

WHAT MATTERS WHEN TURNING UTOPIAS INTO MATERIAL

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ABSTRACT

With an increasing number of open laboratories for cultural and technical experimentation in place, questions arise regarding how and with what effects they come about, what they mean to those who partake and how they organize themselves in order to satisfy those involved. Recognizing the way that these spaces reach of alternative technologies and alternative ways of being we conceptualize them as materialized utopias, which are fragile socio-material arrangements. Rather than articulating grand utopian or ecotopian alternative societies, we look at materialized utopias as the gradual tweaking, probing and fixing of things. We elaborate on this with the study of “*Test Site*” a campus-based open space for experimentation in Helsinki designing with matters such as soap, compost or wood. We show that the thriving of this space is dependent on partly coincidental alignment with the institutional context and purposeful misunderstandings. However, its hybrid character being open to different interpretations does not only help to spur momentum but by the same token also leads to tensions internally as well as externally. Materialized utopias are then bound to be compromised, but in the best case scenario, turn unproductive anxieties into productive care taking of the socio-material surroundings. As the site is in the making, materials and events function as checkpoints and create legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

From frying oil to nice-smelling soap, from urine to tomato to a Bloody Mary or from compost to flowers – these are some of the things happening at an

experimental site next to the university campus. They underline current tensions between what sustainable forms of life appear to request and what the current technology and political regimes can deliver. Nothing short of a radical break and transformation in current practices of wanting more and exploiting the vulnerable indicate sustainability. Sustainability narratives thrive on the idea of radical disruptions between what is and what should be, and are informed by utopian thinking including classics such as Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1978) and contemporary movements such as transition towns. By speaking of materialized utopias we want to highlight approaches where rather non-futuristic and quite mundane activities of design and production such as creating soap from waste oil and setting up a collective to continuously do so are meant to fix parts of the present rather than fully abandoning it.

Concurrently with such activities of do-it-yourself, a number of spaces dedicated to open experimentation have appeared. Amongst others they have been described as fab labs, open workshops or shared machine shops. These initiatives are often driven by dedicated citizens and showcase new forms of production and consumption as well as support structures (Lange and Bürkner 2018). These spaces are premised on broad accessibility and challenging existing modes of innovating.

Both the everyday engagement with material as well as the organizing can be seen as utopian design. Design has made use of different forms of utopias, metaphorically and functional such as the small-scale focus of the arts and crafts movement or the grand narratives of centrally planned social good in modernism (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013). Compared to such utopian designs as endpoints, open spaces for experimentation exemplify ongoing experiments with materials and with organizing collectives. As this is premised upon rather mundane activities of fixing and mending, as well as adhocism (Jenks and Silver 2013) we refer to this as humble design.

Open spaces, as well as other forms of utopia, raise questions of the relations between individuals and the collective and those of recruitment and organizing. In this paper we ask the following questions: (1) What is the institutional context of the initiative and how is

usefulness negotiated? (2) What are the barriers for participating in and materializing utopias in the everyday? The paper draws on the ongoing study of a campus-based open space for experimentation in Helsinki since its preparation phase in January 2018. To answer the questions, we make use of interviews with members, participatory observation, field notes and data from the internal communication channels. We argue that sites for such gradually tweaking the present are utopias. However, since they are open in terms of agenda, rules and outcomes, they are hybrids and highly fragile. In order to stabilize, the role of material and designing with it therefore become essential as checkpoints.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the literature section, we will first discuss different notions of utopias, and how they relate to the experimentalism and openness of open laboratory settings. We complement this with a brief discussion of utopian designs and what we regard as humble design. Next, we introduce the methods, our case, and the findings, before we finally close with the discussion of four major themes.

