



CREATIVITY IN URBAN CONTEXT

An Action Research Project
by Future DiverCities

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Transitional geographies On co-presence in Open Labs Bastian Lange

In the face of multiple crises in the financial sector, food production, climate change, the crisis of political legitimacy, participation, and destruction of natural resources, as well as useless consumption, many protagonists have started to install so-called open workshops worldwide. This article looks at the particular socio-spatial contexts of the protagonists of open workshops and the ways in which their practices take up positioning and location in urban contexts.

Open workshops, for example screen printing, bicycle workshops, repair cafés or FabLabs, are becoming increasingly important and provide [valuable](#)

impulses when hopes are placed on urban innovation processes: craftsmanship, repairing technologies, and DIY-attitudes, the original practice of open workshops – that means transforming old goods to existing usable ones – predestined these as places of alternative consumption and production practices.

To date, these phenomena have entered public, academic and policy discourses at various levels. Federal ministries are aiming to support niche-phenomena such as open workshops and open creative labs, as well as real laboratories. The German Advisory Council on Global Change has stated that in so-called ‘real-world laboratories’, scientists and stakeholders can jointly acquire knowledge and problem-solutions for the urban transformation by trying things out and experimenting.

Parallel to policy papers, such bottom-up phenomena are the focus of academic discourses and have been addressed on the one hand in the context of complex multi-level theories. On the other hand, they are approached as ‘grassroots innovation movements’ and as expressions of experimental urban transformations. Stimulated by so-called transition theory approaches and in order to achieve transition and sustainability goals further, systems necessary for everyday life (e.g. mobility, housing or energy supply) have been addressed.

Our line of thinking is informed by the invitation of [Smith et al. \(2010\)](#) to conceptually prepare ‘transitional geographies’ and to closer consider a spatial perspective in the debate of transition theories, aiming at bringing these insights into case studies and concrete expressions. Our results show that open workshops can be discussed as a cohesive manifestation of transitional geographies. We contribute to a more detailed view of horizontal networks of bottom-up phenomena in spatial contexts.

Central to this focus on open workshops is the question of how they can be scaled up out of their niche and become more and more effective on a broader regional scale. So far, there is no systematic knowledge of the extent to which this type of a bottom-up phenomenon can expand and

scale up. In addition to that, there are huge societal and policy-based expectations on how these micro phenomena can play a fundamental supportive role regarding transitional processes. Open workshops will be tackled as a distinct type of social space in the following, that is in the center of attention in the context of urban transitions and sustainability discussions.

Open workshops are a type of transitional space where people can repair, modify, transform, or even produce goods that meet their daily needs (Ferdinand et al. 2016). The increase in the number of such practices generates great expectations among policy makers and ministries of the broad social impacts and impacts of such phenomena on value-added and material production processes.

In the discourse on the future design of metropolitan areas, the focus is increasingly on forms of experimentation and creative knowledge generation in the modes of co-design and co-production. In this context, social places such as Reallabore, Urban Transition Labs or Living Labs are aligned with the guiding principle of sustainability and designed together with local actors.

Such spaces, as well as the associated ideas of transition, represent a conceptual complement to the transition and multi-level perspectives. They focus intensively on the theories of social practices in governance processes. A discussion on possible interfaces as well as tensions between the transition theories and theories of social practices has been presented in recent years. Socio-spatial relevant practices take into consideration concrete, everyday functions (for example, food, mobility, education, and repair activities) in a horizontal perspective and in a regime-wide way to illuminate them in their collective common, conventionalized and shared dimensions, as well as in their socially differentiated versions.

To date, this research field is decoupled and detached as opposed to spatial explanatory variables. Bottom-up phenomena indeed take place in a

Social Practices and the City

thematic manner and are analyzed in terms of governance regulation as well as transition theory, but are analyzed mostly without context in terms of space. In recent times, conceptual work has been presented, especially from a spatial and urban viewpoint, as a means to view social movements and bottom-up phenomena as urban appropriation processes, as a resource for social innovations, as an expression of the search for sustainable mobility and production options by peer networks.

To date, urban manifestations of economic crises and scarce communal resources have been present in many places, mainly from southern European countries or US cities. The discourse surrounding the 'provisional city' represents an attempt to develop a new perspective on the post-crisis city and on austerity urbanism. Here, the potential of provisional interventions in specific spatial contexts is emphasized in contrast to conventional transition and development models.

