

# Drama in Drammen: Promoting Active Citizenship Through Applied Theatre

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses how applied theatre can promote new models of active citizenship in local urban politics. Focusing on ‘drama labs’ conducted in Drammen, Norway, the paper demonstrates how applied theatre promotes active citizenship by 1) remodelling representational frames and subject positions; 2) enabling new forms of embodied knowledge and understanding; and 3) engaging playfully with difference and contradiction. The paper argues that by promoting new models of active citizenship, applied theatre might reinvigorate public participation in urban politics.

## **Sammendrag**

Denne artikkelen diskuterer hvordan anvendt teater kan prege lokalpolitikk og lokal bevissthet ved å fremme nye modeller for aktivt (by)borgerskap. Med utgangspunkt i ‘drama labs’ som ble utført i Drammen, Norge, viser artikkelen hvordan anvendt teater kan fremme aktivt (by)borgerskap ved å 1) omorganisere representasjonelle rammeverk og subjekt posisjoner, 2) fostre nye former for kroppslig kunnskap og forståelse, og 3) tillate lekne tilnæringer til forskjeller og motsetninger. Artikkelen hevder at anvendt teater kan gjenopplive medvirkningsprosesser i, og engasjement for, ‘bypolitikk’ ved å fremme nye modeller for aktivt (by)borgerskap.

## **Keywords**

citizenship; applied theatre; urban space; politics

## **Active Citizenship and Urban Politics**

This paper discusses how applied theatre can promote new models of active citizenship in local urban politics. Drawing on Engin Isin's 'acts of citizenship' (2008), I define active citizenship less as a formal legal status and more as social, political and cultural practices that are learned and exercised. These practices involve forming new subjectivities and becoming claimants of justice, rights, and responsibilities in and of urban space. Accordingly, my definition of urban politics is less concerned with official party politics and more a matter of citizens taking action and contributing to the diverse social productions of urban space. This is important because urban governance tends to re-enforce an understanding of urban space as produced by 'experts', leaving little or no agency for citizens to appropriate it according to their own needs and interests (Pløger, 2021a). In turn, this might lead to feelings of powerlessness and disengagement from public participation in urban matters.

Indeed, there is a broadly pessimistic body of scholarship (see i.e. Sennet, 1979) dating back to the 1960s and 1970s which has highlighted falling levels of public participation in political activities. Today, the term 'participation fatigue' ('medvirkningstrøtthet') is frequently used when discussing citizen participation in local urban politics in Norway (see i.e. PLAN, 2018). The term points to a situation in which the public is constantly called upon to contribute their time and input, in participatory activities, while increasingly perceiving participatory processes as being nothing more than public rituals to satisfy legal requirements. In consequence, there is a risk that citizens' trust in city governments erodes, followed by disengagement and cynicism at best, and alienation and polarization at worst (Reichborn-Kjennerud et al., 2021). This situation points to an urgent need for new models of active citizenship that turns subjects into actors in the urban arena. I argue that the field of theatre has much potential in this regard.

Theatre can facilitate a liminal space and time that serves to interrupt the status quo and catalyse new imaginative possibilities. According to Isin (2008), this form of interruption is precisely what is needed to form active citizens. To demonstrate how this might work in practice, I discuss the execution of ‘drama labs’ (see Sachs Olsen & van Hulst, 2023) in Drammen, Norway. The drama lab is a form of applied theatre, understood here as participatory performance and collaborative drama practice that is undertaken in local community contexts.

The drama lab was developed as part of the Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) Urban Europe research project CONTRA – CONflicts in TRAnsformation (2022–2024). The project explores how city governments can create arenas for productive conflict in urban planning. Here, the drama lab explored how applied theatre can accommodate dissent and thereby reap the generative capacity of conflict for engaging the public in the transformation of places that matter to them (Eriksson, 2012; Mouffe, 2013; Pløger, 2021b; Swyngedouw, 2005). In this paper, I move beyond the focus on conflict and focus more broadly on how the drama labs involved practices of ‘making citizens’. That is, I discuss how applied theatre might transform subjects into claimants not only of rights to urban space but also of rights *through* urban space: making use of the urban context as a stage for civic activity.