UTOPIAS AND LABORATORIES

UTOPIANISM AS NON-CONCERTED SOCIAL CHANGE

Utopianism offers several propositions and analytical distinctions for the study of open spaces. Firstly, as Karl Mannheim has suggested, utopian forward-looking thinking is what keeps societies alive (Mannheim 2013). Utopian promise stems from the recognition that we do not live in the best of possible world. In particular in the times of heightened trust in the free-market institutions to deliver us efficient and rational use of resources, utopias of sustainability may inform us on transformations. Hence, deliberate efforts to think beyond what is reasonable, possible and ‘real’ may be particularly relevant for sustainability and has contributed to ecotopian thinking (Callenbach 1978).

Mannheim has further made a distinction between spatial and temporal utopias (Mannheim 2013). Whilst early utopian thinking, characterized by Thomas More’s Utopia, was occupied with imagining perfect or good places, and were spatial utopias, utopian thinking became to be more historically conscious and thus anchored in time and oriented towards (social) change processes. Sustainability transitions and transformations witness to this turn away from the end-states and spatial utopias towards the ‘road to sustainability’ and the fair and effective principles of organising and striving towards sustainability.

Utopias, as they are images of alternative societies, organize social relations, but the way of organising can be very different. Starting from Plato, utopias include good societies governed by enlightened elites, but they also include flat, egalitarian organization. Temporal utopias can be viewed as more rooted and realistic, but

equally as watered-down utopias. Arguing for the need for more radical disruptive utopias, Wright (2012) for example proposes that viability of an alternative to the present is more important than the consideration of how one might achieve such a state of affairs. To say the least, those practicing utopias may need to engage in both remaking the socio-technical fabric of the alternative space ‘internally’ as in intentional communities and build relations to the existing reality beyond the utopian space including the steps and processes of moving towards the space.

With our notion of materializing utopias we want to add to these distinctions a notion of radical modesty and highlight arrangements which are not premised on abandoning the present but rather reworking it. Be it activities of fixing and mending, self-build or permaculture, these are activities combining elements of quite mundane and non-futuristic kind. However, whether fixing the worthless, building clumsy gadgets or caring for soil, they nevertheless may bring about things that did not exist. In materialising utopias, such small deeds participate in the lofty aim of remaking the socio-technical / socio-material premises of our existence. Concepts such as ‘recycling’, central to Callenbach’s Ecotopia (1978), may have since long lost their utopian character and their character of sign-posting an Other-place, but may be radical and queer when practiced. Small deeds however also indicate the incomplete, isolated and scattered nature of the efforts and call for questions of alignment and durability of the collectives engaging in such efforts.

OPEN LABS AS PRACTICING UTOPIAS

Concurrently with such activities of fixing, repair and do-it-yourself, a host of spaces dedicated to technical and cultural experimentation have appeared. Amongst others they have been described as fab labs (Hielscher and Smith 2014), open workshops (Lange 2017) or shared machine shops (Dickel et al. 2014). While some are initiated as part of academic research projects or showcase new means of urban governance, many appear to be self initiated by small groups of people as reported in the case of open workshops. These initiatives driven by civic collectives exemplify new modalities of innovation, production and needs based consumption (Lange and Bürkner 2018).

The experimental component can be analysed twofold. Firstly, experiments can be seen in the sense of a laboratory setting, phenotypical for scientific knowledge production. In modern science, the experiment was applied to construct facts, while the laboratory provided the means to purify this construction (Latour, 1993 in Dickel et al. 2014). In contrast, there has been a wave of real life experiments, situated in the wild, therefore not aiming at producing general valid knowledge but at exploring specific cases and adopting generic technologies locally (Jalas et al 2017). Ignoring the logic of isolation, these settings include actors outside of professional science, thus blurring what appeared to be

clear boundaries. Some authors have even suggested that the real-life setting has become the standard as opposed to the controlled laboratory experiment (Groß, 2013: 196).

