URBAN STORYTELLERS

JOURNAL

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INTRO

Urban Storytelling School is a one-year exchange program by the Center for Social Vision (Sofia) and C*SPACE (Berlin), launched at the beginning of 2025, grounded in the idea of storytelling as a participatory tool for transforming neighborhoods into more socially cohesive places. Over the course of a year, twelve young cultural professionals — artists, educators, urban experts, and activists developed storytelling practices engaging young people living in both cities and creating interactive walks, experimental guides, interventions, and mapping projects — ways of analyzing and rethinking existing structures and places. Working in four collectives across Sofia and Berlin, they explored, juxtaposed, exchanged, and envisioned new urban possibilities.

A key part of the program was to understand the contexts that shape young people's realities in each country. In Bulgaria — where voter turnout is among the lowest in Europe — political scientist Ivan Krastev has described the situation as a "frozen democracy." This points to widespread apathy toward political processes and persistently low levels of civic participation, as also noted in the Index for Civil Engagement. In Berlin, young people grow up in an environment of constant transition, shaped by cultural cutbacks, political tensions, the rise of far-right sentiment, and the looming pressures of climate change — all of which contribute to uncertainty and a growing sense of pessimism about the future.

Across these backdrops, participants explored how young people perceive and respond to conditions shaped by political transformations, wars, forced migration, climate change, and the pervasive uncertainty about the future. They managed to raise crucial questions: How do we ensure that young voices find their place in the larger urban narrative? How can multiple perspectives be woven into a collective story of the city? Can storytelling and artistic practices activate communities and connect neighbors? What do we do with spaces in transformation? How do we live with uncertainty? How can our neighborhoods become more inclusive and youth-friendly?

Participants were invited to actively engage in creating these narratives, drawing from their ideas about the present and their visions for the future. Through their projects developed from scratch diverse voices were amplified. Topics such as local and global identities, heritage, commemoration culture, gentrification, communication with non-human entities, care, access to public space, and inclusion became starting points for exploration. The proj-

ect encouraged direct interaction with urban environments and local communities to instill a sense of belonging and citizenship. City explorations and hands-on experiments empowered young people to become creators, share their visions, and inspire other young people to act — aligned with Erasmus+ priorities of fostering common values, civic engagement, and participation.

This publication is intended to be more than just an archive of the year's activities. We call it a "journal" to emphasize the journey — both conceptually and literally — over the months, while also creating an informal space that captures the complex, often spontaneous, and always inspiring conversations that took place during the project. It reflects moments from shared experiences such as the *Urban Storytellers Dinner* at C*SPACE in Berlin, the *Imagining Cities* practice-sharing at the art space Swimming Pool in Sofia, and, not last, the launch event of this very Journal. Along the way, we met many professionals deeply engaged in the same questions, and we are thankful to Vladiya Mihaylova, Viktor Damov, Dimitar Nikolov, Silvia Cherneva, Roland Krause, Britta Kaufhold and others for generously sharing their insights.

The publication features a project documentation of the Urban Storytelling School participants. The materials not only document their work but re-activate the spaces they created — spaces of imagination, care, and mutual learning. To enrich the experience, we have added four chapters — *In-between spaces*, *Futures*, *(Unter Construction)*, *(Day)Dreaming* — as invitations to view specific topics through distinct prisms. Some are semi-poetic, expanding the content with more intuitive perspectives. Together they form a journey through environments, contexts, and geographies shaped by young people.

We extend our thanks to Elly Dimitrova and Georgi Lazarov (Crunchy Oyster) for the thoughtful design of both the project and this publication, and to our collaborators Katja Hellkoetter, Natasha Borenko, and Anna Ivanova for their invaluable contributions. Most of all, we would like to express our gratitude to the School's participants — Elena Balabanska, Eleonora Edreva, Izabela Markova, Maria Fallada Llandrich, Ksenia Lapina, Maria Getova, Ana-Maria Molnar, Charlie Wanda, Sofie Kirkegaard, Jamie McGhee, Asya Petkova, and Guglielmo Sandri Giachino — for their dedication, enthusiasm, and genuine care for both the project's ideas and the young people they invited to take part.

Viktoria Draganova and Katya Romanova
October 2025, Sofia and Berlin

You find materials online
in Bulgarian and German on:

Journal for Social Vision

Citymakers

Impressions from the Urban Storytelling School resindencies in Berlin & Sofia

in-between spaces

How do we ensure that young voices find their place in the larger urban narrative?

What are the main challenges that young people will face in the urban environment?

Is there a risk that the virtual will replace the real?

"A SPACE CAN BE VALUABLE BECAUSE OF ITS SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE"

Interview with Viktor Damov

Viktoria: Viktor, it's great to meet you again. Let's use this interview to continue our conversation on the topics we've been discussing quite a lot recently. You are an architect, urbanist, and activist deeply engaged in analyzing the socio-urban landscape of Sofia, where we both live. Earlier this year, we published your essay "The Red List of Sofia's Threatened Spaces Unfolded" in the Journal for Social Vision, which raised many important issues and introduced the concept of socio-urban value.

What changes when we look at the city through the perspective of young people — teenagers, students, and those in their twenties?

Viktor: Let me briefly remind you what I meant by "socio-urban value." In most cases, however absurd it sounds, a value in the city means a cultural property or so-called cultural heritage. These are material objects protected by the state because of their scientific or cultural significance. My hypothesis is that a space can also be valuable because of its social significance. To put it more simply — it is not the building that is important, but what happens inside it. Think about the city market, the neighborhood café, the local community cultural center (*chi-*

talishte), or self-organized civic spaces. What constitutes their social value? For example, they may be economically accessible and allow communication between people from different social backgrounds, or they may create a sense of civic empowerment and belonging. If we agree that these places are important, we must start asking ourselves — what do we do with them as a society? Obviously, we cannot preserve them as museum exhibits in the urban environment as we would with a cultural property. So then what? I don't have a definite answer yet, but I do know for sure that the first step is to recognize them as valuable.

How does the situation change if we look at "socio-urban" values through the eyes of young people? Well, I think — not much. In the January text I deliberately expanded the meaning of the concept. I pointed to two broad groups of people who need such spaces. The first are those in direct need — the poor, the discriminated, etc. The second are those who, at first glance, are integrated into society, but for them this is not enough — they want to be part of a community and to self-realize within it.

So, let's think about young people… In a sense, they fall into both groups. Most

young people are not financially independent, which means they seek economically accessible places. On the other hand, this is the age when one looks for their first communities. I would also add something equally important here — this is also the period when you slowly begin to understand what it means to be a citizen. Socio-urban spaces can fulfill all these functions. But there are two important clarifications — young people are not all the same. That's why it is important to think about the diversities that may lie behind the idea. The other is that there are underprivileged young people who are in urgent need of such places — those with limited financial means or those discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Viktoria: In our conversations last year at the Center for Social Vision you pointed out as additional examples of "socio-urban value" the square in front of the National Palace of Culture or the mirrors of the Central Department Store as important for young people. What makes them socio-urban values?

Viktor: In this case, the label is not particularly important. They are valuable to the people who use them, and that is enough. At the time I didn't find it nec-

essary to direct my attention to them, because these spaces are public and important for the city anyway. They will not disappear. Over time, young people may change, as well as their activities in these places. This is a natural process. In that sense, the only thing needed for these spaces is that the activities of young people, which already take place there, should not be prohibited — skating at NDK and dancing at the Largo. Someone once told me that the security was causing problems at the Central Department Store. I don't know if that's true, but I hope not.

Still if we want to reflect on them academically, we can. I think these practices are of particular significance because through them young people reclaim spaces in the city. They realize that Sofia belongs to them just as much as it does to anyone else. They "hack" the city, transforming it for their own needs. In the meantime, they assert their presence to the rest of society. What's particularly interesting is that they do this in places concentrated with symbolic power. The Largo or the Soviet Army Monument are perfect examples. Through their practices they alter the meaning of these spaces. They manifest the attitude of the free individual towards authority.

Viktoria: Are there other similar spaces that you think deserve attention — in Sofia or elsewhere?

Viktor: More and more I think about the *chitalishta* (community cultural centers) in Bulgaria. They are the recognized "socio-urban values" by the state. If we want to develop the idea on a practical level, perhaps the easiest way would be through them. In many places across Bulgaria they are extremely important spaces for young people. They offer all sorts of activities and opportunities for forming communities.

Chitalishta have a long history. They began to be established in the mid-19th century, independent of the Ottoman Empire and based on the principles of democracy, solidarity, and tolerance toward all living in Bulgarian lands. The chitalishte network played an important role in the Bulgarian national liberation movement. They were created by Bulgarian society because it needed them.

But what is their mission today? They preserve and transmit much of the nation's traditional values. And don't get me wrong — this is an important task. But it often prevents us from asking what kind of chitalishta today's society needs. Moreover — even though they are funded by the state, they exist in material poverty. This is also a problem of civil society. It does not recognize them as places for civic participation, which they once were. Yuri Valkovski wrote good articles on the topic a year or two ago. But why do I point to this example… There are exceptions. Look at initiatives like Trotuar 2020 or Mechtalishte, or completely independent spaces like Kopriva. There are citizens who are rethinking what a *chitalishte* can mean and what young people can do in them.

Viktoria: What are the main challenges that young people will face in the urban environment in the near future?

Viktor: On a global level — the tension between the need for free, accessible spaces and the increasing commercialization of the city. It's a problem if the only place where a group of students can gather is a café or bar. Here is a clarification again — I myself argue that in theory such places can also be considered "socio-urban values," but the conditions for that are specific. It is much more likely that a space develops such value if it was created with that intent from the start. Universities could provide spaces for their students to self-organize with almost no resources, but they rarely do so. A positive example here is "Projectirane" at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG). It has worked on this principle for a decade.

On a local level, we face another problem — public space is disappearing. In the new neighborhoods there are no inter-block spaces, no squares, rarely gardens, let alone parks. This is nothing less than an urban planning disaster. If we return to the idea of how important it is for young people to reclaim public spaces in the city — how can this happen when they simply don't exist? When the only logic of spatial production is that of capital — this is the result.

Viktoria: Is there a risk that the virtual will replace the real, or rather is there a new type of hybrid experience of the city emerging, and what does it consist of?

Viktor: There is definitely rising tension between the two. I think we all experienced it firsthand during the Covid pandemic. Design theorist Silvio Lorusso speaks of digital maximalism and dwelling minimalism.

