

# HOF *gesang* (Court minstrelsy) – encounter and sharing

Diverse – moving – mind-e x p a n d i n g

## An attempt to recover the abused courtyards for the residents by choral power

In May 2006 the rear side of the city of Zurich resounded with a large variety of choral singing: during four weeks as many as sixty choirs sang in nearly a hundred backyards. By making the backyards of the city resound, this memorable event raises the question about the significance that is attributed to these valuable urban spaces. More than 1700 singers performed in order to promote the backyards as places for lively interactions among neighbours. The city's wide-ranging choral culture – choirs representing all styles and generations – took a stand for a shared concern in a way previously unheard of.

## What started the movement?

The rear side of the city is largely unknown. Even though courtyards and backyards take up as much as one fourth of the city's space, hardly anyone pays attention to them. As late as the 1950s, these spaces were widely used by small-scale industries, or to grow vegetables, to dry laundry or beat carpets. They were work places and thus also places where people met and interacted with each other. Children watched these proceedings, participated in the work or found corners to play in.

Since then, most of these backyards have either been turned into parking space or have otherwise been rendered unsuitable for community purposes. In consequence, the increasingly multicultural residents who live around these courtyards have been deprived of spaces in which good relations among neighbours can develop. This loss not only reduces the quality of living, it also endangers a peaceful coexistence. People who are forced to know their neighbour's favorite TV-program and who witness each flushing of the neighbor's toilet, but who never meet and thus never get to know each other, are unlikely to have much sympathy for each other. Conflicts are not far away.

It is therefore all the more surprising that the quality and the changing function of these semi-public spaces has so far scarcely been noticed by politicians and city planners in Switzerland. In this situation, HOF gesang recommends a root treatment: the recovery of purpose-alienated courtyards as habitats.

## And how is this to happen?

HOF gesang will hardly invalidate the market laws, which invite to abuse the courtyards as a source of extra profit. And it is obviously more profitable to take the 25'000 Euros per annum for ten parking lots than to use that space to grow flowers or let children play on a sand heap. All the same, the singers want to make people think and start an initiative to convert these places back into spaces in which people meet. HOF gesang invites all parties concerned to a dialogue, with the support of city authorities.

Tenants and landlords are encouraged to work together to find ways to turn these bleak spaces into playgrounds, recreational areas, dream spaces, gardens – or at least to take a first step towards realizing such an objective.

To trigger a movement, the singers take an obvious approach: they move around. In this way, choral singing is brought to everybody, including people who don't usually attend concerts: to their balconies and kitchen windows. Especially children and youngsters who do not live in ideal housing conditions experience a singing culture live – on this side of the TV screen. This may make them realize that singing can be a liberating experience and an experience that has the power to unite people. The choirs fight against social isolation and disintegration. HOF gesang wants to offer this as a contribution to neighbourhood development with the aim of mediating between different cultures. To the choirs themselves HOF gesang offers an opportunity to introduce themselves to different neighbourhoods and audiences. Personal contact between members of the audience and singers is easily established in these backyards and offers the choirs a chance to recruit new talent.

### **But who is HOF gesang?**

HOF gesang is an organization set up by private initiative. It is supported by the Hof-gesang-society consisting of persons engaged in the cultural sector and other socially active people who believe in the mind broadening power of music. They choose choral singing to make people aware of the social significance of backyards. Primarily, however, HOF gesang consists of the singers who share in this activity.

The organization is under the patronage of the city of Zurich and is actively supported by eminent figures from different fields, among which music, education as well as city development.

### **And what is the future?**

Since 2006, over three hundred backyards resounded with the voices of well over seven thousand singers in the cities of Zurich, Berne, Schaffhausen, as well as in the Bavarian city of Landshut.

HOF gesang is performing in Zurich every second year, again in May 2014. We hope that choirs in other parts of the country and abroad will join in, for every city would benefit from its lifeless backyards to get enchanted by choral music

Andreas Diethelm

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HOF gesang  
[info@hofgesang.ch](mailto:info@hofgesang.ch)  
 Badenerstr. 18  
 8004 Zürich  
 Telefon +41 43 317 1968  
 Mobile +41 79 224 55 23

[www.facebook/HOFgesang](http://www.facebook/HOFgesang)  
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 - signpost to the mobile choral singing  
 - window on the inviting and bleak backyards