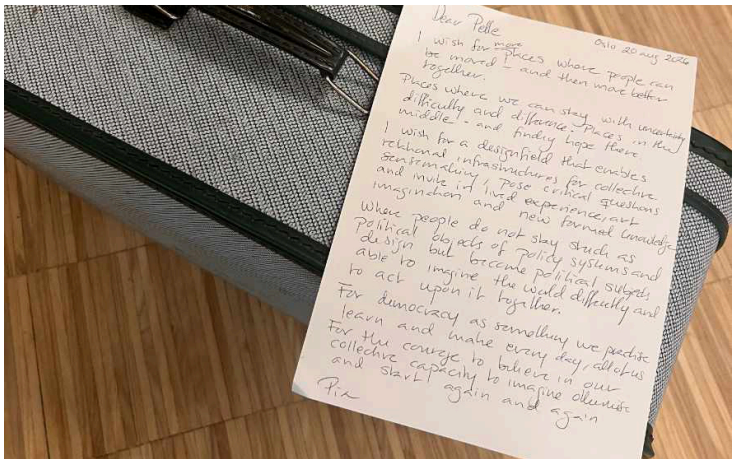
To Be Moved — and to Set Something in Motion

A few weeks ago, I came to the Oslo School of Architecture and Design to talk about participatory design. I left with an even stronger sense that I — and all of us — need to talk about democracy.

By Pia McAleenan



What do we need to design for a democracy that is to remain alive?

We have to talk about it not because I have any answers as to how democracy can be saved. Quite the opposite.

I believe that one of the most important democratic capacities of our time is the ability to remain with what we do not yet know. To have the courage to inhabit the space between what is beginning to break down and what does not yet exist.

What matters is that we do it together.

Relevant links

Democracy by design
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More about the research of Pelle Ehn

Designing for Plurality in Democracy by Building Reflexivity
by Josina Vink

The Context of Addressing Power Dynamics in Service Design
av Audun Formo Hay, Josina Vink & Mari Suoheimo

The conference was inspiring. Two days of participation, design, power and futures came together, for me, around one question:

How do we create more places where people can be moved — and set something in motion together?

A few words in English found their way into me during Pelle Ehn's performance, which opened the conference: *To be moved and move together.*