As for hybrid experience, I would think of it a bit more provocatively. In a sense, there is nothing new in it. For anyone who grew up in the 90s and 00s it was already the norm. Internet clubs were important places for the coming-of-age for many. Later, when most of us had personal computers, this continued — physical communication shifted into digital spaces and back again. I don't mean only chats, but also computer games, forums…

The digital or hybridity are not problems in themselves, but the virtual of 20–30 years ago is fundamentally different from what it is today. We sometimes forget that the internet once felt like a free space. That many found their socially-digital valuable spaces there, and that shaped them as people. The feeling was radically different from today's capitalization of attention and radicalization of viewpoints. I don't want to sound nostalgic or anything like that. These things still exist in some form. What I'm trying

to say is that if we fight for free physical spaces, we should also fight for free digital ones.

Viktoria: You are part of Underschool at UACEG. What problems do you identify as most urgent in education and in the way young people experience the city?

Viktor: Underschool_ is an independent organization, but it is true that UACEG is our main partner. The mission of underschool_ is to take part in building a long-term vision for the development of architectural education in Bulgaria. But our motivation is not purely educational. Our goal is the improvement of the spatial environment in Bulgaria. Education is just one element of this system. The element that our collective is working on. From this perspective, we believe architectural education should address all the issues we've already discussed, and many others as well.

Viktoria: Many independent cultural NGOs are driven by young people and/or work with young people — through participatory programs, artistic interventions, and community activation. What is their role in times of political crisis?

Viktor: Their role is more important than ever. Unfortunately, in Bulgaria the word "politics" is dirty, and people avoid it at all costs. But politics is everywhere and it affects us all. At underschool_ we try to turn the students in our collective into citizens of a democratic society. I often feel that I myself don't fully know what that means. No one ever taught us. Not to mention that the age gap within our team isn't particularly large. We learn from each other. We do things, make mistakes, and reflect on them. That's the way forward.

Conversation at Svetofar Bookstore in 2024, part of the Nine Elephants festival

ZEHN/ДЕСЕТ
CHAIN-TRAVEL-CARD

Ksenia Lapina and
Maria Fallada Llandrich

This participatory project explores youth identity, sense of belonging, and the imaginative, hopeful futures envisioned by young people in Berlin and Sofia.

We chose tram line 10 — present in both capitals — as our thread of connection. A tram connects places within a city, brings strangers together, and here becomes a metaphorical line stretching between Berlin and Sofia.

Along this line, we approached ten young people in each city. We invited them into conversation and asked to capture their portraits. After each interview, participants were asked to respond to a question left by the previous person — and to pose a new one for the next — creating in this way a living chain of questions and answers that moved along the tram line and time, initiating a written conversation between two strangers.

Our questions to the young people touched on public space, identity, hope, and visions of the future. The aim of the project was to record personal stories of the participants navigating urban life — grappling with challenges, shortages, and barriers, but also recognizing the value of places and connections with others.

The result is a zine that gathers their portraits, excerpts from the interviews, a playlist with songs that are meaningful to them and the evolving question–answer chain — a moving record of youth voices carried across two cities, two tram lines, and many encounters. The participants were asked to select questions for themselves from the list:

PUBLIC SPACE & BELONGING

- Where in Berlin/Sofia do you go when you need to clear your head?
- Is there a place in the city that feels like it was made for you?
- Have you ever had a moment of joy or connection on the tram?
- What is Tram 10 to you?

IDENTITY & SELF-EXPRESSION

- Tell me about something you're wearing right now — why did you choose it?
- If your style had a message, what would it be?
- What's something small that makes you feel powerful?

FUTURE & AGENCY

- If the city listened to you, what would you ask it to change?
- What do you hope your neighborhood will be like in 10 years?
- When was the last time you surprised yourself?

HOPE THROUGH SMALL THINGS

- What's something you look forward to each week?
- Can you describe a recent moment that made you smile, even just a little?
- Is there a song, object, or memory that reminds you to keep going?

THE INITIAL INSPIRATION

Tram lines are very practical, and for people living in cities where they operate, they often feel quite ordinary. At the same time, they carry something nostalgic — especially when old carriages run alongside the new ones. Taking one of those older wagons can feel like a little time travel. So when we learned that Sofia also has a tram line 10, we kept it in mind while developing our idea, which initially started as participatory zine workshops with young people. We thought it was an interesting idea then to connect young people moving around the city with this way of transportation.

THE PROCESS

The first idea was very vague, but we remember brainstorming and thinking about using something loud and sparkly to attract young people to our project. During this process, we both realized that what truly drives us to make art is connection. We love meeting people and feeling that sense of connection. The real sparkles are on the inside. That is exactly what we felt when we spoke with the first person we interviewed.

Until then, we thought of the project mostly as a trial — the questions, the photos, the question–answer chain. But when our first conversation went so smoothly, what struck us most was that this young person, whom we probably never would have spoken to otherwise, seemed to genuinely enjoy it. At that moment, everything fell into place.

Of course, there were also challenges. After one very spirited conversation and some strong portraits, a participant later told us they did not wish to be part of the project. We felt set back, but soon realized that this was actually one of the most important principles of the project: willing participation.

Our methodology was, in many ways, intuitive rather than objective — and that is something important to acknowledge. We chose people based on instinct, not statistics. Perhaps that is also why the project brought us joy: talking to people outside of our usual bubbles, who, at first glance, seemed open and sympathetic.

THE COLLABORATION

Our group was very small, and it had already existed in the same setup before. We study together and had already worked on projects as a team. The funny thing is that we applied to the Urban Storytelling School separately, but then found each other again within this project. Working together has been very rewarding. We often say that the project couldn't have been done without both of us. Going out alone and talking to strangers is not something we usually do in our free time. Being together — and dividing roles and tasks — was essential for us as a duo. This also continued into the making of the zine: one of us focused on the visual elements, while the other worked with the texts.

LEARNINGS

Through this project we learned that young people in the city care about many of the same things everyone else does — cleaner streets, friendlier people, more parks and spaces to come together. But what stood out most was their strong desire for self-expression: they want the freedom to find themselves without being judged. We were amazed at how openly they shared their dreams and wishes for the future. The conversations moved us, inspired us, and left us feeling hopeful about what's ahead.

THE SCHOOL

We think our project connects really naturally to the themes of the Urban Storytelling School. We invited young people in two European countries to have conversations with us, and they could choose the questions they liked. That gave them a sense of agency, and many of them told us little stories — about the city they live in, the parks and spaces where they hang out, but also about places that feel unsafe. It was powerful to hear how honestly they shared what they like and don't like about their urban environment. The exchange was not just between us and them, but also between the young people themselves — because once their answers are shared in the zine, they will read what others said. They will see how their voices connected with others. For us, it feels like we're contributing to a bigger narrative. It's not just about individual stories, but about building bridges between young people in different countries — like Germany and Bulgaria — and showing how their hopes and questions overlap. In a way, it becomes a collective story about what it means to grow up in European cities today.

?

Was ist deine liebste Cupcake geschmacksrichtung?

schoko

~~Beschreibe~~ Beschreibe Berlin in einem Satz

Wann wurdest du das letzte mal in einer Freundschaft enttäuscht?

Um wirklich glücklich zu sein brauche ich 3,800 Netto.

Wie viel Geld brauchst du, um glücklich zu sein?

Mein zweites Zuhause, wenn ich in anderen Städten unterwegs bin e nach B. zurückkomme, fühle ich mich zu Hause

TWO WEEKS AGO

WHEN COMMUNICATION WAS UNCLEAR AND SAFETY FADES FOR DOUBT TO GROW

WHAT DO YOU DO IN ORDER TO FEEL JOY.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU GOT TO EXPERIENCE A FEELING OF FREEDOM?

Als ich vor ein paar Tagen mit meinen Freunden draußen in der Sonne gebadet habe

Was bedeutet Freundschaft für dich?

Who's the most important person in your life & why?

I would open a restaurant, a fusion of everything - mostly asian & italian because I love it & I love cooking :)

Wenn du einen Laden eröffnen könntest, welcher wäre es?

Liebe, Vertrauen, Halt Spaß, Verbundenheit

Mother, she raised me very lovely, and appreciates everything I do, and helps me

Wann hast du das letzte mal vor lachen geweint und warum?

Das letzte Mal vor lachen geweint habe ich vor ein paar Tagen, als eine Freundin und ich rausgefunden haben wie witzig es aussieht, wenn man vor lachen den Kopf in den Nacken legt.

Welcher Song versetzt dich jedes Mal direkt in eine gute Zeit? :)

What's the last time you felt truly content with your life? *

I don't like this question, but I believe that often, times people don't need a reason to feel insecure. Not being a 100% sure and

Why do you think people are not confident enough?

Ribs by Lorde

The last week of school, when we recieved our final marks and I went out with my friends.

What was the last thing that made you feel proud of yourself?

I last felt proud when I did something I was afraid of and succeeded regardless.

When was the last time you felt really emotional?

Sina (22) | Revaler Str.

„Ich kann auch noch was über mein Kleid sagen. Das Kleid ist von meiner Mitbewohnerin, die zwei und sechzig Jahre alt ist. Es war die Notlösung, weil ich hier auf Wohnungssuche war und es ist sehr kompliziert ist, etwas zu finden, aber wir verstehen uns jetzt sehr, sehr gut."

„I can also say something about my dress. The dress belongs to my flatmate, who is sixty-two years old. I was looking for a flat here and it's very complicated to find something, so at first it was a stopgap solution, but we get on very, very well now."

Nia (19) | Between Pl. Zhurnalist and UASG
"I am really fascinated by pens, fountain pens, especially. I have one that I can refill, and it makes me think that even if it finishes the ink, I can refill it again. And in a way it keeps going. So, it makes me feel like I can keep writing my own story in a way."

Artur (19) | Grünberg Str./Warschauer Str.

„Ну, я радуюсь то, что я дожил до этого дня. Ну то, что я здоровый, то, что у меня нет никаких проблем. И просто радуюсь жизни, то, что я молодой."

„Well, I rejoice in the fact that I've lived to see this day. The fact that I'm healthy and I don't have any problems. I simply enjoy life and being young."

Theo (23) | Pl. Makedoniya
"Recently, I had a very bad time with my family, like, some family drama happened. And the thing that helped me a lot was my camera because I just went outside, even though hell was released. I went outside and I started walking, I started taking photos, and it just made me motivate myself to be calmer."

