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# VITAL VILLAGE

Development of Rural Areas  
as a Challenge for Cultural Policy

Entwicklung ländlicher Räume  
als kulturpolitische Herausforderung



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# Aus/From:

*Wolfgang Schneider, Beate Kegler, Daniela Koß (eds./Hg.)*

## **Vital Village**

Development of Rural Areas as a Challenge for Cultural Policy/

Entwicklung ländlicher Räume als kulturpolitische Herausforderung

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Due to global processes of transformation and the social challenges posed by demographic change, rural areas increasingly demand attention from politics and the public sphere. The contributions in this volume demonstrate how in different European countries it is mainly the cultural players who offer suggestions for an organization of the changing forms of communal life that is keeping with the times. The arts in particular have proven to be able of providing fresh impetus and new insights.

This compendium of theory and practice combines outcomes of studies in cultural policy, introduces exemplary models and thus constitutes a first attempt at determining the position of innovative cultural work in rural areas. All essays both in English and German.

Durch globale Transformationsprozesse und die gesellschaftlichen Herausforderungen des demographischen Wandels rücken ländliche Räume immer mehr in den Fokus von Politik und Öffentlichkeit. Die Beiträge des Bandes zeigen für verschiedene europäische Länder, dass vor allem Kulturakteure relevante Anregungen für die zeitgemäße Gestaltung des sich verändernden Zusammenlebens geben. Insbesondere die Künste stellen dabei einen Nährboden für weiterführende Impulse dar.

Dieses Handbuch für Theorie und Praxis führt Ergebnisse der Kulturpolitikforschung zusammen, stellt beispielhafte Modelle vor und wagt somit erstmals eine Positionsbestimmung innovativer Kulturarbeit in ländlichen Räumen. Alle Beiträge sind in Englisch und Deutsch enthalten.

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Weitere Informationen und Bestellung unter/For further information:

[www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-3988-9](http://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-3988-9)

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# Foreword

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IVO PEETERS

Cultural centres are at the heart of the artistic and sociocultural life of European communities, both large and small. It is a luxury to have dynamic professionals in our network who believe that sociocultural work can really make a difference, especially in the development of rural areas. It was no surprise that the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC), through those members and their work, found the way to Hildesheim, to the university's Department of Cultural Policy, to Wolfgang Schneider and Beate Kegler. The ENCC working group on rural development is one of the most active groups in our network.

Since the majority of European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) in the coming years will be addressing the same challenge, namely the development of new models of cooperation with surrounding rural areas, the step of cooperation with them will become more and more important.

In addition to acting as a distributor of all kinds of relevant working models put together by its own members, the ENCC can also become the bridge between the ECoC's models and the whole cultural field in Europe. In several countries, the development of rural areas and, especially, the role of culture in this respect will become an important cultural policy issue.

Therefore, I would very much like to congratulate the contributors to this book, *Vital Village*, for their important work in this field. I am sure that this book will help local actors all over Europe to become even more creative and vibrant in their approaches to socioculture. The development of community life is the cement needed to rebuild vital villages.

# Introduction

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BEATE KEGLER, DANIELA KOSS AND WOLFGANG SCHNEIDER

Vital Village. The development of rural areas as a cultural-political challenge. The programmatic title of this volume encapsulates what is currently motivating many people in Europe in the face of ongoing social transformation processes outside the metropolises. Contributors from all over Europe have outlined their positions here in order to provide us with their perspectives on the subject. We are offered an insight into scientific discourse in the field and encounter very concrete practical experiences in cultural work and cultural policy.

The challenges facing people in diverse rural areas in Europe can already be clearly identified at the start of the first part of the present collection. Demographers and spatial researchers get to the heart of the issue and provide concrete examples. The further away the villages are located from places of education and employment, the more drastically the changes seem to affect the design power of the communities. Older, poorer, fewer, and with decreasing levels of education – this is the prognosis for large swathes of rural areas that are located far from the well-to-do suburbs surrounding urban centres. Although not equally true for everywhere in Europe, several areas are vacant, and schools, shops and post offices, pubs and even churches are showing visible signs of decline. Cultural studies and cultural policy research show that this development also affects the previously strong grassroots culture and its ability to foster identity. Wherever the last sources of inspiration are no longer enough to bring people together to take joint action with perspectives that reach beyond the village, the stage becomes set for resignation, and for anti-democratic and populist ideas. There are also villages where this isn't the case, where artists and cultural actors are taking on the challenges of rural areas and attempting to provide impulses and initiative networks in various ways in order to restore the balance between urban and rural areas in relation to living conditions.

