# ACTORS OF URBAN CHANGE

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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.

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.

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

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

craftsmanship, repairing technologies and DIY-attitudes, they make room for alternative consumption and production modes.

These experimental spaces have been gaining attention in the public, academic and policy arenas. Government agencies now want to support niche initiatives such as open workshops, open creative labs and real laboratories. Grassroots innovation movements are now a focus of academic discourses as expressions of experimental urban transformations. On the policy level, topics such as mobility, housing and energy supply—systems that affect the everyday life of city dwellers and which many of these spaces are working to transform—are becoming more relevant in order to achieve sustainable development goals.

A defining character of such experimental spaces is their rootedness in civic collectives. Unlike narrow notions of innovation, often restricted to fields such as small business networks or industrial clusters, social and collective practices serve as the backbone of redesigning and even reinventing open, accessible and user-centered spaces. Such 'open innovation' attitudes have not only come to infiltrate alternative or green economies; they also support a needs-based and user-centered social logic. It seems natural, then, for maker-spaces, creative labs and open workshops to spontaneously get involved in resource-saving, environmentally friendly, socially balanced work, as they embrace the principles of open access, mutual learning, knowledge sharing and a do-it-together attitude.

Both perspectives—top-down and bottom-up—envision places as the relevant yet controversial terrain of the urbanized 21st century. On the one hand, places such as Billebogen in Hamburg are more than just public places and many of them have grown to become models of new social configurations and cultural practices. On the other hand, top-down efforts such as the "New Downtown" in Hamburg simply follow a planned formula with minor functional mixtures, as they emerge in Hamburg's HafenCity.

Bottom-up, user-driven place formations are successful because there are backed up by social interest groups, social movements and a collaborative governance: like-minded collaborators are often united by high motivation, anti-utopianism, practical enthusiasm and straight-forward political agendas. They act out of growing political concerns for designing free, open and affordable living spaces with a clear user orientation. These types of collaboratively designed spaces reduce development, building and planning costs and guarantee greater acceptance in the long run.

In turn, top-down planning approaches with a higher degree of formalities have started to be more sensitive to the ever-increasing public interest toward planning and building projects that are based on participation through collective structures.

**An outlook: from collaborative places to transitional geographies**

The wide range of user-centered places and bottom-up phenomena can be understood as practical and collaborative manifestations of the local. These actions are primarily oriented toward their immediate surroundings. But to what extent can small niche efforts be upscaled and disseminated in order to gain more momentum? Or should they remain local and small?

From an urbanistic perspective, small innovative projects such as the Billebogen often begin in geographical niches. They act and communicate live and in person within their communities. But even though their actions are local, they participate in horizontal communication networks stretching beyond the local fix. In this way, bottom-up initiatives become visible as local manifestations and responses to global challenges and crises in the urban context. They react to ineffective top-down approaches and complex challenges with horizontal practices. By showing pragmatic solutions within their own neighborhoods, they respond to regional, national, European and global economic, ecological or knowledge-based crises.

A core motivation of those city dwellers pushing urban change forward is to demonstrate that other, practical alternatives are possible within peer networks and that top-down hierarchies are often not the best way to provide alternative solutions. In believing and practicing this philosophy, they embody a narrative of autonomy, a narrative which shows that problem-solving can be made concrete and feasible.

The social designs of these local geographies can be seen as examples of a new, 21st-century urbanization: one that is happening under completely new social, political, cultural and economic conditions. They show how people in urban areas around the world struggle to ensure access to public common goods, acting on their desire for social participation and their need to preserve social infrastructure for more inclusive politics, economies, cultural spaces and more.

People want to recreate a world in which food no longer tastes the same and social relationships and experiences feel real.



The idea of public place as the polis of the European city—for strolling, consuming and showing oneself—is shifting more and more toward the idea of a place where existential questions about participation in social processes are presented, planned and negotiated anew. Young and old city dwellers alike increasingly demand a say in the design of new places in their neighborhoods, just as they strive to preserve places that have become culturally significant for them. New protesters, for example, are becoming increasingly skillful in defending themselves against projects that change their location, thus helping local and site-specific values to gain acceptance and recognition.

After an era of continuing globalization, communities are taking pragmatic approaches right where they live, work and play. Overwhelmed by the profusion of analog and digital networks, people want to recreate a world in which food no longer tastes the same and social relationships and experiences feel real. Edges and corners, sharp points and notches are placed in today's world in order to lend the missing haptics of the digital age a new old grip. These initiatives are in stark contrast to the everyday objects that have lost quality, fit, usability or taste due to industrial production methods.

In the course of the search for the right plot of land, the do-it-together-and better-culture—originally assigned to the protesting punk in music, fashion and society—has been reformulated and has become the source of new production of spaces. Their main focus is not only on the re-appropriation of production processes—that they want to do it "themselves"—but also on making it "better". Do-it-better is the driving force behind numerous local designs. As a result, the poor, the elderly, asylum seekers, migrants and the unemployed are being displaced on the outskirts of cities. It is very difficult for them to take such design processes into their own hands as a highly qualified urban lifestyle community is doing by knitting, gardening, crocheting and crafting.

Socially and politically motivated groups undoubtedly try to react or point to these political distortions, social fragmentations and cultural exclusions with new forms of spontaneous and temporary appropriation of space. This shows that the long-standing and clearly existing relationship between city dwellers and their place is broken: more and more sub-collective, site-related and particular interest groups—no longer homogeneous local claims of a fictitious citizen—are standing up for their interests.

These are new city dwellers who no longer put forward uninformed concerns about the design of urban places, but rather draw their claims from disruptive global patterns. Climate change, the energy crisis, war, migration, mobility and structural economic change are forcing an ever-increasing number of people to reclaim their everyday autonomy and to initiate social and collaborative processes that create meaning—and are part of a larger narrative of transition.


ACTORS

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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?

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