YOUTH SPACES: FROM CHILL SPOTS TO CIVIC SPACES

Interview with Kinder- und Jugendbüro Pankow and Gangway e.V. by Katya Romanova

What do young people need in the places where they live, study, work, and spend their free time — and how can we involve them in shaping the city? To explore this question, public designer and urban project manager Katya Romanova spoke with two local youth institutions in Berlin-Pankow: *Kinder- und Jugendbüro Pankow and Gangway e.V.* **Together, they share insights, experiences, and strategies for making urban planning more inclusive and responsive to the needs of young people.**

Roland: I work for *Gangway e.V.*, providing outreach youth work. I'm part of the youth streetwork team in Berlin-Pankow, responsible for the northern districts: Buch, Karow, and Französisch Buchholz. We go out to public spaces and engage young people aged 14 to 27 to support them in all aspects of life — whether school problems, domestic violence, or conflicts with the police.

We don't just refer them to services; we accompany them directly to the places that can help. Voluntary participation is key: we don't act without their consent. Our approach is critically accepting: we also work with young people who consume substances or hold questionable worldviews. That's not an exclusion criterion. We accept these attitudes at first and work with them once trust is established.

Britta: At the *Kinder- und Jugendbüro*, we work to give young people in Pankow more influence — whether in political decisions or in implementing their own ideas. We are a cooperation project between Kinderring Berlin e.V. and the Pankow Child and Youth Participation Department in the Youth Welfare Office (Fachbereich Kinder- und Jugendbeteiligung des Jugendamtes Pankow) since April 2024.

We create spaces for participation and organise projects. For example in the project Youth Jury where young people can apply for funding for their projects and receive up to 1,000 Euros for their own initiatives. We also work with adults, advising and sensitizing politics, administration, and professionals on youth participation, children's rights, and civic education. Especially in urban planning, we collaborate closely with the authorities to ensure youth spaces and new neighborhoods meet the needs of young people.

Katya: What exactly are Youth Spaces or Jugendorte?

Roland: When we talk about Youth Spaces, we mean publicly accessible spaces. Young people need places to chill without structured activities or educational programs. Spaces where they can spend time after school, doing typical

youth activities, without being constantly watched.

Our idea was to support discussions with administration, politics, and the district with concrete data. We conducted a survey in 2022-2023 where young people could indicate how their ideal Youth Space should look. 300 respondents in Pankow, and later 1,000 citywide in Berlin. The top requirements: seating, preferably weatherproof, lighting, trash cans, public transport access, nearby shopping, and Wi-Fi.

Katya: Anything unexpected?

Roland: Not really. We've worked in the district for over 30 years; the issues remain the same. What's new is having data to back it up. Saying 1,000 young people want benches carries more weight.

Now, through our network, we promote Youth Spaces across the city and bring the topic to politics and administration. In Pankow, it worked: the district decided to strengthen and expand youth spaces. Without the survey and our lobbying, it probably wouldn't have gained traction.

These must be dedicated spaces, and we are pushing for this on all levels. We find politics receptive, but administration less

so, because there's no bureaucratic concept for youth spaces. There are playgrounds, public spaces, activity areas — but no official category for "youth-only." That's why it's hard to implement; no one feels responsible.

Katya: Where do young people hang out in Berlin or Pankow?

Roland: We have to be careful — it's not about all young people. Youth Spaces aren't a counter-model to youth centers, which are excellent and widely used. Youth Spaces target those who don't attend centers, or who go outside after hours. We surveyed mainly young people who cannot comply with youth center structures — rules, alcohol bans, protective measures. Some want to consume, talk about topics from rap lyrics, or have discussions that protected spaces might restrict. They turn to public spaces.

In Buch-Pankow, many public spaces meet youth space criteria: sheltered, with seating, visibility in all directions. The closer to the city center, the harder it is. In Prenzlauer Berg, for example, youth gather at Stargarderplatz but are often approached by authorities and given formal warnings, which shows how contested public space is.

Katya: And shopping malls?

Roland: In other districts, yes — for example, Gesundbrunnen Center or an abandoned building Steglitzer Kreisel, where empty spaces were opened for youth, with skating, table tennis, and similar activities (Project "*ZiK — Zeit ist knapp*").

The challenge with shopping malls is that young people often lack the money to consume, creating conflict with store owners. Youth still hang out, use Wi-Fi, occupy seating, may be loud or annoy security. This is tolerated only as long as they spend money there.

We want to show: young people should participate in public life without money. If they drink and play music in a park, it's seen as a disturbance. Adults at a jazz festival drinking wine? That's culture. The difference is financial. Understanding this is key to seeing why youth go to public spaces.

Britta: I'd add that youth have a poor image, especially among adults and unfortunately sometimes among decision-makers. Often, we forget that we were teenagers ourselves. Teens face constant scrutiny and are judged before they even act. Public spaces are exhausting under that gaze. Because Youth Spaces are not legally protected, implementation is especially difficult. Playgrounds are simpler — they are regulated, defined, and the administration has laws to follow rules. It's a major goal that youth spaces also gain legal recognition. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child extends to age 18, emphasizing that young people need spaces to play, relax, and develop according to their needs.

Katya: Often, people say young people don't want to engage — they just want to chill. Do you see that? And how can they be encouraged to participate in urban planning?

Roland: Yes, they want to chill — after a full day of school under strict rules, they need a break. Dismissing it as "just chilling" overlooks that it's social interaction, exchange, and a way to engage with peers. They do sports or music too, but not every day. Society tends to view youth skeptically.

Outreach youth workers Marc & Roland in front of the Gangway e.V. Rooms in Berlin-Buch

When young people are out in public today, it's quickly assumed they're using substances, dealing, or being criminal. With the topic of Youth Spaces, the fear immediately comes up: "If we create special places for young people, won't they just become criminal hotspots?" But all these things happen anyway, even without dedicated Youth Spaces, and that's often ignored.

Britta: Engagement in urban planning works the same way as for adults: you have to make it attractive and show the benefits. Quick, visible results are important — not just projects that will take five years to implement. Sometimes there is a mistrust which is closely tied to negative stereotypes about youth — if they are constantly told they just sit around and chill, it's discouraging. That's why it's so important to build trust and show that they are taken seriously — not just for young people, but for everyone.

Katya: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Roland: People often ask what's so bad if young people don't hang out in public spaces. My biggest concern is that they'll retreat even more into the digital world. Public space is central to their socialization — this is where informal exchange happens, where they learn about democracy, see posters, election campaigns, and access advisory services.

Public spaces are not just about us as a society maintaining some oversight or knowing where they are — they allow young people to participate meaningfully in social and democratic life, to experience diversity, and to learn how to coexist within structures that aren't extremist.

Britta: To add, I think the bigger question is really who is part of our society — and how we can adapt the city to include them. This means making it inclusive and accessible, for all ages and needs, rather than expecting people to adjust to our city or public spaces.

Survey "Jugendorte in Berlin 2023: Mehr als Spiel- und Sportflächen (Juni 2022 — Oktober 2023):

54% of survey respondents said covered, protected areas are essential for youth spaces.
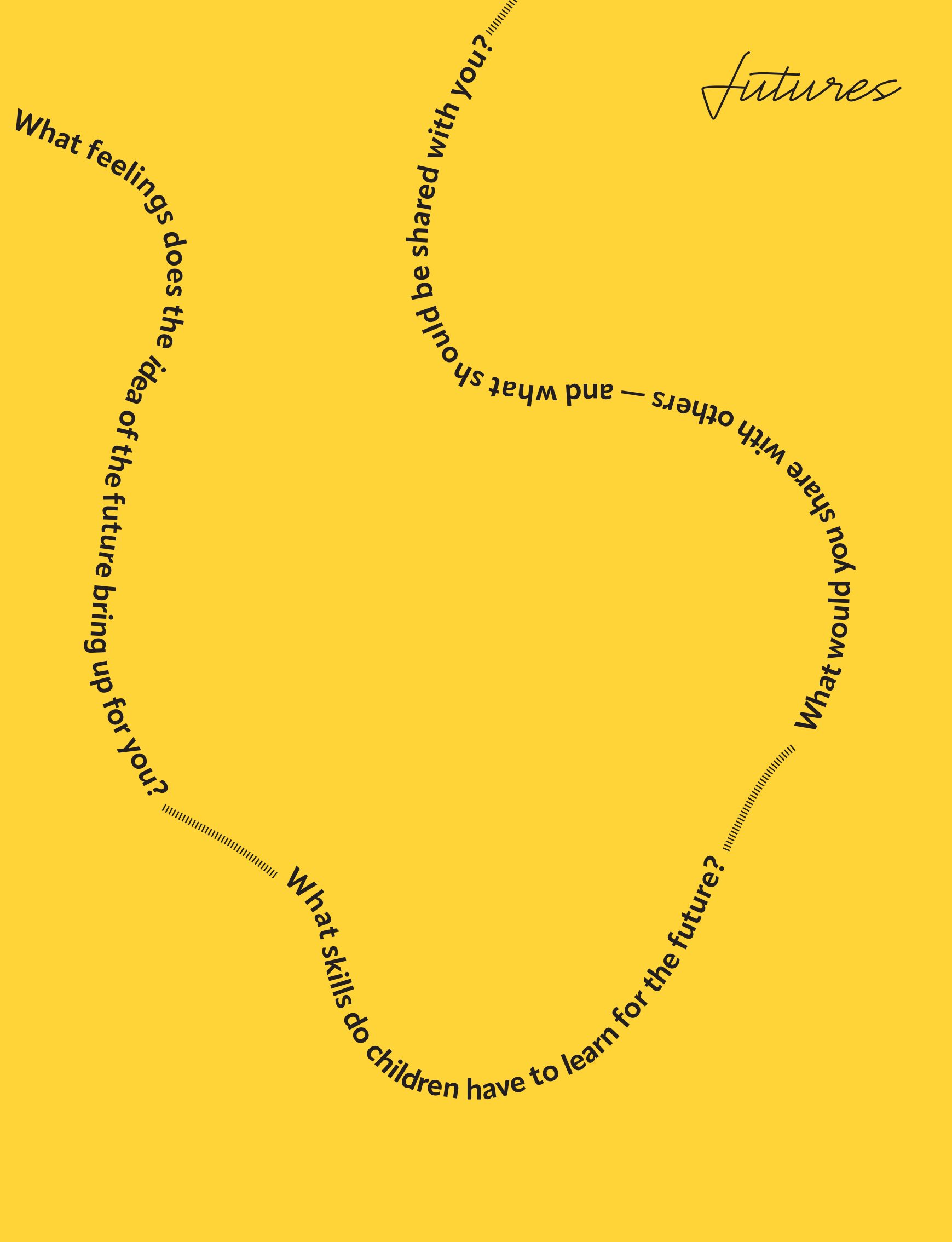

Young people actively use this hidden area in the local park, Berlin-Buch.

