

What Cities Know About: Urban Spaces as Civic Labs

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It might sound solemn and pathetic, but this indeed is supposed to: Today we all are actors as well as witnesses of a revolution! – Of a revolution of our cities' public and cultural life! Everywhere the urban civil society seems on the move. And not only within the dramatic scope of political mass movements from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Maidan in Kiev...

It rather and more often assumes unspectacular forms: green eco-initiatives or local civic forums, parents' networks or art happenings, fairs in the neighborhood or tourist parties. You can actually find this everywhere, also in rather "placid" cities like here in Heidelberg, in Montpellier or in Salamanca.

Why that? – First and simple answer: Because we, the citizens, want it that way! Because we search for more social life, for more cultural variety and for more political participation in our cities. Because we now want to turn functional "working places" of the past into atmospheric "living spaces" in the present. And especially: Because these urban spaces and lifestyles become an identity lab for us, too, as a design studio of new images also of ourselves as residents.

So: "Yes, we and the cities can! We can do

our own urban thing!" This would be the guiding theme of the current "renaissance of the cities". This is also the solemn message of the "new urbanism". And this also touches directly on our subject here in Heidelberg: "knowledge – base(d) – urbanism". In four short pieces I would like to explore now something more of those new perspectives on urban spaces and knowledge cultures.

1. Urban spirit: a paradigm shift

We actually only realize how "revolutionary" this new urbanism really is if we look back in time, too. Historically the city evolved from the immigration of people, knowledge, ideas, and goods moving on to the urban market - thus, from social mobility and cultural innovation. In this way, "city" always represents both: a migrant and a synthetic product.

“Migrant”, since the city is reliant on its foreign exchanges and its terms of trade. And “synthetic”, since it depends on the integration of different social structures, cultural styles, and power architectures.

This is also the “genetic code” of the modern city of the 20th century. Even though urban spaces are becoming more heterogeneous, this growing social and cultural variety is still subjected to the Fordist work regime and the functional planning regime. And that means that all urban living forms remain subordinate to industrial production, modern traffic, and capitalist consumption, that they are supposed to be effective “job worlds”, not comfortable “life worlds”.

The first then to break with this iron “Fordist” principle – and that’s what matters to me here – is now our late-modern urban life, which initiated the turn in many ways and radically indeed. Since today we are carrying out a sharp paradigm shift: from the old model of the city as work- and traffic-world to the very and new idea of the city as culture- and life-world. And this indeed means a deep mental change, too: Since urban knowledge and urban mind also redefine and find expression in new cultural styles and practices.

**Berlin ist, wenn die schönste
Bewohnerin Migrationshintergrund hat.**



Advertising poster for the newspaper Berliner Morgenpost with the slogan “When the most beautiful resident has a migratory background, that is Berlin”. | 15

Without any doubt this paradigm shift is also the consequence of a previous policy shift. Because the dramatic and worldwide “crisis of the cities” – at the latest in the 1960s – forced a radical change of course in urban policy. As a reminder only: In 1961 Jane Jacobs released her dark diagnosis: “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”. In 1971 the German Association of Cities demanded: “Save our cities – now!” And in the same year a New York art group produced a T-shirt with that logo “I love New York”. – We all know it. But we today tend to forget that back then, in 1971, it was not the logo of a “hip” metropolis. It rather was a cry for help from a “dying” city. A city that like many others at that time was on the verge of yielding to traffic, destruction, cement, crime and emigration.



The globally known logo from the T-shirt "I love New York". | 16

Since this crisis however our cities have sustainably changed. A lot of old industrial productions and infrastructures disappeared. In this regard especially municipal "top down" programs were launched to institutionalize and festivalize culture: in the shape of new urban museums and art galleries, of music and theatre festivals, of libraries and literary coffee shops, of parks and plants. And at the same time countless "bottom up" culture and citizens' initiatives developed, which took care of schools, trees, traffic and playgrounds. Thus, a dual process began: of culturalizing urban spaces and of communizing urban groups.

But at the same time, we also notice, that these new urban spaces, movements, and knowledge-based cultures are threatened in manifold ways: by the consequences of social inequality and segregation, by centralist and functionalist planning, by the impacts of gentrification and capitalization. So our knowledge-based society works like this: mostly playful and creative, but often ambivalent and unclear, sometimes mixing party and policy. And that means: in a post-traditional urban spirit and style.

