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# Who's place is it? Enacted territories in the museum

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**Abstract:** There is a growing trend to embrace the idea of public participation in the work of museums, from exhibition design to collections. To further develop participatory cultures in museums, these negotiations and emerging practices should be examined more closely. This paper explores a museum's whole-hearted attempt to engage with the societal issue of climate change and work with a high degree of participation from civic society when staging a temporary exhibition. We investigate experiences in the process of building, measuring, separating and transgressing during the collaboration. Based on these explorations the paper presents three emerging and interconnected territories in the staging of participatory temporary exhibitions, the territory of aesthetics, the territory of action (autonomy), and the territory of unpredictability. The result contributes to research on public participatory practices mainly in museum context.

**Keywords:** design; territory; participation; unpredictability

## 1. Introduction

New forms of activities are being developed at museums. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has promoted participation in those new forms and describes the role of museums in relation to democracy, inclusion, sustainability, and local development. It suggests that museums are perfectly positioned to address and enhance sustainability, since they can work with communities to raise public awareness and support research and knowledge creation to contribute to the wellbeing of the planet and societies for future generations (ICOM, 2020). There is a growing focus on community participation in museum activities (see for example Simon, 2010; Morse, 2021; Sachs, 2018) and museum audiences are envisioning a new type of museum, one that goes beyond participation and interaction, that demands a new social order of museum values that break down past hierarchies (Giannini and Bowen, 2019).

Research on public participation in museum exhibitions revolves around questions of power and participation in the production of knowledge in a setting where museums are presented



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as “free-choice learning settings” (Falk & Dierking, 2016, p.107) or as open settings in which users “are free to perform and communicate individual and collaborative experiences of objects and situations according to their own design” (Carr, 2001, p.180). The boundaries of this (somewhat illusory) freedom are also recognized: the museum visitors are offered the possibility to process information in their own critical way, but they are always accompanied by the political-social agenda of the museum (de Gaay Fortman, 2020).

Museums are also described as proactive and innovative organizations which are constantly guided by missions, goals, and ideologies that operate within a certain political and economic environment (Stylianou-Lambert, 2010). Museums often perceive their mission as a mixture of several different requirements: scientific, caring, public amusement, education, and knowledge transfer (Aronsson, 2007).

In *Reflections of a Culture Broker: A View from the Smithsonian*, Richard Kurin (2014) discusses the museum’s relevance and local roots, the audience’s involvement, and the public participation. From his insider perspective, Kurin describes and analyses how countries, authorities, organizations, groups, and individuals negotiate the space at the Smithsonian. He makes it clear that representations of different groups and history do not just happen; they are mediated and negotiated in many ways by those involved, who have their own interests and concerns. For example, the decisions made and the meanings and interpretations in exhibitions are negotiated by participants, visitors, and the press (ibid.). Kurin’s research, which calls for reflection on work and decision-making processes in museums, is now beginning to have an impact in the Swedish museum system (Grandén, 2017).

This paper discusses a specific aspect of public participation in museums, namely when opening up the exhibition space to non-museum workers. It explores and presents different territories, transitions and negotiations that occur during an ongoing collaborating exhibition process, through the construction of an object (a Tiny House), the experiences of the construction team and its interactions with museum staff and museum visitors.

## **2. Background and Context**

### *2.1 The making of the exhibition*

To further develop participatory initiatives in museums, the negotiations and emerging practices should be examined more closely. The museum presented in this paper seeks to engage with societal issues and involve visitors and the local civic society in its efforts. As part of this approach, the ‘Sustainable Rooms’ exhibition aiming at engaging visitors as participants in conversations and actions on how we can live more sustainable was planned and prepared. The museum staff were interested in exploring Participatory Design’s guiding principles such as equalizing power relations, democratic practices, situation-based action and mutual learning in practice (Van der Velden et al., 2014) and had previous experience related to PD (Schaeffer et al., 2020). As part of creating participatory culture in the museum,

visitors were invited to participate in activities connected to crafting, recycling and renovating at home and a non-profit association was invited to plan and stage one part of the exhibition which consisted of building a Tiny House. They aimed at a critical reflection on 1) waste of materials in building processes 2) standards and norms in building 3) women's invisibility in building houses and running heavy machines.

The museum staff and the invited association had to discuss territorial boundaries such as safety, noise and dust, space limitations, time plan and opening hours to make the collaboration possible. The three members of the association shared responsibilities in planning and organizing the Tiny House area and they, in turn, invited others to workshops and shared their process with visitors.