In the second part of this publication, several of those people involved at this level report about their diverse practical experiences. Year after year, a village community succeeds in staging a highly-regarded opera performance in a converted pigpen. Elsewhere, digital media are used to form village communities. Yet more examples show that the revitalization of traditional grassroots culture can also be an instrument for vitalizing the modern village, and it has also long been clear to many European actors that cultural policy plays an indispensable role in the development of rural areas. Cultural policy actors are looking for answers to the challenges of rural development in many different ways, and, together with cultural actors, they are experimenting with diverse strategies, from different funding programmes to cross-departmental network projects – starting with rural initiatives but also in conjunction with urban actors, as mobile and decentralized concepts as well as through development-related consulting and lobbying. Examples of these heterogeneous approaches, from Cyprus to Latvia, and from Ireland to Austria, comprise the third part of this book.

On the one hand, when reading about the different experimental approaches and methods, the existing diversity of the movements searching for ways to revitalize rural areas becomes apparent. On the other hand, despite their heterogeneity, it also appears to be about similar processes and similar challenges, both within Europe and, probably, beyond. The current promotion of the active shaping of living environments by the social communities resident there, a togetherness that looks beyond the confines of the village, is a pan-European challenge. The many examples of successful discussions also demonstrate the value of undertaking joint search-movements to increase the initiated exchange on successful paths toward the Vital Village. The time is especially ripe for this, bearing in mind increasingly populist trends and the growing disenchantment with Europe in rural areas. European positions and first approaches to a transnational exploration of innovative ways toward the Vital Village, as described in the fourth part of the anthology, provide hope that cultural actors are able to make significant contributions in relation to the inclusion of rural areas in considerations about Europe, the creation of impulses and the promotion of networking.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARITY**

What was surprising in the process of putting the book together was not so much that the search for a common language presents a very serious challenge, especially in rural areas. What was more unexpected was that participatory cultural work in rural areas, which is central in the examples included here and in search-

movements, appears not yet to have been the subject of common consensus regarding the terms used to refer to it. Participation has many levels. “Grassroots culture” and “social culture” are used with quite different conceptual understanding. “Amateur art” does not mean “lay art” per se. The term “professionalism”, when referring to cultural actors, is either the opposite of voluntary service and understood as paid work, or an expression of a professional activity which requires previous training. At times, however, professionalism also means the special mastery of artistic disciplines. In the following culture thesaurus, an attempt is made to try to set out common definitions which will facilitate European or international discourse on this subject.

## **CULTURE THESAURUS**

### **Culture**

The term culture in an extended sense is understood to refer to all manifestations of societal engagement that shape the coexistence of people in a social community or a sphere of identification. Cultural activities can be based on artistic activities but also on further aspects of life, including local customs, traditional cuisine and beverages, manners of communication, and regional languages, for example. The measurement of quality in this heterogeneous field is not limited to the professionalism of the explanations but also includes further factors such as the degree of society-forming potentialities.

### **Arts**

The term art primarily refers to the cultural expressions of art, also referred to as high culture. The arts comprise both performative and visual arts, which manifest themselves in the forms and formats of theatre, visual arts, dance, singing and instrumental music, for example. Art understood as the practice of the arts usually requires rehearsal, technical knowledge and skill. The quality of art is often measured according to the degree of mastery of the performance.

### **Grassroots Culture**

Based on the definition drawn from popular sport, “grassroots” culture can be understood as cultural expression which, according to a broad concept of culture, refers to activities that derive from the artistic-cultural leisure activities of the general population. Grassroots culture is based on civil society engagement, is local,

and is self-organized. Cultural knowledge is passed on through mutual togetherness. Grassroots culture follows local societal arrangements, can build upon traditional forms of non-material cultural heritage, and is always also an expression of societal design.

### **Amateur Arts**

The term “lay” or “amateur” art is used when it needs to be made clear that the actors do not perform professionally and/or did not receive any professional training for engaging in artistic activities. Regardless of the lack of training or relevance to the performer’s profession, “lay” or “amateur” art that aspires to high artistic standards does exist. The term alone does not say anything about the artistic quality of recreational activities. In German-speaking countries, the use of the term “amateur” is mainly found in the context of theatre, whereas the field of music refers more often to “laypeople”. The distinction between “amateur” arts and “leisure” arts found in English-speaking countries, where a further distinction is sometimes made between serious leisure arts and forms with a more social emphasis, is rarely found in the German-speaking world.

### **Socioculture**

Socioculture is a concept which has established itself as referring to a form of participatory cultural work which orients its events, projects and participation formats towards bringing people from different walks of life together for collective cultural activity. One of the basic criteria of socioculture is its modern orientation towards societally relevant issues, which are directly related to the situation of the local and regional population.

Growing out of the grassroots movements of the 1970s, socioculture initially developed as an urban countercultural movement opposed to the then prevailing affirmative and rigid high culture of the post-war period. Directed towards the demands of a culture “for all” and “from all”, the grassroots movements sought to counteract the inhospitality of the cities (Mitscherlich 1965) and tested basic democratic design principles. During the course of the alternative movements of the 1980s, socioculture also established itself in rural areas and has since then been trying to establish contemporary and society-shaping cultural work based on local needs and conditions. With the opening of the arts and established cultural institutions to participation-oriented and increasingly contemporary impulse creation, high culture has also responded to many sociocultural demands. The arts have now become an integral aspect of sociocultural activities and projects, also in rural areas, and the boundaries with traditional grassroots culture can be quite fluid.

