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# Madame Ruetabaga's Prefigurative Politics at the Urban Fringes of Grenoble

Claske Dijkema and Morgane Cohen

**Abstract** During its practice of critical social pedagogy in street workshops, Madame Ruetabaga has shown that it is able to create a space that is radically open, where groups form and dissolve over a period of two hours every week. The workshops lay the basis for a form of prefigurative politics in an area generally to be perceived as anomic and as a place of violence and tensions. During the street workshops, Madame Ruetabaga temporarily challenges power relations and suspends rules to replace them with new ones for the specific period of time and in a specific space of the square. The association provides a space for children to experiment with new kinds of freedom and limits that differ from those at home or in institutional spaces. This example provides an alternative view to both the pessimism of the death of public space and the utopian idea of mass movements challenging global capitalism *à la* Lefebvre and Harvey. The focus is on the everyday, the mundane, the micro and how they can sometimes produce extraordinary situations.

**Keywords:** Prefigurative politics, social pedagogy, marginalised social housing neighbourhoods, children, right to the city, effects COVID-19

## Introduction

*‘Meeting people where they live, at the foot of their residences in order to learn, work build and struggle together’* [that is what social pedagogy is all about] (Dababi et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Every Friday, the cart of Madame Ruetabaga arrives at one of the central squares of Villeneuve, a marginalised social housing neighbourhood in Grenoble, a middle-sized French city. Once arrived, volunteers of Madame Ruetabaga unload the cart: they roll out the carpets, they unpack the wooden crates and install all over the square material to play and be creative. The volunteers position themselves according to the activities they are in charge of that day. Some children are already waiting, others come down from their apartments, accompanied by their parents or alone, and engage with the volunteers and activities.

During its practice of critical social pedagogy in street workshops, the association Madame Ruetabaga is able to create a space that is radically open, where groups form and dissolve over a period of two hours every week. Critical social pedagogy, an approach to education developed by Helena Radlinksa in early 20th century Poland, combines education and upbringing with politics and public life. This form of education teaches how to engage in dialogue with others and develops skills of cooperation and interaction in order to fight against violence, ignorance, intolerance and nationalism (Theiss 2018). The workshops lay the basis for a form of prefigurative politics (Ince 2012; Springer 2013) in an area generally perceived as anomic (Dubet 2008). Created in early 2014 by a group of people, who partly built on their experience with social pedagogy at Intermèdes Robinson in the Paris suburbs (Dababi et al. 2012), Madame Ruetabaga has become an important player in the political and cultural landscape of Villeneuve. The workshops of Madame Ruetabaga provide a counter-narrative to both the pessimism of the death of public space (Davis 1990, Sorkin 1992) and the utopian idea of mass movements challenging global capitalism that we find in the early work of Lefebvre (1973) and Harvey (2012). The focus of this chapter is on the everyday, the mundane, the micro and how they can sometimes produce extraordinary situations.

This chapter builds on the literature that has emerged over the last decades about the politics of public space, including Iveson’s (2013) work on the appropriation of public spaces by active/activist citizens involved in “DIY urbanism,” Holston’s (2008) research on practices of everyday resistance and insurgent citizenship, Hou’s (2010) work on guerrilla urbanism, and Amin, Massey, and Thrift’s (2000) interventions on claiming rights to the city. Others, such as Mitchell (2003), have considered public space’s potential as a locus for (counter-)politics and activism, drawing on Lefebvre’s (1974/1991) dialectics (De Backer et al. 2019). In this special chapter, we want to zoom in on the everyday and the microlevel as a site of political expression. For this, we turn to the lens of performative, prefigurative, and affective politics of the everyday, agreeing with Himada and Manning (2009) that “Politics” with a capital “P” is much less the “real

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from French by authors.

deal” than it presents itself. While “Politics” operates in the sphere of representation, where precomposed bodies are already circulating, “the micropolitical is that which subverts this tendency in the political to present itself as already formed” (p. 5).

Within the larger picture of forces that shape the city (e.g. capitalist, racist, governmental, criminal forces), and in comparison to powerful actors in Villeneuve, such as the National Agency for Urban Renovation, the municipality, large construction companies and the police, the intervention of Madame Ruetabaga hardly seems relevant. While we are well aware of the limited impact of this small association, we nevertheless think there is something important to learn from what it has achieved with relatively few means. Madame Ruetabaga creates the possibility for those who don’t own anything in the city, who are simply users of the city and its social services, to appropriate the city in some small way. This right to the city in a Lefebvrian sense, is ‘a right to inhabit, to appropriate and to freedom’ (2009 [1968], p. 35) but it is also a right to participation, which ‘cannot be conceived as a simple visiting right [...]; it can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life’ (in Lecoq 2020). Madame Ruetabaga offers participants in their workshops this right to both the material and political aspects of access to the city. Through the work of Madame Ruetabaga we want to raise awareness about the importance of access to public space for (micro)political action and citizenship.