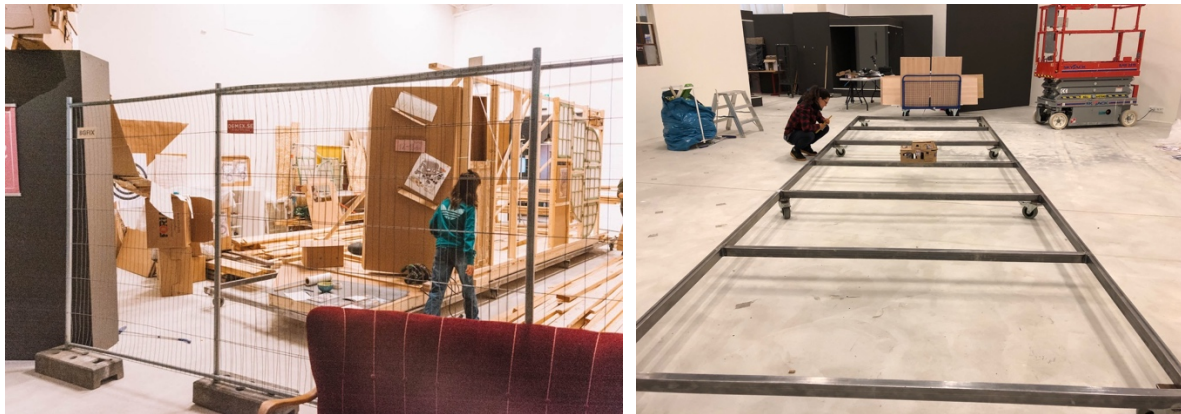
The exhibition space of 'Sustainable Rooms' was structured into four different zones;

- The entrance to the exhibition space as a welcoming first zone, where an art installation invited visitors to contemplate their way of using everyday objects at home.
- The second zone consisted of the exhibition "Sustainable home" that had been displayed in another museum and then adapted to the new exhibition space (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. The exhibition space in the museum. The second zone, a space that enacts order and a finished exhibition (left) and the fourth zone that enacts the temporal and explorative (right)*

- The third zone was a workshop space, where different events connected to crafts were staged.
- The fourth zone was the Tiny House area (Figure 2, left). Since the Tiny House had to be pushed out through a narrow museum gate at the end of the exhibition - a low metal fundament (Figure 2, right) was ordered for the Tiny House to be built upon.



*Figure 2. (Left) The Tiny House temporary exhibition/building site surrounded by the fence; (Right) The low metal fundament that was ordered for the Tiny House*

When the exhibition proceeded the involved parties developed ways to manage the collaboration. One way to research this is to elicit territories that were experienced, expressed and negotiated in various manners. Through our analysis of the Tiny House project collaboration at the museum three areas for negotiation had more tension than others. In the result we framed the negotiations within the themes as emerging territories of aesthetics, action and unpredictability.

## **2.2 Territory**

In *Rethinking Territory* (2010) Joe Painter states that “territory has usually been understood as a bounded and in some respects homogeneous portion of geographical space.” (p 2) Painter suggests that the phenomenon called territory must be “interpreted principally as an effect: as explanandum more than explanans” (p 6). This effect is the outcome of networked socio-technical practices and thus conventional ideas of territory need to be reconceptualized, as “necessarily porous, historical, mutable, uneven, and perishable” (p 7). Territory is never complete, but always becoming” (p 7). The socio-technical practices he references include such things as the mundane arrangements of material, laws, and control over an established boundary that create a territory that appears as a structure that gives meaning to people’s lives.

Territories can also be shaped through enactment (Bonnevier, 2007). Enactment is synonymous with representing or performing through action – for example, when dramatically representing a character on stage or, as in our case, staging a Tiny House building process in the

museum. In *Behind Straight Curtains*, Bonnevier (2007) analyzes enactments of architecture to show how the performative force may transform the built reality. Bonnevier also explains how architecture messes with the borders of norms and gender and how the built space transforms people's actions. We define territory as socio-technical practices and place it within the boundaries of the context we explore.

### *2.3 Physical literacy*

Apart from describing the building process of the Tiny House as a performance, a participatory action negotiating territories, it can also be described from a perspective of physical literacy as it provided opportunities to explore issues through embodied, felt experiences.

