

Opening up spaces of possibility with artistic experiments

An interview with Viola Schulze Dieckhoff and Hendryk von Busse, conducted by Christian Schulz

As graduates of urban and spatial planning, they both took an artistic approach to questions of urban design and urban policy at a very early stage. Schulze Dieckhoff works at the TU Dortmund and is also active in '*die Urbanisten*' [The Urbanists] e. V., Dortmund. Von Busse is involved in and co-founder of the '*Freiraumgalerie – Kollektiv für Raumentwicklung*' [Open Space Gallery – Collective for Spatial Development] in Halle/Saale.

<https://dieurbanisten.de/>

<https://www.freiraumgalerie.com/>

In your six theses on 'post-growth planning' you, Viola, write together with Christian Lamker: 'Post-growth planning needs experimental and artistic action!' What exactly do you mean?

Viola Schulze Dieckhoff: Christian Lamker and I have always tried to bring together post-growth and planning and have noticed that it is not always socially acceptable to talk about post-growth. And so, through what can be said and what cannot be said, through 'do-able' and 'not do-able' things, we came to realise how important experiments and art are. It is actually clear that the growth mantra of economic activity doesn't work and must be abandoned. There's enough scientific evidence that shows that life satisfaction doesn't increase with more money and more consumption, there's also no direct link to social justice, and GDP also grows through climate disasters and through diseases. Those are the facts but it's not always easy to talk about them and to link things up with them because you can then quickly

find yourself socially 'offside'. And let's just say that through 'experiments' it's possible to open up a kind of protected space – many people also say: to open up windows of opportunity or to create spaces of possibility – in order to consider what we actually want, how we want to live, how we want to work. And this space is not dependent on private economic interests or political calculations (e. g. thinking about the electorate) and is thus without any social path dependencies. Art also takes this up, firstly as an experiment or laboratory. However, art is also anchored in the Basic Law, and artistic freedom is protected. This goes beyond the fact that individuals can think about art to include the notion that people can also do what they have thought about, and that they can exchange ideas about it and also empower new discourses. Art is therefore centrally important because it also ends in a product and materialises, perhaps in a way beyond what has been previously thought of and worked out as a socially accepted norm. But artistic creation also changes things, through performances such as theatre or even when you design facades. Just looking at others triggers something in the viewer and changes something in the viewer's relationship to his or her environment – and can thereby create something new. Art and experimentation are therefore a possible way to 'fuel' the socio-ecological transformation, perhaps we can find transformative practice through the transformative actions of art and experimentation. The point is to show that changing, wanting to change and being able to change are also part of what we do, not just maintaining, preserving and preventing.

Where do you, Hendryk, see references to the topic of 'post-growth' in your recent projects? What role does art play in the imagination of post-growth living worlds?

Hendryk von Busse: I would simply use the example of the mural. The mural itself, as an urban design tool, has no direct relation to post-growth. But by investing resources, time and empathy, urban surfaces are enhanced or given life and identity, and thus become more than purely functional design. Otherwise, it depends very much on how you do this urban art, what you do with it. Where I see a connection is, for example, with our work on the 'civic neighbourhood concept'. In Halle-Freiimfelde, we used murals to revitalise vacant buildings and to provide a better identity and image for the neighbourhood, which also had an impact on quality of life. Thanks to the increased attention, it became clear that a plan was needed for this forgotten

district. It was then courageous of the city to say: 'OK, we didn't do anything about this upgrading, the public did that, so the public should also design the neighbourhood concept, i.e. the future of this neighbourhood'. So this neighbourhood concept came about as a result of art, and it has many components that have to do with post-growth planning, for example, planning not from the outside through investors or redevelopment programmes but from the inside with the ideas, input, wishes and needs of residents. In this neighbourhood concept – based on the wishes of residents – there are many areas for artistic and experimental activities. So there's a citizens' park where people can garden, but which is also available for other projects. Besides classic post-growth activities like urban gardening and street art, there are also just open spaces and workshops where no one has defined what has to take place, and which are intended to remain flexible – even in the long run.

This civic neighbourhood concept also includes some guidelines for property development, e. g. how owners can come together to design cooperative property projects. In the process of developing the neighbourhood concept, a close network of residents and property owners was created; this neighbourliness was an important basis for further discussion.

So art is also a vehicle to promote social participation and democratic participation in the design of urban districts. Can you elaborate on that?

