

# COMPOSING THE UMEÅ PANTRY: A PLATFORM FOR DIALOGUE ON FOOD PRODUCTION AND HUMAN SURVIVAL

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## ABSTRACT

The Umeå Pantry was a five-week long public art event held in Umeå, Sweden, aimed at making concerns about food production public and supporting local communities interested in food related practices.

The event consisted of a series of performances where participant communities were invited to a dialogue on food concerns and practices in the region. The performances took the form of communal activities such as food harvesting, cooking, workshops, debates and demonstrations.

The making of the art event highlights the practice of creating forms for engagement and participation of disparate communities around social issues.

In the broader picture, this project contributes to the understanding of community participatory design and design for social innovation.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years an increase in urban population and consequent urban lifestyle has made food production and consumption an important issue for environmental sustainability. In Umeå the demand for sustainable agriculture food-systems has encouraged the adoption of

strategies such as the transition town movement (Hopkins 2008) promoting local resilience.

In this context the Umeå Pantry project returns to the locality, its people and vernacular knowledge as a source of inspiration. The project (the Umeå Pantry project is referred to simply as project or event in the rest of the paper) aims at making concerns around food production in the region public and supports the transition movement towards ecological and social sustainability. This type of engagement is never ready and this project can be considered a way station, albeit a necessary one in forming and supporting of communities that can drive this change.

The project's orientation as an art event grounds it on concepts such as relational-aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002) and public participatory performances in art. Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as a set of artistic practices, which take as their theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context.

With respect to design practice, we find that the established traditions of user-centered and participatory design have both been challenged by an increasing interest in how sometimes radical re-appropriation and innovation happen in socio-cultural contexts. Examples discussed range from studies of how lead users develop their own solutions to problems (Von Hippel 1986) to how processes of social change can be initiated and driven at the grassroots by communities of practice (Wenger 1998). Furthermore, there are examples suggesting a shift from methods for understanding people, and for bringing people into a design process to participate, to methods (or perhaps better: performances) for situating and staging design processes in places previously not included in user-centered design practice (Burns, Cottam, Vanstane & Winhall 2006). Thus shifting the emphasis from bringing people (or information about people) into the design process, to situating the design process in a socio-cultural situation

rarely under control and re-defining even the basic terms and relations between ‘designer’ and ‘user’.

The influence of concepts such as relational-aesthetics and the traditions of participatory design provide the conceptual background of the project.

This practice-led project was part of a larger enquiry on ‘design and social innovation’. As participant observer and part of the project team, the author’s actions in shaping Umeå Pantry are attempts at understanding design embedded in the socio-cultural context and engaging communities on social issues.

The subsequent sections of this paper illustrate the making of this event and provide examples of the orchestrated encounters between participating communities and individuals. The concluding section discusses the event as an art oriented participatory design practice and its relevance to community participatory design and social innovation.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background of this project lies in the Scandinavian tradition of participatory design practice (Bjerknes & Bratteteig 1995; Bjerknes, Ehn & Kyng 1987). These early participatory design studies dealt with the work environment and situated the practice within institutional boundaries. The Umeå Pantry however is a public event taking up a rather broad topic to address. The challenges of handling the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the project require informal strategies to cope with the unexpected situations, compared to plans and formal procedures, Argyris and Schön have termed this often situated approach as theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, cited in Hillgren, Linde & Peterson 2013).

In this project the definition of community is understood as ‘communities of practice’ (CoP), a term coined by Etienne Wenger (Wenger 1998). She describes them as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. An important attribute of such a community is that they build relationships that enable them to learn from each other and develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, beliefs, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice (Wenger 1998). The author spent a few months as a member of the local urban farming collective and frequented meetings of other sustainability focused communities to understand their motivations and build trust.

