and just society, there is an apparent need of an institutional involvement that fosters the long duration of the projects and their network dimension.

1.2 Theoretical background - *situating* problems and purpose leading to the analytical framework

1.2.1 Social or Ecological problems?

Transition or Sustainability are perceived and pursued, in different cultural (or geographical) contexts, in France and in the Netherlands. Generalising the discourse on the international debate, we see how the term “Sustainability” has lost frequency compared to the term “Transition”. The first is more related to development, to a given direction to take (UN 1987). The other seems to keep this discourse more open, in dialogue with anti-system rhetoric (Markard 2012).

In France ‘Sustainability’ is literally translated into “Durable”, focusing on a time dimension of future generations of projects. The associated discourse in planning calls for a real participation of citizens, and a change in procedures to get a less rigid and distant bureaucratic institutional structure (Grimaud and Stavrianakis 2021). Within the historical centralisation of the French government, citizens strive for liberty and appropriation. The “social” side of Sustainability supports hybridisations, fostering citizens' appropriation-participation in processes, where social innovations aim to find new more “personalised” and “alternative” ways of doing. The accent is on the social and organised communities that look for other ways out of the technocratic and capitalistic way of living.

In the Netherlands ‘Sustainability’ is primarily linked to ecological and economic concerns. The focus is related to changing the way human beings produce and consume. Large parts of the Netherlands were built by controlling water, which necessitated a close collaboration and consensus between public institutions, private companies and citizens. This collaboration, often referred to as ‘Polder mentality’ traditionally stands for this need to reach a shared understanding in order to survive. It results in an attachment to work, on doing concrete things together. Producing economic value is not perceived as “bad” as it could be in France.

1.2.2 Cultural context approach and problematization on transitions

In order to analyse and define the *mixité* as the external and contextual component of “Situated Democracy”, as Situated Knowledge (Haraway 1988) and ecological-political theories say, cultural context matters.

The “Situated Democracy” concept was issued from a Marseille based research on citizens' initiatives and contributed to the definition of the *not-defined* hybrid French “Tiers Lieux”. Officially originated as bottom-up initiatives, these places have recently been taken to the attention of the national institution by the Levy-Waitz report (2021) as places where to realise “the sustainable transitions of territories”.

If the original “Third Place” Oldenburg’s concept (1989) meant a different place from home or work to meet, the French contemporary *non-definition* took some more typical characters.

Despite doubts about the institutionalisation of the phenomenon that would affect their true experimental nature (Idelon 2020), these places are considered to be issued from bottom-up initiatives, driving the capacity for hybridization of worlds (Gwiazdzinski 2016) and of a highly celebrated new way of being citizens by "doing" (Burret 2013, Bonnot 2019).

However, the true diversity (the *mixité*) regarding the nature of publics (as gatherings of citizens, local entrepreneurs and other members of communities) *taking place* here is not clear. Several authors have expressed a risk that these third spaces rather foster gentrification than enhancement of a variety of population types (Correia 2018, Watine 2020, among others...).

Tiers Lieux have been presented by institutions, in a way, as places to realise a “Situated Democracy”, referring to these spaces as “neither public nor private initiatives”, or the so-called hybrid and in-between “third actors”. Despite their interest, local or national institutions are not typically providing structural funding for these often temporary experiences to subsist and have a real long term impact.

Institutions do not offer funding since Tiers Lieux cannot prove that they provide a public service. The risk of public services delegation is also seen as a danger for removing institutional responsibility in fundamental public services from French scholars (Richez-Battesti et al. 2012). Wijkhubs in Rotterdam seem to have what Tiers Lieux are lacking: they are sustained by institutions that provide a temporal duration and a network infrastructure dimension.

We argue that giving a contextual and external definition of “Situated Democracy” based upon Tiers Lieux and the Wijkhubs would also help defining their democratic contribution as a public service, to truly bring new *substance* to democratic and active citizenship.

As a *hybrid* initiative, aiming to be neither public nor private, the un-clarity about the definition of publics that visit or make use of Tiers Lieux seems to be one of its defining characteristics. This corresponds also to the still rather opaque notion of *mixité*, which would need to be analysed in its contextual and external situated dimensions.

We will analyse these dimensions using the Circular Value Flower - CVF method (Leclercq & Smith 2022), a multi-layered analysis method that starts from the actual community initiative and from there unravels the different layers of stakeholder engagements, spatial relational context and the impact the initiative makes by addressing the multiple values that have been created.