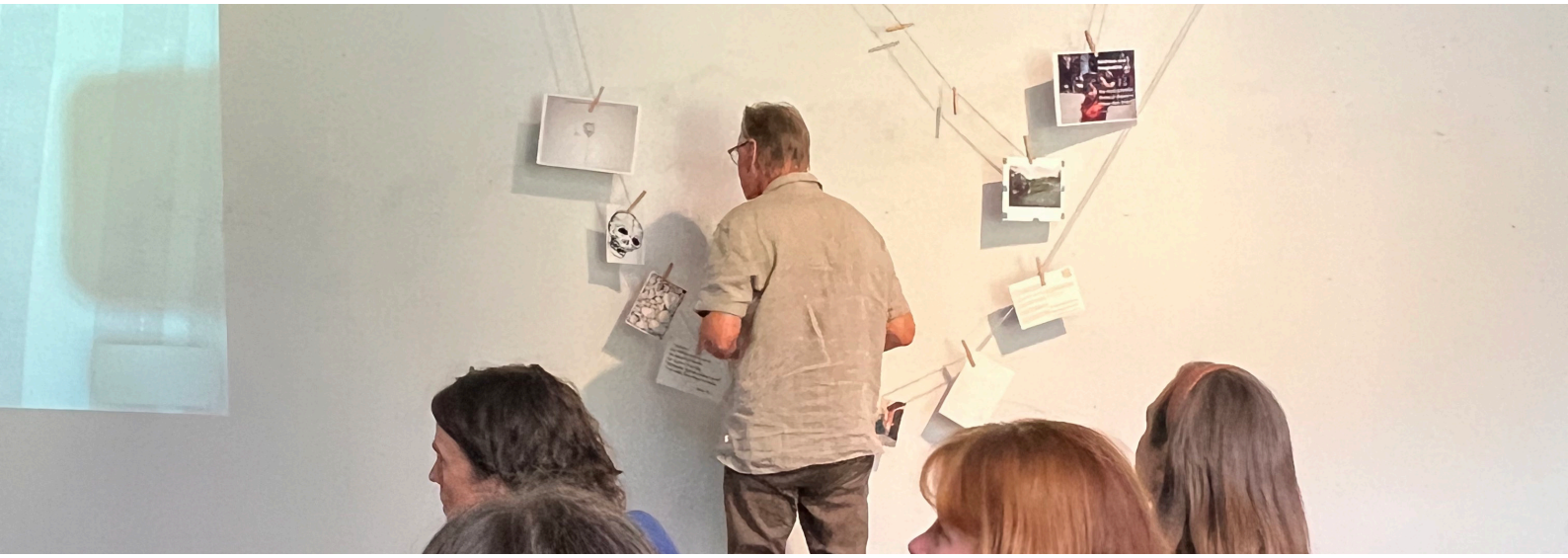
A room filled with letters

The first day did not begin with a traditional keynote. Pelle Ehn had created a performance. Music. Voices. Stories. Fragments from a long working life. And countless letters and postcards.

For some time, Pelle has been inviting people to write to him about the kind of democracy they wish for and the kind of design that might contribute to it. The letters become part of his archive — a string of

thoughts, questions, hopes and imaginings of what might yet come into being.

The work is called Letters to a *Utopian Epistles Archive*.



Eva, a young design student from Estonia, reads her letter and wishes Professor Ehn *deep unrest*. She speaks about the need not to escape into either dystopia or utopia, but to dare to remain in the genuinely complicated and uncertain space in between.

She leaves the stage, and something essential has shifted in the room.

When individual voices are gathered together, something else emerges. A collective work. I think about how often we separate the individual from the collective. As though reflection were individual and action collective. As though I first need to finish my thinking on my own, and only then meet others. But perhaps our thoughts come into being differently when they encounter the thoughts of others.

When I put my own pen to the postcard, it feels strangely significant. My words will become part of the collection, alongside other people's thoughts about democracy and participation. Perhaps we need more spaces like this. Spaces where we can be alone in our reflection and, at the same time, together in our becoming.

To be moved. And then, to move together.

Hope as a responsibility

Pelle speaks about our moral responsibility to find hope in dark times. Not optimism. Not the belief that everything will somehow work itself out. **Hope as an active stance.**

We live in a time when the future can feel both overwhelming and difficult to imagine. Climate change, war, technological transformation,

inequality, polarisation — and a growing sense that the systems we depend on are no longer quite capable of doing what they were created to do.

It is tempting to choose one story. Everything is going to fall apart. Or: we will invent our way out of it.

Dystopia or utopia. But perhaps democracy needs something else: shared in-between spaces where we can hold both what is difficult and what is still possible.

Spaces where we can say:

We don't know. But we refuse to give up our capacity to imagine that things could be different.

Democracy as an everyday practice

We often speak about democracy as institutions, electoral systems and representation. Something that manifests itself primarily when we go to the polls every four years.

But politics is larger than that.

Politics is also about how we want to live together. Who gets to define the problems? Whose experiences count as knowledge? Which futures are considered realistic? Who gets to imagine something different — and participate in making it real?

I believe we need to see people less as objects of politics and more as **political subjects**. Not merely as people to be informed, activated, supported or persuaded to vote. But as people with the capacity to understand their situation, articulate what they long for, organise with others and participate in shaping what we hold in common.

It is an old democratic idea. But it feels strikingly relevant today.

From participation to agency

This is where the days in Oslo meet questions that occupy me deeply as Förnyelselabbet approaches its first ten years.

We have worked with futures workshops, dialogues, system maps, prototypes and many other forms of participation. With children and young people, municipalities, government agencies and civil society.

