How to Meet the City – Urban Spaces for Friendly Encounters

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1 ABSTRACT

As urbanists, we observe public spaces every day with an eye toward their purpose; we critically gauge their facilities, features and sociocultural connotations. Are they used on a frequent basis? Do people rest, do they gather, do they linger, do they mingle? Is there any social interaction? Do these places contribute to an objective sense of well-being, welcoming those who temporarily reside there? Do they replace a piece of nature?

In comparison to closed architectural structures which are reserved for private or semi private use, public spaces have the important role of hosting a wide range of people from different social and cultural backgrounds. While architecture usually predicts its type of use, open space has the potential of being unpredictable and can trigger dynamics within its urban framework that greatly influence the way a city is perceived. In order to obtain a positive result when transforming an open space, we have to focus on those who use the space on a daily basis, the people who give it its character. The users must be the focus of our investigations, their various needs must be the vision to begin with. In the end, it is the people who constitute the identity and authenticity of a place.

Whether or not there are smart city solutions for the inhabitants of an urban space, it only serves the users if it is made for their specific needs. We want to optimize sustainability, respond to climate change facts and enhance urban well being while allowing people to notice the individual features of a space. This reaction is very individual to each city and has its own energy which makes a place special and unique. The ambience of a city is hence the reflection of the behavior of its city dwellers.

Keywords: versatile places for friendly encounters, genius loci/genius societatis, moderating society, participation process, transforming identity

2 VERSATILE PLACES FOR RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

2.1 Urban Landscapes

As evidenced by well known examples throughout history, the final use of open space is not always predictable. The way places are put to use is not always what was intended by their planners. While Haussmann imagined the Paris bourgoisie in the cafés embellishing the city's grand boulevards, it was the common people who crowded these places. While the philanthropist idea of Olmstead to create a central park in the suburbs of New York where people can mingle regardless of their ethnic roots, their religion or social background was at the core of its inception, high society soon prevailed as they began to settle around the edges of Central Park. The nature of the park changes and makes it less attractive for the common people.[1] This leads us to the following conclusion: while as an urban planner you are not in a position to guide social behavior with architectural features, instead you can provide urban landscapes that encourage the possibility of social encounters that architecture in general can't fulfill.

Recently, we won the competition of the southern square of Karlsruhe's railway station. While the northern part is well linked to the inner city of Karlsruhe, the square in the south has a merely logistical role for rail passengers who are either dropped off at the station, park their bikes or take a cab.

Our proposition for a place of versatile use was made for the efficient handling for passengers, but this was only part of our consideration. The place as we designed it is meant to be a place for people to gather, to rest and to make part of this space their own for the short time that they inhabit it. It is also meant as a place to observe and perceive the environment. A very purposeful feature of the space will be a mobile 'cloud' which moves to the position of the sun and corresponds to climate conditions. The cloud, which inspires the project's name (*climate watch),* is a smart device which shifts its size from small to big according to the

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[1] Sennet, Richard: Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City. Munich, 2018

daytime temperature. If you are an inhabitant of Karlsruhe or frequenting the place on a regular basis and you are a careful observer, you might realise the relation between the shape of the cloud and the weather conditions, and the direct connection to the place you live in.

While the cloud has a cooling function on hot summer days, it can act as a playful feature for children and of course for adults who use the place for a break or for meeting other people. With a breathing floor covering and a canvas canopy at the entrance, the place can become a retreat on climate peak days for people looking for rest, while each season has its own appeal due to the nature of the cloud. Hoping to attract a wide range of visitors who use this space regardless of its original function, we want people to claim it as a feel-good place for their specific purposes. However, only time will tell how the place will be accepted by its users, and if they go beyond the imagined original use.

2.2 Participation as a Key to Society

Architects are driven by a vision, and by the conviction of what a place is able to provide. In order to achieve a result that is long lasting and resilient, we work together in close relationship with the inhabitants and the future users of a planned space. In a participatory process with customized interventions and activities we try to find interested people and those who frequent the places the most at present or will in the future. To target the group of non users and attract a wide spectrum of potential users is one of the great challenges during this phase of the project. Interacting with a diversity of potential users is the first step in a process where we try to find the living genius loci, the spirit of a site. The second step is to guide their ideas, wishes and dreams into a concrete implemantation.

2.2.1 Identity

During this consultation process, residents and users are not only familiarized with the possibilities of what a place could be, but also with its history and traditions, a knowledge which can lead to enhanced community identity. Especially places that are no longer frequented for various reasons (economical or social, etc) are in urgent need for identification and revitalization.