Places, spaces, and districts, which have fallen out of the functional classical exploitation context, are subjected to revision with respect to new functional, spatial, and time-based models.

Protagonists address open workshops as counter-horizons and as collective and social places, in opposition to an articulated distrust of everyday urban life. As an interviewee stated, a core motif is 'to create spaces' and 'to creatively make use of empty and abandoned space'. This gives opportunities 'not only to meet the wishes of the citizens for innovative uses for resident buildings and fallows, but also to strengthen the resilience of the municipality against the global. They are aiming at strengthening locally perceptible challenges of the next years and decades'.

In this case, spatial attributes are directly related to their own initiative practices: 'In a city where vacancy exists and its growth is to be feared, the support of new usage concepts would be a smart investment in the future'.

Strengthen the Locale

In relation to the social transformation frames, a respondent refers to the following infrastructures: 'Provision of a fixed space through the city, for example, storage facilities for spare parts (primarily usable waste); It is great in the inner city, so it is publicly effective (here many shops have been empty for years!)'.

The specific spatial situation leads to expectations, to clusters of vacancies in the urban fabric and to structural holes, as the interviewee states, 'there are not enough people in the village to take the necessary initiative'.

The motif to compensate and to fill social and spatial structural deficits in urban context is also reflected in the comments of the following interviewee: 'In the parish yard, there is an old barn and stables, which were saved by adolescents and adults from decay and are now being further developed' (factory and cultural barn). **When it comes to the question of the impacts - how should the open workshop develop in the next 5-10 years? - the interviewee said: 'to heal the district and spread happiness'.**

The linguistic attributions of the open workshop by the protagonists give expression to expectations and to the realization options, as they are bundled in the image of a creative milieu. Expressions such as, 'We want to give space' and 'creating value for neighbours is the main result' (Response ID: 24) as well as, 'You like to travel in the SCHILLERKIEZ (a Berlin neighbourhood), live or work here and would like to network in the NEIGHBOURHOOD and you want to do something with MEDIA?, then the SCHILLERWERKSTATT is the right contact for you' (www.schillerwerkstatt.de), are indications of a solidarity-neighbourly culture of the neighbourhood.

Other protagonists described their relationship to the district as follows: 'Founded in 2002 by a resident initiative, the Werkstadthaus has developed into a multi-faceted meeting point, which is used by people from the French quarter, from all over Tübingen and far beyond. Popular

Updating the Locale

offers are, among others, the open workshops and courses' (<http://www.werkstadthaus.de>).

Temporary events in the district are conducive to social relations, as described in the following: 'On this day, we were around 200 artists, politically active and socially committed. In the meantime, we have become more and [at the same time] remain what we were on the first day: a bunch of people with different views and approaches, with different life processes and backgrounds, elderly and younger; People who were already friends before August 22nd and people who had never met before their time in the quarter of the river' (webpage Gängeviertel e.V.).

The focus is on self-determination: 'The HONIGFABRIK is self-determined, artistic, craft, emancipatory, musical, political, local, theatrical, social, the beautiful and ... committed' . In retrospect, it is therefore considered as a city and district developer for 'culture and art in the district, where everything has begun with the occupation of a vacant factory building. Since then, an urban process development has become a major cultural center' (webpage Honigfabrik, Wilhelmsburg).

The open workshops and bottom-up phenomena, which have been analyzed here can be approached as practical manifestations of the local. Based on the expressions of the protagonists, it becomes clear that their area of action is primarily oriented to the proximate local space. In respect to the expected upscaling processes and effects from external they remain at least in a structurally contradictory position.

From a spatial perspective, however, this means that open workshops are located in niches in co-present, multiple, local contexts. With their workshop practices, they refer relationally to specific local contexts. Bottom-up phenomena and their practice thus become visible as local manifestations and local responses to globally-spread crises. They react to multi-scale and vertically effective challenges with horizontal practice in respect to regional, national, European, and global economic, ecological

Open Workshops

or knowledge-based crises, as well as ineffective top-down approaches. Their own practice is oriented horizontally in local networks of the social proximate area and is addressing solutions against experienced and felt grievances by showing pragmatic remedy within the local neighbourhood.

A core motivation of the promoters and makers in open workshops is to demonstrate that other, practical alternatives are possible in horizontal peer networks and that not only top-down hierarchies have mastered alternative solutions. Open workshops show the feasibility of alternatives. This assertion, in addition to its daily practices, always carries a narrative of autonomy, a narrative that says that problem-solving can be formulated and made feasible.

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