2. Methodology

2.1 Marseille and Rotterdam: second cities, major problems or solutions? Tiers Lieux in Marseille and Wijkhubs in Rotterdam; two case studies

2.1.1 A common “port” story

To apply our analytical framework in defining *mixité* as a contextual and external character, as we said, cultural contexts comparison is fundamental. We have chosen to compare Tiers Lieux in Marseille with Wijkhubs in Rotterdam, in order to say *how* those places are places of “internal” and “external” “Situated Democracy”.

Analysing the cultural context approaches and problematizations on transitions and how they frame to realise them (global/national political background) is the first step of the analysis, necessary to understand how then this can be applied to the urban dimensions of Marseille and Rotterdam, which have many similarities. They are both “second and port cities” in their own national context. On the other hand, it is on this national level that these two are then very different in how their frame “transitions”.

This helps even more the “contextual and external” (*situated*) point of view of the analysis, as it aims to cross perspectives that are common under some aspects, and opposite for some others, enriching the diversity of point of view and so the veracity of the analysis.

Despite the previous general conceptualisations about the two countries, Marseille and Rotterdam are both considered as the “un-disciplined” and “second cities” of their respective nations. Compared to Paris and Amsterdam, these two port cities are the most multi-ethnic, and industrial, not elitist and “cultural”. It is useful to compare these two cities from two different cultural contexts, since they both have a “second-city” and “alternative” perspective in their own contexts. They both have historically been two “délaissées” cities from the central authority, and developed a large number of vacant port related sites and other abandoned spaces. As a reaction, strong feelings of solidarity, stressed by the migrant influence, related to many bottom-up and autonomous citizens initiatives, regard both the two cities.

The energy crisis in the 70’-80’, the progressive dismantling of the city-centred port infrastructure, and the economic crisis of 2000 and 2008, caused decline of both cities physical, social and financial structures, which was followed in recent decades with new “central” funding to renovate these broken structures and to reinvest, in order to re-dynamize the two cities and making their inhabitants more resilient.

In Marseille, the *établissement public d’aménagement* Euroméditerranée in the 90’ was the starting point of this regeneration programme centred around the renovation of the Joliette Port Area. In Rotterdam its regenerative phase was symbolically kickstarted with the construction of the Erasmus bridge and its masterplan of the Kop van Zuid 1989, which included a variety of waterfront projects, led by private-public partnerships of port authority, municipality and private actors.

Both the two cities, especially Marseille, started attracting young artists, even before the institutional renovation processes, as cities of a certain liberty and “un-control”. Rotterdam, bombed heavily during the first WW2 was postwar literally an “empty” space to where creative talents were invited to come and experiment. Both the two municipalities try, more clearly and explicitly or not, to keep these different “creative class” populations in the city and create a more “mixed” and productive environment (Florida 2002).

2.1.2 “Institutional” or “social” lack of democracy?

The same comparable perspective can be seen on how the contemporary and escalating crises of representative democratic systems is presented.

In the last elections inhabitants’ voting behaviour demonstrated the same trends: the most disadvantaged communities perceive an increasing distrust in government and are increasingly less likely to vote, e.g. only 19% of the people in Rotterdam South voted in recent elections (Rotterdam Gemeente 2024).

In Marseille, the popular culture had a tendency to fight against the Paris-centred central state. The city has always hosted localised protests, that however never aimed to organise and

dialogue with institutions, in order to really have an impact on their purpose (Interstice research –Civis Open Lab 2022).

For Rotterdam, and more generally in the Netherlands, Femke Kaulingfreks in her 2023 academic year opening lecture at the university of Amsterdam, says that democratic crisis here is due to a lack of confidence not from citizens in institutions but vice versa: from institutions into citizens.

A cultural context has the tendency to present and then resolve the problem in a particular way. We make some very general considerations about the French and Dutch national contexts, without an anthropological and social-political in depth analysis.

The French academic visions or narratives on “problematization” of their contexts are based on critical philosophy (Lemieux 2012). This push to critique the government, and focus on collective capacity and solidarity, look for SDGs for changing in institutions

The Dutch are closer to a pragmatism philosophy and think more about doing things on their own, individual effort is the focus. The university of Utrecht (Jordan 2021) for example developed the IDGs - internal development goals, in which the focus lies on the individual and the interchange in the way people act, also in groups, to have an impact on the changes of institutions.

