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REIMAGINING SPACES

Illustration: Norma Nardi
COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR TRANSFORMATION

By Dr. Bastian Lange

A new generation of city-makers is shaping the transition to the next city.

In times of increasing interest in urban spaces for living, working, meeting, finding shelter, exercising democracy, expecting safety, getting educated, consuming and even exploring as a tourist, one would expect that planners, politicians and city officials would have enough experience and knowledge on how to make use of niches, voids and hidden abandoned and unused spaces. Or those spaces that were given a clear but rather selective function decades ago and, today, are repurposed as societal needs are shifting: parks and green spaces built for esthetic reasons are becoming sites for urban gardening, physical exercise, performative practices or meditation. Public spaces formerly built for strolling, seeing and being seen are often temporarily transformed by skateboard meetups and teenage dance battles.

How can the social collaborative mechanism of small-scale, bottom-up placemaking approaches envision new and broadly accepted uses for these in-between spaces?

Very often, out of temporary cultural and district initiatives, initial seeds emerge and lead to open cross-sectoral cultural formats in more established festivals and urban places. The annual Lendwirbel festival in Graz, Austria, for example, is rooted in self-organized efforts of transversal initiatives that want to temporarily reprogram urban space into zones of cultural intervention. In doing so, they are helping new practices of cultural production and urban life to become visible so that new local practices start to transform the city and its public spaces.

Social and collective practices serve as the backbone of redesigning and even reinventing open, accessible and user-centered spaces.

There is an increasing need for new uses of urban spaces based on growing demands of diverse groups of people in European cities and beyond. But there’s a lack of expertise on how to design, to initiate, to cope with and even to plan collaborative spaces that serve multiple purposes and are easily adaptable to specific local needs.

As a response to these rising demands of open types of urban spaces, community initiatives are starting to make sense of spaces for different user groups, especially on a small-scale dimension. This applies to top-down attempts by city administrations designing open public spaces, as well as state-initiated laboratories, where different parties come together to negotiate solutions for neighborhood demands. The German Advisory Council on Global Change (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Globale Umweltveränderungen (WBGU) 2016, p. 26) in particular has stated that in so-called “real-world laboratories”, researchers and stakeholders are able to explore problems and solutions for the urban transformation by trying things out and experimenting together.

Contrary to top-down approaches, there’s an ever-increasing range of bottom-up attempts envisioning spaces in cities that address political oppressions, social segregation, cultural and economic displacement or the lack of free spaces. Although both approaches operate on the same scale, a more collaborative, steered approach can enrich the multiplicity of urban spaces.

In classical top-down urban planning, knowledge and creativity-based placemaking go hand in hand with small place designs—after the era of large attempts such as campus universities, media quarters, suburban knowledge silos and monofunctional innovation parks. In these mega-projects, key concepts such as the Smart City or Sharing City very often ignore the relevance of various forms of social encounters.

After an era of ignoring local demands and needs, larger development projects are incorporating more participatory practices to meet the place-based demands in urban economic development strategies. In liberal, progressive societies, it is becoming more and more relevant to integrate diverse social groups and their identity politics in urban realities.

As they engage in the local context, established Smart City policies are challenged by less structured, collaborative forms of work. Open workshops, real laboratories, FabLabs, urban laboratories, repair cafés, coworking spaces and others are becoming increasingly important, as they provide valuable input into social urban innovation processes. Defined by social practices such as...
People want to recreate a world in which food no longer tastes the same and social relationships and experiences feel real.
The future of cities across Europe looks very bright! That’s the most important thing we’ve learned from the energizing experience of the past 18 months. We had the pleasure to work with 30 amazingly engaged changemakers from municipalities, citizen-driven movements and local businesses who are all enthusiastic about one question: how can we make our cities better places for people to live in?