Many playgrounds in residential complexes don't meet teenagers' needs — they prefer spaces where they aren't constantly observed.

futures

What feelings does the idea of the future bring up for you?

What should be shared with you? — and what should be shared with others — and what would you share with others?

What skills do children have to learn for the future?

RECIPES FOR FUTURE

Elena Balabanska, Eleonora Edreva and Izabela Markova

"Recipes for Future" gathers the hopes, beliefs, and ideas of young people along the route of tram No. 10 in Sofia. The project's aim is not just to collect individual perspectives but to work together to create collective recipes for a shared future.

Through workshops and a survey, we engaged young people from different schools and socioeconomic groups along the tram's route, which we use as a symbolic and literal line of connection between various neighborhoods and communities.

The tram's route starts in the area around Paradise Mall Center, whose fancy office buildings, IT companies, and corporate atmosphere symbolize the dominant cultural narrative that tech will rule the future. But with every subsequent stop, the tram leaves behind this "paradise" and journeys into a more colorful and many-layered Sofia, passing by universities, vocational schools, and foreign language high schools.

After hearing from young people, we translated their visions for the future into recipes which we riso-printed into a zine, each ingredient being inspired by something shared in a workshop or survey. The project culminated with a picnic in West Park, the final stop of the tram, for which we cooked each of the recipes.

THE INITIAL INSPIRATION

EE: I moved to Sofia last year after growing up in the United States, and the city's well-thought out public transportation network made a big impression on me. I lived for a few months in Krastova Vada, a neighborhood full of new construction of tall office buildings and expensive housing for IT workers, that for me exemplified Sofia's growing participation in techno-globalism. And at the same time, the tram no.10, which starts at the edge of the neighborhood, kept catching my eye. It's one of Sofia's older models of trams, and I liked the way its visual presence broke up the otherwise very homogenous scenes of traffic, bustle, and new architecture. I rode it a few times to see its route and noticed how frequently it was used by young people from the many different profiles of schools and universities along the way. It was exciting to me to see young people studying in so many different fields despite the way tech is positioned as the dominant way forward, and it made me curious to learn about how they conceptualize the future in light of these narratives.

EB: I was especially excited to work with this tram line because of a personal connection to it. As a former student at one of the schools along the route, I was curious to revisit it now through the eyes of an urban planner. In my youth I often rode this tram and have vivid memories of landscapes it passes through — the urban forest near Vishneva, the cobbled streets of Lozenets, and the panel blocks and market in Vazrazhdane.

THE PROCESS

IM: The process of developing our project was very fluid — the idea and the form of the final result kept shifting along the way. We started with one plan, but after every encounter, the project changed. The key moments that really defined the direction were the workshops with young people. Hearing their hopes, worries, and visions shaped the recipes we eventually created.

One of the challenges was figuring out how to translate these visions through our own eyes and through an artistic approach, without losing their authenticity. We didn't want to just "report" what young people said, but to find a way to reimagine their perspectives into something tangible — in our case, food.

Our methodology was a mix of direct engagement (workshops, surveys, conversations) and artistic translation (turning voices into recipes, stories into ingredients). Storytelling was central because it allowed us to highlight individual stories while connecting them to a shared narrative. For example, Gabriel, the student who baked the bread for our final event, is not just someone we collaborated with — his contribution also became part of the story of young people's dreams, hopes, and worries for the future.

In this way, storytelling helped us create a bridge: between voices and recipes, between individual perspectives and collective imagination, between today's realities and tomorrow's possibilities.

THE COLLABORATION

IM: We were really lucky with our team — the collaboration felt very smooth and natural from the start. Each of us brought different strengths and experiences into the project, and that shaped both the process and the final outcome. At the same time, we were constantly learning from each other, whether it was about design, facilitation, or even how to cook new things.

This balance between contributing our own skills and being open to learning created a dynamic where the project could keep evolving. It also made the work feel less like dividing tasks and more like building something together, step by step.

EB: Collaborating with students of diverse ages and backgrounds was a learning experience in itself too. The conversations we had with them, and the flavours, feelings, and colours they described, shaped the direction of the project and influenced the format of the final output. As a team, we hadn't predefined that we would specifically work with food recipes. I believe neither of us thought we would.

LEARNINGS

EB: Young people along tram No.10 hold both hope and a feeling of uncertainty about the future. Most imagine a peaceful, connected, and fairer world, yet many doubt we are moving in that direction. Anxiety surfaced often — about a quarter of survey participants said the future makes them uneasy. For young adults, the biggest concern is how to make career choices and find opportunities in a time of political and climate instability.

In the workshops we had the chance for more nuanced conversations about the emotions the future provokes. Using a wheel of emotions perhaps helped par-

ticipants explore a broader vocabulary to describe their feelings. Interestingly, the students we met expressed more confidence and enthusiasm about what lies ahead compared to the young adults in the survey. They spoke of big plans and dreams for travel and self-realisation. Moving along the tram's route between schools and universities of different profiles, I noted how the idea of success takes many forms — for some, it meant building a strong career and contributing to citizen culture; for others, it was the vision of a large family or the commitment to serving God.

Despite the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the future, we learned that young people draw motivation from connection, care, and the possibility of new experiences. They are energized by time spent with loved ones, shared problem-solving and creativity, travelling and seeing the world. Many spoke about time spent in nature, which consistently came up as a source of strength and renewal.

THE SCHOOL

EE: I'm proud of the way our project built upon itself throughout its different stages–gathering the stories and voices of the youth, translating them into the recipes in our zine, and the final event that brought so many people together to share in a collective experience of eating. For me the final event especially rounded out the way "Recipes for Future" relates to USS and its themes. In our earliest brainstorming sessions as a cohort, we talked a lot about how we wished for more spaces of intergenerational connection, that our cities could provide more opportunities for young people to be heard and celebrated by older generations. I think that our picnic succeeded in doing that in a way–many people of all generations gathered to eat a meal directly inspired by the thoughts and feelings of the youth.

For more information:
@recipes.forthefuture

Spicy
Sriracha
cream cheese
dip

Салса
от праскова

Peach
salsa

Зелена
разядка

Green dip

Tomato
chutney

Домашен
чипс

"THE LACK OF SHARED SPACE IS NOT ONLY AN URBAN PROBLEM, BUT ALSO A SOCIAL ONE"

A conversation with Vladiya Mihaylova and participants of the Urban Storytelling School

During the summer residency of the Urban Storytelling School, we talked with Vladiya Mihaylova from Toplocentrala — chief curator for visual arts at the new art center in Sofia that provides a platform for independent art, performance, and community engagement. The conversation touches on urban change, democratic processes, young people, and the relationship between art, community, and public life.

Vladiya: For years, I worked at the municipal Sofia City Art Gallery, and then took the position of the head of the Visual Arts Department here. Toplocentrala was founded mainly through the joint efforts of the independent scene for performing arts, contemporary dance and theater, which lacked proper infrastructure in Sofia. We see Toplocentrala as a continuation and "revival" of part of the National Palace of Culture — because the building of the Center is constructed on the foundations of the old thermal power plant of the National Palace of Culture — but as a new type of institution which acts more horizontally, more in the network, which engages different communities, not only artistic.

I've worked on several projects dealing directly with public space. One was in Plovdiv, where the artist Kirill Kuzmanov built a mirror wall across a small street. Another project in Sofia was with Czech artist Katarzyna Šeda, known for her long-term community work aimed at real neighborhood change. She created a city game in the overbuilt district of Manastirski Livadi — West, where the infrastructure is chaotic and the cars dominate the traffic, due to massive overdevelopment, something we often see in Sofia.

The lack of shared space is not only an urban, but also a social problem — it cuts connections between groups in Sofia, leaving few places for spontaneous communal life. Cities become more and more fragmented, and people more and more disengaged. So the real communal work should be a very complex one, beyond temporary events; it requires creating sustainable spaces where people can gather, stay, and form communities on their own terms.

Viktoria: What about the broader socio-political context art operates within?

Vladiya: I think artists are mediators in public space, as they don't come from specific interests. When you make a drawing, you do not necessarily engage, but you expand your imagination around how and what you can see. In this way, artists play an important role as mediators and facilitators. They act as provokers — not only of communities, but also of thought, attention, and attitude — stimulating processes that unfold in the public space. Through their work, artists expand mental horizons and initiate transformations that can be urban, architectural, conceptual, or even political.

When democracy "came" to Bulgaria — a phrase commonly used in the country — it did not merely signify a political change, but the arrival of an idea associated with the imagined world beyond the Iron Curtain. However imagination is one thing, and the practice of democracy is another. In Bulgaria, democratic culture had little ground to build upon — there were no deeply rooted traditions of civic participation or institutional transparency, and the ideals that "arrived" often clashed with the realities of post-socialist transition.

For years, Bulgarians were asked: "Do you feel European?" Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, yet people still asked me this. I would say: "What do you mean? We are in Europe, so I am European, no?"

In the early years, democracy often appeared as a kind of performance — a spectacle resembling a magician's show, in which everything seemed suddenly and magically possible, yet the illusion faded when confronted with everyday realities and institutional inertia. And within years, the real performative process was completely different from the very democratic ideas. I'm speaking now as a cultural theoretician. In the early 1990s, there was massive privatization — everything communal was dismantled and returned to individuals, but in a chaotic, power-driven way. This created deep social imbalances: the very rich, the very poor, winners and losers. In the 1990s, there was also excessive individualism. Everyone wanted to express themselves freely, but that isn't real democracy. This excessive sense of individual freedom often came at the cost of boundaries — a space where personal ambition and desire for growth overshadowed collective responsibility and eroded many of the

values that once held people together.

Bulgarian society still operates as a Balkan (Oriental) one that has public space crossed with networks, and I'm talking about money networks, business networks, business related to a political life that occupy the shadow of the public space.

In recent years, we have seen small, independent spaces that somehow survive within this network of interests and manage to exist between these interests. But it's just the start of the real democratic process that we should develop from now on.

Viktoria: How do today's global conditions—where wars erupt in some regions while peace feels petrified elsewhere—reflect on our ability to navigate and adapt?

Vladiya: Globally, I think we're witnessing the manifestation of the darker side of modernity. Neither Putin, nor Trump, nor Netanyahu came from nowhere. These figures emerged from long historical processes shaped by human decisions and particular value systems grounded in excess: the cult of the individual, domination over nature, grand national or spatial ambitions, and the concentration of capital.