We want to understand both the different movements, how institutions can change to arrive at social initiatives and how social groups can organise themselves to change the system.

By analysing places of social innovation - POSI (Adler 2021) and using the concept of “Situated Democracy” (Démocratie située) we say that community-places can allow for materialisation of aspirations, visions and objectives of these “complementary” (and not anymore conflicting) groups and movements towards just transitions, to work as places of *transformative social innovations*.

Many hopes in situating just transitions *are placed* in two different spatial frameworks represented by places imaginary in the two cities : Tiers Lieux in Marseille and Huiskamer-Wijkhub system in Rotterdam.

In Marseille the idea is that Tiers Lieux can reinvent the industrial or other “friches” (empty spaces) of the city, and subsequently repair the territorial fractures of the not-homogenous city-territory.

In Rotterdam, these multi-scalar typology of spaces are financed by the municipality and work as a diffuse infrastructure of “Palaces for the people”(Klinenberg 2019), to enhance citizens’ engagement at the one hand, but also have a degree of control over them and the neighbourhood at the other hand.

2.1.3 How “Tiers Lieux” work

It is by Ray Oldenburg definition (1989) with which most literature introduces the Tiers Lieu (Third Place) - a place where people gather informally as an alternative to the first (home) and the second (work). Actually, this does not include the contemporary characteristic and process of abandonment and recovery in the circular urban fabric, which is therefore essential to the definition of contemporary French Tiers Lieu.

Gilles Clément and Patrick Bouchain's definition of Tiers Paysage helps to understand this. These two concepts both mean “the abandoned” (*le délessai*), neither formal nor informal, capable of embracing the dimension of uncertainty and provisionality - of *Lieux Infinis* (Infinite Spaces) (French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2018 - Encore Heureux) and making it a force for sustainable transformations of territories as a space for perpetual social and ecological experimentation.

The rapport Levy-Waitz officially represents the Institutional and academic appropriation and willing definition from the central-state, within its objectives.

This was requested by Jean Castex - French Prime Minister in 2018 - to understand the phenomenon of Tiers Lieux. The national institution was interested in these places for some main characteristics. They are considered the largest urban movement ever observed in France since the popular education movement, as they give concrete and practical contributions to civil society to address the challenges of transitions in our century in the territories. In Tiers Lieux, the creation of economic activities cannot be separated from social utility. They go beyond institutional frameworks and bureaucracy and therefore succeed where public policies fail.

This classification marks the passage for these experiences from “friches culturelles” and anti-system (Lextrait 2017) to the places of “transitory urbanism” for testing “unconventional” politics.

Despite doubts about the institutionalisation of the phenomenon that would actually affect their true experimental nature (Idelon 2020), since they are runned by “third actors”, that are neither public nor private actors but issued from the so-called “third sector” of the *Economie Sociale et Solidaire* - ESS (Social and Solidarity Economy), these places are considered to be issued from bottom-up initiatives, driving the capacity for hybridization of worlds (Gwiazdzinski 2016). They are presented as contributing to democratic and social innovations giving consistency to a “communautés de pratiques” as a new way of being citizens by “doing” (Burret 2013, Bonnot 2019...). Their aesthetic “contribution” is based on frugal and temporary space design, recalling their “not-conventional” dimensions. Many artists also express themselves through testing new styles in spaces design here.

The Levy-Waits report proposes some points of an analytical grid for Tiers Lieux, in order to define their overall contribution: These are their way to promote entrepreneurship in the territory, experimentation and social innovation, cooperation and free contribution, hybridization of activities, openness and conviviality.

Other analyses by independent and publicly co-financed research firms like Agence Phare, tried to understand their social impact under a territorial approach (Klein et al 2008), standing back to the *situated* dimension of these experiences in places.

The “temporary actions” network created by third actors like Yes We Camp association and Plateau Urbain cooperative, are called by the same actors as “urgency and festival urbanism” actions.

The temporal and transitory dimension of these experiences allows for excepting from rules and experiment, to generate “internal” social innovations. The consequences on how the “external” and contextual component then impact on space and time is not really clear.