A focus on everyday agency in a context where people have limited control over their lives has two aims: 1) uncovering subaltern forms of agency; 2) providing a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of marginalised and racialised social housing neighbourhoods as places of violence and otherness. After the wave of terrorist attacks in France in 2015,<sup>2</sup> marginalised social housing neighbourhoods have, in addition to violence and otherness, become even more associated with Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>3</sup> This new articulation of marginalised social housing neighbourhoods builds on a long process that spatially locates the dangers associated with the working class, with immigrants and with crime (Dikec 2007). While visibilising violence, media generally do not capture the alternative and everyday prefigurative politics that inhabitants are engaged in. Through a narrative of the ways Madame Ruetabaga opens up public space and temporarily densifies social relations in Villeneuve, we provide a counternarrative of marginalised social housing neighbourhoods that makes visible the marginal possibilities at the fringe.

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<sup>2</sup> Although discourse on terrorism is instrumentalised by the politico-military elites of the world, we still deem the term ‘terrorist’ appropriate here for the deathly attacks in Paris that have been claimed by jihadist organisations, based on the following (geographical) definition of terrorism as ‘an act of violence, different from other acts of violence, e.g. genocide, war, war crimes, political assassinations etc. in that it is (1) a spectacle directed towards a wider audience than the immediate victims, (2) directed towards place destruction and/or (3) place alienation’ (Mustafa 2005, p. 79).

<sup>3</sup> Le Parisien, ‘Patrick Kanner: Des centaines de Molenbeek potentiels en France’, March 27, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/opinion/molenbeek-belgiums-jihad-central.html>, accessed March 15, 2017.

This text is based on an ongoing dialogue between the two authors, who have been involved in different ways in the association, as well as in other projects in the neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup> The first target of our engagement was to find out to what extent knowledge and university collaboration can strengthen actors that work towards social transformation (Dijkema, Gabriel, Koop 2015) and a first version of this text was presented at the RGS-IBG in 2016, at a session on “Young people, public space and gender”. The latter was written together with Mélodie Fournier, who was the coordinator of Madame Ruetabaga at the time.<sup>5</sup> With our interdisciplinary backgrounds in political science, geography and architecture, we decided to provide a spatial analysis of Madame Ruetabaga’s political work. We draw on our observations (2015-2021); on five (audio-recorded and transcribed) group discussions (2016), exploring why the work of Madame Ruetabaga is special in the neighbourhood, what Madame Ruetabaga is able to achieve and how; on radio interviews carried out during the workshops; on pictures and on documents produced by the association.

The first section of the chapter discusses the everyday politics around public space in Villeneuve. This section mainly draws on the PhD research carried out by Claske Dijkema (2021). The following sections draw on the action research carried out by the co-authors. The second section describes in further detail what Madame Ruetabaga is about, its analysis of societal problems that are the starting point for its work, what it sets out to do, who participates in the workshops and how they are funded. The third section describes the space and time of the workshops, supported by a map that shows the core, fringe and outer edge of the workshop space. Throughout this section, we seek to demonstrate how Madame Ruetabaga opens up space. The fourth section discusses how Madame Ruetabaga temporarily densifies social relationships, followed by a discussion of the political dimension of Madame Ruetabaga’s work. Taking the initial unpublished paper as starting point for this chapter, it was clear that an update was necessary due to the COVID pandemic: a central aspect of Madame Ruetabaga’s work, bringing people together physically in public space, was no longer possible during the different moments of lockdown in France. The association had to rethink its mission, how to continue to form a collective in these challenging times when physical co-presence became a source of danger and

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<sup>4</sup> Morgane Cohen and Claske Dijkema got to know each other during a training in social pedagogy offered by Madame Ruetabaga (2014). The collaboration that led to the writing of this chapter grew out of a growing friendship and a curiosity to learn from each other and to work together. When we started data collection and writing in 2016, Claske Dijkema was at the beginning of her PhD research and Morgane Cohen was a volunteer at Madame Ruetabaga. Since then, their roles have changed: at the time of writing Morgane fulfils the role of paid coordinator of Madame Ruetabaga; and Claske has a postdoc position in another country but continues to follow the association.