## Participation

Participation is a general term for different forms and levels of participation and goes beyond mere involvement. In the German-speaking world, participation is also referred to as “*Teilhabe*” (“having a part”). The term is generally defined as the involvement of the participants in joint decisions about the design of processes and the setting of goals. The nature and intensity of the participation can be just as variable as the degree of design possibilities of processes. They range from institutionalized forms of participation, such as public meetings, to basic democratic decision-making structures for civil society actors, such as those found in self-governing citizens’ initiatives in the context of socio- and grassroots culture.

## Volunteer Service Position

The term “volunteer service position” refers to the binding acceptance and free execution of a range of responsibilities that generally serve the public good. Appointment to a volunteer service position can be conducted informally or through election by the voting members of a charitable civil society association. Sometimes contractual agreements are also made for agreed-upon tasks. In the case of certain bodies, such as registered associations, legal and executive representation can be carried out by volunteer officeholders, and appointment to the volunteer position is legally binding.

## Civic Engagement

In contrast to a volunteer service position, “civic” or “voluntary” engagement is not characterized by the assumption of a bindingly defined concrete set of responsibilities. The unpaid activity can also be adjusted to individual needs and possibilities in terms of scope, duration and content, and has no legally binding status. While the term “civic engagement” emphasizes the commitment to society-shaping processes and the common good, “voluntary engagement” is a more general term for unpaid activities which are assumed or executed of one’s own volition.

The terms “volunteer service position” and “voluntary” or “civic” engagement are sometimes used as synonyms despite their concrete meanings in general language usage.

## Artistic Processes

Artistic processes are understood as formats which are based on impulse creation, execution or design by artists. Artistic processes are built upon the fundamental idea and framework of professional artists who support the direction of planned

experimental scenarios in an implementing role or at least an observational capacity. In this way, they create experimental fields and spaces of possibility which can facilitate thinking about things in new and lateral ways, testing out ideas, and arriving at a playful examination of “what if” scenarios.

### **Cultural Participation**

“Cultural participation” is defined as active involvement in cultural and societal-design processes by local people. Artistic processes can play a role in this, but general grassroots cultural activities and design formats are the central focus of cultural participation. The provision of impulses and setting of conditions can be carried out by professional art and cultural creators, and can also arise from civil engagement.

### **Arts Education**

The term “arts education” is understood as holistic and sustainable learning through and in connection with the arts. It calls for practice, which leads to increased skills, but also includes the transfer of knowledge about the background, history and specifics of the respective disciplines. The professionalism of those actors who initiate and accompany these educational processes as artists and art educators serves as a quality criterion for artistic education. Art education takes place, for example, in art, music, theatre and dance schools. Art education is frequently offered in individual or group lessons, but also in looser formats, such as those available at open studios.

### **Cultural Education**

Cultural education is based on a broader concept of culture that is not only related to the arts but also encompasses interdisciplinary formats, grassroots culture, and sociocultural approaches. “In a modern concept of cultural education,” notes the cultural scientist Vanessa-Isabelle Reinwand-Weiss, “is the fundamental aesthetic question: how do we want to live together as people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how do we want to shape our culture(s) and which tasks correspond to the individual subject?” (Reinwand-Weiss 2012: 113).

### **Cultural Mediation**

In contrast to cultural education, cultural mediation takes the mediation process into consideration and is less focused on the education process of the cultural user. Cultural mediation focuses on the search for methods and strategies relating to the design of frameworks and communication with the potential cultural users. In this

regard, cultural mediation itself can make use of the language of the arts and approaches of cultural participation. Through “help with translation”, the cultural users will become participants, question-askers, seekers and researchers. In this way, cultural mediation can generate opportunities, create impulses and enable changes in perspective.

## **Cultural Policy**

The concept of cultural policy is primarily used to describe national and communal action in the field of art and culture, regardless of the underlying political understanding. Therefore, cultural policy includes both the promotion of the actors of art and culture and the accompanying steering mechanisms, the definition of cultural assets worth protecting or supporting as well as the design and assurance of the accompanying framework conditions. State cultural policy usually takes place in conjunction with other actors and constellations of actors who are active in cultural policy. These can be, for example, cultural and art associations, churches and educational institutions, and other actors. If culture is understood in its extended sense as a form of shaping society, the concept of culture as such is inherently a general political task. Cultural policy must therefore always be translated to societal policy. In this sense, it is a cross-departmental task. It follows that cultural policy actors are not just institutional representatives and elected politicians but also all of the actors and constellations of actors who are active in cultural and societal development.

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