The idea of staying true to a city's authentic roots and traditions is central to our design in the city of Wallenfels, where civic leaders struggle with vacancy and a lack of identity which differntiate it from sourrounding cities. Historically, the picture of Wallenfels was dominated by lumber mills and a river running through town with a system of weirs. It was used to drive the mills with hydro power and as a transportation system to float lumber and in times before the arrival of the railroad. Eventually, the river was covered and together with the weirs disappeared from the city center altogether. Our intervention consists of bringing back the water and its weirs into the city center and with it the identity of Wallenfels. Hence we reinforce its authenticity through a traditional feature. The exposed riverbed and weir can regulate and retain water and serves as a cooling factor on hot summer days. Once the city of Wallenfels has reinstated its central attraction, the people of Wallenfels benefit from a place to play, to gather and to rest, which in turn serves to strengthen their community. With this new basis for community, action against vacancies can be taken with a high chance of success.

2.2.2 Identity and Responsibility

Another project might examplify a lack of identity and how to regain it along with the help of the future users and residents. A historic park in the city of Landau in der Pfalz known for its Vauban-fortifications struggled for decades with the water quality of the lake, a central feature of the park. Hence the water will be drained, the lake restored, and in the course of the restoration, the park should be partly renewed. The lake is not only in the heart of the park and very central to Landau, it also had a pivotal history of being a drainage basin for flooding in protection of enemies throuogut the 18th and 19th century. Many actions have already been taken in order to maintain and raise the water quality, yet without much success. Besides the environmental problems, the park attracts marginalised and disadvantaged people groups and makes Landau residents feel unsafe in this space.

Our first intervention will be to drain the water and form the basin to a deeper and narrower shape. Together with the help of a streetworker and a youth worker and some teenage helpers, we will build special water wheels which will allow people to cross the lake while pedaling. The Landauer inhabitants can take posession of the lake and use it as part of the park while it had previously only been a visual esthetic feature.

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Thanks to the handmade floating objects, the exceptional nature of the place will be emphasized. It will be a unique attraction at this site.

Besides this positive effect, the oxygen level in the water can be manually raised by pedalling over the lake. This means that the water quality can be improved in a playful way. Here smart assets could help increase the motivation of Landau's residents to actively help enhance water quality.

Publications on smart cities across the spectrum often mention the fact that the complexity of cities is not being taken into account when talking about issues of urban planning. When individual solutions are needed, current top down smart solutions are provided. Martin Tomitsch states in *Making Cities Smarter* that "it is crucial to empower the inhabitants of cities by helping them to make smarter choices."[2]

In a former version of *climate watch* in Karlsruhe, an artistic installation competition for San Jose in the US that we participated in 2008 called *climate clock* a steam cloud on the top of a rooftop garden that could be seen from far away was responding to the current air pollution. On good weather days with good air quality the cloud was invisble, while on days with a higher level of air pollution the rooftop garden was wrapped in a dense cloud. People of San Jose would be in the position to make eco-friendly choices regarding their effect on air quality for example choosing the bike instead of the car. Though the project reached the penultimate selection it hasn't passed the final selection phase. As a landmark and a smart devise that admonishes people in a large neighbourhood about their proximate air quality was probably too much of a responsibility for the city government. The in situ sculpture that was meant to stand for a hundred years was finally never built in the end.

In regard to Landau and the water quality of the aforementioned lake, a smart device that indicates whether the lake needs more oxygen could function almost like a nudge and can be seen as an individual solution for a certain community. A display with a water quality indicator could play an important role in the way people relate to their neighbourhood; it can also be understood symbolically and stand for the environment at large. On the one hand it can inform the people in a city or town, and on the other hand it can empower them to improve the situation. Or in the words of Martin Tomitsch: „The idea here is that citizens can then use this data to inform their own decisions, rather than relying on the government to analyze and make decisions for them.[3]

2.2.3 Adoption due to the Participatory Process

While the concept of being a smart city is often understood in a merely technical way, the city of Vienna for example emphasizes social balance and inclusion within their smart features. Usually, smart solutions are employed only when city districts and neighborhoods are already developed. They serve to connect and link people within a social framework. The website of smart city Vienna quotes: „Projects and initiatives are launched and supported in five action areas: matching, community, education, sustainability and communication."[4] Though this approach is rather unique among smart city concepts, it aims to improve the social backbone of a city which is not yet the emotional link to a neighbourhood or a place.