In the early 20th century, modernity was tied to ideas and collective visions of progress; today, it is tied to the personal ambitions of those who have accumulated capital and symbolic power to act. This concentration of wealth has brought with it the concentration of power, the erosion of the middle class, the deepening fragmentation of societies and the disappearance of public space and institutions. What once appeared as the promise of personal freedom has transformed into a system of privilege, where the boundaries between ambition and exploitation are blurred.

What we are witnessing now is an excessive pathology — personal in some cases, systemic in others — and a pervasive narcissism that has become the defining illness of our time. This narcissism legitimises the right to be ruthless, to put oneself first, to confuse self-expression with self-interest. It is an extreme distortion of the concept of personal well-being, which no longer depends on mutuality or

solidarity but on visibility, accumulation, and domination. Trump is visible only because he has the platform, yet the mindset he embodies is widely shared.

I do believe we are living through a time of profound change, though its direction remains uncertain. On one hand, there are people who recognise these problems and try to act, even if their power is limited. On the other hand, there is excessive, self-referential power without long-term vision — and that is what fundamentally distinguishes our present from the beginning of modernity.

Viktoria: Let's go back to the topic of young people, a topic at the core of the Urban Storytelling School — how do you feel about young people today, and what do you think their real options and actions are?

Vladiya: I have no clear idea, but it's definitely very different. Our generation grew up with a strong sense of the future — now that idea feels blurred. But this uncertainty also gives young people a higher threshold than we had at their age. They seem more mature in a way, with a stronger sense of responsibility. They probably understand better than older generations that extreme individualism doesn't work. I think they're pushed to think about this because they need to imagine a possible future.

Eleonora: For our project "Recipes for Future", we did workshops in several schools and also conducted surveys at tram stops. Of course, we found a big mix of perspectives, but what really surprised me was that many of the young people we spoke with weren't as anxious or worried about the future as we expected. That was a big surprise for me — a lot of them actually have curiosity about the future.

Curiosity as an emotion came up a lot, along with a sense of excitement. What I found interesting was the mix between individual and collective visions of the future. Many talked about wanting to realise themselves professionally, and they felt capable and confident about that. And a lot of students also wanted more collective values: care, understanding, and cooperation.

Vladiya: For me, as a mother, this raises big questions about what our children have to learn. What is a "good skill"? My generation valued discipline and knowledge. I imagine that it's better for me to keep the curiosity of my children, so they can know that they must seek new knowledge and be curious all the time. I'm really not sure that some of the professions will exist in the near future. There's a clear tendency that now we go back to nature and make things with our hands again, with gardening or making bread.

Guglielmo: In our project "Finding Home", we interviewed people from different backgrounds who had moved to Berlin. We wanted to understand how and when people start to feel at home in a new place. In Berlin, many refugees came because of the wars. Is this also something you see in Sofia? There's a lot of pressure on the city here too — it feels quite similar to what's happening in Berlin.

Vladiya: Is it also a topic in Sofia, this migration crisis all around, and is it also felt in the texture of the city, and in the reaction of the society. But, it depends, it's not an equal thing. I mean, Bulgarians open their homes and their hearts for Ukrainian people, but if we speak about migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, it's not the same. And in this, Bulgaria is a very conservative country, it's not hospitable at all. We do have a lot of examples of the Bulgarian state refusing to give citizenship or permanent residency to people who are political migrants and could be killed.

And I do believe that Germany and France are much more open than Bulgaria towards migrants. Though historically, towns like Plovdiv are all migration towns. We have Armenians, Jews, Turkish people living there, and they live without this migrant identity crisis that we have, because it was natural to move from place to place. Now, we do have an identity crisis related to migration; we have a lot of fear, fueled and exaggerated by right-wing people, and it's part of the whole contemporary situation, which is also produced by these identity policies.

Maria: The last person we interviewed yesterday, Maggie, 18 years old, said she really hates how fragmented society is and how people are divided by labels. From my own experience, especially now that Ksenia and I are finishing our mas-

ter's in Berlin, which focuses on post-colonial thinking and challenging oppressive systems in art institutions, I've realised how important it is to name differences — to acknowledge that being white or Black, for example, is not the same experience. But it's equally important to move beyond those labels. There's intersectionality, and there's also individuality; it's crucial to see how we connect as human beings beyond those differences.

Switching the topic a bit — how do you see the connection with the community, and how can an art space become more independent from state funding? This has become an important issue in the art world, especially when the state grows more authoritarian.

Vladiya: Bulgaria was never anywhere near Germany in terms of public arts funding, so we don't feel the cuts as harshly, simply because we never had that level of support. But yes, we feel it. Especially this year, the Ministry of Culture includes a very populist party that has no real understanding of art or why it matters, so they see no reason to fund it. We're facing serious difficulties; institutions like Toplocentrala are struggling.

The idea of public money and public investment in arts is related to education, it's related to the development of visual or performing or whatever artistic language, outside of the market dependency, and it's related to the social access to art. When we speak about the departure of the state in public funding, we speak about changing the art field as well, because, sadly or not, big projects, like operas, big theatres, are not possible to exist without state funding. The state is not a corporation; it's a tool, it's a channel of money for the people. Without state funding, a lot of art spaces will be closed, and this is a reality because they cannot exist without public money.

A PLACE BY THE WINDOW,
2020, a project by Kateřina Šedá
at Monastery Meadows — West,
Sofia, curator Vladiya Mihaylova.

"WHAT WOULD YOU SHARE WITH OTHERS — AND WHAT SHOULD BE SHARED WITH YOU?"

"Sharing" Kiosk — Небайдужі
Text & Photos by Maryna Markova, Koopkultur e.V.

A kiosk that doesn't sell but shares — that's how the project Sharing to Empower began. It explored how newly arrived people from Ukraine in Berlin invent their own forms of sharing and how these practices can create a sense of belonging, help build community, and help shape a new urban environment.

The starting point was the construction of a mobile "Sharing Kiosk," designed and built by a Wilkommensklasse (classes for learning German as a second language) from Berlin. They gave it the name Небайдужі — a Ukrainian word for "those who care," "those who won't look away."

It all started with a simple question: What would you share with others — and what should be shared with you? Objects, knowledge, gestures, memories. We built a collective storytelling process from this question. The ideas took shape as a mobile vehicle: a kiosk on a cargo bike, carrying things, experiences, practices and messages from place to place.

IMAGINING WAYS OF SHARING

Some imagined a tiny hotel on wheels — a place to pause while on the move. Somewhere you could charge your phone, drink water, take a quick shower, fix your bike, and gather strength again.

Others envisioned a first-aid station for recently arrived people: shelves filled with essentials — hygiene items, clothing, medicine — alongside toys and crayons for children, food for pets. A shelf where you could leave something and take something in return.

One group wanted to dedicate the kiosk entirely to animals. Their reasoning: people often receive support, but animals rarely do. They imagined water fountains, feeding stations, and a small shelter to rest or hide — a piece of home for animals in the middle of the city.

Some looked back to their memories from Ukraine: games in the treehouses, friendships and conversations. Their vision was a kiosk similar to a treehouse — a joyful space with chairs in the sun, a secret box for wishes, and a glass cabinet to display and pass their messages.
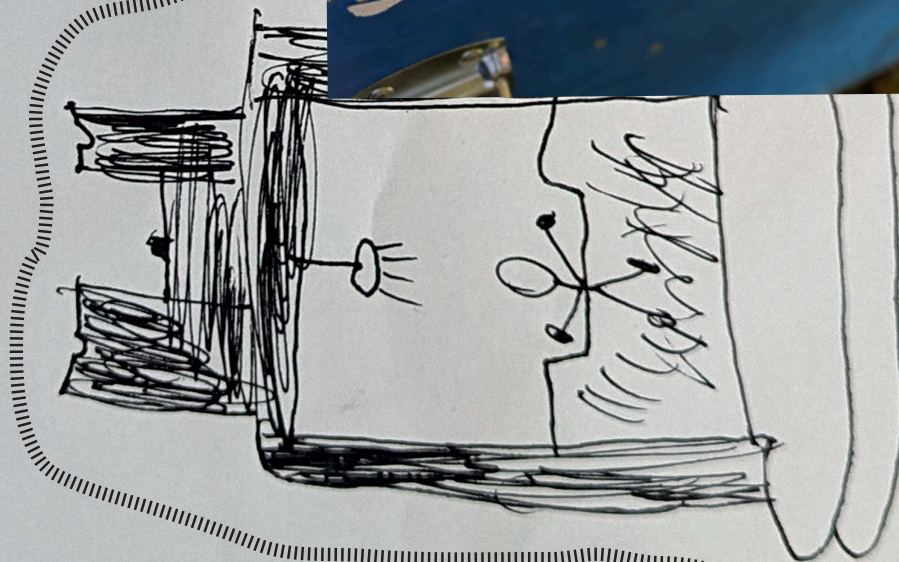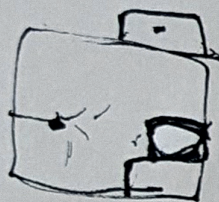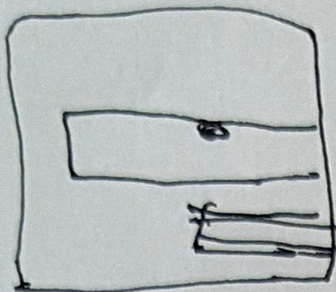
OUTCOME

Not all of these ideas could be easily combined. But step by step, a small kiosk on a cargo bike came to life: with self-built chairs, swap shelves, and tools to repair bikes. Its roof could fold out — at times becoming a dining table, at others a print station or a workbench for new ideas.

The kiosk turned into a place for stories. The young people wrote messages and memories on its surface. Inside, they left secret texts — words not meant to be read — and uplifting notes for those who would later encounter the kiosk.

In the end, the Sharing Kiosk became much more than a functional space. It grew into a collective storytelling tool, a living example of how participatory storytelling can empower young people to shape their environment, activate communities, and create new images of "home" in a foreign city.

(under construction)

What do you think art can give to young people in the city?

What does it mean to bring home with you?

How do we live with uncertainty?

FINDING HOME

Charlie Wanda, Jamie McGhee, Sofie Bang Kirkegaard, Guglielmo Sandri Giachino

"Finding Home" is a sound installation that asks: What does "home" mean for young people with migration backgrounds? The project emerges from conversations with young adults living in Berlin, synthesizing a range of personal perspectives that are shaped by movement across borders, memories carried from elsewhere, and the process of finding home away from home. The installation presents recorded voices alongside symbolic objects: small things mentioned in each story, held onto or remembered. Each voice is housed in a moving box, creating a tactile and intimate archive of migration, memory, and the many ways we try to define what home can be — physically, emotionally, and symbolically.