The Umeå Pantry also borrows from community participatory design processes; the formative topics shaping the development of community processes described are: new forms of politics, publics and infrastructuring (DiSalvo, Clement & Pipek 2012). These topics are interrelated and feed off one another. Here politics refers to a politicised rhetoric that emerges out of the participatory activity through which the

desires of the community can be represented. Politics is also inferred when engaging in agonistic discourses in the pursuit of democracy, where marginalised voices are given due part in the discourse (Mouffe 2002). The idea of publics is taken from John Dewey’s ‘the public and its problems’ (Dewey 1927), where the public is described as a confederation of bodies that are temporary formations that crystallise and dissolve around an issue. In the Umeå Pantry this takes the form of articulation of concerns on food-production and its mutually constructed publics. Lastly, infrastructuring implies the necessity of platforms for deliberation and support for the emerging publics (Ehn 2008).

More recent work on design for social innovation is done by Manzini and colleagues from the DESIS (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) network, along with social innovation labs such as NESTA, The Young Foundation and Ashoka. These labs have also been working towards exploring the landscape of open, local and connected communities (Manzini & Rizzo 2011). More than often their interventions claim radical change as their goal and a practice that supports scaling up grass root innovation over the long run. However, the ambitions of the Umeå Pantry as a small-scale intervention are to engage and build the capabilities of the many communities already active in the region by building shared commitment and co-learning. During the course of the project the concerns around food-production become focal points in a joint enquiry and exploration of local food practices (farming and non-farming activities such as cooking, preserving, distribution, research and development etc.). The acts of making food concerns public and public making, become the main ingredients in the composition of the Umeå Pantry.

## COMPOSING THE UMEÅ PANTRY

This section covers the historic context of food production in the region in and around Umeå and introduces the organising team of the project and its infrastructure. It then goes on to describe, through processes of engagement, imagination and alignment, the acts of public making and making concerns public.

The food industry in the region is imports driven and the local food production happens in the sparsely populated countryside. Mainstream farming remains a physically and economically challenging profession and is hampered by rural flight. The practice of urban farming in Umeå is bolstered by urban growers and activists, with some of them having formed informal urban gardening communities who rally for sustainable change in the city. There is a weak but growing rhetoric emerging that is in opposition to the disempowering socio-economic effects of globalisation. In spite of this, the membership in these communities remains low and limited to the same individuals. Another hindering tendency is for these communities to become closed in, hostage to their own singular activity such that they are unable or unwilling to evolve their practice in response

to changes in society. Umeå also has a large university, home to researchers on food, farming and culinary arts. All of these, in addition to supporting institutions involved in food distribution, storage, retailing and catering services, constitute the food- network in the region.

The Umeå Pantry was a project based on a concept by an artist collective with the idea of showcasing local food practices through a communal pantry and cooking events. The project team tasked to plan and run the project was multidisciplinary and included the author. The team appropriated the basic idea of the pantry and communal cooking to fit the context of Umeå and its communities. The main adaptation was in the introduction of a range of material and discursive activities in a move towards more performative alternatives as compared to presentations or meetings. The project had a limited sponsorship by the festival organisers and was further supported by donations of food, time, space and material from public volunteers and farmers who supported the concerns being raised.



Figure 1: The custom built infrastructure of the Umeå Pantry

The infrastructural artifacts in the project consisted of a pantry stocked with food from local farms, a mobile kitchen and outdoor dining area custom built for the project. On few occasions a cafe served as an indoor presentation venue. Additionally, some of the activities were hosted in nearby city-gardens, neighborhoods, farms and forests. The events and the food cooked were offered free to the public. In return they could without any obligation contribute raw ingredients or volunteer time for cooking. Most of the food used in the project was donated and was listed on the pantry windows along with the name of the farm/ individual where it had come from. This became an entry point for the participants to claim ownership of the project, not only as volunteers with delegated responsibilities but also as advisors and initiators of activities within the event.

A rhythm was followed throughout the event: food collection during the weekdays and community cooking on the weekends. The food collection entailed a trip to the local farms to harvest produce. The weekend cooking was accompanied by presentations and

activities, for example cooking workshops, live demonstrations and harvest parties. The combination of a collective activity and discussions was a signature ritual introduced in the project and named Pantry-talks. The repeating nature of the activities over multiple weeks meant that the people participating in the event were getting to know each other within the bounds of the event and also outside. This familiarity accompanied by growing trust would help the participants to engage in agonistic dialogue, especially on controversial issues.