Gradually, we have become less preoccupied with the methods themselves. Not because methods are unimportant. But because, time and again, we have seen that a good method does not in itself create innovation, transformation or democracy. You can facilitate a brilliant workshop and still leave power exactly where it was.

You can ask young people what they think and then continue making every important decision somewhere else. You can invite people into a room without allowing them to influence what the room is actually there to discuss.

So increasingly, our question has become:

What needs to exist around participation for people actually to become agents?

Relationships. Time. Trust. Learning. Space for friction and conflict. Encounters between different forms of knowledge. And above all: the experience that what I do together with others can actually have consequences in the world. This, I think, is what we mean when we speak about **relational infrastructure.**

Labs as democratic infrastructure

The commons is not simply something that exists. It is something we do. It requires relationships, responsibility, conflict, learning and care.

This is also how I have begun to think about our innovation and transition labs. Not primarily as project organisations, but as places where different people and different forms of knowledge can come together around challenges that no single actor can solve alone.

In this sense, a lab can become **democratic infrastructure.**

Not a place where people are invited to comment on proposals that have already been developed, but a place where we can become wiser together. Understand more. Imagine alternatives. Learn. And, eventually, dare to act differently together. This also asks something different of leadership.

Someone needs to be able to hold the space without controlling it. To hold uncertainty and conflict. To keep the question open for long enough that something other than what is already known has the chance to emerge. Equally important is cultivating the art of pausing.

The pause as a democratic practice

During the second day of the conference, one of the panellists suddenly says:

Pause.

She speaks about the pause as something we need for a more vital democracy and a renewed social contract.

Something stirs in me. Can it really be that simple? Or is it precisely the simple things that have become so difficult? We live in a time that demands action. But perhaps it demands reflection just as much. The ability to stop before rushing ahead with our first interpretations. To notice what we take for granted. To see which perspectives are missing. To allow something we have heard to change our own understanding. To be able to say: *I was wrong. I see it differently now.*

We often think of reflexivity as an individual capacity. But what if we need to develop **collective reflexivity**? Organisations capable of pausing together.

Leadership teams capable of reconsidering. Communities capable of examining their own assumptions. Politics capable of learning — not merely implementing.

Perhaps this is one of the most underestimated forms of democratic infrastructure we can build: **spaces where we can collectively work and rework our judgement.**

More of this. Less of the other.

After ten years with Förnyelselabbet, I believe societal transformation needs more of precisely this: Spaces for collective reflection and reflexivity. Encounters between different forms of knowledge and experience. The capacity to imagine multiple possible futures.

And less participation as consultation. Less projectification of change. Fewer quick solutions to complex problems. Less expert knowledge treated as the final word. Fewer meetings designed only to produce decisions. Fewer predefined visions of the future. Fewer organisations so busy doing that they have no time to learn from what they are already doing. This is not an argument against action. **It is an argument for wiser action.**

Perhaps we need to design less — and enable more

During the second day of the conference, we turned the question around. If democracy needs to be redesigned — how does the field of design itself need to change in order to contribute?

I do not believe design should take over democracy, nor that political questions should be transformed into design projects. But design can become better at creating **conditions for emergence**. Places. Practices. Relationships. Stories.Representations. Experiments. Forms for collective sensemaking.

The designer then becomes not simply someone who makes things *for* people, or even *with* people, but someone who helps create the conditions in which people can **make together**. Perhaps, quite simply, we need to design less and enable more. Enable people to meet. Allow the unexpected to have a place. Help us recognise our own knowledge and that of others. Allow a longing to become a shared question. A question to gather a community. A community to become a movement. A movement to change an institution. And institutions actually to be changed by the people they exist to serve.

Perhaps this is how I would describe Förnyelselabbet's task today:

Not to arrive with the solutions, but to mobilise the capacity of people and organisations to create together what does not yet exist.