We observed in several of our planned spaces that the more we involved residents in the participatory process prior to the planning stage, the faster the people adopted a place and claimed it as part of their identity. Various places like our pedestrian zone in Böblingen or the communal housing project wagnisART show that it is not the completed project itself which leads to its successful adoption, but the process of how to achieve these results. The acceptance of a new site is thus more likely when a myriad of possibilities is provided for all users and every single person has the chance to take ownership of the site.

Our urban cooperative housing project wagnisART in Munich which has won multiple awards over the past three years like the german sustainability award 2018 and the german landscape architecture award 2017 for participation and planning has a unique history and is based on a community that has been carefully formed in a very deliberate way.

Over several participation sessions the (initially anonymous) group of people first approached the site itself. In the course of several workshops, the coop members chose the architects they wanted to work with. During

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[2] Tomitsch, Martin: Making Cities Smarter. Designing Interactive Urban Applications. Berlin 2018 p.21
[3] cf. ibid p.24
[4] Stadt Wien, SMART CITY VIENNA: www.smartcity.wien.gv.at/site/en/social-city-vienna/ (February 2019)

this phase, the group members picked out the architectural details of their housing project. The further we got into the project, the more clearly the final group of participants crystallized, and was committed to remaining in the project.

The project gained its recognition in part due to the character of the community, which is similar to the structure of a small village. The central part of wagnisART is the so-called village square, where the residents can gather the way people used to encounter each other around the village well in times past in order to exchange information and take part in various community events. Five residential units are arranged in such a way that a flow between the housing unites and the neighbourhood can take place. We established a transition zone considering the importance of a lively exchange in the neighbourhood. Working with different topographic levels, public zones and zones that imply privacy were designed. The outside areas of wagnisART are designated for exchange in the neighborhood the way a restaurant situated at the corner would invite people from the outside to mingle with residents of wagnisART.

Unlike in traditional housing projects where acess to each apartment is granted via the shortest route from the street, in wagnisART the entrance to each unit is situated on the inside of the complex and every apartment is accessible only through a central staircase. Hence the residents meet their neighbours time and again without great effort.

Although supported by the architects' design, the social dynamics of these sites are driven by the day-to-day happenings among the locals. How the space is utilized by the cityzens is a question of choice and involvement in public life. The residents' strong identification with the place itself helps to transmit a positive message to the outside and in turn inspires them to adapt the outside space for their own needs.

Another great plus for the community, and a smart solution in terms of sustainability, is a series of rooftop gardens where wagnisART residents grow their own vegetables. The gardens provides further cooling (without energy expenditure) of the roof on hot summer days, and are yet another way to foster community among the coop members.

3 GENIUS LOCI AND GENIUS SOCIETATIS

3.1 Inexchangable Places

The relationship to a site and further to the city evolves to an emotional place when the habitants develop it together with the planners. In the example of wagnisART the process of designing with regular gatherings and workshops was an important step for the adoption of the site. The cooperative society who was a group of individuals in the beginning forged strong bonds within them at the time of construction. This led subsequently to several ideas of community spaces within the housing project.

In his famous essay *Construction of the Society*, Luigi Snozzi states that the obligation of planners is to shift the design from mere formal expressions to an expression by society enabled through architecture.[5] While at the end of the last century the city planner's philosophy was to organize and order the needs of society, today the actual task of those of us who are planners is to moderate and translate the needs of society.

This was also the main focus in Puchheim near Munich where a park for all Puchheim residents with diverse needs was the planning task. In order to meet the expectations of different users, we focused on the inhabitants in several participatory steps. A focus group was put together specifically to help us sound out the individual needs of each social group.

With the help of a temporary ice skating rink in the park we tried to attract as many people as possible in order to have access to a wide range of Puchheim residents, who were asked to fill out a short questionnaire in exchange for a free pair of rental skates. Besides getting to know the people, we wanted to get a feel for and understand the atmosphere of site. The interest in participating was impressive and people from all genders, ethnic groups, age ranges and cultural origins were willing to help us out and answer the questions. Our design for the park comprises several aspects which we incorporated in response to the various needs of the local population, which were clarified by the participants via the questionnaires.

During the finalisation phase of the design, the surrounding institutions were informed of the upcoming project, and we were intrigued to notice a high grade of acceptance compared to similar building projects

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[5] Snozzi, Luigi: Construction of the Society. Zürich, 2009

where the local population had not been included in advance. In joyful anticipation, the neighborhood involved themselves in the last tasks of design. After construction, the local residents will be called upon once again to participate in a decorating workshop for the playtowers with typical patterns of their cultural origin.