Secondly, real-life laboratories have been developed as test beds for alternative practices (Schneidewind and Scheck, 2013). They exemplify semi-protected spaces, premised upon welcoming failure and irritation as part of learning, and being productive in terms of new ideas, knowledge, artefacts and practices. Hence, Lange and Bürkner (2018) conceptualise such spaces as assemblages, where actors, materials and tools link together in changing constellations. What is interesting in the open labs is open-ended, imaginative, and footloose propositions which are developed in there and how this is qualitatively different and complementary to traditional science organization rather than competing with it.

Openness can be understood as a free access to the means of production as found in the majority of fablabs (Lhoste and Barbier 2018), but also as less hierarchical, egalitarian structure, and trust. Regarding the supposedly flat organisational structure, Lange and Bürkner (2018), in their study on open workshops in Germany, point out that power imbalances are present, and what is more, ironically, readily accepted by the practitioners. To be more specific, the founders or amateur experts within the space can even unintentionally create hierarchies and regulate access (Toombs 2016). At the same time, there are also various practices of mutual material and social support, which are claimed to be signs of emerging post-growth modalities (Lange and Bürkner 2018) and might be conceptualized as repair work on a communal scale (Hector 2018).

Experimental or even utopian, radically open or even deviant, flat or even egalitarian, these sites of practicing alternatives, require resources, to organize and produce them, and in very real terms come together and fall apart. We next turn the focus to the organizing principles of the sites and in particular on what kinds of organizing work is done with the notion of design. Here, the practice of open spaces indicates a more humble design practice of tweaking existing reality, fixing material and building collectives.

UTOPIAN DESIGN/ HUMBLE DESIGN

Utopian thought is part of design theory and practice since it formal origins at the end of 19th century. In the times of the arts and craft movement, proponents like Morris were concerned with the working conditions of the new industrial labor force as well as with its outcome - standardized products. According to Morris utopian thought, workers should be freed from the alienation of forced labor and instead deliberately support the common good (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013). Consequently, the role of design appears here as a utopia of restoration, i.e. to come back to experiences

of the material environment which appear natural (Selle 1973).

In comparison, the rise of modernism by the 1920ies located design as central means to support social change on a grand scale. The supposedly mass-produced products of functionalism were hoped to deliver quality to everybody, while social housing in the form of new building blocks provide the cocoon within designed settlements. In the second half of the 20th century the paternalistic take of modern design was critically reflected upon and became gradually substituted by research into specific, situated user needs (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013). For Drukker (writing at the turn of the 20th century) this period (60ies and 70ies) was the final chapter of socially engaged design, replaced by the decorative and ironic elements of postmodernist aesthetics (Drukker 2004). Others have argued, that the critique of rational, unified progress exemplified by postmodernism still puts forward utopian ideals, namely that technologies can after all mediate the multiple ways of people living their life (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013).

Across these epochs, design was intricately linked with utopian thought reliant on some form of technical mediation. This mediation took different forms from highly functional to more metaphorical ones. Specifically with respect to the less functionally driven aesthetic of early postmodernist design, we see parallels to contemporary developments of speculative design and design fiction. Here, not solutions but issues are foregrounded and made explicit with the help of designed artifacts (Auger 2013). Graphical illustrations as well as more immersive three-dimensional settings shall help to point to future(s) often far ahead in time. No matter if they depict the future infrastructure of living and commuting, or provoke in the form of seemingly functional, everyday objects, they make use of an essential component of utopian stories. The new and distant needs to be connected with the old and familiar (forms) (Sargisson 2007). The weaving together of presence and future as well as the level of technological sophistication might however take different routes as shall be explored in the following.

In collective sites for experimentation, new but also old, forgotten practices are explored and made available to others through designing digital but also physical and social infrastructures (Hector 2018). Thus, while they embody hopeful and partly hyped visions of a better future, they appear to be much more pragmatic. What we refer to here, is the use of rather mundane activities, tools and infrastructures in order to materialize parts of utopian futures in the presence. Compared to earlier utopian designs they are not endpoints in the sense of products delivered to users, but ongoing experiments, premised on relative broad accessibility. Most strikingly, when thinking of the ad-hoc and DIY approach, design in this context often starts with what is at hand rather than conceiving something complex no matter what resources it will take (Jencks and Silver 2013).