The paper is structured as follows: I first situate the drama lab as a site-specific response to the redevelopment of Bragernes in the city centre of Drammen. I go on to analyse how the drama lab enacted new models of active citizenship by reconceptualizing participation as a political arena in which citizenship could be enacted in new ways. To elaborate on how this worked in practice, I firstly demonstrate how the drama lab accommodated personal stories and narratives, and in so doing enabled participants to ‘see’ each other differently and create new rules and roles for themselves. Secondly, I discuss how the drama lab playfully engaged with various perspectives on urban space, enabling new

understandings of the redevelopment. Thirdly, I highlight the importance of embodied knowledge for the formation of active citizenship and illustrate how the drama lab invited participants to embody and ‘act out’ different parts and positions concerning the redevelopment. Finally, I point to how the drama lab made space for a playful engagement with difference, and in this way promoted a dynamic model of active citizenship in which participants could move back and forth between different political categories and thus avoid entrenched and polarizing positions. I conclude by highlighting a threefold potential of applied theatre to promote active citizenship, as well as pointing to avenues for further research.

### **The Case of Drammen**

Drammen was chosen as a location for the drama lab because the city is known for its openness to experimenting with new participatory methods through theatre. Furthermore, Drammen was facing a large-scale urban transformation process concerning the redevelopment of Bragernes, a densely populated neighbourhood in the city centre. The city hospital located in the area is moving to another part of Drammen in 2025 and the municipality was keen on initiating participatory processes that would engage citizens in the subsequent redevelopment of the hospital site.

The drama lab was developed by me, a practice-led researcher within the field of socially engaged art, and theatre maker Marthe Sofie L. Eide. We were assisted by Andrea Vik, a theatre maker from Drammen, scenographer Ylva Owren, and Jenny Mood and Sofie Esther Larssen, master students in art and society from Oslo Metropolitan University. The six of us were also the guides in the drama lab. In developing the drama lab, we worked closely with representatives from Drammen municipality with whom we had good relations based on previous research projects. We were also aided by urban researchers Gro Sandkjær Hanssen

and Celine Motzfeldt Loades. They mapped the tensions, values, desires and visions pertaining to the planned development. This was done through observations of citizen meetings, 20 interviews with stakeholders, and analysis of municipal plans and reports concerning the site.

From this research, a key point of interest emerged: the question of what should happen with the former hospital building when the hospital was moved to its new location. The hospital building was characterized by a tall modernist concrete block, called the ‘Central Block’ which had become an object of major resistance when it was erected in the 1970s. The Central Block was described in interviews as an ‘aesthetic alien’ and an ‘ugly brick wall’ that compromised the look and feel of the area. Tearing it down was seen to signal a ‘fresh start’, leaving room for more low-rise developments that would return important local qualities to the area such as more daylight and green areas.

For some, it was, however, important to keep the Central Block as an ‘identity marker’ for Drammen. It provided a form of ‘emotional security’ (Lynch, 1964 p. 83) as a ‘well-identified image’ (p. 80) that facilitated recognition and memorization. This was important to the public because this specific area of Drammen had been exposed to major urban transformation processes that had demolished well-regarded and historical architecture, including whole city quarters.

The conflicting views on whether to preserve or demolish the Central Block made it a key figure in the urban transformation process. Hence, we decided to develop the drama lab as an arena that would not only address but, more importantly, accommodate and explore these conflicting views.

## **Developing the Drama Lab**

There is a long tradition for urban research and planning to draw on artistic practices such as theatre to develop new collaborative formats for urban development (see e.g. Cuff & Louikaitou-Sideris et al., 2020; Dang, 2005; Rannila & Loivaranta, 2015; Fyhn & Rønning, 2016). Some critics (see e.g. Larsen & Frandsen, 2022) observe that when these practices take on issues of contestation and conflict, their deliberation is often marginalized in the overall policy negotiation and excluded from strategic power in the city. It was therefore important to us that the drama lab was developed in close dialogue with Drammen municipality. Hence, in the course of three intense months we ran several workshops, rehearsals, and tests with representatives from Drammen municipality working with participation, as well as with representatives from civil society. This work was a form of practice-led (Smith & Dean, 2009) and participatory action research (PAR) (Kesby et al., 2007).