<sup>5</sup> Dijkema, Claske, Cohen, Morgane, and Fournier, Melody. ‘Street Workshops for Children at the Urban Marges of Grenoble: Creating a Space for Prefigurative Politics.’ Presented at the Annual International Conference - Royal Geographical Society, Royal Geographical Society, London, August 31, 2016. [http://www.irenees.net/bdf\\_fiche-analyse-1084\\_fr.html](http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-analyse-1084_fr.html).

the withdrawal into private spaces the way to protect oneself against this danger. In the fifth and last section we therefore discuss how Madame Ruetabaga adapted its activities during the pandemic.

### **Everyday Struggles over Public Space in Villeneuve**

The function of this section is to situate the case of Madame Ruetabaga in the political and geographic context in which it operates, in order to explain the challenges that neighbourhood inhabitants face. To understand why Madame Ruetabaga's action in public space is political and extraordinary, I explain public space in Villeneuve as a space of everyday tensions.

Villeneuve was built as a modern utopia in the 1970s. The neighbourhood was conceived by Grenoble's socialist municipality at the time, which had great ambitions and a vision for the antithesis of the bedroom community. It worked together with an avant-garde group of architects, artists and sociologists and engaged in citizen consultation. Progressive ideas about public space and the place of the child in the city were at the centre of their reflection. Buildings were constructed on pillars, thereby opening up the space under them for pedestrians; it is car-free; the high-rise architecture has liberated space for the monumental park; and facilities have been integrated in the architecture, thereby creating a large publicly accessible area. Children have a relatively large perimeter in which they can move without being accompanied by a parent, providing a sense of freedom in comparison to children living in the city centre. This makes the spaces in the neighbourhood particularly conducive to street workshops.

Over the years, Villeneuve has lost a lot of its attraction which coincided with a rising percentage of social housing and a changing population (Breynat et al. 2015, DSQ 1989, Dubet and Lapeyronnie 1992). Residents of immigrant origin, from former French colonies and more recently Roma people from Eastern Europe, came to represent a larger part of the neighbourhood residents. In the administrative jargon, the neighbourhood is categorized as "sensitive" and it is part of the French state's cartography of special intervention zones that require specific attention in terms of security and other types of urban policy targeting lowest income areas. Its negative reputation is known nation-wide as a result of the violence that occurred in recent years. Most of the time, however, the neighbourhood is calm and on sunny days its 14 hectare park, lake and hills are an enjoyable place in the city.

Public space in Villeneuve, as elsewhere, is rife with everyday tensions and competition. Dynamics are comparable to that of other social housing neighbourhoods. There are tensions between police and youth over drugs and physical presence at street corners; between youth and older inhabitants over the unsanctioned use of publicly accessible spaces, such as hallways and corridors of apartment blocks. There is a struggle over what is appropriate behaviour in public space and over the right to "otherness" or difference. These tensions have only increased since the 2015 terrorist attacks. For those belonging to racialised minorities, this diversity in the

neighbourhood, which partly is the reason for its stigmatisation, simultaneously serves as a security valve as it offers some kind of protection against a racist gaze, and therefore provides a sense of security and belonging. Residents feel these tensions at specific times and in specific places. For example, weather conditions will increase the unsanctioned use of public space by groups of young men as they look for spaces to gather outside while being protected from the rain (Dijkema 2019). The fear associated with certain spaces and certain moments of the day is gender- and age-specific. Neighbourhood residents know which places to avoid, and they adapt their itineraries through the neighbourhood accordingly. The square where the workshops take place, the Place des Géants, is a place in the neighbourhood that is associated with paroxysmal as well as more everyday forms of violence. In 2012, a group of young men who frequently hung out at the square were responsible for the death of two young men of a neighbouring area (Dijkema 2021, Monkam-Noubissi 2014, Raynaud 2016).

In the neighbourhood, a variety of players mitigates the permanent condition of precarity, frustration, anger and despair that inhabitants are confronted with and that make life a struggle (Dubet 2008). Different actors help people to deal with difficult life conditions, such as public actors, peer groups, solidarity networks and civil society organizations. These actors keep the potential for violence in check and establish some kind of social cohesion and apparent peace. Madame Ruetabaga is one of these actors. It is quite extraordinary that Madame Ruetabaga, in the midst of these multiple tensions and conflicting claims to public space, is able to appropriate every week a large area of one of the central squares for its practice of social pedagogy.