Comparing these characteristics with other forms of design discussed above we suggest referring to this as humble forms of design.

METHODS

For this study, the first author has conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with members (three of them involved strongly in three of the 6 projects each and the fourth joining for some of the meetings and workshops) of the initiative lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews focused on question regarding the forming of the project, the internal and external relations as well as everyday organization. Furthermore, both authors have participated in the monthly meetings of the initiative throughout the year 2018 as well as in three special events, from which they have collected field notes. These events were the planning meeting, the official opening day and the building of the dwelling. Furthermore, the second author, being the head of a closely related master’s program has been involved in securing external funding for the site from a national innovation fund as well as securing a plot land on the campus on which the initiative now operates. Finally, the initiative is using a facebook page for external communications, while internal communications have been organized through a whatsapp group which was recently substituted by a slack channel. The first author has accessed these digital pools in an ongoing manner for purposes of participating in the initiative as well as this study. The decision to partake in the everyday activities was premised upon the belief that this will help to facilitate interactions and provide more nuanced perspectives on the initiative.

CASE TEST SITE



Figure 1: Photoshop visualization by one of the students
 ‘Test Site’ is an open space located on the campus of Aalto University in an outer city district of Otaniemi in the greater Helsinki region. This outdoor space was set up at the start of 2018 by students who were interested to explore low-tech, frugal innovations for sustainability, and is funded and planned to exist for a minimum of two years. From the beginning the exploration was planned to target both infrastructure such as water, energy and sanitation, food, soil health and food production issues, material circulation, but also

exploration on organising events and creating learning opportunities for sustainability. Key to the set up was the will get out of the classroom, out of theory and conceptual thinking.

Despite a low profile start, the *Test Site* initiators have collected support from and created diverse interests among the University campus management, from teachers in the field of sustainability, researchers working on innovations for sustainability and the business development and start-up actors at the campus. As of this moment there are 5 projects on the *Test Site* (Pee-osk, Garden, Solar Disk, Eco Soap Toolbox and Community Shelter) and the frequency of members visits of the site during the summer season was around 1-2 times a week.

Table 1: Timeline

Dates	Actions
Fall 2017:	A handful of Creative Sustainability (CS) MA students begin to look for support for different project ideas Head of CS MA Programme and Sustainability liaison of the university had discussed sites of display for the work related to sustainability
January 2018	Open call for students to propose activities results in over 30 proposals
April 2018	Physical area designated
May 2018	Official opening of the site with 4 projects
November 2018:	Exhibition at university with 6 projects put forward by 18+ regular collaborators, coming mainly from the CS MA programme with background in design, engineering and business.

FINDINGS

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The *Test Site* emerged as complementary element of higher education on sustainable development. Whilst for the initiating students, there was a lack of practicality in teaching, the university on the other hand had for long praised an experimental mode of innovating, the cross-over of disciplines and problem-based learning in real-life context. Moreover, actors employed by the university were keen to demonstrate the capability of the organization and its student members for creative problem solving. Finally, the university had recently decided to establish a ‘sustainability hub’ and welcomed the *Test Site* initiative. However, tensions arose as some felt the *Test Site* would be used more as a poster child by university officials during a sustainability event hosted by the school while not helping to secure the future of the initiative. One of the members shared her initial frustrations: “*They take the pictures when I plant the tree, and they go home and are happy and the problems stay with us*”.

The *Test Site* also emerged with a non-profit logic. Initially, it was based on a very low monetary budget and on an ideology of bricolage and scavenging. Later, as the project acquired more funding from a state owned sustainability intermediary SITRA, both budgeting issues as well as questions of intellectual property rights surfaced. Several of the ideating students had already established companies around their own ideas or prototypes and continue their participation on the premise that proprietary intellectual rights are created and adhered. Hence, the commercialization of ideas, products and relations between actors at the *Test Site* has affected both internal and external resources. Initially, active students could use various resources without committing to exchange or 'pay back' in any ways, but share outcomes. Yet, in course of the development of the project and accumulation of resources, radical ideas have become compromised. At the same time students have not at all spend their budget: "*We wanted everything to be scavenged and only bought tools and seeds*" said one interviewee involved in the garden project. Altogether, relations to the economic actors around the *Test Site* and the form of exchange relations have remained in flux.

