

TEDx Lausanne  
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Dan Acher presents

## **Shaking up the City Experience**

When was the last time you had a meaningful interaction with a complete stranger? When you shared something special - a smile, an emotion? What was the situation, the setting, what triggered it? Maybe you can't remember.

In our western cities we see more and more people walking around staring at their phones, completely detached from their environment. We see more and more people on public transport with headphones on, shutting themselves off from any new potential human interaction. There's a growing feeling of separation, of fear and insecurity. We hardly know our neighbours and we don't know the names of our local shop keepers, police officers, school teachers. Yet when we think of life in villages and small cities in the past, we imagine a place where you would know most people, and interact however briefly with almost everyone you'd pass every day. A sense of community. There were specific places meant to gather people and share experiences, like church, with ceremonies like baptism and marriage. Places for self-reflection. And celebrations like La Fête de la St Jean, Thanksgiving, harvest celebrations. There was the lively town square like the Plaza Mayor in Spain where people would go to just hang out, to walk around together - simply to be with each other. There was absolutely less traffic, certainly more time and definitely more connection.

But we shouldn't be stuck on the past, no! We need to reinvent the city. And that's what my work is about - an experiment in living together in the urban environment. I want to show you that by creatively rethinking our use of urban space, we can transform the way we engage both with each other and with our environment, bringing joy and a renewed sense of community. Because there are great opportunities out there for us to reinvent the city and create new ways of living together.

### **The right item in the right place**

Let me start small with a very simple idea I had about five years ago, when I recycled an old newspaper dispenser, had an artist friend paint it, wrote "[Neighbourhood Exchange Box](#)" and "Take something, give" on it, and put it out on the street. It was just an experiment, I wanted to see what would happen with the box and if people would be interested. And it really took off! People started trading books, toys, egg boilers, DVD's, snow chains and all sort of objects they no longer needed, but that could still be useful to someone else. Soon enough the box became a completely normal aspect of life in my neighbourhood. And so my team and I installed 10 more boxes throughout Geneva.

We started receiving hundreds of posts and messages from "happy customers" - the people on the street - and we started to collect data. Over one year in the 11 Geneva

boxes alone, well over 100'000 objects were traded - that's about 32 tons of material. And what's amazing is that we're not the caretakers of these boxes, we just put them out there. But people will absolutely come and clean up the boxes, making sure there's always content. They'll sort and rearrange them and remove objects that shouldn't be there. And that's something that happens with every single one of the boxes, and with every single one of my participative projects. People start taking responsibility.

### **People want to be useful to their community**

Here's a [time lapse](#) of one of the boxes filmed over one day from my balcony. We can see that 44 people so far have come to the box and interacted with it. Six people have put a large amount of things into the box and 31 people have taken something from it. But I want you to see a woman that's going to come up very soon. She's a sorter, here she comes. Look at her! She just took out the whole content of the box and put it back in, sorted out. I don't know this woman, I have no idea who she is, but these roles just appear and it's something that happens with all the boxes. People *will* take responsibility! And what we learnt from this is: if you put something out for people and they understand that it depends on them to make it work, they will make it come to life. Because people want to be useful to their community.

There are now over 40 boxes over Switzerland and that number is going to double within the next few weeks. There's even been media coverage as far as Brazil, Thailand and Russia. Our mission now is to get Neighbourhood exchanges boxes to really go worldwide and become a completely normal aspect of urban life.

Something I'd like to point out is that the effect of an exchange box on a street corner goes far beyond people just trading stuff. Because people notice that the box is working, that it is respected. And this changes the perception they have of their neighbours, their neighbourhood and their city. Which in turn brings a new or renewed sense of trust, community and security.

We've been organizing [Play Me, I'm Yours](#) in Switzerland for 4 years now. It's a project by Bristol artist Luke Jerram and again, it's a very simple idea. You take pianos and you put them out on the streets for people to play freely over 2 weeks. Last year we placed 45 pianos in the streets of Geneva and neighbouring France, and there'll be 60 pianos out there this summer.

I really liked the reaction from the authorities when I first approached them with the project. They said: "Oh, Dan, we really like you and we love your work, but this is just crazy. Within two days the pianos will end up in the lake or get burnt down". And I said no, let's just see what happens, it's an experiment. And the result was amazing. It really transformed the city. There were pianos by the lake, on public squares, in parks, on street corners, at bus stops, and they were all played extensively. People just went for it. Bands and musicians started going around the pianos to rehearse or give spontaneous concerts, passers-by would play and gather crowds, children who had never touched a piano started banging away. Buskers and bank workers started jamming together, people sang and danced until four in the morning. It was really special.