The engagements were planned around an open thematic framework of the event. Each theme would last for a week and give the stage to related communities and individuals that would be interested in demonstrating their food practice. To be able to derive these themes and invite the communities and individuals, the project team invested time in farm visits and meeting with local farmers, specialists and existing communities prior to the event. The attendees who would be presenting, hosting or demonstrating during the Umeå Pantry were grouped based on complimentary interests or practices and assigned a theme. For example the theme 'Farming and landscape' was chosen as it could bring together urban and rural farmers and 'Why food matters' was chosen to bring together sustainability activists and other critical thinkers. Few of the themes were named so that they could become carriers for a conversation around a locally relevant issue. For example 'Taste of transparency' as a theme was thought of as a critique to the lengthy (unsustainable) food supply chains and the import driven food industry in the region.

The themes selected through this process are given below.

- (1). Farming and landscape: this theme questioned the site of food production and encouraged a conversation between rural and urban farming practices.
- (2). Taste of transparency: this theme questioned the food production and distribution chain from 'farm to fork' and sought to bring food producers and consumers closer.
- (3). Why food matters: this theme brought up political, economic, environmental, social and ethical concerns related to the way food is produced and consumed.
- (4). Art of transformation: this theme highlighted local vernacular knowledge of food preparation.
- (5). Pantry manifesto: this theme was a way to nudge the communities towards collective action based on a shared imagination of a future region.

Although existing sustainability-minded communities were invited as participants, the public facing nature of the event attracted a mixed audience throughout the duration of the event. The involvement of experts and institutions added to the diversity of this milieu.

To create a collective imaginary on food practices in a region is a slow process of sharing experiences,

language and practice. This is however necessary if the communities are to talk about themselves in a reflective mode, see themselves in new ways and recognise the potential of collective action in moving towards this common vision. In the Umeå Pantry, this was achieved to the extent possible within a limited time frame through a variety of boundary-crossing encounters (Akkerman & Bakker 2011) staged with support from the project team. A few examples are given from each of the themes to illustrate this point.

(a). Encounter between food producers

At the onset of the project the food producers who were part of this project were simply labeled according to their site of practice i.e. rural or urban farmers. For example a harvest party hosted by the urban farmers at a prominent public park in the city and in succession a potato-harvesting trip organised by the project team to a rural farm demonstrated the nuances in between both forms of agriculture practices.



Figure 2: The harvest party hosted by the urban farmer collective



Figure 3: The Umeå Pantry team harvesting potatoes with a farmer

The way of life of the farming community as shared by their stories revealed more about their motivations. Some of them had moved from cities to the countryside leaving jobs to pursue farming as a profession. Few of them farmed to satisfy their ideal of self-sufficiency, some were engaged in balancing city jobs with farming on the side through shared land holdings and some had been farming for multiple generations. A richer picture of farming had become visible and the rural urban

dichotomy became a topic of debate, with the participants questioning and suggesting hybrid sites and strategies of farming.

(b). Encounter between producers and consumers

The theme ‘Taste of transparency’ brought together the consumers and producers through the medium of a chef’s practice. Students of the Umeå University School of Restaurant and Culinary Arts guided by project members travelled for two days to food production and processing sites including farms and a fish saltery to collect ingredients for a cooking session.



Figure 4: Students visit a fish saltery to collect ingredients

This collection process encouraged the group to understand and form a relationship with the producers. The food cooked by this group was served to the public along with the stories from their visits.

What defines ‘good taste’? This was the question posed by the group to the audience at the end of the meal. Multiple interpretations of good taste were voiced, for example in relation to responsible food consumption and transparency in the food chain.

(c). Encounter between complementary practices

Multiple views on sheep farming were given through on-stage dialogue between a sheep-husbandry researcher from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and a local sheep farmer. Prior to the start of the event the project team had purchased a sheep from the same sheep farmer and documented its upbringing. The perspectives on sheep rearing placed in front of the audience accompanied by images of the sheep’s upbringing created the ground for a debate on the perception of the sheep as a commodity, as food and as an animal.