Another institutional negotiation has occurred towards the university. From early on, the *Test Site* exemplified an extra-curricula activity with no formal ties to the university. In the course of the progress of the initiative, several formal connection nevertheless have surfaced. Firstly, the university has offered resources to hire a part time coordinator for the *Test Site*, which in the end was rejected by students as concentrating too much power within the initiative. Secondly, the university has offered to issue credits for participating students. This establishment of another 'currency' within the workshop remains open at the time of the writing and certainly does interfere with the initial ideas of practicing sustainability for its own sake, for fun and meaningful collegial experiences. Finally, a plan to organise a course on Spring 2019 at the *Test Site* has necessitated a negotiation of autonomy and ownership of the site.

The *Test Site* has managed to strike a balance between being different and yet accepted in its surroundings. Whilst the technical facility managers have denoted the area an unruly 'Village of the Savage' the campus development chapter of the University management has endorsed plurality and experimental culture. As an indication of this, the *Test Site* was invited to participate in an exhibition on the development of the Otaniemi Campus area.

PARTICIPATING IN AND MATERIALIZING UTOPIAS

The *Test Site* started with only a handful of people, who had to take over certain responsibilities, such as organizing meetings, facilitating them, sending out discussion summaries and agendas for the next meeting as well as organizing the funding and the site. Most of these roles just had to be taken care of and thus were often not felt as natural by the persons responsible for it.

Over time and with some people trying out things they were specifically fond of, the roles in the core group changed little by little and felt more natural. This group will stay involved during the second year of its existence, but meanwhile new students need to come in to eventually take over.

As of this moment, matters of participation seem to be difficult for several reasons. For one, while everyone wants new people to get involved, most people are naturally attached to their projects, thus making it difficult for newcomers to feel ownership. One of the members stated: "*In the beginning I only joined to get our baby going*". Some smaller tasks like watering the garden seem to have been a promising way to get people involved as they provide easy to understand work which on top facilitates conversation flow. At the same time, in the eyes of interested students as well as existing members, participation was heavily compromised by missing information on the site and its practices. Not only was finding the right digital communication channels a constant trial and error, but also the overall purpose and rules of the site remained unclear for outsiders. On this matter, also the highly democratic nature of the community has lead to a perceived slow pace of development and response rate further compromising new participation.

A first step taken was to organise the general meetings as a regular event at the end of each month, where most members are present and action happens. Thus, there is no need to go through the hassle of setting up extra meetings to invite somebody in. Furthermore, by the end of the first year the wooden structure for a small community shelter was built. The project was deliberately planned to be not "finished" once it is up and standing. Thereby, members hope it provides an incentive and opportunity for newcomers to realize their "own" ideas about the place regarding e.g. sustainable designs for the roof or the insulation or the walls.



Figure 2: The barn raise activity documented by one of the students Abigail Garbett

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DESIGN

The *Test Site* process clearly hints at the will to participate in open spaces with varying degree of skills and project ideas. For those participants who had no fix ideas, they prescribed to the very idea of the *Test Site* and to the student collective that was starting to form around it. On the other hand, those who came with a ready idea or a prototype, had less appreciation to the forming processes of practice and rule making for the collective, and, hence, less success in aligning with the *Test Site*. In this case, it seems valid to say that the collective was established first and only then moved into a stage of materialising ideas on a concrete site.