In a multiethnic city such as Puchheim, the genius loci has to be found thus among the local population itself: The residents are the key to the district, and they provide all the ingredients for a successful adoption of the place. The way future use of a space will evolve is strongly linked to the emotional attachment the users feel to the site in the present. In the words of John Agnew, this is when a space in a physical sense is turned into a place, a place of action, that is unique and inexchangeable.[6]

3.2 Act Locally

One of our oldest projects which is still active in different variations is the *freiluftsupermarkt* which started in 2015 after deriving from *agropolis munich* of 2008, a project with the objective of an urban and sustainable food strategy. *freiluftsupermarkt* was based in the middle of an urban development area in Freiham in Munich where a temporary field was set up for integrative agriculture together with surrounding institutions. After two years of urban agriculture, a first branding of the thus far unknown part of town was achieved. In a second phase a mobile container moved to a different part of the neighborhood for a local exchange of vegetables and farm products from the surrounding farms. Together with a mobile cargo bike which was utilized in order to easily access all areas in the neighorhood, an exchange of information in the district took place in several interventions and participatory actions.

A branding over a long time period took place, where a new neighborhood was gently developed, where newly settled people could connect to their more established neighbors, where information about the urban district was exchanged and the green image of the area was developed and reinforced. This process of branding has been already completed in the 23rd district of Vienna in an urban development area where we established a *freiluftsupermarkt* over the period of two years which had to give way recently to the construction site now the site has a unique and green image.

A customized project for the microstructure of a big city such as Munich was the ideal format for acting locally and sustainably in communal and ecological terms. Now that the district of Freiham is growing steadily, smart devices can smoothen their daily routine, but we are convinced that the emotional approach had to be utilized in the initial phase of the project.
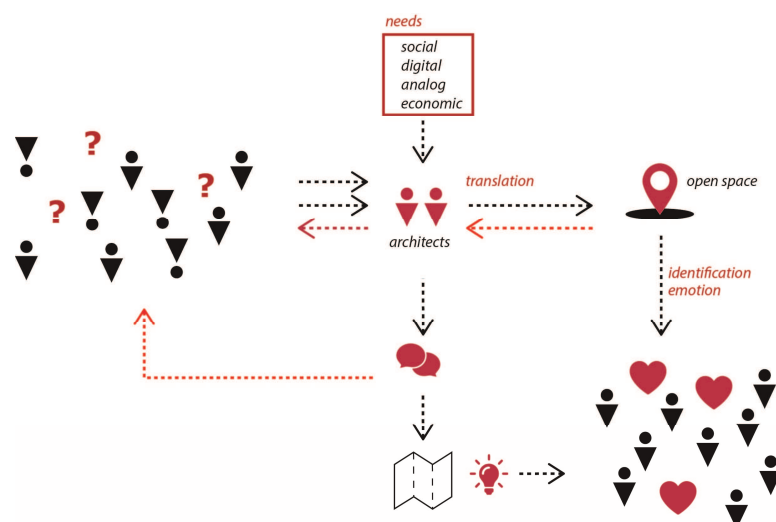

Fig. 1: Space for identification through participation and emotion

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[6] Agnew, John: Space and Place. in: J.Agnew and D. Livingstone (eds.): Handbook of Geographical Knowledge. London 2011

4 CONCLUSION

An effective smart city cannot simply meet the logistical requirements of urban life, but must find a direct and emotional approach to its users. The planners must provide an urban landscape where each individual can forge an adventurous path of their own choosing. Not the total emptiness of a place triggers the creativity of a user (by way of its potential), but the whole atmosphere of a location inspires people to involve themselves in a public space. Sociologist Martina Löw states that cities always have an inherent logic that depends solely on their inhabitants.[7]

The design of a site must appeal to what Richard Sennet calls the Homo Faber, the one who is keen to change activley his or her environment with gestures of different scales.[8] The more a city dweller is emotionally attached to a place, the more responsibility he or she takes for the feel of the living environment. The more individualized the interventions, the more specifically they can be adapted to the innate nature of a place.

A smart city can only be smart when it can count on the collaboration of its inhabitants and their willingness to act in a socially sustainable fashion. Our task is to link technically smart possibilities with analogue tools, and connect urban residents to real and authentic experiences. We then interpret the voice of the inhabitants while they reinterpret the resulting urban space. We call it the phase shifted interpretation

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