To make use of the capacity of the embodied dimension is at the core of the concept of 'physical literacy' (Whitehead, 2010). Physical literacy has mainly been used within research and development in training and sport and is associated with physical activity. The approach has found its way outside these domains and is used among other areas in settings such as city-planning and education (O'Sullivan et al., 2020; Pot, Whitehead, & Durden-Myers, 2018). It is rooted in phenomenology or embodied actions which are described as the way we negotiate, get experience and learn to incorporate and develop a dialogue between our capacities, abilities and the material and the socio-ecological context in which the activity takes place.

Here, physical literacy is used to frame part of the analysis and the discussion on perspectives of action, participation and collaboration.

## **3. Method & Result**

### *3.1 Several approaches*

Our methodology drew on several approaches including methods that are oriented towards qualitative empirical exploration of 'the open-endedness of the world' (Halse & Boffi, 2020; Frayling, 1994), methods that use photographic elicitation (Lee & Sergueeva, 2017; Schaeffer & Carlsson, 2014) and norm creative (Nilsson & Jahnke, 2018) design interventions. An important aspect of our research is that we involve ourselves in the activities (Akner Koler et al., 2018).

The staging of the Tiny House building process in the museum brought forth how climate issues may be explored through the felt experience of materials and building activities (Kosmack Vaara & Akner Koler, 2021). In the building process body movement became a central component and provided a resource for reflection (Tobiasson, Hedman & Gulliksen, 2014).

The intention of the invited association (hereafter referred to as the TH-team) when building the Tiny House was to create a possibility to shape an intimate relationship between the design activities (design interventions such as building live in front of the visitors, lo-fi prototyping, generating data and building-workshops with women) and the audience visiting the

museum exhibition. In negotiation with the museum the Tiny House team curated their part of the exhibition independently and they designed their activities to explore their research questions.

### *3.2 Generating and analyzing data*

Two weeks into the Tiny House project, a photo-elicited interview session was undertaken to investigate the TH-team's experiences of collaborating with the museum.

During the first part, the TH-team were asked to individually reflect on their emotions and intentions when building the Tiny House in the museum context. Four photographs that each member had taken were used to support the reflection.

Three months into the project a second, now online reflection session was held after an online open Tiny House workshop. The session consisted of 5 minutes of group meditation followed by 15 minutes of individual drawing, which was the starting point for a group conversation with focus on new perspectives on the building process and on how ideas had evolved over the past weeks. The three team members of the association will be named as TM1, TM2, TM3 and the visiting carpenter TM4.

The whole Tiny House area was continuously filmed and photographed by the TH-team, external photographers and the museum staff. From the roof, three cameras were directed toward the Tiny House space, recording the whole process to create time-lapse videos that were shown to the visitors as the building of the Tiny House proceeded. The TH-team made notations and collected written notes/comments from visitors and participants in their workshops.

The photo-elicited conversations, interviews with museum staff and the collected experiences and reactions from TH-team's design interventions are used as a base to elicit dilemmas that arose and boundaries that came into play.

In line with territory understood principally as socio-technical practices, we turn our attention in the analysis to physical literacy and to enactment, both interlaced with the material and technical aspects in the Tiny House collaboration in situations around building, measuring, separating and transgressing.

### *3.4 Curious lo-fi prototyping and acting out ideas*

The process of lo-fi prototyping was fundamental in the TH-team's work at the museum premises. From the photo-elicited interview we can see playful curiosity and embodiment unfolding: An image of the interior of a cardboard model of a Tiny House (Figure 3, left) is by TM2 describing her activities in the museum as an exploration of non-standard and non-creative work with a 'childhood mindset of curiosity'; an image by TM3 of a dusty leg (Figure 3, center) representing the process characterized by a reasoning through movements and materials. TM4, the visiting carpenter, elicited the lo-fi cardboard slide in scale 1:1 explaining



that this object was a way of sketching the house and showing it to the museum visitors at the same time (Figure 3, right).



*Figure 3. (Left) The inside of a cardboard model of a Tiny house; (Center) TM3's photo of her dusty leg; (Right) A prototype of the Tiny House in the early stages of the process with the cardboard slide prototype beneath*

Through her drawing, TM3 described the building process as a 'patterned process' (Figure 4). Characters, landscape and dynamics of the Tiny House that at first seem without a clear goal unfold as the material meets the making through physical actions in the building process. TM3 framed her sketch with cardboard to give it stability, but the frame was flexible because from TM3 perspective the project could be changed and reframed at any time.