Practice-led research focuses on the insights that arise from reflection on creative practice, bringing together theoretical reflections with a doing of work in the world. PAR scrutinizes the co-creation of this work, reminding us that our practice-led research was done with and for, rather than on, participants and stakeholders, the ultimate aim being to work together to examine a problematic situation and change it for the better. As such, PAR has much in common with the work by Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal. Both PAR and Boal's 'forum theatre' aims to facilitate an emancipatory process of exploration and awareness. As Boal (1992) points out, theatre lets us see the real from a distance, which in turn enables us to question what we take for granted. This questioning can help debunk power relations that reside in the sedimented practices of real life, and thus to cultivate new subject positions. In a similar vein, PAR connects research and action: the process of recognition and awareness produced through research is guided by political interests and associated with real life. In the development of the drama labs, we brought together these approaches from Boal and PAR and in so doing

let the process be driven less by purely academic questions than by the concerns of the participants.

Important in this regard was to acknowledge the structural constraints pertaining to the ‘invited spaces’ of participation (Kesby, 2007, p. 2821) that are produced through artistic practice. That is, ‘the arts’ might be an unfamiliar terrain for some people, and hence there is a significant difference between inviting people to an event in an art institution and to an event in public space. The drama labs therefore took place not at a theatre but at a junior high school next to the hospital site. This location provided a familiar setting for residents while also helping us reach out to a broad segment of the population.

Three public drama labs were executed with around 30 participants each, including a mix of residents between the ages of 14–84 that consisted of politicians, employees of Drammen municipality, developers (including those that now owned the site) and other interested stakeholders (i.e. architects and researchers). Participant observations of the drama labs and 20 interviews with participants were conducted by the research team. In the following, I will use this empirical material to analyse and discuss how the drama labs enacted new models of active citizenship by 1) reconceptualizing the political arena; 2) accommodating the personal; 3) foregrounding diverse productions of space; 4) embodying roles and responsibilities; and 5) engaging playfully with differences.

### **Reconceptualizing the Political Arena**

The Central Block, as a key figure in both the drama lab and the redevelopment, accommodated what McAuliffe and Rogers (2019) term ‘different regimes of value’. The term ‘value’ is here understood as a form of social relation that cannot be easily compared and exchanged because it is tied to ‘those things that matter to people’ (Sayer, 2011). Such values are important drivers for engagement because, while being incommensurable, they are always a comparison and

people struggle for the legitimacy of their regimes of value. According to Mouffe (2014), such struggle is constituted through passion. This is what leads people to invest themselves in matters that concern them in order to challenge opponents. Yet, in participatory processes there is little room for abstract notions of values and passions. As Pløger (2021a) points out, participation is ‘tamed’ through processes of governing that suppress meanings and claims that are not ‘rational’ and within official politics and planning authorities. To act as citizens in this context means to act in accordance with the protocols of citizenship afforded by the planning system. In response, the task of the drama lab was to ‘unleash’ participation by facilitating an arena in which citizenship could be claimed and enacted in new ways beyond these given subject positions and institutional networks.