THE QUESTIONS WE ASKED:

• What makes you feel home?

Inspired by the Senses
• Which sounds remind you of home?
• Which object reminds you of home?
• Which smells remind you of home?
• Which memory makes you think about home?
• Which food makes you think about home?

THE INITIAL INSPIRATION

Berlin is a city of immigration. Twenty-five percent of Berliners are foreign nationals. That's 972,000 people from 170 countries. Even within our group, we come from Italy, Denmark, Germany and the United States. We started to think about the emotional cost of leaving your home and moving to another country. We also started to think about what "home" means: Can you truly feel at home in a place where people will always see you as a foreigner? Or, conversely, what happens if you return to the place you're "from" and feel like a stranger there? What does it mean to bring home with you? What does it mean to leave home behind?

THE PROCESS

Were there key moments that defined the direction or shifted your approach? What were the main challenges? What was the methodology you applied? Why and how is "storytelling" a good way to approach the topics?

Already during our week at C*SPACE in March, certain themes began to surface repeatedly — movement, flow, and migration. Though still vague at the time, these early conversations laid the foundation for what would eventually become our project.

In the weeks following the initial workshop, it was challenging to find a clear, collective direction. The topics felt broad and difficult to unify. But as the process unfolded, we found that a meaningful starting point for the project lay in the intersection between the city, ourselves, and young people.

We all have personal experiences with moving between countries and navigating different cultures, and living in a multicultural city like Berlin shaped our reflections. At some point, a central question crystallized: What does "home" mean when you've left what you once called home and are trying to build a new one in a foreign place? This is an intimate and personal topic, and we found that working with sound as a medium could be an effective way to transmit a sense of intimacy and closeness.

We further wanted to explore how each interviewed person's story of home could be both heard and "housed", and that's where the idea of constructing a sculptural element to present the audio stories was born. We began experimenting with different ways of exhibiting the project. Early on, the idea of using moving boxes emerged, as they could serve both as a sculptural form and as a symbol of transition, relocation, and being in-between homes.

Furthermore, it was important to us to include an interactive and immersive aspect in the installation. We wanted to create a space where people were invited to physically engage and connect through their senses and own experience. We drew inspiration from each personal story and translated the elements mentioned into spatial and sensorial experiences. Step by step, we tested various formats and ways of building and creating immersion.

Finally, adapting the project idea to a new environment in Sofia allowed it to evolve, shaped by the site itself, as well as by the people who engaged with and contributed to the ongoing storytelling by adding their own perspectives on home.

THE COLLABORATION

We are a group coming from 4 different backgrounds, so it was quite challenging to find a common idea — but interesting as well. With different tests, we defined the project and created an interactive audio installation that revealed different outputs. The idea of "home" arose from the interviewees' memories, a wide range of feelings. This led us to step up the project, building it with a simple yet evocative material, the moving boxes, which allowed us to create a flexible and versatile installation.

LEARNINGS

There's this idea that if you're young, it's easier for you to leave your old home behind and integrate into a new place, especially if you spend your entire adult life in that new place. But we were surprised to discover that even for people who'd moved here quite young, they kept a part of their old home with that. Some of them even considered their old home their "true" home, even if they didn't plan on moving back.

THE SCHOOL

During the Urban Storytelling School, we had intense brainstorming sessions with all the participants on the topics of youth, spaces, cities. Every person and group exposed ideas, proposals and feedback, in a very inclusive way. It was a great experience. We learned a lot through each other's ideas, personal views and experiences.

In the more advanced stage, through the stories collected in our project, we decided to represent key elements of the interviews in the boxes themselves. This representation raised new questions for us: How could we develop the installation not just through audio interviews and sounds, but also by adding a sensorial and interactive element? The result was unexpected. Thanks to a collaborative approach, we learned and discovered new possibilities, incorporating new unplanned features into our idea.

Installation at Swimming Pool, Sofia,
as part of Imagining Cities, 2025

„TEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS ARE THE MOST VALUABLE, BECAUSE THEY CREATE AN AURA, ENERGY, AND SOUL…"

**Interview with Dimitar Nikolov
by Anna Ivanova**

*"1954 - 2024", 2024, marble,
Dimitar Nikolov*

We first met Dimitar Nikolov during the *Imagining Cities* symposium within the Urban Storytelling School, where his imaginative approach to urban space through sculpture stood out. A sculptor and stonemason based in Plovdiv, he works primarily with stone, as his practice moves between craftsmanship and conceptual reflection, connecting street culture, public space, and history. In this conversation, Dimitar shares thoughts on the dialogue between art and the city, the poetics of material, and the traces left by human presence over time.

Anna: What are you working on at the moment?

Dimitar: Well, I continue working by carving stone, but with a desire for more understanding and resonance, since I've started rock climbing and going more often to places where the stone dances and sings.

Anna: What has been your favorite project so far, and why?

Dimitar: I consider *1954 — 2024* the work closest to me, because the site of my observations is very real and personal. I associate it both with the street culture of our capital and the practice of BMX as an extreme sport, as well as with the history of current affairs — not to mention stonemasonry. The essential victory was overcoming the disc brakes toward the clash with the act of intrusion — first by inscribing the names of great authors, second by destroying them as part of a mirror act on the side of factuality.

Anna: How do you choose the places where you create your art, and what inspires you in the urban environment?

Dimitar: I don't like clichés, yet the places impose themselves — just like in the path of a free-spirited creative character, who finds locations due to the nature and form of the urban environment, natural features, or roots that pose the question: "Who am I, and who am I now, in this period of my life?"`

Anna: In *BMXer* you turn sport into an artistic intervention in the city. How do you view temporary interventions as a way to meet and engage young people in public space?

Dimitar: Sport has long been part of art, I believe, because it involves young groups of people in creative expression — be it through performance or through embedding a temporary or permanent environment by inhabiting and building structures within a given setting. Temporary interventions are the most valuable in this sense, because they create an aura, energy, and soul out of feelings, thoughts, and memories manifested through encounters, conversations, and recognition in the art of the moment, or as a post-factum experience.

Anna: Your work in public spaces often brings you face-to-face with accidental audiences. What do you learn from young people's reactions — are they open to such forms of expression in the urban environment?

Dimitar: You know, children are the most fascinating — especially when they approach with their open intensity toward discovering form, grabbing a clay sculpture, a stick, or a pebble, and responding with a free-spirited character. And the parents are even more interesting — with their oratory and directions.

Anna: What do you think art can give to young people in the city that other forms of communication can't?

Dimitar: A path to the child within us.

Anna: In the residency *The Old School,* you work with materials and architectural environments, creating a sense of connection between the traces of ancestors and the contemporary human. How do you think young people today perceive this link with the past in the spaces they inhabit — in and beyond the city?
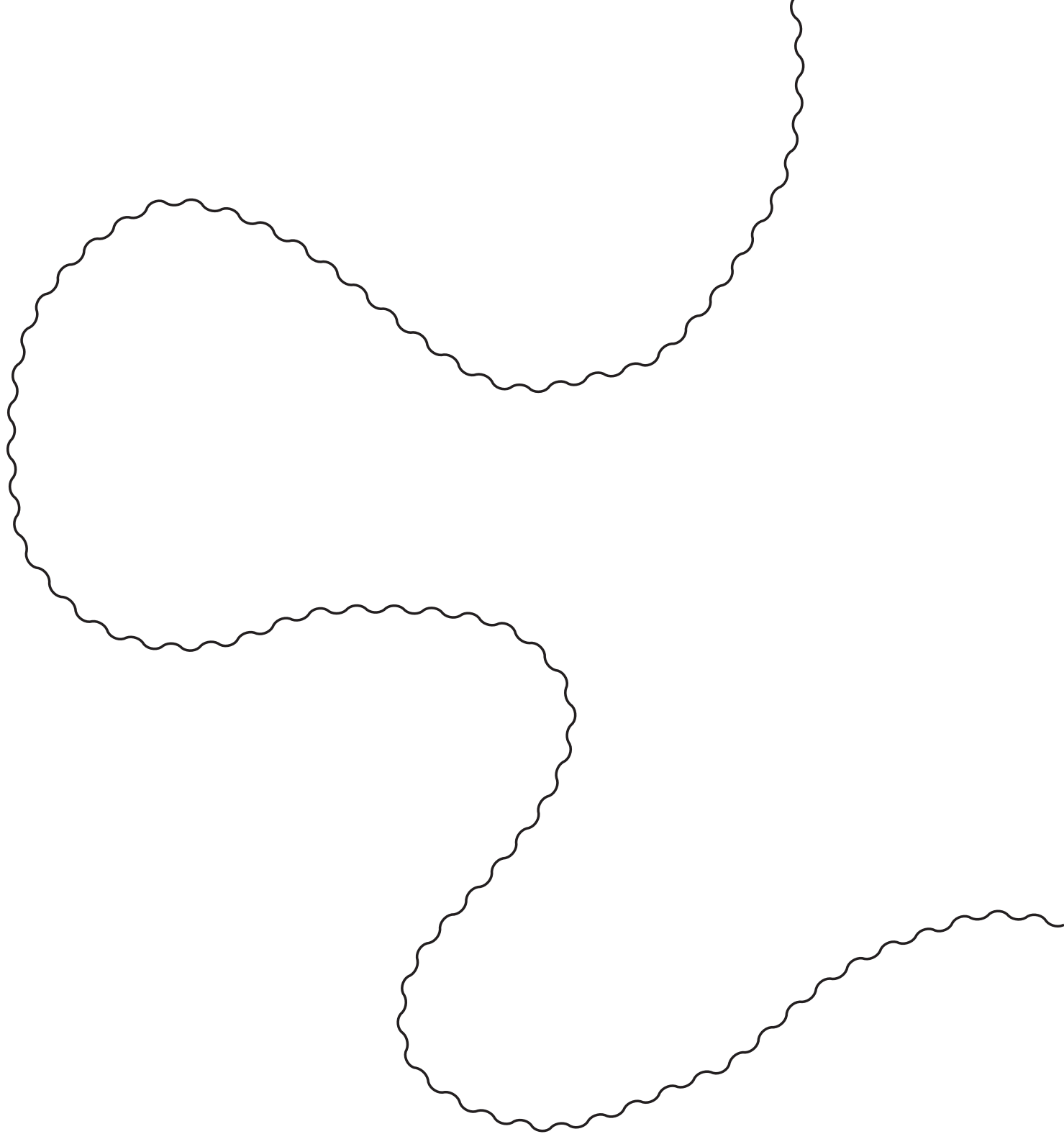
Dimitar: We usually take for granted and as everyday the things we possess in our surroundings, and that's why I consider temporary change a value — a way to make things visible. We often go to new and wondrous places and admire what we see, yet it's hard to imagine difference when it's invisible.