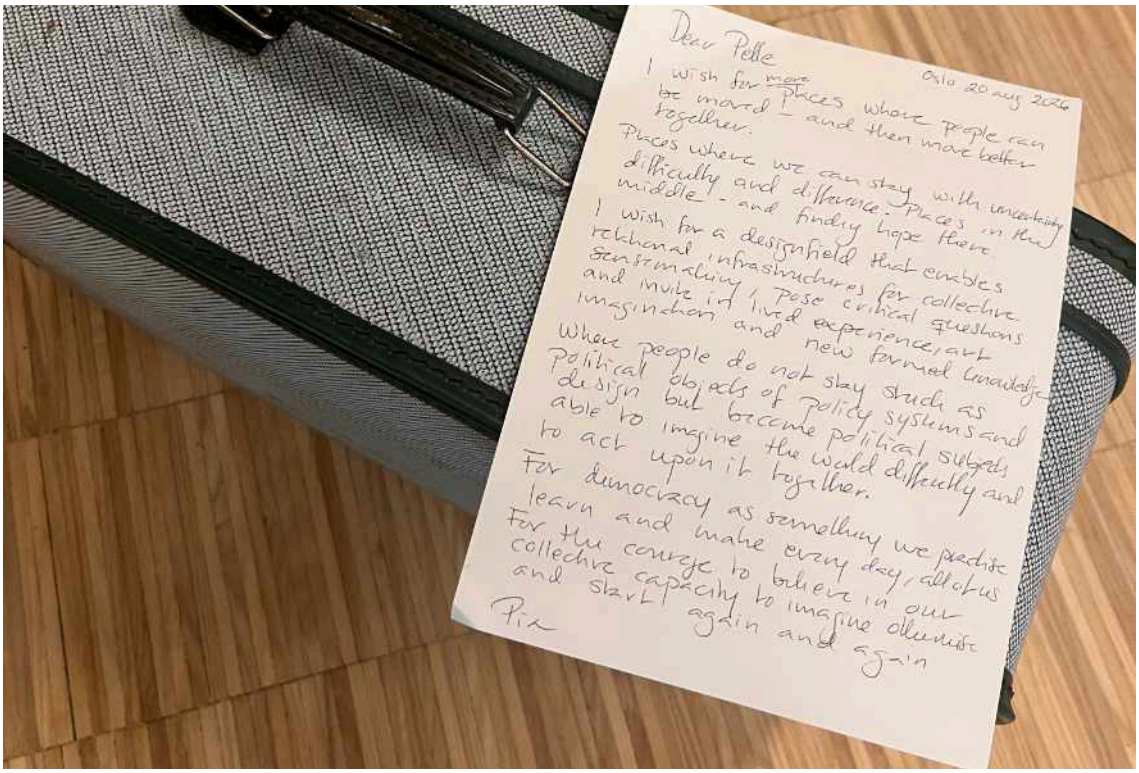
To be moved — and to move together

I think back to Pelle's performance. The postcards. The music. The people listening. The words someone had written by hand. The way individual reflections suddenly became a collective work. It was not merely an image of democracy. It was a small democratic act.

One person thinks, writes, reads. Others are moved — and, from that, begin to think and act differently. *To be moved and move together.*

After ten years, I am not sure we need more labs in the sense of more time-limited projects. But I do believe we need more **labbing in society**. More places where it is possible to pause. More contexts in which we can think together. More opportunities to experiment without already knowing the answer. More communities capable of carrying questions over time. More leaders who create the conditions for others to become agents. More people who see themselves as political subjects. And more institutions that are actually capable of being changed by what they hear.

That is where I want Förnyelselabbet to put its energy. To build spaces for **relational readiness, collective learning and sensemaking**. To create in-between spaces where people can meet across boundaries and explore together what a better society might be. To help organisations not simply do more — but sometimes pause, reconsider and learn.

Because the future is not simply something we need to prepare for. **It is something we are already taking part in making**. Perhaps this is our moral responsibility in dark times: Not to pretend that we know what the future will be, but to refuse to stop imagining that it could be different. And from there, to keep creating the spaces where we can be moved — **and move together**.

My letter to Pelle's collection