### **Gaining Right to the City through Social Pedagogy**

In opposition to other actors in the neighbourhood whose role it is to police space, such as specialised police forces and mediation patrol teams at night,<sup>6</sup> Madame Ruetabaga seeks to open up public space (Dababi et al. 2012). Madame Ruetabaga's concept of opening up space is close to Sennett's conception of the open city, in which borders are porous, which is incomplete in its form and democratic in nature, and allows for encounters, conflicts and dissonances (2006). The workshops have been born from a critique of the education system, of public space, of capitalism and in favour of a public that doesn't find a place anymore in traditional institutions (Dababi et al. 2012). Parents indeed have complex relations with institutions and school in particular as a result of the disqualification, stigmatization and relegation that they may experience. Madame Ruetabaga has chosen to organise its workshops in public space because, in opposition to more institutionalised spaces, such as social centres and community centres (Maison des habitants), one does not have to show one's identity card, to prove one's place of residence or one's age, in order to participate in activities. The pedagogy Madame Ruetabaga proposes distinguishes itself from

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<sup>6</sup> The night mediation patrol team, a neighbourhood service provided by the Régie de Quartier, is in charge of preventing nuisance and insecurity in the neighbourhood. An important aspect of their work is to convince loitering youth groups either to go to spaces of consumption or to go home.

more institutional offers (e.g. school, leisure centres, clubs, sports, libraries) that select, categorize, classify and survey access through doors, walls, financial contributions and administrative procedures. It insists on the pedagogical value of its activity which should not be mistaken for leisure. Madame Ruetabaga uses the city for its prefigurative politics and provides a practical example of what Springer has described in the following way:

“Prefigure is to embrace the conviviality and joy that comes with being together as radical equals, not as vanguards and proletariat on the path towards the transcendental empty promise of utopia or ‘no place’ but as the grounded eminence of the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of actually making a new world ‘in the shell of the old’ and the perpetual hard work and reaffirmation that this requires” (2016, p. 287).

The values upheld by the association are the horizontality of relationships, autonomy, no taking of power, no measuring of performances and no judgement. Madame Ruetabaga stands out for its hands-on approach and its decision to shy away from institutional meetings, saving time that can then be used for establishing direct contact with the families involved in the street workshops.

The association was created in 2013. Its name is a pun: It is both a reference to *rutabaga*, the French word for the root vegetable swede, a root that grows well in difficult conditions and to *rue*, the French term for street. Madame Ruetabaga places the street at the heart of their action. Whatever the weather may be like, the workshops always take place outside, following a strict principle of continuity all year round. Participation in the workshops is free of charge and no particular conditions apply. Madame Ruetabaga organises workshops in four different places, of which the Place des Géants is one. While people of all ages can participate in the workshops, most of the participants are children between three and 14 years old, and the number of people that participate in each workshop varies between 10 and 150. In addition to street workshops, Madame Ruetabaga also organises festive evenings, summer camps, and activities outside of the neighbourhood. The demand for the latter has increased considerably since the COVID pandemic.

Madame Ruetabaga approaches each form of participation in the workshops as a contribution to the collective. It seeks to rotate roles within the collective, in order that roles can be exchanged and reinvented. Therefore, seeking a strict difference between the volunteers of Madame Ruetabaga and the resident-participants of the workshops does not do justice to the fact that the street workshops function through the people that take part in them: it is they who make the workshops as much as the team who prepare the workshops in a material and logistic sense. The team of roughly 12 people consists of a combination of volunteers, interns and employees. Those employed have in almost all cases started as volunteers. The interns are for example young people who have grown up with the street workshops and who are seeking integration into professional networks; students in social work; or adults with professional experience who are looking for alternative and less institutionalised approaches to social or pedagogical work. Participants are mainly residents of the apartment blocks around the workshop sites, residents from other areas being the exception.



Because of Madame Ruetabaga's decision to offer free activities, without registration and open to all, the organization relies on external funding, coming mainly from public funding sources, but also from a few private foundations and it also generates funds through training. Their reliance on voluntary work (50% of their activity) is also a way of auto-financing its activities and is an important driver of the social and solidarity economies.

## How Madame Ruetabaga's Workshops Open up Space

This section looks at the space of the workshops on the Place des Géants. We develop the argument that Madame Ruetabaga is able to open up space by translating its politics of inclusion and libertarian principles in the temporal and spatial design of its workshops. The workshop's rhythm takes shape over four moments in time: it starts with the arrival of Madame Ruetabaga's cart filled with games and other pedagogical material at the Place des Géants, followed by the installation of the carpets and the start of a creative activity (serigraphy, creation of books, sculpture, board games, etc), until teatime and it's holding of a democratic council meeting with the participants, and ends with the departure of the cart and the gradual dissolution of the group. We draw on three spatial concepts to explain how Madame Ruetabaga creates a radically open space: core, fringe and outer edge (see fig. 1).

