On 9 February 2016 Yanis Varoufakis launched diem25 (http://bit.ly/1OGDC4s). The event in the Berliner Volksbühne marked the first public appearance of a new actor on the European political stage. Diem25 set out to ‘democratise’ Europe. Its ambitious goal is to initiate a European-wide constitutional assembly within the next two years.

The text should of course also be read as a view on, and perhaps a hopeful glimpse into the urban future of a more democratic Europe. It is an attempt, so to speak, to anticipate some of the urban, physical implications of the ‘democratisation’ that Varoufakis and many others demand; or, to put it in more neutral terms, of the “the deep and swift changes that the configuration of democracy is currently experiencing” and which will, according to Giovanni Moro, lead to a “general rearrangement of the way in which we think about the relationship between citizens and politics.”

This short text might be read as an open letter to everybody who considers themselves as a participant in or a sympathiser of the diem25 movement. It is our attempt to illustrate that, if we seriously try to set up a European constitutional assembly, we should begin by establishing a network of explicitly political spaces in and between as many European cities as possible.
Finally, the text may be read - by those who spend their time thinking about cities and politics and about their interrelationship - as an invitation to pay close attention not only to space as an object of politics (related to questions of use, ownership, access, construction etc.), but also to space as the specific locus of politics, as the place where people come together in order to act politically. It is in political space where we turn into politicians and observant citizens in the same way in which we turn into kids or parents as soon as we enter the playground, into actors or spectators when we enter the theatre or into employers or employees when we enter the workplace.

We are convinced that not only the concrete physical appearance but also the intangible formalities and the institutional framework of a distinct space influence, whether or not people use it to participate in political affairs. And we are surprised that this influence receives so little attention. As far as we can see, there is not one detailed account of the basic elements of political space and not one researcher or political actor who would stress and analyse the impact of concrete physical spaces on the political participation of citizens.

What is political space? In its most general sense, it is the space where people gather in order to act politically. What is political action? To act politically means, in a wider sense of the term, to engage in public affairs with political means; and, in a narrower sense, to participate in the government of public affairs. We, the citizens of Europe, have countless spaces where we are invited to spend our money, to eat and drink in the company of others, to enjoy art and culture, lie in the sun, pray to God or practice a sport; and we consider ourselves lucky if we have a place to work, a place where we can make a living. But what we certainly lack is a respectable number of spaces - of urban spaces, if you wish - where we, the citizens of the continent, the nations, the regions, the municipalities, are invited to engage in political affairs or even to participate in the government of public - or urban, if you like - affairs. Isn’t this curious?

Usually we assume that diversity is a good thing. A great variety of museums, theatres and concert halls is good for those who like arts, a variety of football clubs is good for those who like football, a variety of bars, clubs and kafanas is good for those who enjoy the nightlife and a variety of banks in a city is good for the bankers. In fact, cities are even defined over (and somehow also confined to) different types of spaces.

If we apply the same logic to political spaces, we have to admit that most cities do not offer a diversity of explicitly political spaces. It is not so important here whether we still believe that the town halls, parliaments and party offices are genuinely political spaces or not. But it is crucial to realise that we, the ‘ordinary’ citizens of Europe, have no spatial infrastructure that would invite us to take political action just as a playground invites us to play.

To be sure, there are a number of places which occasionally or purely by chance turn into political spaces - but the appearance of political action in these spaces is coincidental and not inherent. Whereas a school is built and designed as the adequate space for the typical activity of students and teachers, a cultural centre, even though it may be used to host a participatory project, is not made for political action but for cultural activities. Typically, the only space in our cities that is explicitly dedicated to political action is the town hall, a building that is almost always reserved not for the political actions of citizens, but of their representatives.
Consequently, if we agree that all citizens who are apt to engage in public affairs simply on the basis of their personal, voluntary initiative should be given a fair chance to try - and is it not this what we expect from a ‘democratisation’ of Europe as Yanis Varoufakis portrayed it in the Volksbühne? - then it might be a good idea to think about where exactly they should go.

Let us avoid misunderstandings. Before pointing the finger at political actors, who are so caught up in the world of human affairs that they can hardly look left or right, let alone think outside the box, we, the researchers and critical observers of the political realm, should blame ourselves for not having put political space on the agenda yet. Since we look at politics from the outside, from the standpoint of regular citizens, we are in the privileged position of the spectator and it is our job to collect real-world examples of political spaces, to provide a conceptual analysis of political space, and to highlight its important position at the intersection of cities and politics.

One of the many reasons that explain why urban political spaces for citizens are so scarce, is simply that we do not discuss them publicly. Political space, in other words, is not on the political agenda. This does not mean that, practically speaking, political actors are not aware of the importance of space for their actions. They usually know very well what kind of space is adequate for political action - Varoufakis did not launch diem25 in the Berliner Volksbühne by accident. They simply forget to integrate adequate physical infrastructure, which suits the character of political action and is accessible to all citizens, into their thoughts and into their declared goals. Hence they have failed, at least so far, to provide spaces that stimulate and inspire political initiative among regular citizens who would like to engage in the affairs of the neighbourhood, the city, or even the continent.