Viola Schulze Dieckhoff: I remember we did our first Street Art Festival in 2012, and afterwards Benjamin Davy wrote: 'Ms Schulze Dieckhoff, you have created such a great 'Gemeinsamhaben' ['having together']!' And that was exactly what we created back then. There were no economic interests, we were fresh graduates, financing ourselves with small jobs, and we had a big network. So we could put a lot of voluntary work into a vision, by saying that we would like to paint in the neighbourhood, also together with the local residents. We financed that festival with far less than 30,000 euros and created over 5000 m² of wall designs. That was a process of exchange. We didn't have much, but we were able to give something artistically – the design of the facades, the use of urban space. We traded this with local companies (e. g. providers of lifting platforms), with the economic actors in the neighbourhood, and everyone gave what they could. We were then able to create a little world in its own right. It was precisely this democratic aspect that made it clear to me again that art can be used in different ways. Art is used

or even instrumentalised in representative democracy in order to integrate and involve different parts of society, so rather to initiate somewhat controlled creative processes that can also be useful for planning. But there is a more anarchistic form of art, like uninvited contributions to spatial design – e. g. through graffiti or street art, which is often very critical of growth. The beginnings of the Street Art Festival had a lot to do with self-empowerment, this joint creation in the neighbourhood and the awareness that I can and want to help shape my city. Back then, we also used the facades to shake things up. A small civic initiative was quickly formed, and they didn't like our pictures much and emphasised that the local problems had more to do with cleanliness and safety on the streets. And so there was a second group, and the pluralism of opinion in the city also became publicly visible.

So you managed to mobilise a lot of local people. How did the planning authorities react to this?

Hendryk von Busse: In the case of the 'Freiraumgalerie', it was indeed initially the case that the urban planning authorities tried to prevent it because the word 'graffiti' was used far too often rather than the term 'murals in participatory urban design'. Because of the negative association of 'graffiti', there was concern at the time that the image of the neighbourhood would deteriorate further – become even more stigmatised.

Viola Schulze Dieckhoff: In addition, at that time all activities were being directed towards Halle city centre, and the east of Halle was more or less written off. Efforts were supposed to be concentrated elsewhere.

Hendryk von Busse: Back then, the city had no development concept for the district. Accordingly, there were no plans that our plans maybe *didn't* fit in with, which is often a way of legitimising the prohibition of other plans. The city's failure to tackle the neighbourhood therefore left it basically unable to act.

So when we arrived with our approach, there was at first a certain amount of tolerance. The neighbourhood developed very well and also grew strongly. Many houses were renovated, many people moved in, more citizens became actively involved in the area. The city also noticed this and came under pressure because things quickly became embarrassing – as the neighbourhood

became more visible so too did the city's failure to act and this was also discussed by the media. I think this is why attitudes changed in Halle's urban planning, so there was a willingness to say that we're now going to do something special, not simply designate a redevelopment area and not simply hire a classic urban planning office to produce a development concept. Now we'll take the step of trying a civic neighbourhood concept in order to test public participation as a maxim and also to learn from it. This laboratory, which we had initiated, could then be continued in this way.

What would you like to see in the planning from the point of view of the creatives and artists?

Viola Schulze Dieckhoff: What planners from the administration keep telling me behind closed doors is that if they wanted to do something different, it would be overturned by the city council, if not before. They're always at the mercy of the political process and the city council decisions. I believe that planning could or should act differently and contribute more to the political opinion-forming process. In my opinion, the professional field of planning should not only include consensus building, but should also communicate more facts, bringing out what actually needs to be done in the city and thus fuelling the discourse. With a vigilant urban society, there would then be more opportunities for progressive city council decisions to be made. And art and artistic creation are also good starting points so planners can see that it's necessary to promote places of creation more, because art is an essential building block of democracy, important for democratic negotiation.

We've often discussed the idea of the 'Bannwald' [protected area of woodland], that is, an area where you leave things so that something new can naturally develop. Transferring something like this to the city could mean creating a kind of 'cultural conservation area' and introducing a corresponding land-use category into formal planning, at the regional and municipal levels. Land could also be set aside as commons and for the community economy. Planners could become opinion leaders in a negotiation process.

If you were awarded an unconditional grant for an art project related to post-growth and space, funding you for a year and providing all the resources you needed, what kind of project would you be most excited about?

Viola Schulze Dieckhoff: I'd be particularly interested in a project on the very current issue of 'climate adaptation and mobility'. I'd find it very interesting to make the analyses and plans we've discussed visible in urban space. Which areas will particularly heat up, where there's a danger of flooding, etc. – and to present this artistically, perhaps with street markings, but also to use formats of exchange with the public to inform and reflect on the issues and to collect people's impressions. And this is linked to the question of how a change in mobility can be promoted. My creative place, the one that I'd then like to have, would be a mobile container unit in a car park, symbolising that every parking space we provide free of charge could alternatively be a place of productive creation that generates value for society. From my office in this car park, numerous artistic projects should then emerge that serve to pass on knowledge and trigger discussion.

Do you see a general tendency for art to be increasingly recognised by planning, politics and science as an important element in the social debate about space?

Hendryk von Busse: Initially, I'm inclined to say yes, people are interested and the role of art is recognised. By the way, I also think that all forms of growth criticism have become socially acceptable and can be found in journalistic opinion pieces of all political persuasions. But actually, I think that overall the answer is rather no, because only 'good' art is recognised and promoted. Street art, unwanted graffiti and tags, on the other hand, are considered defacements. There are standardisations and designations for them that are really below the belt. We need to ask which art is wanted and recognised as engaging with space. My feeling is: the current discussions further emphasise the value of beauty and thus narrow understandings of art.