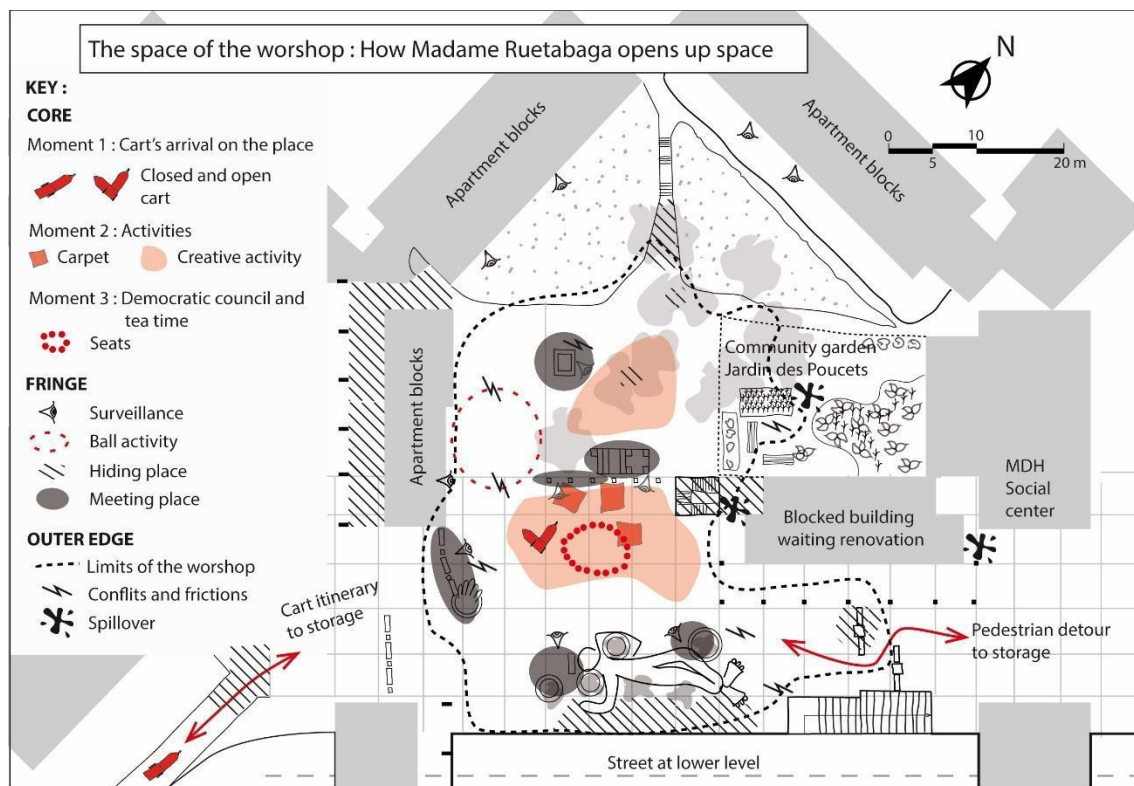


Figure 1: The space of the workshops on the Place des Géants, map by Morgane Cohen.