The relation of the participants and the space took a very clear form in the design of the common needs and the infrastructure of the space. One of the planning meetings was organised to define common needs of various participants and project ideas, depicted in the figure 3. Whilst the image denoted traditional infrastructure needs such as water, power, sanitation and transportation, it also includes aspects such as safety and shared values. Moreover, 'infrastructure' consists of having the raw materials and tools of making.

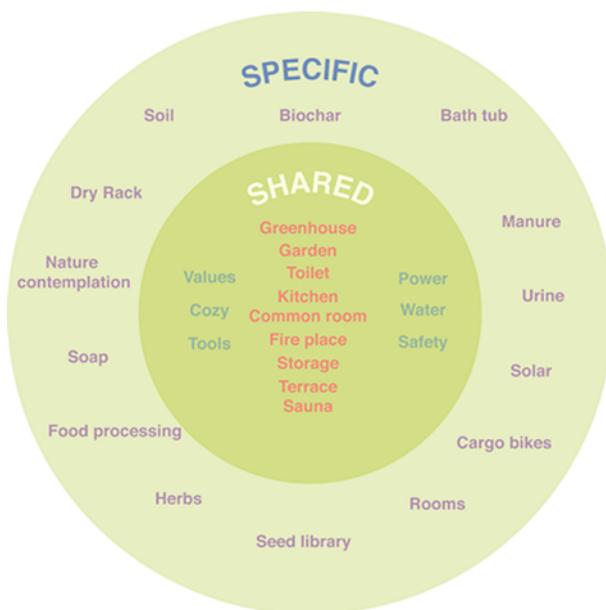


Figure 3: The infrastructure of the *Test Site* created by students during the planning meeting in early 2018

As the site is an outdoor space, and the seasons heavily regulate the activities, design became partly disconnected from the activities: Winter and early Spring allowed for little material engagement, but yielded various conceptual designs and the overall planning of the site. Such activities mediated between visions and the reality at the *Test Site*. Design took place on textual level, but also visual representations were

used. They helped the communication internally but also to get external funders on board (see figure 1 on page 4).

Moreover, physical acts of future-making included aspects of space design and planning of work processes such as where to source material, were to place them at the site and sequences of assembly (e.g. the shelter). In addition, the *Test Site* participants needed to design the organisational structure and how they communicate with each other. Finally, they had to figure out how to represent their activities or what in commercial terms would be called branding and includes naming the site or designing a logo (see figure 4).



Figure 4: The logo

DISCUSSION

NEGOTIATING WITH THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Open spaces are a proliferating phenomenon of trying to rethink sustainability both as a process and mode of organizing and as alternative practices of everyday life (Lange and Bürkner 2018). They seek to be locally rooted innovation spaces (Smith et al 2017) but at the same time distance themselves from the normalcy of ongoing unsustainability. Estrangement and finding a new ground for alternatives makes them utopian while being concrete as well.

As strange, unreal arrangements, open spaces may serve as curiosities useful for demonstrating vital powers of innovation. Not uncommon, cities (Scholl et al 2017) and universities (Kohtala 2016) have attempted to create open innovations adjunct to their more traditional modes of operating. Such attempts may be sincere, as open spaces may indeed contribute to different ways of working and hold potential for innovations. However, and by the same token, open spaces are hybrids that

witness to multiple institutional logics and create tension in their environment (Smith et al 2017). Tolerance and support of such initiatives is far from self-evident within the traditional institutions.

As the initiative was additionally well-aligned for the purposes of the actors in the university, the *Test Site* secured support. Self-initiative, learning-by-doing and getting-hands-dirty resonated with the institutional discourses amongst which *Test Site* was launched. On top, sustainability and frugal innovations had also become a topic of established interests in the university. Hence, the *Test Site* certainly is not distinctive in its own operating environment. On balance, it is different and strange as a student-lead outdoor environment in a university which has little to no biosciences, but the logic of engaged, student-centered learning for social purposes ties it to the institutional logics of the university. At the same time, radical thoughts on degrowth, less material forms of well-being, and more appreciative relations with nature and other species point to potential conflicts with more progressive and even imperialistic institutions of science. Yet, until this far the *Test Site* has remained small and marginal enough not to cause trouble as unorthodox and strange place.