As Isin (2008) observes, political thought is concerned with ‘practices’, ‘conduct’, ‘discipline’, ‘rule’, ‘governance’ and ‘action’ to describe what political agents do and how they behave. Participation, then, often values routine over rupture, order over disorder, and habit over deviation. By focusing instead on ‘fun’ and ‘play’, the drama lab disrupted and redefined dominant conceptualizations of the political arena. Several participants highlighted that this was key to break with everyday habits and roles. As one participant pointed out: ‘When you play in this way, you bring in so much more of yourself. You were challenged in a different way. I allowed myself to act differently than I normally would.’ The liminality of theatre is key here. In line with the theories of anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality can be understood as a threshold in space and time when disruption of the stable is possible. As such, liminality constitutes what Turner (1979, p. 97) calls ‘a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise’. Accordingly, the drama labs built on the function of theatre as setting the stage for an estrangement of that which is familiar and taken for granted (Metzger, 2011). As I illustrate in the next section, this was done by using theatrical tools such as scenography, staging and storytelling to turn conventional models of participation



upside down. In practice, this meant moving away from the overriding dominance of a rational citizenship model that privileges cost-benefit calculations concerning the production of urban space, towards the various emotional or affective cues and attachments that also drive political will, expression, and action (Bleiker, 2009; Gould, 2010).

### **Accommodating Personal Narratives**

In formal participatory settings the conversation between city governments and civil society revolves around a predetermined plan for a specific area. As Pløger (2021a) observes, participation here becomes a one-way politicized process in which participants are made aware of the premises of the plan, its content and consequences, and what it is possible to affect within the different levels of planning and decisions. This formal participatory setting can be seen as what Foucault (2020 [1975]) calls ‘disciplinary spaces’ in which subjects are compartmentalized. That is, subjects are seen only in terms of their specific roles – as planners, developers, residents and so on, giving them very little possibility to challenge the rules to which they are subject and the roles they play, and much less to create new rules and roles (Marquez, 2012).

In contrast, the drama lab took as its starting point not the official plan for the area, but the many personal stories and relations associated with it. For example, at the start of the drama lab, the participants walked onto a map made from textile, which covered the whole floor. The map worked as a conversation starter, with the guides inviting the participants to share their personal memories, associations and stories connected to the area. Key here was that the participants appeared to each other as distinct individuals representing who or what they wanted (including opinions, interests, preconceptions, and agendas), rather than as predetermined roles.

The ‘storytelling session’ was concluded as the participants were asked to place their porcelain cup (they had each been handed one at the entrance, containing coffee or tea) at the

place that mattered most to them in the area (see figure 1). It was perhaps no surprise that most participants put their cup on the Central Block, to which they all had a personal connection. Some had worked there; many had been hospitalized at some point in their lives; some had given birth there and some had said goodbye to loved ones there. These personal, and quite emotional, stories created a space of appearance where individuality emerged from self-disclosure among equals. This sharing of personal stories is, according to political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958), what makes social activity *meaningful*: when the activity can be embedded in specific stories tied to particular people. Arendt observes that this is also what makes political acting fun. That is, it creates what Arendt calls a form of ‘public happiness’ which comes from acting together as a collective. Arendt (1958, p. 198–199) compares this collective acting to theatrical acting as it creates a ‘space of appearance’ where ‘I appear to others as others appear to me, where men [sic] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly’. Indeed, one participant observed that the drama lab made her ‘see’ the other participants differently. She contrasted the experience to attending consultation meetings. She was always eager to speak in these meetings and would sit on the front row with her back to the other participants. Hence, she would not normally notice who else was there, unless they were speaking too. Now, however, she was exposed to more views and perspectives than she was used to from these consultation meetings, and thus found the experience very engaging, refreshing and inspiring. Another participant, one of the developers of the site, pointed to the importance of appearing to other participants ‘as a human in flesh and blood sitting there beside them’. This way, she said, she was able to exit her role as ‘the developer’ and instead establish relations of equality with the people to whom she spoke.

It is worth noting that these relations of equality were nevertheless artificial. The drama lab did not erase the inequalities of status or power that operate in everyday life. But the

common situation of the participants in the drama lab had the potential to temporarily suspend the distinctions that otherwise regulate the interaction between people.