*Figure 4. A photo of TM3's drawing describing the building process as a 'patterned process'*

### **3.5 Material, tools and bodies on stage**

All the activities connected to the building process such as collecting, moving heavy stuff, cutting, carpentering, taking design-decisions and handling tools were related to emotions of both satisfaction and frustration. TM1 tries to express that with an image showing TM2 active in cutting (Figure 5, left). To TM1 the process was a shared journey with teamwork but



also a process of many difficult decisions and fear of not being able to finish the project within the time frame of the exhibition due to lack of building skills.



*Figure 5. (Left) TM2 shaping material; (Right) TM4's photo of collected material*

TM4 found building the house and at the same time being “on stage” in the museum to have positive connotations to creativity, show, entertainment and teamwork. She expressed her expectations through the photo of the pile of material hoping that when the project was finished, there would be nothing left (Figure 5, right).

Most of the material came from second hand sources. The TH-team had to learn how to straighten and split it into right dimensions. As time went on and more materials were collected, the space got crowded and messy (Figure 6). This created a lot of frustration as the TH-team had to make constant rearrangements of the materials to make space for their building activities.



*Figure 6. Lots of collected “waste” material distributed in the Tiny House territory which became smaller and smaller*

It also included removing building materials and safety equipment such as the scaffolding from blocking the view for the visitors. This made TM4, the only professional in the team, question whether there were any safety rules and if anyone cared whether the team followed them. The safety aspect also unfolds in the conservation of the museum objects, why the TH-team was not allowed to do dusty work in the exhibition area. As a consequence, the team had to carry the large bulky materials through the museum during opening hours (Figure 7) and cut it in the museum wood workshop.



*Figure 7. The TH-team carrying material for the Tiny House through the permanent exhibition*

### *3.6 Can it look like this?*

The museum staff tried to help by offering advice on how to organize the material and provide waste bins, cleaning supplies and shelves. The coordinator of the project at the museum, said that in her view, inside the fence the group could organize things as they wanted. Sometimes it was a lot of unorganized stuff, and she said, that is something they are not used to in the exhibition area. She described it as a “cardboard aesthetic” and said that her first thought was “Oops, can it look like this?” And then she thought, “Oh yes it can!!!” She said that this collaboration gave her an opportunity to reflect on her own assumptions about museum aesthetics.

The TH-team described their building process as a situation of playfully learning, teaching, organizing, making and watching. They used temporary materials such as cardboard for lo-fi prototyping in 1:1 that allowed their thoughts to quickly become materialized (Figure 8). The character of the teamwork process contributed to a rough, chaotic and unfinished expression that stood out from the rest of the museum exhibition. In some situations, the Tiny House zone expression caused confusion. Some visitors turned around in the entrance to the zone since they thought that the space was under construction.



Figure 8. The TH-team used cardboard to materialize their thoughts and ideas through creating a rough, chaotic and unfinished expression

### 3.7 Separation, inclusion and transgression

While visitors could walk through the other parts of the exhibition, a construction fence was installed around the Tiny House area for safety reasons. The fence changed the whole relation to the space, creating a clear boundary between the exhibition zones. It was important for the TH-team to challenge themselves by including visitors. This involved sharing the project and the building process live in the exhibition, exposing the growing structure of the house in the exhibition and collecting visitors' view on dwelling and building. TH-team continuously creatively transgressed the fence-border and even dissolved it by designing artifacts such as cardboard postboxes (Figure 9) and signs that they attached on the outside of the fence. Not in order to provoke or that they were disturbed by the fence, but in order to allow visitors to participate in their exhibition.



Figure 9. Cardboard post-box transgressing border, the fence surrounding the Tiny House exhibition



As an outcome of being on stage, however, the TH-team felt a mix of satisfaction and frustration when visitors tried to transgress the boundaries of the exhibition. Exhibiting the process was touched upon in one of the photo elicited conversations where the team expressed that “the TH-team is also the exhibition, so we exhibit ourselves.” The visitors were separated by the fence, but the set-up invited them to take part in the building activities by leaving notes (Figure 10) or directly talking to the TH-team inside the fence. For example, conversating with TM1 about what constitutes a home when she was standing on a ladder using the screwdriver.



