Amorphous figures in blue, red and black, with continuous and broken lines extending in all directions. Next to them insect-like beings latch onto layered forms—Juan Miró has shown human existence as a chaotic and dynamic plenitude. Viewers recognize an existential experience: Life is manifold, complex, with many interconnected facets, while other elements seem to float in rootless isolation.

The life of Emily H. for example. As a single mother Emily is raising two teenage girls. To take care of her daughters, she only works part time at airport security. As the girls’ father does not pay any alimony, the family barely can afford life’s existential necessities. The oldest daughter loves ballet. But she can’t afford to attend live performances. Even their last outing at the movies is a distant memory for the family.

Paula D., a retired personal secretary, doesn’t want to accept that reality. She creates a vision that culture’s many offerings should be freely available to one and all. This woman insists that poor families, jobless people and the elderly barely scraping by on a small pension should be able to go to a concert, see a play or an exhibition just like their better off fellow citizens. People like her tend to run into the obstacles created by the world of compartmentalized responsibilities that would even reorganize the exuberant, pulsing organism of a Miró painting into neat fields of color. In our society, people and their needs are turned into clearly defined objects of administration. The youth welfare office attends to neglected kids, indigent adults fall under the purview of social services, while cultural institutions such as theaters or concert halls carefully control their respective turfs.

But who can poor, underprivileged people yearning to see a ballet turn to? Who is responsible for their needs? This question cuts across firmly entrenched lines of responsibility. And therefore, at least at first look, nobody is there to hear them. The people at the welfare office don’t know whom to contact at cultural institutions. The people there tremble at the thought that other institutions might not participate in such a program. And the secretary’s friends are asking her: “Have you lost your mind? How would you define neediness? And what if those poor people don’t behave themselves in our splendid concert hall?”

Our community foundation, the Bürgerstiftung Stuttgart, has ambitious goals: We want to help visionary people engaged in public life to achieve real change through co-creation, not in a bureaucratic style. We believe that help, support and backing should work on the assumption that life is complex. The Bürgerstiftung wants to be the open meeting place for diverse people — whether they are intent to solve specific problems, reinvigorate a neighborhood or create a successful organizational structure for themselves. The Bürgerstiftung is a place for people who appreciate living as an art to come together and find answers for all the complex issues reality throws at them. As this can only be accomplished by groups—and highly diverse ones in an urban setting—instruments of steering and moderating their efforts are needed. To this end, the Bürgerstiftung Stuttgart has chosen and further developed the roundtable as a method. For this endeavor, the foundation has found support at the Breuninger Stiftung.

A roundtable has been launched when the retired secretary insisted on her idea of “culture for all”. After an intensive search, people working in the arts, welfare officials and community group were called upon. Together, they developed a functioning model in nine months.

Do not expect roundtables to be silver bullets for every kind of conflict and dispute in a community. But as a result of research in networking and based on long experience with moderation and facilitation, they are extremely well adapted to conditions on the ground. To be effective,
roundtables call for a clear, unambiguous goal and a shared attitude. These “artists of living” have to agree on their materials and a medium before they create a new work. In the case of the secretary’s dream, everybody around the table already had believed that anyone should have access to culture before the group even assembled. This roundtable did not tackle the fundamental question: what rights do indigent people have?

It might seem trivial, but the success of the roundtable model does depend on shared, basic assumptions among the participants. One of these is the deep conviction that people are in fact capable of creating shared solutions. But a real consensus can only be reached if every participant can freely question and critique the ideas on the table. They also should be able and willing to follow up on their own commitments to the group.

The roundtable on “culture for all” presents a good example on the workings of the model. Participants weren’t presented with predesigned concepts to be haggled about. Instead, they started with a clean slate and brought their resources to the issue. But it could be assumed at the outset, that cultural institutions would be willing to provide a certain number of free tickets, while welfare officials would identify needy individuals to receive them. Furthermore, the secretary also had agreed to provide funds to found a non-profit association to approach additional cultural institutions and raise funds for future ticket buys.

Another shared attitude is of crucial importance: The roundtable provides a level playing field among participants. Nobody should be able to pull rank. Every contribution has to be equally valued and appreciated. There are no hierarchies. Donors are just as important as volunteers sharing their experiences or experts chipping in with their knowledge. If a theater director levels with a jobless person, they already enrich society as a whole.

To make a roundtable into a fertile ground for ideas, new alliances and lasting relationships, a host and caretaker is needed. The roundtable has to be a pleasant occasion participants look forward to attend. Therefore, food and drink are just as important as breaks. And before the table is being set up, competent research is needed to identify capable and willing members. Who are the players in a respective field? Who can bring valid experiences to the table? Who is already engaged in the relevant issue as a volunteer? A roundtable can’t be a closed shop. If the group realizes it needs more input, a new chair should always be added.

This brings us to the moderation. This might well be the single most difficult task at the table, as a moderator has to keep the goal in mind. This role also demands a focus on reaching the common aim by creating a result driven, step by step process. It is therefore certainly useful, if the moderator has prior experience and special training for his role.

Set up along these lines, a roundtable can facilitate the creation of sustainable projects, revitalize neighborhoods, as well as develop common goals and ideas while avoiding the growth of ineffective parallel structures to existing organizations. In this fashion, a roundtable can bring donors, founders, civil activists, the business community, politicians, and people working in the arts and in government together.

Roundtables work. The group tackling “culture for all” created a program to provide free entry for needy citizens of Stuttgart to more than sixty cultural institutions. Thanks to this effort, Emily and her two daughters have now discovered modern dance.