Anna: Your work around the Monument to the Soviet Army shows an interest in history and politics in public space. How engaged are young people with these themes, and how can art bring them closer to them?

Large-scale stone assemblages created during 'The Old School Residency', Gorna Lipnitsa, 2024, Dimitar Nikolov

Dimitar: Politics drives art, and art drives politics. As for how engaged young people are, I wouldn't dare to say, since I don't want to put people under a single label. Egypt, Greece, and Rome are the important examples in history — as a reference, one could mention the melted gold elements of the statue of Athena, which stood in the Parthenon during the Peloponnesian War. This happened due to people's reasoning that without art there is no culture, and without culture, a state cannot exist.

(day)dreaming

What does an inspector of Playability of Public Spaces do?

Who tells the story of a neighborhood?

Where can you find young people in the city?

THE SHINY SEXY: HETEROTOPIAS IN STUDENT TOWN

Maria Getova, Asya Petkova, Ana-Maria Molnar

Through the stories of people living in Student Town, Asya Petkova, Maria Getova, and Ana-Maria Molnar map the many faces of the neighbourhood, originally planned during socialism for newly arrived students. Does Student Town remain a space for youth, or has it gradually turned into a home for all generations, beginning to resemble any other district in the capital?

The Shiny Sexy — a random sign on a random shop in Student Town — turns into an inspiration for the representation of Sofia's youngest neighbourhood. A place where every wall is covered with posters advertising chalga singers, where billboards blind you with colour, and the smell of döner kebab hangs on every corner near the nightclubs. But also, where kindergartens face lingerie stores, public laundromats are placed next to every dormitory, and an ice rink stands across the food market.

The project explores the neighbourhood through its heterotopias — spaces where overlapping functions bring together people with different daily routes. The team — an architect, a poet, and a photographer — made a guided walk through the area in July, tracing the imaginary map shaped by its inhabitants. A journey from palace to palace, revealing hidden treasures, fantastic characters, and their stories.

ONLINE SURVEY

- What's your age?
- You are: Male/Female
- What is your connection to Student Town: I live there/ I study there/ I work there/ I used to live/study/work there/Other
- Which is your favourite place in the neighbourhood and why?
- What do you notice when you walk on the streets of Student Town?
- List 3 places you often pass by.
- List 3 places you avoid on your route.
- Do you spend your free time in the neighbourhood?
- Do you have an interesting story about/from Student Town to share?

IN PERSON INTERVIEWS:

- Are you from Sofia or when did you move to Sofia?
- How long have you been living in Student Town?
- Do you remember the first thing that made an impression on you when you started living/studying there?
- What do you like most about the neighborhood?
- What is your favorite place in the neighborhood? Why?
- How do you think the Student Town differs from other neighborhoods?
- What is your daily route? What impresses you most about it?
- Do you spend your free time in the Student Town?
- Is there anything that annoys you in the neighborhood?
- Are there any places you avoid?
- What is your most interesting story about Student Town?
- What are your dreams for the future of the neighborhood?
- Do you think you will continue living here in the future?

The Student's Park

The Children's Palace

THE INITIAL INSPIRATION

The project emerged from the provocation of Urban Storytelling School to focus on young people. All participants were asked the questions "Where can you find young people in the city? What spaces do they mostly occupy?". From there, our team decided to look into "the youngest" neighbourhood of Sofia — Student Town. Constructed during Bulgaria's socialist regime for young people coming to Sofia for their studies, the neighbourhood continues to be predominantly inhabited by working-age population. During Bulgaria's so-called "transition" — describing the period after the fall of the socialist regime and the switch to a capitalist system — Student Town became associated with its "chalga" (Bulgarian popular folk music) clubs and nightlife, encapsulating the symbols of the societal and political shifts, still evident in the neighbourhood's visually diverse landscape. As a result, in the following years, it has continued to carry the reputation of a loud and unpleasant space. It has been neglected due to various prejudices, not only by many of Sofia's residents, but also by local policies. Our aim with this project was to find other perspectives, look into the stories of the neighbourhood's inhabitants, observe the ways they interact with it, and understand why so many young people find life there attractive.

THE PROCESS

Once we had chosen to focus on Student Town, we allowed the process to develop naturally. Our initial intention was to take people on a walk in the neighbourhood, but we had no specific direction since we didn't know the area. While scouting potential locations, we accidentally stumbled across what ultimately became the starting point of our route — a private kindergarten designed to resemble a fairytale castle.

We conducted online research via a questionnaire in which we invited people to tell us about their most visited places, the daily routes they take, and if they avoid any areas. Participants were encouraged to share their interesting, funny, or notable stories from the neighbourhood and many of them were eager to recount their memories and experiences. We interpreted their responses in the form of a map, which became our final representation. A small number of people from different demographics were invited for in-depth interviews and asked about their connection to Student Town. We represented their views and stories with quotes in our printed visual materials, as well as in the guided walk.

This method of investigating the multilayered perception of the neighbourhood appeared to be the best approach to fostering new discussions around it. The stories we collected — funny, ridiculous, sometimes strange — were an authentic way to invite the public to consider a different viewpoint on a place with a deeply rooted problematic reputation. Storytelling proved to be the most effective and humanising method for exploring the intersections of urbanism and youth.

THE COLLABORATION

During the Urban Storytelling School at C*Space Berlin, multiple ideas and concepts emerged from the common discussions between Sofia and Berlin participants. We were given diverse perspectives on how to reflect upon the presence of youth in the urban space. Most importantly, a lot of questions arose and followed us back to Sofia, where we had to transfer and apply them to the local setting. The process of looking at the particular context through the lenses of wider questions, valid for different places, fostered the genesis of our project. Furthermore, our team was composed of people from very different educational and professional backgrounds. Consequently, the final project needed to be a combination of all of the team members' artistic or research profiles, which significantly influenced the direction of our creative inquiries. "The Shiny Sexy" was born out of the internal dynamics of our team, and it resembles a patchwork of our wide-branching interests and methodologies for exploring the connections between youth and urban spaces.

LEARNINGS

The interviews we conducted during our research gave us the definite impression that what young people value in Student Town is its compactness, having everything needed in close proximity, living in "a city within a city". Young people like the variety; they are eager to find new spaces to visit, and have the energy to explore the urban environment. Although we often heard that leaving Student Town isn't necessary for daily needs, the absence of certain essential facilities is still noticed by the young residents. Facilities such as bookstores, as well as places to study or gather within the dormitories or the universities. In the end, exactly those spaces, which a classic student campus is unthinkable without, are the ones missing or converted to some other function. Student Town is far from the image of the typical campus; it took on a life of its own as a vastly growing neighbourhood in the capital of Bulgaria. However, youth, for all its novelty, remains in need of this centuries-old notion of common spaces.

THE SCHOOL

During the process, we identified many parallels between our project and others, especially the project "Finding Home", focusing on the topics of migration and belonging. The team explored the topic of home and what objects newcomers bring with them, so they could recreate the domestic bliss. Our project focused on the outdoor space and the transformations it endures due to the presence of young people. This "young" domestication of the urban environment is connected to the adoption of very specific functions, such as public laundromats. They are found in this district, rather than elsewhere in Sofia, because the dormitories lack washing machines, creating a need for such facilities close by. Further, the concentration of fast-food restaurants in Student Town is incomparable to other areas within the city, driven by an unparalleled level of demand. By chance, during our guided walk, we witnessed two students carrying a fridge and a couch in the courtyard outside their dormitory. In other words, The Shiny Sexy investigates how young people are creating a "new home" beyond the inner space — an extension in the urban landscape that generates heterotopias.

INSTRUCTION SESSION

Instructions by Silvia Cherneva, Inspector of Playability of Public Spaces and member of the Association of Independently Playing Citizens of Working Age

Hello! My name is Silvia Cherneva, Inspector of Playability of Public Spaces. I am here due to the unprecedented interest in the activities of our inspectorate, and with the goal of familiarizing more of you — especially those interested in obtaining a license — with the details, practices, and regulations of our work.

To get a sense of the audience — are there people here with children? With dogs? Some of you may face similar challenges to ours. And are there others — without children or dogs — who remember recently playing just for the sake of it? We might speak with you later. For everyone else, I hope this lecture is exactly what you need; we will leave time for questions at the end.

The lecture will unfold in several stages: first, I will tell you a bit more about myself, about the inspectorate and the association; then we will summarize the characteristics that make a space playable; and finally, everyone will have the chance to take part in a practical evaluation of the remarkable space we are in right now.

What is my background? I am a member of the Association of Independently Playing Citizens of Working Age. Our practice is low-skilled, yet not particularly popular and largely anonymous. Sometimes it is confused with outdoor sports, but unlike those, our goal is not to lose weight, gain strength, or perform a set number of repetitions. There is some overlap with the parkour and freerun communities, except that we are not interested in virtuosic athletic feats, nor in creating Instagram content.

So, what exactly do we do? As I mentioned, our practice is non-functional — and this is where its potential lies. At its core is the question: *can I use my body in an unusual way?* As we enter adulthood, most of us face the challenge of constantly engaging in useful activities, and our bodies fall into a mode that serves these functions. Thus, we use them in a limited set of ways — walking, sitting… any others? (question to the audience).

The idea of playtime is to try out other things our bodies can do, but rarely get the chance to. For example: climbing, swinging, spinning until we feel dizzy, hiding somewhere. These are activities without any purpose other than to be interesting and fun in the present moment, to connect us with another person playing alongside us. A less obvious result is that sometimes, by placing our body in a new position, we discover a new perspective — both on the world around us and on the world within.

What makes a place suitable for this kind of play? First of all, it needs to feel safe and secure. In my research, I find that in order to take risks, I need to feel safe. For example: no cars passing by. Also: some kind of backdrop or shelter. The shape of the space matters too. If it already has a function — like a sidewalk — it's best not to overlap with it, so we don't interfere with others, and they don't interfere with us. Sensory conditions matter as well: how noisy is the space, how hot, how cold, whether it's drafty or airy. Simply: how pleasant is it to stay there.

Do we need special play equipment? Those with children and dogs might confirm that they can play anywhere. In fact, we all can play anywhere, and urban spaces already offer opportunities for this. Part of our activity is exercising the imagination — seeing familiar things in unfamiliar ways, linked to the possibilities they offer our bodies.

