

Debrecen, July 8th 2010

STOP HOMELESSNESS

I am happy to be here in Debrecen today for opening this exhibition of the 13 sculptures, which represent 13 different homeless individuals. Now, they are here at this attractive square between some beautiful buildings: A museum of modern art, a cultural center and a hotel.

The sculptures were “born” in Denmark, created by the Danish artist and sculptor Jens Galschiøt in cooperation with the Danish organization “projekt UDENFOR”.

Now, these 13 homeless individuals have crossed borders, and not just the borders between countries, but also the non-visible borders. They have entered the space normally used by other people. I know that this square is not a prohibited area for homeless people, but honestly, don't we really prefer if they could stay in other places? Are most of us really acting like members of the NIMBY-group? This means that we accept the fact that homeless people need to stay somewhere – as long as it is Not In My Back Yard.

For me, who have been working with homeless people during the last 30 years, there is no doubt that it is necessary to show people in severe need in an artistic way – it is a way to understand. And we have to understand. It is obvious that this kind of art is political, and we really need this kind of art!

All of us here have feelings, but most times we are afraid to show them. We have learned to keep a facade. In art we meet these feelings, and I have learned that meeting and listening to homeless people also let me see the same feelings in them. Strong feelings like sorrow, joy, love and anger - to mention some of them. It is important that somebody takes – or must take - on their shoulders to make sure that we do not forget that we are not only people of rational thinking but that we also have and need these feelings.

Anger I say. Yes, but I am not talking about anger against the homeless people. No, I am talking about the anger homeless have against a community, which is excluding certain people. And I agree completely. Don't forget that homelessness not only means “without a home”, but also means “not to be at home”.

Is homelessness then only a symptom of not having money for a home? Yes, this is also true, but that is just one part of homelessness. In all western countries you will find people living a life as a homeless - or in all these rich countries, I could also have said. Some of these countries even declare themselves as welfare countries, and also there we can find homeless people.

In a way I don't understand why, but even in a rich welfare country as my country, Denmark, some people are living as homeless. It can be due to poverty, to mental health problems, to drug-using or to alcohol addiction. But whatever is the reason is the suffering, the shame and the pain is what homeless people always have to live with.

Out of a population of 5 million people in Denmark 6.000 are homeless. It means 1 out of a 1.000 citizens are homeless – either sleeping rough, at friends' houses or in shelters. During one year approximately 15.000 people experience homelessness.

It must be a matter of great concern to bring the number of homeless people down, in Denmark, in Hungary and in the rest of Europe. In my opinion, in order to do this we have to follow 3 lines:

A professional, practical line, where we ensure good services and know about best practices. We need to do outreach social work, to ensure health services, to help find homes as a part of a housing first-strategy and to find suitable jobs. All in respect to the single individual and to empower him or her to take care of him- or herself.

A political line to ensure an overall strategy on a national level as well as a local level for combating homelessness and also for ensuring the money needed to bring the strategy to reality.

And finally, nothing is possible without a population demanding homelessness to be stopped and who is not always talking about the homeless people's own responsibility, but also about our responsibility for the weakest members of our society.

Homelessness can be discussed over and over again, but don't forget that we are living now. They are living now. And we have to do something now. It can be done, be optimistic, it is possible to make changes.

But be also aware of the reasons for being pessimistic. I can tell you, we know that giving homes and inclusion in the community to homeless people also opens up for new challenges of a new kind homelessness. I sometimes think that we create the circumstances for being homeless, so we have some people to look down at, and to be able to think that at least we are better than them.

But nevertheless it will be unfair and unjustified to let some people be suffering for whatever there could happen in the future.

Please, don't forget article 25 in the human right declaration. It tells that: " Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and social services and security". This is a fair demand. It is not impossible to offer, or what do you think?

Take a look at the 13 sculptures here on this square. See the individuals and read their stories. Imagine what it feels like to live like this. Yes, everybody is responsible for himself – but a society where we don't feel responsible for each other is in a humanistic context a poor country.

To be excluded means that an excluder is needed. All of us with our good and ensured lives are these excluders too.

Now you have listened to me. Take a look at the sculptures, and I will then ask you to think with your minds and to feel with your hearts. Take care of the homeless people, with respect. And don't forget that they are human beings too.

Preben Brandt