2.1.4 How “Wijkhubs” work

The Wijkhub system is supported by the municipality of Rotterdam and works on a multi-scalar system of public infrastructure. The municipality of Rotterdam is separated in 39 ‘Wijken’ (districts) (Rotterdam Gemeente 2024) represented by their own council. Every Wijk has at least one Wijkhub, as a public services centre, and a Wijkhouse, for more social and cultural activities. Then, every citizen can present and submit their own initiative to open a Huiskamer (living room) in the neighbourhood. These are literally some “salons on the street” and cover the “buurthuis” street dimension, that is the very proximity of the street.

This is a way for the governmental system to know more from the territory and to test this system in Rotterdam.

Citizens have the opportunity to use municipal funds to support the opening of a Huiskamer, in light of their own interests and to improve the liveability in their direct proximity, for example by greening activities, as ecological function. They have the occasion to make and work together towards just transitions, and see the effect in their everyday life, just in front of their house.

Aesthetics of these places are really like family living rooms, and make people feel at the most recent and advanced analytical framework used in literature to analyse Wijkhubs experiences is the CVF.

The value flower method (Leclercq & Smit 2022) seek to measure value of circular activities in these places, measuring the following points: Community aspirations and activation capital; Collaboration methods and processes; Resource cycle (from an ecological perspective); Physical development (how initiatives translate into space); Generated values

2.2 Research approach: Data collection and analysis

The research approach is based on quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

Comparing perspectives from two different cities and cultural contexts demonstrates how “sustainability” means differently depending on this. We focus on France and the Netherlands, looking for associated key words to “Sustainability” and/or “Transition”, in the last 10 years academic discourses. For the French context the research was made on Cairn.info, for the Dutch on TU Delft University and Amsterdam University portals.

We also used literature and quantitative data for general description of Tiers Lieux and Wijkhubs typologies, also using local non academic reports.

Qualitative research is based on a participatory-observation (Bastien 2007) experience, in different time and spatial levels. We focused on the Marseille Coco Velten Tiers Lieu that was temporarily installed in Belsunce central and “prioritaire” neighbourhood, from 2018 to 2023. In Rotterdam we observed the vibrant neighbourhood of Delfshaven and its multi-level Wijkhub network including Het Bollenpadje Huiskamer .

We use our analytical framework, inspired by the CVF, to compare Tiers Lieux in Marseille with Wijkhubs in Rotterdam, in order to say *how* these places are places of “internal” and “external” “Situated Democracy”, through their own and *situated-contextual* definition of mixité.

The analysis consider these following steps:

The chapter number 2.1 defined how these two contexts created two different places of “Situated Democracy” in the “internal” dimension: Tiers Lieux origin and problems, framework analysis that already exist (Rapport Levy-Waitz); same for Wijkhubs. In both cases we put into light the “formality” degree of actors initiating and taking place in the initiatives (from un-organised citizen to multi-level institutions) from the “internal” point of view and how the “internal” innovation (the produced value) is realised (what are the “pratiques” of “the communities of pratiques”...). This also means to analyse the context as relational context (who are involved), enabling capital context in spatial context.

We will now define in chapter number 3 how Tiers Lieux and Wijkhubs create “Situated Democracy” in “external and contextual” mixité dimension. As the Circular Value Flower (CVF) does for “circularity values”, we want to analyse the previous points in Tiers Lieux and Wijkhubs as a “mixité degree” value. How does the “formality” degree of actors initiating and taking place in the initiatives (from un-organised citizens to multi-level institutions) link to the produced values from the “external” point of view ? The external point of view is given by situating, describing the spatialisation (acts in real life) or projection (internet or social

network) of the internal particular “Situated Democracy” value into the different levels of the context. Following the CVF the multiple value creation is based on those 5 elements – economic, social, cultural (in this lies the democratic structure) aesthetic and ecological. The different levels of the context are the “buurthuis” or proximity dimension, the neighbourhood, the city, upon different temporalities. We want to measure this capacity by superposing CVF questions in different space and time levels.

In what way and how the element of ‘mixité’ of places of “Situated Democracy” helps define its contextual and external dimension? Among the mixité of differently organised and formally defined publics or citizens’ communities taking place, what is and how does it take place, the role of institutions in ensuring this ? Which publics are included or excluded? But especially, where and when? How do these scales enter into relation among each other?

This will define the mixité degree of a place as an “external and contextual” dimension of “Situated Democracy”, that is able to measure “spatial” and “temporal” value in order to define a place's relations with other different communities.