So here we are, at the threshold of the practical part of this lecture. You might ask: does the place we are in right now meet the minimum requirements?

We see that imagination is necessary. So I now suggest that we test the playability of this triangle, even though officially it is just a sidewalk and a parking lot. I did a preliminary survey, and the points for playability on my scale fell just short. That is why I brought this additional piece of equipment. You may treat it as part of the landscape and include it in your evaluation.

The idea of playtime is to try out other things our bodies can do, but rarely get the chance to.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

1   Identify elements of the place that correspond to the body and can offer interesting possibilities for movement.

2   Try out the movement you imagined, and observe how interesting and/or pleasant it feels. These are subjective categories, since "interesting" can sometimes include discomfort or physical challenge.

3   Take care of your own safety!

4   Based on your experience with each element, evaluate it on the following scale:

-3 PTS.: I don't feel safe.

-2 PTS.: Something in the environment distracts or annoys me.

-1 PTS.: It's uncomfortable to stay here longer — too noisy / hot / cold / etc.

0 PTS.: Nothing particularly interesting happened.

1 PT.: I found one initial movement, but nothing beyond it.

2 PTS.: I could spend at least 10 minutes here.

3 PTS.: I could stay here all day.

We see that imagination is necessary.

Performative lecture by Silvia Cherneva as part of Nine Elephants, 2025.

BIOS

Center for Social Vision (Sofia) is a platform fostering exchange of experiences, policies and action towards socially-related art practices. Established in 2021, it brings together curators, artists, researchers, writers, architects and designers to explore the intersections between art and society, looking for opportunities for dialogue and reflection. It has hosted several large-scale programmes, such as "Negotiation" (2022), "Constitutions" (2023), the research group "Art in the city" (2024) and the informal practice sharing "Imagining Cities" (2025). Run by the Blue Cube Foundation. www.centerforsocialvision.org

C*SPACE (Berlin) is a purpose-driven creative space for co-working, projects and events in Berlin-Weißensee. We also initiate cultural and learning programs, co-creating and connecting ideas and encounters across borders. C*SPACE is a hub for social innovation, where global and local neighbors come together across cultural and sectoral boundaries to develop critical awareness and solutions for new forms of regenerative work and learning, as well as celebrate cultural diversity and exchange. C*SPACE stands for curiosity, courage, community and collaboration. www.c-space.eu

Elena Balabanska is an architect and urban designer based between Sofia and Copenhagen. In her practice, she explores creative research methods to trace narratives and social patterns in the built environment. She has international experience in participatory planning and design across scales – from urban assessments and neighbourhood plans to exhibition design. @e_balabanska

Silvia Cherneva works in dance, performance, and film. In her debut performance, *Critical Mass*, where performers hang from ropes suspended from the ceiling, she discovered that the audience enjoys hanging and swinging when given the chance. She has conducted research on the topic as a resident artist in the Trilateral Exchange program in Budapest, Sofia, and Philadelphia (2023–2024). Her current project, *Unstable Ground*, presents a kinetic installation for public spaces. In her spare time, Silvia acts as a self-appointed inspector of the playability of public spaces, occasionally reporting her findings on social media.

Viktor Damov is an architect and a PhD student at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering, and Geodesy. He is a co-founder of the architectural education research collective Underschool_. As part of this collective, he co-organized the exhibition and educational forum "Education Works: Observations on Architectural Education". He is currently participating in an academic exchange program at GTAS in Braunschweig, Germany, where his research focuses on the topic of "spatial agency."

Viktoria Draganova is a curator, founder of the art space Swimming Pool and its artistic director, initiator of diverse educational programs and research initiatives, including The Center for Social Vision. Since 2024, she curates Nine Elephants, a festival for art interventions in urban space. Viktoria also contributes to cultural policy development through her participation in working groups and committees. Based in Sofia, she holds a PhD in law and legal history.

Eleonora Edreva is a transdiscplinary artist, researcher, and educator. Her work explores intersections between traditional knowledge and contemporary life, moving between visual media like textile, video, and installation, and socially engaged practices like crafting with medicinal herbs, planting gardens, and creating spaces for intentional exchange. She holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Chicago and an MFA in Art & Ecology from the University of New Mexico. www.e-edreva.com

Gangway e.V. (Berlin) is a street social work organization supporting young people and adults throughout Berlin. Founded in 1990, Gangway works directly where society often looks away — in public spaces, on the streets, and in communities where people face exclusion, addiction, homelessness, or conflict. Over 100 social workers are active across 11 of Berlin's 12 districts, helping individuals regain control over their lives, access housing, education, and employment, and develop perspectives for the future. www.gangway.de

Maria Getova has a background in Cultural Studies and holds a Master's in Arts and Contemporary Culture (20th–21st Century) from Sofia University. She is an author of poetry and critical texts and has participated in different multidisciplinary projects. She is currently working as a cultural manager. In 2023 her debut poetry book titled "Half-Life" was published. @mimgetova Guglielmo Sandri Giachino is an architect, spatial designer and independent researcher. His work focuses on sustainability, community-driven strategies, urban analysis and critical reading of the space.

Maria Fallada Llandrich completed a BA in Arts and Design at Eina University in Barcelona, where she studied a mix of graphic and editorial design, design culture, illustration, and photography. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Raumstrategien (Spatial Strategies) at Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin, exploring artistic approaches to urban spaces and community engagement. www.mariafallada.com @mfallada

Anna Ivanova is a Sofia-based illustrator and assistant coordinator at Swimming Pool and the Blue Cube Foundation. Trained in the UK, her work explores the emotional architecture of post-socialist life - how memory, identity, and the everyday shape domestic and urban spaces. She co-founded The Slavic Tale, examining Bulgarian identity through sculptural miniatures of socialist-era housing, and is part of Kolko.slavko, a platform reflecting on the city as a space of cultural memory.

Kinder- und Jugendbüro Pankow (Berlin) empowers children and young people in Berlin-Pankow to have a say in shaping their surroundings. The office supports participation in decisions on public spaces, such as playgrounds, youth clubs and youth work, and neighborhood development through workshops, consultations, and participatory projects. As a cooperation project between the association Kinderring Berlin e.V. and Fachstelle Kinder- und Jugendbeteiligung und politische Bildung des Jugendamtes Pankow, it strengthens self-organization, civic engagement, and dialogue between young people, district administration, and politics. @mitbestimmen_in_pankow

Sofie Bang Kirkegaard has a background in social science and works in social urban development. She engages in interdisciplinary collaborations and explores critical perspectives

on the city including urban activism and sustainability. With a foundation in urban planning and performance design, her work is driven by a strong interest in community engagement, cultural exchange, and social inclusion.

Koopkultur e.V. (Berlin) is a migrant nonprofit organization and interdisciplinary network that initiates artistic, educational, and social processes. We see our work as a contribution to collective learning rooted in everyday experience, spatial relations, and shared forms of knowledge. Our practice engages with space both as a physical environment that can be shaped and as a social site of encounter and negotiation. For us, learning unfolds in the interplay between people, bodies, objects, and stories. www.koopkultur.de

Ksenia Lapina studied literature and social pedagogy and is currently pursuing an MA in Spatial Strategies at Kunsthochschule Weißensee. Born in the former USSR, she has been based in Berlin since 2015 and works at the intersection of art and community practice. Her creative work combines photography, text and textiles, and her background as a social worker shapes projects that facilitate dialogue and connection in urban and social spaces. @ksenia_lapina_works

Izabela Markova is an artist and graphic designer based in Sofia, Bulgaria. She works across branding, event design, posters, and illustration. Recently, she has been exploring diverse media and techniques, from art installations and collaborations to printing methods such as linocut, silkscreen, and risoprinting. @izabela_markova_

Jamie McGhee is a novelist and historian who explores the systemic policing of marginalized bodies. McGhee's work has been supported by art fellowships from Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Zürich University of the Arts and the Folger Shakespeare Institute. www.jamie-mcghee.com

Vladiya Mihaylova is a critic, curator and a cultural historian. Since 2021 she is a chief curator of visual arts at Regional Center for Contemporary Arts "Toplocentrala". From 2007 to

2021 Mihaylova was part of the team of Sofia City Art Gallery as a curator at Vaska Emanouilova Gallery where she worked on the programs for contemporary art and the museum archive of the gallery.

Ana-Maria Molnar is a photographer based between London and Bulgaria. She holds a BA in Press and Editorial Photography from Falmouth University, UK and is also an alumna of the VII Photo Academy in Sarajevo, where she completed Level 1 and 2 courses in Documentary Photography and Visual Storytelling. A lot of her work is influenced by both her international travels and the different facets of everyday life, and includes long term documentary projects as well as theme-based series.

Dimitar Nikolov is a Bulgarian sculptor and stonemason based in Plovdiv. He graduated from the Tsanko Lavrenov National Art School with a degree in Iconography and later earned a BA and MA in Sculpture from the National Academy of Arts, Sofia. Working primarily in stone, his practice explores material, form, and site-specificity. He has participated in numerous symposiums and exhibitions, including Contact Areas (Ilindentsi, 2019), Art of the Miniature Biennial (Ruse, 2020), In the Spirit of the Master (2021), Depoo Gallery (2023), Casa degli artisti(Milan, 2024), and The Old School residency (Gorna Lipnitsa, 2024). In 2019, he received first prize for sculpture in the Expad Global competition.

Asya Petkova is an architect and urbanist with a Master's degree from Politecnico di Milano (2024) and a Bachelor's from the Technical University of Vienna (2022). Her work explores the connection between space and narrative, with a focus on local identity, social inclusion, and participatory design.

Katya Romanova is Berlin-based interdisciplinary designer, C*SPACE program, and co-founder of re:imagine your city network. She has got over 13 years of experience in nonprofit and socio-cultural management with focus of participatory creative approaches, urban transformation, audio storytelling, and rituals of remembrance. Katya holds degrees in Language Teaching and Visual Communications, and is pursuing a M.A. in Public Design. www.reimaginecity.org

Charlie Wanda is an illustrator and art mediator based in Berlin. Her work combines drawing, performing arts and participatory practices. She has developed projects with people with disabilities and in refugee centres. Her commitment aims to foster empathy and reduce social barriers through artistic encounters.She works with institutions such as the Goethe Institute, the Institut Français, the Akademie der Künste and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. She designs multi-sensory performances, accessible exhibitions, inclusive workshops and live drawings, exploring care, perception and living together. www.charlottewanda.com

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