**[Insert Figure 1 here]**

**Figure 1.** Placing cups in the storytelling session. Photo: Lucas Leonardo Ibanez-Fæhn

### **Foregrounding Diverse Productions of Urban Space**

After the storytelling session, the participants went on an audio walk in the area around the Central Block. The audio walk enabled a site-specific and playful engagement with the different and conflictual interests, values, views, and opinions pertaining to the development of the area. This was done by giving the views and perspectives gathered in the research phase to non-human ‘actors’ in urban space. These were actors such as, for example, The Old Power Station (advocating for preserving the cultural history of Drammen); the Social Housing Block (proponent of affordable housing for the new generation citizens); the Tourist Sign (dreaming of branding Drammen through new ‘starchitecture’); the Forest (‘Marka’) (preaching to the humans about learning more from nature in the way we build cities); and the Central Block itself (wanting to serve the citizens in Drammen in the best way possible) (see figure 2). Through these actors, urban space was presented and defined in line with the well-known definition by geographer Doreen Massey (2005): as a social and contingent construction that is the product of interrelations and always in the process of becoming. Hence, the audio walk foregrounded that urban space is a product of diverse social practices.

The audio walk had political potential in that it resisted any ‘given’ representations of urban space. It challenged what critical urban theorists (i.e., Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Edward Soja) points to as a process of ‘depoliticization’ in which urban space is moved from a realm of social practices to a realm of expert objectivity. That is, dominant visions

tend to portray the city as a product of ‘experts’ (city planners, developers, urban governance stakeholders) who determine in advance which approaches to urban space are legitimate and decide what kind of use is good, just, and appropriate: a bench is for sitting, not sleeping on; a park is for families with kids, not for youth to hang out, etc. (Cresswell, 1996). As urban critic Raymond Ledrut points out (as cited in Deutsche, 1996, p. 52), the moment the city is severed from a diverse social production and seen instead as a homogeneous physical entity external from its users, it appears to exercise control over its citizens.

In contrast, the audio walk highlighted the role of the participants as active producers of urban space. The recorded voices of the buildings, squares, and objects were rearticulated through the participants’ movements and their encounters with the area. At the same time, spontaneous juxtapositions arose as the participants had to navigate between two places at once: the space of the audio narrative (in which spaces and times were folded together, allowing distant past and near futures to overlap) and the space of the city (the physical here-and-nowness of the walk). This way, the participants became co-producers of the audio walk. Instead of presenting urban space as ready-made, as is the case for touristic audio walks, it enabled living and lively encounters with the city, facilitating emotional and affective ways of making, not merely representing, place.

Several participants mentioned that the audio walk made them ‘listen differently’ to the various perspectives concerning the future of the Central Block. Some said they became more aware of its role as a representative of modern cultural heritage, manifesting the need to preserve buildings from different time periods and not just from specific historical epochs. Others claimed that they gained new insights concerning the value of environmentalism and the potential for the Central Block to become an experiment in new and more sustainable forms of urban development. This form of listening can be compared to ecologist Andrew Dobson’s concept of ‘apophatic listening’ (2014, p. 196), defined as a form of listening that

hinges on the suspension of pre-existing categories in order to ‘open up and open out alternative ways of looking and acting in the world’ (ibid.).

**[Insert Figure 2 here]**

**Figure 2.** Walking past the Central Block on the audio walk. Photo: Lucas Leonardo Ibanez-Fæhn

### **Embodying Roles and Responsibilities**

The apophatic listening of the audio walk was accompanied by activities that foregrounded embodied knowledge as key to the formation of active citizenship. As Conrad (2004) observes, individuals are not generally aware of the myriad ways that their bodies are marked by culture, politics, and power. Hence, embodied forms of knowledge are likely to be represented, conveyed, and understood most effectively through performance, interruption, and reflection. In other words, embodied knowledge says things about people’s aspirations, vocations, confidence, and opinions which can be drawn into much sharper focus through the process of ‘acting out’ a part (Ryan & Flinders, 2018).