DYNAMICS IN OPEN AND HYBRID SITES

We also see different interpretation among the actors inside the Test Site. Similar to FabLabs, also the case at hand is neither a living room, workplace, nor scientific laboratory (Kohtala and Bosque 2014) and represents something different to all members. Therefore, the implementation of such spaces in itself appears to require experimentation and trial and error (Hector 2018). When achieved, open-endedness of the agenda and any results of it, might render them interesting to different groups of people and different purposes (Akrich et al 2002). Here, activities and artefacts of open spaces can be brought into networks by purposeful, partial interpretations and even purposeful misunderstandings. Indeed, when looking at the initial “Call for proposals” for the *Test Site*, it clearly attracts more people if you talk about hybrid, experimental spaces where the outcome could be almost anything as long as it fulfils some criteria such as excluding hate speech.

However, the open-endedness also brings problems. This includes overcoming frustration related to obstacles, slow pace of progress and the difficulties living up to the ideals of the open space discourse. Quite clearly, notions and experiences of efficacy seem to require clear leadership and management of the activities. Different than Lange and Bürkner’s observation of assemblages, our own empirical analysis hints at more ordered spaced organised around visionary leaders, who introduce and push ideas about projects or events (Lange and Bürkner 2018).

The flipside of open-endedness further appears in the difficult negotiations between different actors both regarding external as well as internal relations. When potential newcomers do not really know what the initiative is about, this highlights one important point about such experimental sites. Often neither the purpose nor the rules are clear – unlike say a football game – they are continuously in the making. Therefore, the discourse of open-ended, imaginative and latent places needs to find material forms and get articulated in real outcomes as Kohtala (2018) suggests for maker-spaces. Hence, the great joy for example when a pile of compost soil arrives at the *Test Site* as a product of a large scale centralized municipal operation and delivered by a commercial service provider. This pile of soil functions in several ways. Firstly, it allows the students to implement the gardening project and thereby adds to the overall site. Secondly, it underlines that they have reached a certain level of visibility and credibility, if these actors work with them. Much the same can be said about the sustainability event in which the site was displayed as the recent successful impact of the school.

OUTCOMES OF HUMBLE DESIGN

The site responds to the anxiety of the impasse of sustainable consumption and represents utopian thinking in its attempts to imagine, articulate and practice social life. Despite diversity of participants and their understandings of the place, the rhetoric of openness indicates that these spaces facilitate trust, respect and aims of participating individuals. Ideally, some of such spaces may turn unproductive anxiety of individuals to inspired collective action, be it growing food, making soap, building shelter, find support for the initiative or decide about the name and look of the place.

In contrast to bold, spectacular and visionary design, open spaces are compromises themselves. These tamed utopias are not fixed spatial utopias as earthly heavens, even when good for temporary relief. In the *Test Site*, projects like the Peeosk (using human urine to produce food) or the Eco Soap (using waste cooking oil to produce beautiful objects), turn ideas which appear radical to the majority into practice. The projects implicate the body, bend and blend politics and, as we have suggested, come out of the humble design attempts to reconcile human existence with other beings and sustainability. They are, however, also communities of innovation-in-practice, which seek to produce the component parts of sustainable forms of human life for broader use in the society (Smith et al. 2016). By the same token, they are not completely estranged and do not demand by far as much time as e.g. intentional communities require (Sargisson 2007).

To continue this thought and to be very blunt, the cases seem not to be able to deliver their original, radical utopian aspiration and might even be bound to “fail” in this sense. Still, they can continue to exist and deliver something. Acting out your ideals is utopian in the sense of the forward-looking society of Mannheim. Different

to the strict, modernist narratives on future, open spaces and particularly the modest, humble design and trial and error in there, can be thought as a new, postmodern modality of engaging with our material surroundings.

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