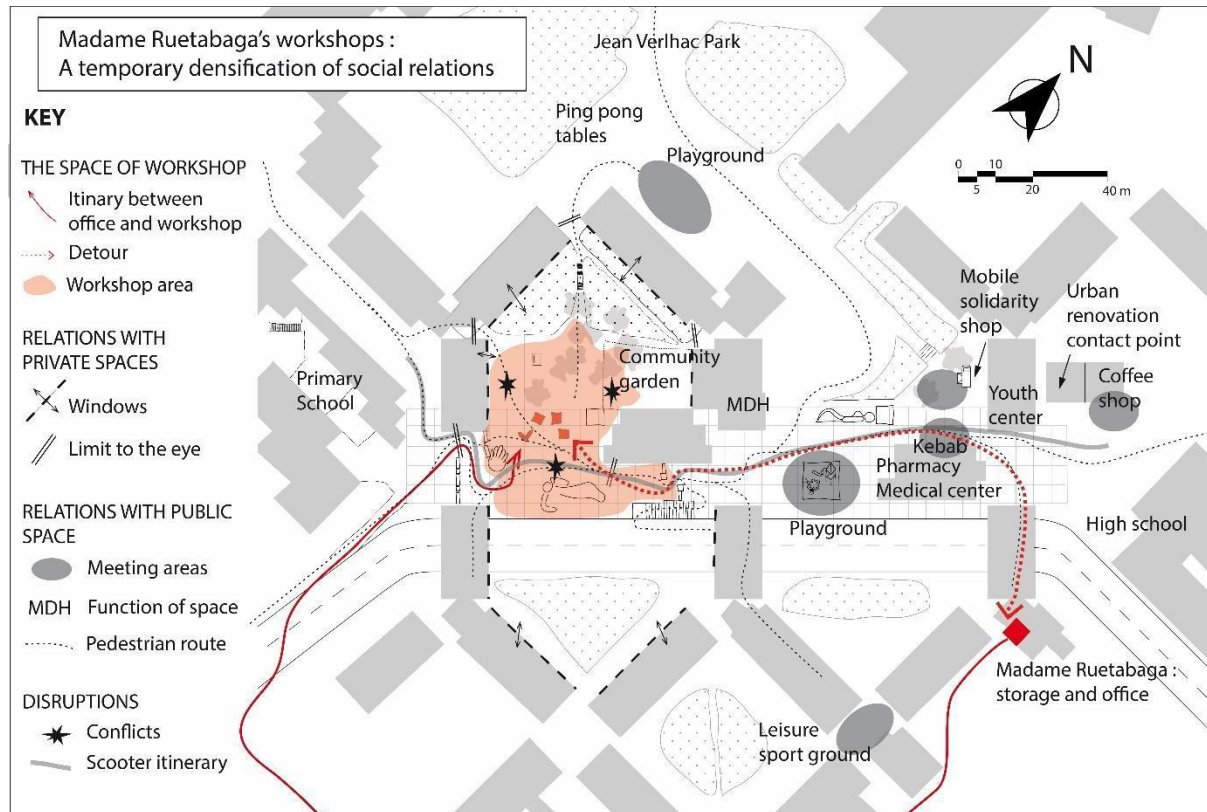
The **core** of the workshops is where the activities take place, where the pedagogical material is stalled out and past productions are exposed, and where tea is served. It is the visual attraction for newcomers and the permanent meeting point for regulars. The **fringe** is the transition space between what is in- and what is outside of the workshops. Here, we can think of the watchful eyes of parents from the apartment windows, the terrain used for ball games, hiding places at the margin of the workshop and finally, benches or other objects where people sit together. At the fringe, people participate indirectly in the workshop by their presence and occasional remarks. The **outer edge** is the space surrounding the workshops where things happen that do not directly enter into interaction with the activities, except perhaps in case of conflict (scooters, a drifting soccer ball) or when they become part of the discussions of the participants. What keeps the workshops radically open is not so much that they take place in public space itself. After all, there are many closed groups that gather in public space. Rather, it is the creation of a space that has a mediating function between those in- and outside. It therefore allows for the mixing of people and their roles, and renders the space integrative. To explain how it works, we take the forest fringe as a metaphor. One of the key characteristics of the forest fringe is that it is porous: it is neither a limit nor a border that can only be crossed through defined and controlled passage. The fringe offers a multiplicity of opportunities for passage between the interior and exterior; the public and private; the known and unknown.

Four types of displacement contribute to the formation of this fringe and thereby widen the outer edge of the workshop's perimeter. The different itineraries are indicated in the map (fig. 1). The first itinerary is that of the cart from the office of Madame Ruetabaga to the Place des Géants. This moving through the neighbourhood allows the volunteers to meet and greet children and their families, exchanging news and inviting them to join the workshops. The second itinerary is that of other volunteers, reaching the square from other directions but with the same social function. These displacements contribute to the connection between different spaces of public occupation. The third itinerary is that of small groups of children and volunteers during workshops, who go and fetch material or water. These are privileged moments to discuss and to listen to concerns, often linked to difficult periods in children's lives. The fourth type of itinerary is that at the end of the workshop when the cart returns to Madame Ruetabaga's office and people depart in other directions. It is a moment of saying goodbye, letting go, reassuring that the team will come back and sometimes accompanying a child to their home in case a volunteer has identified any specific needs of children. The end of the workshop constitutes a moment of tension. The group that has formed and has appropriated the public space is now going to be undone.

### **Madame Ruetabaga Temporarily Densifies Social Relations**

We think of the workshops as a temporary densification of social relations. First there is one line, then different lines coming together, leading to a fusion of interactions, forming a group, which is then unravelled again. These lines are visualised in a second map (fig. 2) with the itinerary of the cart, the pedestrian paths leading to the Place des Géants, which sometimes conflict with the

itinerary of scooters, and the movement down from the apartment blocks to the square. This map visualises how the people who participate in the workshop maintain relations to those in the private and public spaces in the vicinity of the workshop space and thereby integrate these more distant spaces.