*Figure 10. Photo from outside the building territory. Notes with comments and questions from visitors are taped on the fence. The brown cardboard box is where visitors can ‘post’ their messages to the building team.*

### *3.8 Visitor with no admittance*

In the process of negotiating and talking about the formal rules and regulations in a museum a norm became apparent; a museum is a place regulated to be safe for visitors and staff, and safe for the objects. Some of these objects the museum should keep safe for eternity. That is why it is important to control the material entering an exhibition.

Many things that are brought into exhibitions need first to be frozen. At the same time, the museum should be a community place for the people living now. A problem arose when a long-tailed silverfish was found on the second floor of the museum (Figure 11).

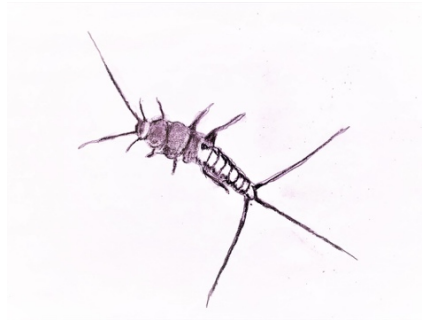


Figure 11. A long-tailed silverfish

It can spread throughout a building and feed on paper and thereby become a real problem (Szpryngiel, 2018). The animal found on the second floor, (the floor above the museum exhibition) were immediately assumed to have come from the wood in the Tiny House exhibition, as is recorded in an official safety report.

### 3.9 Measuring

The perspective of measuring elicits stories around the limitations of the museum space. The doors of the exhibition hall were not large enough for a house to go through, and so either the size of the doors or the size of what was built needed to be negotiated. The base of the house was chosen so that it would fit through the biggest exit door, and it was agreed the house would be finished elsewhere. Still, this border created tension for the group. “Measuring” as a word was mentioned by TM4 when reflecting on her feelings when the project would come to an end. TM4 felt that it would take a week to “drive this thing out.” And that they need to put a huge amount of manual work to make it happen.

TM3: The Tiny House through the tiny door!

TM4: Ah, we just smash it

TM4: In the worst case it is much easier to make a bigger door!

TM3: Yes, we will tell them [the museum] to

TM4: I like demolition jobs

Several voices: We will call you [laughter]

Even though this discussion was partly a joke, with a lot of laughter, it points to the serious question of who has the power here. Space size was not static but changed with the materials and usage.

## 4. Discussion

The negotiations and enacts that unfold in the collaborative exhibition design process can be described as enacted territories. People's enactments in the museum are entangled with these diverse territories and in this research three territories did unfold: territory of aesthetics, territory of actions and territory of unpredictability.

#### *4.1 Territory of aesthetics*

The enacted territory of aesthetics is partly related to the function of the safety fence surrounding the Tiny House zone in the sense that for the museum staff that part of the exhibition was staged inside this fence. The chaos, the lo-fi prototyping cardboard material, the “ongoingness” and the playful becoming could be accepted by the staff because it was clearly separated from the rest of the museum. As expressed by one of the staff when changing from surprise to acceptance of aesthetics in relation to the Tiny House.

What also became visible in building of a Tiny House in the museum was the contrast to the rest of the museum's exhibitions which show how people have lived during past times by using full-sized human dolls, tools, part of the housing and everyday objects that often carry traces of use. The TH-team was on stage with their bodies, building live in front of the visitors and prototyping for sustainable ways of future living which expanded the museum aesthetics.

The territory of aesthetics that we unfold here points to the tension around aesthetic norms at the museum. What becomes visible in our analysis is that by enacting an aesthetic expression and experience of “ongoingness”, the current norms of exhibition design at the museum are made visible. The visibility and reflection of norms makes negotiation possible and produces new qualities, and for museums and other institutions that work with public participation, it is important to consider and be attentive to the “disciplining” that the institution enacts in the territory of aesthetics. The outcome of this territory put forward notions of separation and transgression.

#### *4.2 Territory of action*

The TH-team was fenced in a ‘cage’ as expressed by some of the museum staff, but while there was a clear border around the house, the territory of action was continuously negotiated so that the TH-team could autonomously work on the house.

Playful conversations about getting the Tiny House through the ‘tiny door’ illustrates these kinds of negotiations. Paying attention to the territory of action (autonomy), the questions raised concerning the possibility to change the scenography and curate the content of the dialogue staged, but still leave the more manifest structures immovable and what it means for the process.

With no previous experience of building or working with defective material, handling tools they had never used before and organizing a part of an exhibition for the first time was challenging. As the whole activity needed the TH-team to make use of their bodies’ physical abilities and give the physical activity of building a central focus in the process it provided opportunities to enhance physical literacy – as an individual territory of action.