Figure 5: The Umeå Pantry team with the sheep farmer and his sheep

#### (d). Encounter with political actors

The theme of ‘Why food matters’ introduced socio-political institutional agendas to the public. For example representatives of the Nordic Genetic Resource Centre explained how Scandinavian seed-banks work and propagated the idea of preservation of biodiversity in the face of mono-farming culture. Discussions with student researchers working on genetically modified seeds revealed that both of these practices consider themselves to be sustainable but have very different notions of what a sustainable future looks like. Other organisations like the Federation of Swedish Farmers discussed regional issues at stake in agriculture and encouraged people to support local farms. The dialogues centered on what was at stake and how we could balance sustainable farming practices and feed a growing world population.

#### (e). Encounters in-between consumers

The food-sharing events gave the participants a chance to demonstrate do-it-yourself techniques that transformed raw ingredients into food preparations. Example of those are butter-making and vegetable-pickling sessions. The conversations that followed focused on local knowledge and skills about food processing that were fast being lost.



Figure 6: A demonstration of the pickling process and sharing of the recipe

#### (f). Encounters with marginal practices

The project team invited food producers that are making local, unique and often marginalised food products for a demonstration. For example, an azolla (aquatic fern) cooking workshop revealed that foods not considered edible, could in fact be highly nutritious. Producers of bread made out of tree bark (Barkbröd) introduced its making process and its history as famine food. These products prompted discussions around human survival in times of adversity and extreme food scarcity.

The description of the participants as consumers and producers is reductive to say the least, though used in the above examples it encourages us to imagine the possibility of hybrid roles in the continuum between the two.

### OPEN FOOD FUTURES

The project ended with the project team releasing a call for collective action in the form of a workshop called Open food futures facilitated by the author. This was an attempt by the project team to align the participants towards a shared purpose. As part of the last weekend of the event this activity was by subscription or invitation only as opposed to the drop-in nature of all other activities in the past. The call specified that the workshop participants should be interested in taking forward the ideas developed during this project, aiming to include community leaders and motivated individuals.

The co-design workshop started with a workbook, a personal manifesto on food production, which asked the participants to articulate their version of a ‘green utopia’. Utopias can signify totalitarian political projects or fictional worlds, but in this case the intention of making and sharing each others green utopias was to critique current day food practices and find common values that could drive collective action (Bradley & Hedrén 2014). It should be noted that dissensus was as important as consensus in this meaning-making process and encouraged by the project team members.

The discussion on ‘utopias’ was followed by an exercise to map hybrid practices that could lead us to the different visions of life in the city and the future of farming. These practices in the form of products, services and infrastructure where plotted onto the map of the city. The use of the map aided the participants in identifying how the urban could be connected more strongly with the rural and the local food networks strengthened. The workshop ended with participants coming together around key ideas that ranged from growing food at home using aquaponics to exploring land sharing for community farming.



Figure 7: The open food futures workshop

## RESULTS

It is too soon to see the full effects of this project in the communities who participated. Although a few new work groups have formed consisting of Umeå Pantry project team members and participants of the project. The intention of these groups is to develop some of the ideas that came up during the event.

As hoped, the encounters between the actors have aided the articulation of new imaginaries and social arrangements. For instance, in the Open food futures workshop through the activity of sketching ‘utopias’ the participants discussed Umeå in light of desirable and non-desirable world states. A quote from a participant workbook reads – *“Umeå is very much a dystopia now, sucking energy, people, knowledge and resources from the surrounding areas...we need to start living our lives where we live and not somewhere else”* (this person lived in a smaller town outside Umeå). Responses such as these prompted the debate on rural-centric production and urban-centric consumption as the popular imagination of urban-rural livelihoods with respect to farming. The ideas that came out of this discussion envisioned hybrid farming sites and practices that would encourage relationship building between urban and rural dwellers.

The encounters further influenced individual and collective identities of the actors who were bound together by a common issue and exposed to each other’s knowledge and practices. To illustrate this with an observation, some farmers who were not often part of public forums, when asked to debate farming issues became increasingly vocal and at home with their realigned identity as experts amongst the other participants. In general, the project has brought many of the farmers and food experts closer to the other like-minded people and communities in the region.