The embodiment of perspectives and values was acted out at the end of the audio walk as the participants were guided through an exercise of ‘sociometry’ inspired by the sociodrama techniques of psychotherapist Jacob Moreno. Sociometry is a tool for exploring interpersonal connection and group dynamics. The participants had to answer a series of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions by positioning themselves on each side of a road. This was the first time in the drama lab that the participants made their own perspectives visible to each other and in so doing disclosed their differences. One of the developers said this moment made her acutely aware of the power she holds as developer. Answering the question ‘Do you feel that you can influence the development of this area?’, it was only her and one person from the municipality that

answered yes by positioning themselves at the right side of the road. She had taken for granted that many more would answer ‘yes’ given the many participatory processes that the developers had organized. Hence, she felt ‘physically embarrassed’ that she was one of the only ones feeling a sense of agency and empowerment.

The reflection by the developer points to an important ethical aspect of active citizenship: to actualize or perform how a role or action is answerable to the other (Isin, 2008, p. 31). This was further explored in the next part of the drama lab in what we called ‘the echo chambers of demolition and preservation’ in the school’s basement (see figure 3 and 4). Here, the participants were invited to ‘act out’ the parts of either an enthusiast for demolishing the Central Block or of an enthusiast for preserving it. Before entering the chambers, the participants were asked to pick sides: ‘Do you want to preserve or demolish the Central Block?’ The participants could choose the side they personally agreed with or the side that they disagreed with but wanted to examine in more depth. Having picked sides, they were led to the echo chambers where they embodied their role through acts of demolitions or acts of preservation. The demolition enthusiasts smashed the cups that were placed on the textile map during the opening ‘storytelling session’. The preservation enthusiasts repaired the broken cups with golden glue using the Japanese art of preservation known as ‘kintsugi’.

In these acts of demolition and repair, affect was invested in the two regimes of value pertaining to demolition or preservation. Here, affect is understood not as an inherent property of bodies, objects, and signs, but as a social construct that can be invested in bodies, objects, and signs through performance (Petrovic-Lotina, 2021). For example, the demolition enthusiasts admitted that it was much harder for them to actually smash the cups that were invested with personal narratives from the storytelling session than to sit and rationally discuss why the Central Block should be demolished. What helped them smash the cups in the end was coming up with the justification that they had to allow the area to be given a fresh start rather

than be tied to the past. The preservation enthusiasts had an easier task. The care invested in repairing the cups made them connect their regime of value concerns around the environment and the future, particularly regarding the importance of valuing what we have rather than constantly replacing it with something new.

The focus on embodying and acting out the conflicting perspectives on the Central Block had an important political function. As opposed to the distance produced in the ‘constructive’ and rational set-up of formal participatory processes, the drama lab sought to ‘actualize people’s inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analyzing it’ (Rogoff, 2006, p. 1). Hence, the activity of the echo chambers brought together that being discussed and those discussing so that it was not possible to objectify it as in a disinterested mode of engagement. Rogoff (2006) observes that this activity has transformative power because, rather than simply looking for an answer or solution, it enables a heightened awareness and access to a different way of knowing.

**[Insert Figure 3 here]**

**Figure 3.** In the echo chamber of demolition. Photo: Lucas Leonardo Ibanez-Fæhn

**[Insert Figure 4 here]**

**Figure 4.** In the echo chamber of preservation. Photo: Lucas Leonardo Ibanez-Fæhn

### **Engaging Playfully With Differences**

According to Isin (2008), acts of citizenship are those acts through which citizens emerge not as predefined beings but as beings acting and reacting with others. These acts perform ways of becoming political in so far as they constitute constituents (beings with claims). As Marchart (2019) observes, becoming political is often premised on an underlying logic of simplification

that forces people to pick sides: are you with us or with them? While it can promote passion and engagement, there is also the risk that stakeholders are forced to have strongly formed views that will be hard to modify. This might result in locked-down positions, as admitting to being persuaded by the opponents' arguments might entail a loss of credibility. What the drama lab offered in this regard was a playful setting where participants could afford to let their guard down since nothing was directly at stake. Hence, the drama lab responded to the need identified by Malzacher (2014, p. 26) for a 'playful (but serious) agonism where contradictions are not only kept alive, but above all are freely articulated. Only through this can we prevent an antagonism that ends all negotiation'.

