

HOF *gesang* (Court minstrelsy) – encounter and sharing

Diverse – moving – mind-expanding

An attempt to recover the abused courtyards for the residents by choral power

In May 2008 the courtyards of the city of Zurich resounded for the second time with a large variety of choral singing: during four weeks as many as 75 choirs sang in 150 courtyards. By making the courtyards of Zurich resound, this memorable event raises the question about the significance that is attributed to these valuable urban spaces. More than 2000 singers performed in order to promote the courtyards as places for lively interactions among neighbors. The city's wide-ranging choral culture – choirs representing different styles, cultures and generations – took a stand for a shared concern in a way previously unheard of.

What started the movement?

The rear side of the city is largely unknown. Even though courtyards and backyards take up as much as one fourth of the city's space, hardly anyone pays attention to them. As late as the 1950s, these spaces were widely used by small-scale industries, or to grow vegetables, to dry laundry or beat carpets. They were work places and thus also places where people met and interacted with each other. Children watched these proceedings, participated in the work or found corners to play in.

Since then, most of these courtyards have either been turned into parking space or have otherwise been rendered unsuitable for community purposes. In consequence, the increasingly multicultural residents who live around these courtyards have been deprived of spaces in which good relations among neighbors can develop. This loss not only reduces the quality of living, it also endangers a peaceful coexistence. People who are forced to know their neighbor's favorite TV-program and who witness each flushing of the neighbor's toilet, but who never meet and thus never get to know each other, are unlikely to have much sympathy for each other. Conflicts are not far away.

It is therefore all the more surprising that the quality and the changing function of these semi-public spaces has so far scarcely been noticed by politicians and city planners in Switzerland. In this situation, HOF gesang recommends a root treatment: the recovery of purpose-alienated courtyards as habitats.

And how is this to happen?

HOF gesang will hardly invalidate the market laws, which invite to abuse the courtyards as a source of extra profit. And it is obviously more profitable to take the 25'000 Euros per annum for ten parking lots than to use that space to grow flowers or let children play on a sand heap. All the same, the singers want to make people think and start an initiative to convert these places back into spaces in which people meet. HOF gesang invites all parties concerned to a dialogue, with the support of city authorities.

Tenants and landlords are encouraged to work together to find ways to turn these bleak spaces into playgrounds, recreational areas, dream spaces, gardens – or at least to take a first step towards realizing such an objective.

To trigger a movement, the singers take an obvious approach: they move around. In this way, choral singing is brought to everybody, including people who don't usually attend concerts: to their balconies and kitchen windows. Especially children and youngsters who do not live in ideal housing conditions experience a singing culture live – on this side of the TV screen. This may make them realize that singing can be a liberating experience and an experience that has the power to unite people. The choirs fight against social isolation and disintegration. HOF gesang wants to offer this as a contribution to neighborhood development with the aim of mediating between different cultures.

To the choirs themselves HOF gesang offers an opportunity to introduce themselves to different neighborhoods and audiences. Personal contact between members of the audience and singers is easily established in these courtyards and offers the choirs a chance to recruit new talent.

But who is HOF gesang?

HOF gesang is an organization set up by private initiative. It is supported by the Hof-gesang-society consisting of persons engaged in the cultural sector and other socially active people who believe in the mind broadening power of music. They choose choral singing to make people aware of the social significance of courtyards. Primarily, however, HOF gesang consists of the singers who share in this activity.

The organization is under the patronage of the city of Zurich and is actively supported by eminent figures from different fields, among which music, education as well as city development.

And what is the future?

HOF gesang will be performing in Zurich for a third time in May 2010. Until then, we hope that the courtyards of many other cities will resound with choral music, too.

Yet before, from May 26th (European Neighbour's Day) to June 10th 2009, HOF gesang will be performing in Bern. Choirs from the town and anywhere are cordially invited to join in.

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Rear Window on inviting and bleak courtyards