## DISCUSSION

In retrospect, the making of the Umeå Pantry could be understood as ‘artful integration’ (Suchman 2002), where the design work is not a singular activity but comes together in the ongoing alignment of disparate actors. The tactics used to achieve this, is the interplay

between the rhythms established during the event, themes, encounters and infrastructure. Below we discuss the relevance of these tactics in the making of the event.

The weekly rhythm of the project allowed the team to improvise activities in response to emergent situations. Due to the gap between the weekend cooking activities, there was room to improvise the weekend menu depending on the donations by the participants and the harvesting activities. Changes to the programme could also be made if the team thought it would be relevant to the theme.

As guidance schemes, the themes created by the team channeled dialogues but also allowed for spillovers in the form of overlapping activities across themes. The themes do not aim to be exhaustive, but rather are formed by grouping together of complementary local food practices (and people representing them) and in some cases the intent to critique current food systems.

An important purpose of orchestrating the encounters was to contextualise abstract concerns on food through activities, around which a dialogue could take place. The material and discursive nature of the encounters intends to provide an experiential quality to the encounters and support better dialogue. Additionally, rituals such as the Pantry-talks run across themes and tie the individual encounters together. This provides a cohesive character to the entire event that is engaging and easy to communicate to the public.

The pantry, kitchen and eating space were custom built for communal activities. The use of the pantry to stock donated or harvested foods, with the name of the person/farm mentioned on the pantry window represented it as a shared collection. These physical materials along with the encounters and rituals all together act as boundary infrastructure (Bowker & Star 1999; Akkerman & Bakker 2011) in-between the participating communities and individuals.

Bourriaud in his explanation of a relational art event suggests that the ‘arena of exchange’ established during the event can be judged in aesthetics terms by analysing the coherence of its form, the symbolic value of the world it envisions and the image of the human relations reflected by it (Bourriaud 2002).

Understanding of the participatory design practice as a relational-aesthetic event challenged the project team to think in terms of the encounters as creating a specific sociability, represented by convivial human relationships and a resilient world state. In few of the themes the team was able to translate this thinking into orchestrating the encounters i.e. for the ‘Taste of transparency’ theme the culinary-arts practice was redefined by the chef’s relationship to the food growers and responsibility towards the consumers.

The relational-aesthetic concept further inspired the project team in the day to day making of the Umeå Pantry. The team embraced informal strategies to cope with the ambiguous relationship between the

participants and the project team. A focus on affordances rather than strategic design and distribution of agency became a salient mode of operation for the project. For example, letting participants host or contribute to the event by volunteering was a way to share ownership of the event. One such example was of the local urban farming collective taking on the role of the host and organising a harvest party for all the Umeå Pantry participants. The team acknowledged the possibility of unknowns beyond authoritative knowledge regimes, and strove to bring in knowledges from the margins by inviting disparate participants and showcasing lesser-known food practices like the making of bark bread.

## CONCLUSION

The project began with the intent to make concerns on food production public and support local communities involved in food practices. Engaging the various communities and individuals took the form of the participatory art event influenced by notions of relational-aesthetics. The making of the project is explained through the use of tactics such as rhythms, themes, encounters and boundary infrastructures, which give it an open structure. The notion of ‘artful integration’ is used to understand how the design engagements would come to fruition over an extended period through an ongoing alignment of disparate actors.

Contrary to participatory design traditions within organizations, this project situates itself in a more ambiguous setting, embedded in the socio-cultural context and in service of a larger social agenda.

The authors propose that in this context, the community participatory design exercise, seen as a relational-aesthetic event could provide a valuable frame to understand how participatory design projects could respond to the socio-cultural context when tackling complex social issues.

The author’s role as part of the project team is also worth elaborating on. Although the team functioned collaboratively on all aspects of the event production, the author gave special attention in incorporating the understanding of an open structure in the project. This is represented in the thematic framework and the rhythms that were established during the event. Furthermore, he has been instrumental in thinking about the boundary infrastructures (Akkerman & Bakker 2011) as materials, rituals and discourse that went into preparing the encounters.

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