2.3 Limitations of the research

The research qualitative analysis does not reach and exhaust the variety of these socially innovative experiences, but tries to define two contextual based typologies related to the respective urban fabric dimension. As an ontological limited point of view and analysis, this calls for more perspectives and experiences to be enriched, in space and time dimensions. This makes on the other hand that even a limited number of points of view has an epistemological value for the research.

The case studies are described here under a very succinct synthesis compared to the complexity of the processes. This text wants to only be a first introduction to them.

3. The analysis - Defining how Tiers Lieux and Wijkhubs create “Situated Democracy” in “external and contextual” mixité dimension

3.1 Coco Velten Tiers Lieu and other Marseille networks

3.1.1 Description of the case

In the Ilot Velten block, between the Porte d’Aix monument square and the limit of Belsunce neighbourhood (figure 1), lies Coco Velten. This place is part of the dynamics of temporary occupation of public-owned urban wastelands, to experiment with new uses other than privatisation, to promote a mix of activities and occupants: it combines spaces for professionals and artists who want to engage in the circular and solidarity economy with temporary housing for people in difficulty.

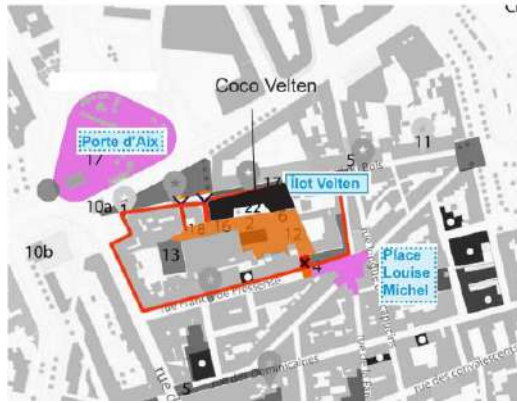


figure 1, schema of the position of the Velten bloc (ilote) in Belsunce neighbourhood nord side, Borrello 2020

3.1.2. Stakeholder network & mixité

The project was led by the association Yes We Camp, supported by the SOS Group and the cooperative Plateau Urbain. Yes We Camp - Ywc was founded in Marseille in 2013 with the acquisition of a temporary permission to occupy a site (that will later become the Foresta project) for camping during the Marseille European Capital of Culture events. However it was in Paris with Les Grands Voisins experience that the “third actor” association model of temporary occupation truly developed. This model was then reproduced and implemented at Coco Velten with the initial support of Lab Zéro, a laboratory of the regional prefecture, and Marseille Solutions, a local association on development of solidarity projects.

Ywc mediates as a third actor as it works by a 60% of self-funding, by the “cantine” bar and restoration sources, and by a 40% of central-state contribution.

Compared to other local actors, they have the possibility to experiment new innovative forms of doing that are still not defined, but they are at the same time structured enough to communicate and have an impact on institutional decisions.

The “internal” innovation of Coco Velten is made by having around twenty regularly paid persons involved in the project (only counting the Ywc side and without counting the other association’s équipes distributed in France), getting open the place almost all week long as any commercial bar activity and also offering a special programming in week-ends. At the same time employees are often well educated people that chose to earn the minimum wage salary for working in a vibrant environment where competences and skills are, in part, always mixed and evolving following situations.

Inhabitants of the emergency housing have also the privilege to interact with the variety of free cultural activities and participate actively in, becoming strong members of the team.

Also volunteering constitutes a way to integrate the vibrant environment, especially for running the bar during the events. As we said, the bar is the first source of financial support.

Coco Velten is a central-state property building set in a municipality block, where other actors of the ESS take place.



camp 2021

figure 2. La terrasse de la cantine, Yes We



from Coco Velten rooftop - the closed access on Belsunce nord side. Borrello 2022

figure 3. View of the block “coeur d’ilot”

3.1.3 External and contextual situated democracy

The municipality decided for security reasons to only open the block on the Porte d’Aix side, without relating it with the other Belsunce entrance (figure1). The cantine’s terrace also needed to be protected by some opaque barriers separating from the rest of the bloc-ilot space (figure 2).

Because of these physical barriers and limitations, Coco Velten was not visible for the majority of citizens’ of Belsunce (figure 3)

On the other hand, thanks to Yes We Camp reputation in France and its big network, Coco Velten managed to create some occasions to coordinate and impulse some cultural common activities among the associations of Belsunce, attracting many participants from all the city, like in the occasion of the Babelsunciades Festival, that re-impulsed an ancient local festival initiative (figure 4).

