

LE SENS COMMUN N'EST PAS SI COMMUN [1]

Side Notes on the Summer Schools Resetting Neighborhoods

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Neighborhoods are ambiguous landscapes of high complexity, and so is the choice to work with them. Though we all live somewhere in some neighborhoods and hopefully enjoy the sunny sides of those environs, neighborhoods are rarely subject to the thinking of the urban planner. Neighborhoods withdraw classification and have no need of the formal aspects that come along with the planners' and designer's core repertoire. What is the scale and shape of the present matter? How many blocks belong to the notion of the neighborhood? How many residents constitute a neighborhood? What binds the locale spatially and mentally? An initial impression might consider the term 'neighborhood' being outdated and old fashioned, a nostalgic fantasy. The term 'neighborhood' may smell frumpy and petit-bourgeois, it somehow contradicts the understanding of an increasingly globally oriented and mobile society. What are contemporary readings of neighborhoods? Is the subjective reading of my neighborhood the same as yours? Most probably not.

Traditional urban planning tends to prefer the well-defined organizational bodies with clearly delimited administrative boundaries, such as the district or quarter, the subdivision of the land in uniquely allocated building plots with streets as part of the binding infrastructure, every square meter properly divided in public and private ownership and responsibilities.

Despite the difficulty to trace and describe, let alone to analyze neighborhoods, each year anew, the summer school with groups of 40 to 60 international participants engages in a series of events to consider, reconsider, think and rethink, and perhaps, even 'reset the neighborhood'. The topic is ambitious and the students' engagement courageous. Where does the call for the neighborhood come from?

The chosen subject creates space to engage with quite different values and approaches to thinking, approximations that go against the grain of disciplinary criteria and much established commercial production. I'd like to think that the attractiveness of the design topic 'neighborhood' can be found in a widespread resistance to authority, which is the authority of design [2], the protocol that constitutes and shapes our everyday as urban designers, planners and thinkers embedded in a predominant economic, exchange value oriented reality.

For a better understanding, I want to boldly brush over current conditions in planning and production. As we all may sense, spatial policies and the real-estate industry are rather conservative, protective, and sometimes even reluctant. Even at the risk of being cliché, the building industry is mainly market-oriented, producing quantity, sheer numbers, making profit the save way. Due to the lack of imagination and a lopsided orientation towards market efficiency, municipalities, developers and other decision makers avoid or exclude risk and experiment. Planning is a top down organized régime, and this way of planning allows for particular solutions only.

Recent big and medium-scale developments in Berlin and elsewhere evoke irritation and resistance. Since the deregulation and privatization of the early 1990s in Germany and elsewhere, municipalities often lost control and grip in qualifying newly built areas. Too many plans are based on globalized imaginary with little insight and tact, they render exchangeable patterns of habitation, sometimes blatant monotony in thinking, organization and expression.

In the world of mass-culture, humans become consumers and senses are replaced with entertainment. According to Peter Sloterdijk: "This happens when city dwellers leave the 'gravitation field of need' and being confronted with having plenty of 'excessive' time. Marx taught this as 'alienation', Heidegger described it as 'insidious distress'. The question of being has lost its urgency, and this situation in itself is an emergency." [3]

Being sensitive to existing conventions and procedures, designing at design schools sometimes becomes a difficult topic. Students are not indifferent, they are increasingly reluctant to the etiquette of design, to prescribing and drawing down concrete building options. Often they act rather cautious in the decision-making process, searching for other criteria and models to commit themselves. In resisting the authoritarian hierarchies of the designer's world, the student's world of design –along with a rapidly growing group of professionals– is challenging the role model and accordingly the possible outcomes by embracing rather inclusive models of organization and production. Small is the new big. The young generation attempts to challenge formal architectural and urban approaches with so-called informal strategies, bottom-up approaches, community led or neighborhood driven plans, and incremental housing projects.