When we told everyone via social media that there were only a few days left before the pianos would be removed, the reaction was really emotional. People said: “I’ve never seen my city like this! I’ve met so many people”. “I’ve sung and danced all night long with complete strangers. They can’t go, please let the pianos stay!”

And none of the pianos had been damaged. We had even told people they could go on the street to actually paint them but hardly anyone dared. The ones that did were told off by passers-by! People really took care of the pianos. When it started raining, we would start going from piano to piano to cover them up with a special rain cover we’d attached to each one. And every time we would get to a piano, it would already be covered, quite often with someone still playing underneath the cover!

At the end of the first edition, the local authorities came back to me and said: “Dan, you’ve given us back our faith in the population” and that’s BIG.

### **Breaking up routine, creating new experiences**

With [Les pianos, la nuit](#) I took the piano project a step further. I organized concerts on the pianos between midnight and one in the morning, but on weekdays only. The reactions came in really quickly. “But why on weekdays?? I’m working tomorrow! What about culture for all?!” And I said: “I’m not that interested in how many people will turn up, I’m interested in the experience. And that’s just started right now with you asking yourself whether you’re going to stay up late and what you should wear, and how you’re going to get back after the trams stop running, and if anyone else will be there.”

We had 200 to 300 people at every concert, listening to opera, or dancing the tango, or singing and clapping to Cuban beats. All this while the rest of the city was asleep. We tend to see people in Switzerland as quite closed off and cold, but when given the opportunity, people love to come out and experience things with complete strangers. You just have to scratch the surface, just a little, and it all comes out.

Another one of my projects is [Touch 'n dance](#). It’s an installation for city squares where you’re invited to come and plug in your own mp3 player to blast music and dance. The thing is, if you want the music to actually play through the speakers, you have to gather seven people and get them to link hands. Because they have to make a chain that connects two switches that are 25 feet apart! Then the music starts for 3 minutes. And then you have to start all over again. This is really powerful because you see complete strangers calling out to each other. “Come on over, we need you, you too, over here!” and actually physically connecting to share an experience.

### **Gathering crowds to share emotions**

Moving up in scale, [CinéTransat](#) is a fantastic series of events throughout the Summer. It’s a free open-air cinema in a beautiful park by the lake. People come with their picnics and sit on the grass enjoying the sunset until the movie starts. But it’s much more than this. For me, the movie is just a pretext for what we can get people to experience together.

First of all, we only play cult movies with happy endings. People vote for the movies they want to see, we have picnic contests, theme nights with props and games, people dressing up, and before the film we have a giant karaoke where it's not just one person grabbing the mike but the whole crowd singing together.

And here's what a [Bollywood Night](#) looks like. We have Bollywood dancers and we grab the mic and say ok everybody, let's dance, stand up. And the whole crowd goes for it and dances together and learns the routine. All these little things add up to completely transform the cinema experience. We go from an individual experience in a movie theatre where, if you start speaking to your neighbour someone will start kicking the back of your seat telling you to shut up, to a collective experience where everybody is laughing, clapping, singing together, whistling at the bad guys, having a good time together. And when the movie ends people leave with a smile on their face and the feeling of having lived something pretty special together.

And we can go deeper than that. This is [SECRETS](#), an installation I've been working on. For this we want to build giant wooden letters 4 and a half metres high and place them in a city square. Over several days, people are invited to come within the centre of the installation. There'll be cards to fill in that say: "This is my secret, let's burn it together". People are invited to come and free themselves of a secret by pinning it anonymously to the inside of the giant letters. Or just to come within the space and be a witness of the humanity that surrounds them through other people's secrets. And then on the last evening, we all get together and set the whole thing on fire.

This kind of "ceremony" already exists of course. But you have to travel halfway around the world to the middle of a desert to places like Burning Man, or to a spiritual retreat where you remove yourself from society for a few days for some inner contemplation. But what if we could bring these moments back into the city, to everyday people like you and me? What if we could bring these moments of shared emotions, these rituals, back into our lives?

In short, I believe that by creating the right situations - big and small - we can transform the way we engage with each other. We need to create more opportunities for people in cities to meet, to be together and to share. To be good to one another and have fun together, because when all this happens, we get to know each other better and to trust each other more. And this is how we transform the way we live together.

<http://www.tedxlausanne.com/talk/shaking-city-experience>