Nevertheless, as it was planned to be, even after a two-years prolongation, this experience only lasted from 2018 to 2023.

The many disadvantaged and excluded people that found here a welcoming and free place where to be appreciated and “valued” are now back to their “abandon”.



figure 4. Communication flyer by Yes We Camp 2020

3.1.4 Other networks

The experience of La cité des Transition is an essay of a municipal initiative network around associations and companies involved in the ecological and social transition in Marseille. The *Transition Ecologique* delegation at the municipality financed a three year research project for tracing local initiatives on the whole urban territory. After having constituted a group of interested and involved organisations, the guide of the project passed to a temporary private or third sector “bureau” that organised the elections of the permanent *Conseil d’Administration*. This initiative is in 2024 at its early stages, but the common objective and “manifest” of the cité is clear: to take Marseille to a just ecological and energetic transition and imagine working on a project-based methodology to collaborate. The democratic participation on this network process shows a private and public collaboration under this objective, as well as the long length of the ongoing process. For the moment, the cité hasn’t found a physical open infrastructure to situate and after an open public meetings phase for building its governance model, and when losing its institutional support, it’s now more retracted and focused into its internal construction.

3.2.2 Het Bollenpadje Huiskamer in Rotterdam Delfshaven Network

3.2.1 Description of the case

As it is the case for many Rotterdam Huiskamers (Avest et Sepp 2015) Het Bollenpadje was born from another project in another location of Rotterdam, before getting permission and funding from the municipality to set up in Bospolder side of Delfshaven neighbourhood.

Three women founded the place in 2021 and are responsible for it, since they have some paid hours from the municipality, even though the time spent for the initiative is never counted. One of them needs to respond to regular municipal controls on activities and demonstrate the positive impact of the initiative on the “buurthuis” street dimension.

3.2.2. Stakeholder network & mixité

This place should be a collective public living room, where everyone can enter and feel at home. Its aesthetic follows this principle as everything is curated and cocooned as we would like to be at home (figure 5). Habitual people from the neighbourhood have keys and can open and go there whenever they want. Everyone that passes in the street is welcome for a coffee. The open and buurthuis-central position of the place invites to get in or to know more about (figure 6)



figure 5. View from the inside. Borrello



2023 figure 6. Het Bollenpadje is situated at the intersection of Rosier Faassenstraat and Catharina Beersmansstraat. Borrello 2023

This place is very important for intergenerational exchange and fighting against isolation. “While making things together, we open our earth to each other” says one of the officially responsible people of the place.

Anyone who has a project can be helped in realising this, and every event is welcomed and can be hosted there.

3.2.3 External and contextual situated democracy

The strong externalised dimension is not only visible from the street, but thanks to many outdoor activities. More than greening, the “Bospolderplein soup time” is a moment when habitual neighbours go together and stay in this huge close open space, that in normal times is not always welcoming for everyone (figure 7).



figure 7. A cart is used to take soup and

drinks in the close Bospolderplein

A habitual neighbour explains: “You can organise things yourself as a resident group up to a certain point, after that you need the municipality and systems to tackle bigger things. Entering into that collaboration is possible here.”

All the variety of Huiskamers in Delfshaven, that are an exceptionally high number compared to other parts of the city, are related to the central Pier 80 Wijkhouse, where primary public services are provided.

3.2.4 Other networks

The network dimension of these local experiences, is for example also given by energy cooperatives initiatives, like the DelftshavenCooperatie. This is a grassroots initiative (in some parts financed by the municipality) that links the different wijk of the macro-area of Delfshaven, Bospolder, Spangen and Tussendijken.

In this same neighbourhood we see other examples of both municipal or independent networks to strengthen forces. This is the case of the BoTu alliance of Huiskamers, where Het Bollenpadje is also part, related to the broader programme BoTu (figure 8). This program aims to mix and influence de Tu (Tussendijken) wijk, poorer, with the Bo (Bospolder), where residential renovation has already started and a more mixed population is setting in.



figure 8. Picture of the BoTu Huiskamer network flyer, Borrello 2023

3. Discussion

Analysing the contextual and external dimension of two specific innovative experiences, we want to answer the question of how Tiers Lieux in Marseille and Wijkhubs-network in Rotterdam can contribute to democratic and just transitions, from an institutional perspective and a citizen-communities one, from the Marseille “social” and the Rotterdam “technical-ecological” one. These points of views are all complementary and needed.