2. What does urban knowledge mean?

First of all it means that today our knowledge-based societies are not only dependent on academic and technical knowledge and on the corresponding formal educational qualifications. This represents only one source. The knowledge systems of everyday life are at least equally important, too. Because a lot of models of applied knowledge and of social creativity originate from

it: namely concrete local initiatives, social practices, and cultural experiments as living forms of "citizen science".

In this respect, our everyday knowledge navigates us through the social landscape like a "GPS". It helps to identify its spaces and groupings and to differentiate them as own and alien. Our urban spaces today involve their own, complex geography of knowledge. That means: place- and space-bound cultures of knowledge, collected in local constellations and organized in social configurations, for example, in the local interaction of urban trade and handicraft, of regional architecture and urban design.

Urban knowledge always has "spatial dimensions": Because in the condensed and compact city area spatial and cognitive textures are traditionally tightly intertwined. Carnival in Venice or in Cologne, Art Nouveau buildings in Vienna or in Prague, citizens' initiatives in Berlin or in Basel: All those versions represent general as well as specific local knowledge traditions at the same time. And by doing so, they represent a historically-based local knowledge, which is stored in the urban



Tourist-bashing graffiti says in an amusing way: "You are not welcome!" | 17

spaces and in the urban society: in the form of knowledge communities and knowledge zones – namely as local initiatives, clubs, neighborhoods, internet blogs, profession groups.

This urban knowledge is thus communicated, circulated and practiced in quite different social and spatial configurations, be it in the everyday mode of a conversation or in the digital medium of the Internet. However, if it is involved in concrete and sustainable local practices, an own knowledge culture evolves: numerous social communities of practise. And now it is they that form a partly collaborative, partly competitive structure parallel to the local administration. Because they organize different knowledge in different forms: in civil talks and backyard meetings, in open databases and media services, in new social forums and networks. So, all this is indeed about: civic science!

3. Who are the social actors and representatives?

Those activities of civic movements introduce completely new dynamics to our political-administratively "barricaded" societies. Since

urban spaces thus become a permanent civic workshop: namely as places of social contact, of cultural experiments, and also of new concepts of "society". Of a society, which increasingly wants to consider itself a civic society, organized in specific local terms.

Therefore "urbanistic" attitudes today more and more rapidly feed into "actionist" forms: The amount of local occasions as well as the variety of the civil models obviously keep lowering the threshold to activity. In this respect, this mode of taking part in protests, in round tables, in initiatives or in lists of signatures almost belongs to a "civic habitus" – almost used like friendships on Facebook, but with totally another obligational force. Since this habit then is about urban identity-work and local networking at the same time.

Though a new configuration in city planning and in urban policy thereby evolves, too. The individual expert and his certified knowledge are now confronted by a new collective expertise, which represents another, a social and practical knowledge, and which receives its mandate from the civil movement. A new "amateur-expertise" via urban citizenship: This "citizen science" now questions both, the old top-down mode of city planning as well as the old nimbus of administrative experts.

And alongside this civic expertise a new form of strategic moralization finds its way into urban policy, too. This corresponds to the general societal development. Since vegetarianism and fair-clothing style are just as "moralized", thus declared to be ethically superior attitudes, as the correct social or sexual identification or as urban bikeways and street trees. So, everything is thereby put in a greater ideological context, which symbolically elevates a specific decision, and which declares it as a question of principle.



New ways of seeing the city: “Attention: Play street” refers to a German road sign for a traffic-calmed street. | 18

As such the lifestyles of residents and mobiles, of migrants and tourists have converged within the past 20 years in most of our cities. Especially compared to desolate urban landscapes of the 1970s, the contrast is downright breathtaking, since we as today’s urbanists get enthusiastic about free urban spaces, urban commons and local citizenship.

4. What does this “citizen science” induce in our cities?

First of all: “Urban visions” are in demand again. Urban spaces as cultural life worlds, business parks as creative districts, city centers even as green leisure resorts: These are perspectives of a new mental belonging to our cities, too – images indeed of a new urban home and citizenship!

Of course, I can’t present a very detailed analysis here, given the short time span. In any case, I would like to outline some fields where the strong social dynamics of urban movements and the amazing cultural creativity of urban knowledge cultures become apparent.

► The struggle for a new public of spaces within the city. Namely, for “open” spatial structures, where private practices and civic actions as well as commercial events can evolve: neighborhood banquets and street concerts, soup kitchens and trade markets, play streets and urban gaming – and also Caribbean carnivals as in London or Jewish Meschugga parties as in Berlin. All this shows us both: the “rediscovery” of urban space as a zone of public life – and at the same time its new “invention” as an intercultural

space, as a stage and as a playground of diverse urban styles and groups.