What does the neighborhood driven approach hold? Are neighborhood driven plans and participation romanticized as a kind of panacea, a miracle cure to the many topics that challenge the urban every day? It seems the right time to scrutinize the formal way of decision-making. However, can we do without? What are the models of participation imagined? Moreover, which urban scales and scopes those models would address? According with the architect and theorist Markus Miessen, the politics of participation could be differentiated between cooperation and collaboration. [4] In his book with the provocative title 'The Nightmare of Participation', he rejects the mode of cooperation as a consensus oriented participation model that –admittedly much condensed and simplified– is oriented towards facilitating and mediating the existing state of affairs, thus monotonously preserving the political and economic status quo: "Because today's networking culture is based on consensus [side by side in harmonic agreement] rather than [productive] conflict, it merely produces multiplications, but rarely new knowledge." (Miessen:95) Instead, Miessen advocates the "crossbench practitioner," an "uncalled participant", an "uninvited instigator", (Miessen:103), that is a "friendly enemy", a "professional amateur" who operates outside the protocol of production and through the format of conflictual participation to challenge the notions at hand. It is this distant critical voice who through an unpredictable, yet productive engagement potentially "points out the realities of responsibility" (Miessen:92). Miessen calls for an acting without mandate as a form of critical engagement, to open up space for change and enable 'political politics' that define space.

The summer school is a setting to raise questions on the topic of spatial production and reproduction. And the scale of the neighborhood seems to be a perfect vehicle that allows for critical engagement. How to produce new knowledge on the urban condition? What is the setting and what wants to be reset?

During the ten summery workdays, the topic at hand becomes a device; an obstacle that productively disturbs the learning and teaching routine. Questioning the why and how informs the arena arranged for the students and other experts from various cultural and regional backgrounds. Amsterdam, Istanbul, and Porto, each place and accordingly each summer school anticipates a specific topic that goes along with the general theme of the envisioned 'big neighborhood reset'. Yet the main questions orbit around the notions of providing or even claiming greater access to urban space and resources for all inhabitants, to overcome boundaries, in particular if it comes to socially and economically fragile communities.

Due to the limited nature of the workshop sessions, the engaging discussions and designs can't deepen to detail, yet the sensitive spirit with which students from the various cultural backgrounds and levels of education address their concerns is exceptional. And it seems as if the ten-days-frame of the summer school is quite fruitful in raising many legitimate questions on the complex issues to be settled. Together with the faculties and a group of external experts, the colorful mix of participants shape the unpredictable nature of the desired professional amateur. Their productive engagement seek to overcome apparent restrictions and to re-inform the process and the materiality of the given. How to be inventive with conventional matters? How to control the volatile optimism? How to be simultaneously pragmatic and challenging?

To emphatically address and optimize the use- and exchange value of the fabric, what would be the relation between the various users and uses? What would be the spatial and legal framework for such an environment?

How to integrate issues of the collective or co-ownership into the new practice? What would be key priority? How to de-functionalize? How to imagine a maker's city? What needs to be designed and what would be left to the users to define? What is then the role of the urban planners and designers in creating those attractive and productive neighborhoods? Finally, how much design needs a great design? Naturally, such an event raises more questions than answers. That is what I call success. "Pour vous, madame, je dois interrompre mon agonie." [5]

[1] [5] Both quotes are attributed François-Marie Arouet [1694-1778] better known as Voltaire; quote attributed to Voltaire: "Common sense is not so common." Voltaire, A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary

<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/voltaire-the-works-of-voltaire-vol-x-the-dramatic-works-part-1>

[2] A topic explicitly addressed by Peter Eisenman in a recent lecture at the IIT Chicago (Mies van der Rohe Society Lecture Sep 26, 2016)

[3] According to the commentator Fabienne Hoelzel in 2009: A talk between Peter Sloterdijk and Matthias Horx, moderated by Roger de Weck: Wohin müssen sich unsere Städte entwickeln? http://www.magazin-world-architects.com/ch_10_02_onlinemagazin_geblickt_de.html

[4] Markus Miessen [2011] The Nightmare of Participation. Sternberg Press. Berlin, New York.