A number of prejudices are in the way of this analysis. First of all, we usually assume, for example, that space would be always political. This is true only in the sense that the usage, the ownership, the access to space are important political issues; but it is not true in the sense that we act politically everywhere we go. Secondly, we tend to believe that any space is at least potentially political. This is certainly true in the same way as we could say that, if you really want to, you can play football pretty much everywhere. But it obscures the fact that different spaces have very different qualities and some are more adequate for certain activities than others. Thirdly, we usually understand
politic participation as a process that requires an invitation for citizens - and those who are always invited to go somewhere else are never actually hosts themselves, and thus it seems as if citizens do not really need their own political spaces. Moreover, we have developed great faith in and pay much attention to online participation and virtual political space. To be sure, apps and websites for public participation and deliberation have a number of qualities and they do contribute to opening up access to the political realm; but they can never substitute real personal encounters of real people in the real world.

So far, we have obviously not given an account of what exactly we understand as political action. Hence we still have no clue what characterises the institutional and the physical dimension of political space. We can approach this question by asking ourselves what politicians are actually doing as politicians. Most people would probably say: they just talk; or, more specifically, they debate. In fact, this answer is so popular that it has turned into a cliche, a prejudice and a banality. It would indeed be superfluous to highlight that debate is the essence of politics if we were not, at the same time, confronted with the opposing view that violence - which actually only begins where discussion and debate have come to an end - is also a part of politics and that even a terrorist attack is a form of political participation. Would not according to this view the battlefield also be a genuinely political space? These equally widespread but glaringly contradictory views indicate that the question of political action is not so easy to answer after all. In our opinion, a theoretical analysis of political action has to consider, among other authors, the work of Hannah Arendt whose analysis not of political systems but of the political experience and whose examination of the political realm are, as far as we can see, unmatched.

We assume that it is possible to derive from Arendt's analysis of political action certain principles of political space. These principles inspire the design of political institutions and of physical space which both aim to facilitate and to keep within boundaries the political interaction of citizens. To derive institutional and spatial principles means, as it were, to shift the focus from the users of political space itself - who, simply through their actions, turn space into political space no matter where they are - to the (future) curators and architects of political space, who can trigger and provoke but never force citizens to take political initiative and engage in worldly affairs.

The principles of political space can become real and sometimes quite literally concrete in different forms and shapes under different circumstances. This is why we should not try to develop in theory a fully-fledged system of political institutions and neatly designed political spaces. What we can and should do, however, is collect and analyse the greatest possible variety of existing political spaces, of precedents which always possess exemplary
validity and will therefore help us to understand better the theoretical principles of political space. Henri Lefebvre called this methodology ‘transduction’. And if he is right, it will help us to strengthen the political elements of existing spaces and to create new and better political spaces in the future.

These spaces will be primarily characterised by the debates that go on between those who choose to participate and between those who decide to watch the actors. In some respects, they will remind us of theatres because theatre is the only art that is exclusively concerned with the stories that unfold wherever people do not just exist, one next to the other, but interact with each other, that is, address each other as the unique individuals who they individually are. These political spaces will highlight and nourish the tremendous capacity of human action to create relations between people; but they will at the same time have to find institutional as well as physical boundaries to limit the very same capacity of creating relationships, since it is inherently boundless. Political spaces will invite us to deliberate, which basically means to liberate ourselves from our personal standpoints and to move back and forth between different views, perspectives and opinions. They will help us to put ourselves in the position of others, with whom we are inevitably confronted as soon as we enter the political realm. They will highlight that nobody can form an opinion alone, without the benefit of other opinions to which a given perspective can be compared. Moreover, political spaces will be related to the world that surrounds them, not only in the sense that public affairs will be discussed, but also in the sense that local history and tangible reality will be reflected on an institutional and physical level. These spaces will establish and protect political equality between all citizens who decide to participate in the political business of discussion, judgement and decision making. Political spaces will invite and encourage people to engage in public affairs. They will improve our skills of discussion and argumentation, of giving an account and explaining how we see the world, of listening to others and of embracing diversity. In that sense they will be competitive. Further, political spaces will force us to appear personally, together with our claims and opinions, in the light of the public. Exposing the individual, the speaker, in front of others, they will be spaces of courage which do not tolerate anonymity (as most online media does). Political spaces will not claim to make the government of public affairs more efficient, simply because politics is not about efficiency. Political spaces will give citizens the chance to act in concert with others, to be among peers, to show who one is and to experience who one is with, to engage in worldly affairs and to change the course of events.
No matter how unrealistic or far-fetched the spread of political spaces may seem today, we should not dismiss it too hastily. To remind ourselves how quickly a new typology of space can establish itself in our cities, we just have to take a look at the recent history of co-working spaces which, almost out of nowhere, have sprung up all over Europe.

What do we see when we look into the future? It is of course impossible to foretell with certainty what European cities will look like. But if we imagine a democratising or even a democratised Europe, then one thing seems certain: it will be a continent full of spaces that people use, because they prompt us to engage in worldly affairs in the form of words and deeds.