*Figure 2: Madame Ruetabaga's workshops, a temporary densification of social relations, map by Morgane Cohen*

When children join the workshops, parents may stay in the **private spaces** of their apartments and continue to keep an eye on their children through the windows (see fig. 1 and 2). An indirect relationship is created between the volunteers and the families without seeing each other, this is what we describe, in the map, as Madame Ruetabaga's relation with private spaces. Each child, when coming to the workshop, receives indications from caretakers regarding which limits are not to be crossed. In most cases they overlap with the limits of view from the windows. This latent link can be activated in times of crisis. For example, once a recorder was stolen during the workshop, all families were visited to ask them to speak about the problem and make them part of the solution. It did not take long before it was brought back. Beyond times of crises, it also happens that parents themselves take the decision to step into the core of the workshops. For example, it was surprising to see that when a mother participated for the first time after having watched for over two years, she knew exactly what was going on and even knew the names of the volunteers.

The direct and indirect participation of parents is an important source of legitimacy of Madame Ruetabaga.

In addition to being linked to private spaces, the workshops also establish relationships with **public space**, where groups of people gather, on the outer edge of the workshops. Each meeting place has its own function and public. There is for example a group of young men that gather in front of a kebab joint, families (mostly mothers) with small children sit on benches around a small playground, and children that look for corners to play ball games. People circulate between these spaces and thereby create links, which equally can be mobilised in times of crises (example of recorder that has been previously mentioned). Children participating in the workshops also voluntarily explore the link between these different spaces during a community radio project. Children set out with a recorder to interview people in the neighbourhood about a specific topic. It is an opportunity to be present in areas that are usually off limits for them and feel legitimate about it. One time, when visiting the kebab joint, they were made to feel that they were not at their place. This became an occasion for a group discussion about access to public space with the children concerned.

During workshops, conflicts mainly occur in interaction with those who are outside the workshop and who use the square to go from one place to another. Children's activities can be disturbing for passers-by. Several times, older people have scolded children who were playing ball right next to the workshop because the ball caused fear of harm among older people, or because they were hit by a ball. Others may complain that Madame Ruetabaga occupies too much space. A more important source of friction is the incessant passing of scooters across the square: the activities spread out over the square stand in the way of the scooters, which forces them to slow down. One of the more lasting conflicts is with the gardeners of the community garden, Jardin des Poucets, where Madame Ruetabaga also has a plot. The (mostly older) gardeners don't agree with Madame Ruetabaga's pedagogical principle of (respective) exploration of the environment. The gardeners would like the children to enter only under adult supervision, which leads to arguments between the children and the gardeners.

Over the period of two hours the space of the square is made more public, in the sense that Mitchell describes as 'a site of interaction, encounter and the support of strangers for each other; as a place of gathering and vigil; as a space to communicate information and interchange' (2003, p. 6). Madame Ruetabaga does not occupy the square, but through its presence, it contributes to the actualisation of publicity. During the time of the workshop, the presence of the group forces the scooters to slow down, and children obtain greater freedom of movement. Moreover, at times, during conversations, participants have spoken up about a difficulty they have met. The association offers social and political accompaniment in individual cases, connecting families to networks that might improve the situation of a family. The space of the workshop is also used to make collective claims: for the installation of a swing or for access to public facilities. It has, for example, obtained access to the kitchen of the highly regulated neighbourhood community centre, as well as to the

restricted community garden mentioned above. It can make these claims as a result of its local legitimacy and the indirect links that have been demonstrated earlier. The workshops of Madame Ruetabaga are also a place for public expression, e.g. through discussions about political events and through their collaboration with a community radio station to make children's voices heard. The terrorist attacks that have taken place in France and the Islamophobia that they have caused have been important topics of debate, but also more local events in the neighbourhood that are source of tensions.

For the reasons developed above, the space that has been opened with the workshops should be analysed as a political space. It is a form of direct action and prefigurative politics: no authorization has been asked from institutions to carry out workshops, neither for the installation of signposts, nor for making small campfires in order to heat milk for hot chocolate in the winter months. By-passing red-tape becomes possible as a result of *de facto* presence and local legitimacy. Their action is prefigurative because Madame Ruetabaga puts in place, on a micro-scale, the kind of change they would like to see in wider society.