To what kind of mixité of communities and publics do these places refer? What is their democratic contribution to it?

The democratic value of Wijkhub-network in Rotterdam seems to be linked to the very strict local scale, the ‘buurthuis’, that privileges a more mixed component of publics especially in age gap.

If the “exhaustive” mixité is not always guaranteed, municipality “officially” gives the possibility to create a large number of different places for differently mixed communities.

Superdiversity is often related to Rotterdam particular identity (Scholten et al 2019) and our analysis showed how this identifies with the ‘buurthuis’ communitarist spatial dimension. It is not clear then how these different communities interact with each other.

Huiskamers in the Wijk-network depend on public financing and have a very “technocratic” way to demonstrate social impact, that exhausts social workers and distorts the “social” and democratic contribution of these initiatives.

For the case of the Tiers Lieu Coco Velten, the autonomous funding by the cantine-bar activity disturbs in a way their democratic component too. In order to offer free public events, bar incomes are very important and the équipes take the habit of inviting the same artists they know, since they have a lot of not preview “social” work and less time.

As a hybrid initiative, the other side of dependence is on institutions. Coco Velten had also a particular case of conflicts among different institutional levels since the building where the initiative set was of the central-state property while the coeur d’ilot block was a municipal

property. The misalignment of visions and wishes contributed to the isolation of Coco Velten from the neighbourhood of Belsunce.

Furthermore, the équipes didn't have enough competences and the time to focus on the social value of a complicated neighbourhood as Belsunce, without the urban dimension institution of the municipality.

Especially, the contextual and social contribution was not really possible since the experience was imagined as temporary, even though everyone implicated was hoping this not to be the case.

The national Network of Tiers Lieux Cooperative asks for a durable support by institutions as these are places offering a public service, but they are not able to demonstrate social or public impact.

They are places of “the right to test and risk” (Besson 2021), where different people mix and foster hybridity, scaling up “transformative” messages from there to the institutional scale. Technocratic ways to demonstrate mixité or participation of citizens, or to produce economical value are often excluded as qualities of these places.

On the other hand, the street and neighbourhood dimension here seems to be farther. Tiers Lieux are places of the “exception” and are less numerous and diffuse than Wijkhubs-network.

4. Conclusion

Defining how (where and when) places foster “Situated Democracy” allows to define their contribution to the urban fabric as a public service.

Our analysis has shown a method to define the mixité degree of a place as an “external and contextual” dimension of “Situated Democracy”. This answered the two main questions of understanding if these external and contextual elements can be found in these examples of Tiers Lieu and Wijkhub as a form of ‘situated democracy’, and if these dimensions are a valuable contribution to the concept itself.

Wijkhubs are very well contextualised and externalised in their proximity-buurthuis dimension, but less on a neighbourhood and even less on an urban scale. The mixité of publics, if realised, is stuck into these territorial short dimensions. The role of the institutions through its infrastructure should facilitate the network dimension, but in practice this is not really the case.

Tiers Lieux are well connected to the urban-fabric dimension, but not really to their proximity environments. The kind of mixité comes from people from different parts of the city. Indeed they are represented by people having a specific and homogenous aesthetic taste, that looks for the “exceptional” and “alternative”, anti-ordinary-

The role of institution is officially for fostering hybridisation and institutionalisation of bottom-up initiatives, but here we don't know where “the bottom” comes from.

In Marseille Tiers Lieux are not related to elected councils like it is in Rotterdam and they don't have this “vocation” not even in the institutional narrative. Tiers Lieux are places where to experiment, where institutions meet citizens. Tiers Actors would like these initiatives to stay hybrid on one side, but having structural and long-term public funding on the other. Is this a contradiction or a force point of Tiers Lieux?

(Multi-level) Institutions seem necessary to guarantee coordination among the parties, as different communities are in order to assure the citizen-individual engagement and action, for appropriating future common visions and actualising change. A Rotterdam ‘buurtuis’ institutional approach based on proximity and practical activities to “circularity” foster a mix of participation, but lacks on coordination among the different groups in the city. A Marseille Tiers Lieux approach doesn’t relate to definable territorial or spatially exteriorised dimensions and is a short and limited experience in time. The mixité of people taking place here is not measurable under these dimensions, as is their democratic contributions.

These outcomes open for more research on how defining public(s) identities to realise just transitions and on the role of spatiality, in giving consistencies to identities and so to possible common directions to transitions.

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