The playful agonism was further 'acted out' in a staged 'oral battle' between the demolition and preservation enthusiasts. The format of the battle was borrowed from the artist collective *Building Conversation*, initiated by the Dutch theatre director Lotte van den Berg. Inspired by communication techniques from all over the world, *Building Conversation* develops 'conversational performances', meaning performative models for dialogues that are staged in various contexts and settings (Malzacher, 2014). In the oral battle, the demolition and preservation enthusiasts stood in two lines facing each other (see figure 5). They pointed out the differences between them in the form of statements that start with 'we' or 'you': 'We are thinking about the environment', 'You are profiteers'. The groups were instructed to speak only on behalf of their group and the perspective they represent. They were not allowed to answer the statements of the opponent, but rather take in the statements of the opponent and then let them go.

The playful structure of the battle helped participants problematize or challenge the arguments of the proponents rather than simply respond to them. Many participants observed that this made them realize that both groups in fact wanted the same thing: what was best for the neighbourhood. They noted that the arguments of both groups were indeed very similar



(focusing on caring for the environment, quality of life, accommodating residents' needs, etc.). This surprised many of the participants and helped them gain a broader understanding of the complexity of the matter as something very different than the black-and-white situation painted in the echo chambers. As one participant explained:

I realized that it was possible for me to accommodate a development with or without the Central Block. It was no longer important for me whether it should be preserved or demolished, and I realized that there are so many other factors that are more important for the totality of the development.

Hence, while the us vs. them set-up of the battle might appear both antagonistic and simplistic, it made visible the complexity of urban politics. Even though the participants were divided into opposing positions, the overlapping arguments demonstrated that this division is by no means a simple affair because the group's position is far from consistent. Accordingly, the drama lab foregrounded that urban politics is an intertwined and contradictory terrain where there is rarely a point reached in which it is entirely clear which side one is on. In turn, this promoted a dynamic model of active citizenship which allows space for individuals to move back and forth between different political categories, rather than assigning them fixed or predetermined roles.

**[Insert Figure 5 here]**

**Figure 5.** Standing opposite each other in the agonistic conversation. Photo: Lucas Leonardo

Ibanez-Fæhn

## **Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated in this paper, the potential of applied theatre to promote active citizenship in urban politics is threefold. Firstly, the liminal character of applied theatre sets up ‘a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and, if need be, remodelled and rearranged’ (Turner, 1979, p. 468). This allows an opening up of new spaces of representation in urban politics. Here, citizens might participate as everything they are (including personal narratives and emotions); challenge fixed and predetermined rules and roles and act on other subject positions and possibilities for being. Secondly, the embodied character of theatre enables participants to productively work with emotion and affect (addressing anxiety, anger, joy, and passion). As research points out, the ability to engage with emotions is key to creating engagement as well as understanding what interventions and actions might inspire or resist change (Westman & de Broto, 2022; Mouffe, 2014). In accommodating embodiment, theatre furthermore facilitates a space in which diverse social realities and values can be performed and negotiated, not only verbally but also bodily and imaginatively. Thirdly, theatre provides a playful setting where differences and conflicts can be freely articulated and where stakeholders can afford to let their guard down since nothing is directly at stake. Hence, participants can experiment with new perspectives and thoughts, and express understanding, bafflement or self-criticism, without the risk of incurring losses of credibility.

As for the possibilities for this model of active citizenship to reinvigorate public participation in urban politics, a concrete outcome was that several of the drama lab participants took the initiative to set up a meeting between themselves, the municipality and the developer in order to discuss a way forward with the development of the area. Seventy people showed up at the meeting. The municipality had never experienced that kind of initiative coming from the citizens before and attributed it to the collective engagement created through the drama lab. They furthermore pointed to the potential of the drama lab to

build relations of trust between city governments and citizens. They described the drama lab as a form of ‘democratic training’ that could shape the ways in which the municipality would conceptualize and work with participation in general. This suggestion points to exciting avenues for further explorations into the potential of applied theatre to promote new models of active citizenship.

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