The political importance of the work of Madame Ruetabaga lies in the fact that it offers participants opportunities of emancipation as a result of the libertarian conception of workshops and citizenship. The street workshops are conceived as an organisational space in their own right: a space in which people over the time of the workshop can experience what it means to be part of a collective and contribute to what this collective stands for. Madame Ruetabaga does not ask for institutional permission to occupy central squares in the neighbourhood and generally avoids seeking institutional authorization for their activities, they claim space rather than ask for it.

### **Maintaining Links When the COVID Pandemic Disrupts Everyday Life**

During the pandemic, coming together collectively, even outside, became a threat to people's health. To keep safe, people retreated to private spaces. In this section we look at the ways in which Madame Ruetabaga discovered methods to maintain a minimal level of connection.

In December 2019, during an outing Madame Ruetabaga organised to the museum of contemporary art, a member of the association said that a virus was arriving from China – she already had her hydroalcoholic gel ready. The other people who participated in the outing, at first, laughed at her prediction. Three months later, the first lockdown was announced on the day when the neighbourhood's carnival celebration should have taken place. The street workshops were cancelled for long periods of time (2020-2021) due to lockdown restrictions: two months from April 2020, one month from November 2020, and one month from March 2021. Right after the announcement of the first lockdown, the team got together outside in the park to discuss what role Madame Ruetabaga could play during this crisis. When social life shifted to online spaces and social, educational and professional links were maintained through digital tools, the digital divide became even more tangible as a factor of exclusion in the neighbourhood. Schools and social

workers lost contact with the more precarious families, and at times turned to Madame Ruetabaga. The association's non-institutional approach meant that they were better able to maintain relations, because the digital divide was not solely responsible for failing connections: families in situations of administrative precarity share a general distrust of institutions and believe that they will not be cared for if they fall ill. Some chose to protect themselves by closing themselves off from the outside world, especially if family members were struggling with other health issues. Madame Ruetabaga decided that its role was to stay in contact and remain dedicated to attending to the specific needs of families, because it felt (inspired by Janus Korczak) that it is not the child that should adapt to society, but that society should adapt to the (needs of) the child.

In order to maintain relationships with all those involved in Madame Ruetabaga, the team reached out by phone to all the families whose numbers they had collected over the past years, to let them know that they were still there and available if needed. A volunteer said 'Madame Ruetabaga is like a good friend: it is always there for you when you need it' (and therefore different from social workers). The phone was however an unreliable tool to keep up with links, because several families could no longer afford buying telephone credit. The team passed by the homes of some families to chat on the doorstep and, for one of the authors, hanging out in the neighbourhood during the hours of the food bank, was a way of making herself available to families that might want to speak to her. The queue at the food bank was getting longer every time and the amount of food distributed decreased proportionally. Madame Ruetabaga applied for an urgency fund, Urgence COVID, to organise solidarity, which allowed them to punctually distribute food and parcels with materials for manual creative activities to 45 families. This was the only collective project that Madame Ruetabaga could conceive in the period of the lockdown but allowed at least to maintain links over a longer period of time. The team was in touch with families to inform them about the parcels, to collect their shopping lists (each family could decide on the content of the parcel, up to 30 €), to agree on a time of pick-up (five families per week throughout seven weeks), and to set the time when they physically met to pick up of the parcels. These weekly distributions were the only direct collective discussion space without connection problems and became the team's barometer of how families were doing. Madame Ruetabaga's effort at maintaining relationships provided a certain continuity in uncertain times.

After the lockdown, the team observed that children were much more agitated, and experienced more difficulty in concentrating. Despite its efforts, the interruption and withdrawal to private spaces had created distance in once closer relationships. Moreover, the danger of the virus had not disappeared: activities on the square had to be spread across a wider area, masks were used, and all activities that involved touching had to be stopped.

## Conclusion

In moments of crisis people withdraw from public space and seek refuge in private spaces. This is true for the sporadic events of violence that the neighbourhood was confronted with in 2010, due to the riots that took place after two men died in a violent confrontation with the police; in 2012 due to the youth violence leading to the death of two young men; and in 2015 due to the terrorist attacks. It is even more true for the period of the health crisis due to COVID-19. As appropriating public space is an important tool for prefigurative politics and for claiming one's place as political subjects in France, the withdrawal into private spaces has important political consequences. At the time of the workshop, the square is a terrain for politics: appropriating public space during the time of the workshops also means community building, the possibility of belonging, networks and solidarity. Through the lens of Madame Ruetabaga's experience during the three lockdowns, it became evident that the right to the city was curtailed, that there is a large inequality regarding access to digital spaces that partially replace the material spaces in the city and the neighbourhood, and that keeping some form of community was a major challenge that takes time to rebuild.

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