It was at the same time a try to incorporate and make visible the often-absent person or active bodies in museum exhibitions.



What the Tiny House project is about, became in the museum setting a reflection on a political-social agenda (de Gaay Fortman, 2020) involving the TH-team, the visitors and the museum staff. On the one hand the stable structure of an institution plays a role in stability, but on the other hand it poses a challenge since it is a space that requires preparation and negotiation for example concerning security and what one can and cannot do when it comes to sharing space.

These factors create an inertia in museums as a place for participation, that can complicate participation in depth, and that can seem conservative but stable as a holding framework. In a negative reading, the TH-team was exhibited and exotified when the museum built them into an exhibition, put their activities behind a security fence and recorded their process using three cameras in the ceiling. On the other hand, the action of having the Tiny House project at the museum created autonomy beyond the visible fences and structures at the museum. The women in the TH-team were the ones that took the initiative to build the house, they chose to bring in others, they communicated with the visitors, and they chose how to do it.

The outcome of sharing a territory of action between an institution and civic collaborators, genuine inclusion requires that the institution use its power to empower its collaborators. A question emerges in this negotiation: who becomes in fact a visitor/participant or a museum worker when the participation, as in this project, tries to challenge past hierarchies?

#### *4.3 Territory of unpredictability*

The story unfolding around the long-tailed silverfish reminds us to reflect on the possible embedded anthropocentrism in museums and public collaborations. The silverfish entering the stage was an unexpected part of the collaboration, with a potentially major negative influence on the exhibition and on future collaborations.

The territory of unpredictability in museums draws attention to, that we not only share the museum space with human visitors but also with animals, plants and the overall climate. The demand to preserve objects in the collections forever for future visitors, while at the same time opening the exhibition space for new ways of learning and designing exhibitions has shown to be a collaboration that is difficult to balance.

The territory of unpredictability also points to the more positive unpredictable outcomes of a collaboration guided by an open-ended design process. The non-profit association that was invited had little experience in constructing and it was their first exhibition. They approached the building process through improvisation and playfulness, letting the material and ideas that emerged during the process guide the way. Not knowing what type of material they would find nor having a blueprint of the house to follow, contributed to a design process where not mainly ideas for design but limitations in material had a major say in the process.

The enacted territory of unpredictability unfolds tensions around control and prediction that need to be negotiated in collaborative projects. Even though the collaborators in this study

prepared for different scenarios connected to safety, noise, dust etc. they could not predict that certain outcomes would emerge, negative as positive.

The outcome of this territory shows that it is important for institutions to keep in mind when starting collaborations that there is a territory where unpredictability rules.

## 5. Conclusions

We have investigated collaborators' experiences in a museum's whole-hearted attempt to engage with the societal issue of climate change and collaboration with local civic society.

We have investigated the collaborative exhibition design process and discussed what/how negotiations, and enactments of territories came forward. The results present three emerging and interconnected territories in the staging of participatory temporary exhibitions: *The territory of aesthetics* points to the tension around aesthetic norms at the museum. For museums and other institutions that work with different participatory design efforts, it is important to be attentive to the "disciplining" the institution enacts in its 'own' territory. The tensions in *the territory of action (autonomy)* point to the possibilities of - and what hinders - creating an un-disciplining culture in a disciplining institution. Another related thread is that of the physical activity in the building process, the skills and knowledge developed for the TH-team as an individual territory of action. *The territory of unpredictability* unfolds around the unpredictable outcomes of a collaboration: the long-tailed silverfish reminds us to reflect on a possible embedded anthropocentrism in public collaborations of museums; the enhancement of physical literacy argues for a space and structure of patience and openness that allows for the unpredictable to take place.

Who's place is it? This activity, by a small group of people, is connected to the broader questions of public participation in cultural institution activities in design of exhibitions since our result brings forward the negotiation and creation of territories in a museum as a continuous process. The result contributes to research on public participatory practices in museums and suggests that negotiations in relation to territories of aesthetics, action and unpredictability may guide the way.

When the exhibition closed and the Tiny House rolled out through the tiny door of the museum, it was not finished. It has since been invited and will continue to develop in close collaboration with a mall focusing on second-hand items and students focusing on re-use of material. The civic association continues to explore in dialogue with the public; actions related to design and constructing of a home and what attitudes are present in these questions related to physical literacy and social sustainability.

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