► The increased architectural attempts and programs to save the constructional urban heritage. The post traditional city tries to organize an active historization and authentication of the urban life worlds. That’s, what faces us everywhere and every day: On their menus many restaurants talk about the building’s history, about the family’s Bavarian or Indian origin. On big site fence signs local restoration projects inform the public about the historical place and the reconstruction plan. And actually a lot of in memoriam notices on walls as well as on the internet announce the “death” of historical buildings or of trendy bars.

All these little texts are elements of a great and strategic urban narrative: Since they refer to the “common capital” of urban knowledge and local memory.

► The rediscovery of urban quarters and neighborhoods. A few years ago, this was quite still different: Affiliation to a certain neighborhood often meant social discrimina-

tion. Since “hood” described an urban territory of lower class and migration. Today placing in a specific hood vice versa means to be socially located and rooted. And you don’t even have to be born there anymore. Today, even immigrants are very quickly turned into “avowed natives”. You thereby join a rather symbolic local we-group.

► The Mediterraneanization of our city centers, namely the installation of café terraces and urban beaches, of palm trees and oleander on the riversides and in pedestrian zones, to imagine an urban “open air resort”. Here, migrant traditions are just as important as our own tourist experiences: Both forms of “Mediterranean” knowledge come together. And this combination then enables us to dream “southern” imaginations and scenarios “at home”.

► Art events, which increasingly enter in public spaces as aesthetic intervention and as “creative common”. These days, from Beijing



Guerrilla art in the public space: urban knitting | 19

to Berlin, concepts like urban knitting, urban gardening or urban art attempt to actively shake and break the routines of urban everyday life and the isolation of urban spaces.

These examples express especially this: a real dramatic change of “urban culture” and of “urban mentality”. These new and other conceptions of spatial use and city design, of lifestyle and creativity, of pleasure and party, of networking and communifying: They have already become “everyday” demands and “popular” attitudes – namely public movements and civic practices. And that’s precisely what gives them a new historical and cultural legitimacy.

And this legitimacy in particular makes the grave difference towards the urban everyday life of the 1980s, when “Fordist” work- and life ethics still dominated. When shopping, promenading, jogging, chilling, partying in the afternoon were still deeply “illegitimate” needs. When ice cream, aperitif and espresso at the local Italian café named “Venice” had to be consumed inside, behind curtains: no “dolce vita” in the bright and public afternoon!

During this actual transformation of the urban society old clichés disappear, too: Confrontations for example of “native” and “migrant” make just as little sense as those of “private” and “public” or of “party” and “policy”. Since the boundaries in between become blurred. And in the open spaces new “inter-cultural zones” and “hybrid mixtures” come to the forefront.

The new urbanism provokes the use of the “city-lab” as a social field for experiments: namely, to further develop urban landscape and urban society alongside more unconventional as well as sustainable cultural ideas:

- ▶ As for instance developing the concept of the social city further on, by regarding its working, living and educational facilities as corporate resources, as urban commons, which have to be “fairly” distributed and used.
- ▶ Or the concept of the city as growing inter-cultural space, where variety and encounter push the further cosmopolitanization of the urban cultures.
- ▶ Or the concept of the green city, which wants to sustainably improve the health as well as the aesthetic qualities of the urban landscape – especially via ecological and energetic plans of architecture and transport.
- ▶ Or the concept of the creative city, which draws its cultural capital from the immigration of mobile groups and from the presence of tourists. Since it thereby receives new impulses for intelligent product as well as service economies.

But I also guess that none of these “great” objectives, however, will be achieved, unless they are built on the basis of “little” civil-social initiatives. – Unless “urban heritage” does not only mean architectures, city theaters and museums anymore, but especially also the social knowledge resources and practice forms of the city. – Unless the “citizen science”-based cultures and energy potentials are even more intensively integrated as tools of an “everyday steering” into the urban policy. – Unless it is finally understood, that urban space and urban knowledge are just as valuable and inalienable “commons”: our “urban crown jewels”!

And in order to design and to polish these “cultural urban jewels” further, an International Building Exhibition here in the city of Heidelberg could indeed be the perfect “civic” place and format!



“Mediterraneanization of the city”: Open-air bar in the government district in Berlin | 20

