Site visits

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In essence, site visits are conscious observations of the built environment. This method is used to gain insight into a place by means of *direct physical analysis*. This article primarily concentrates on an approach used in spatial planning disciplines—however, the site visit method is relevant for anyone who would like to obtain a better understanding of the built environment. The *built environment* constitutes the focus of the observation, although interactions between humans and non-humans (plants, animals, or weather) are also taken into account. In order to comprehend all these facets of space, it is advisable to incorporate perspectives, methods, and tools from other disciplines—such as ethnography, biology, or botanics—into the site visits. However, since the built environment directly influences most human and non-human interactions—as their context and product—the planning perspective offers just as much inspiration for other disciplines. Importantly, site visits can serve to gather important information about "more than just" buildings: For example, a brief glance at doorbells can tell you a lot about the migrant background of the residents.

To start with, it is important to describe the difference and the correlation between site *visits* and site *analysis*. In urban design and urban planning, site *visits* are part of the larger site *analysis*, which in turn is usually an integral component of the design process. There is a diverse range of site *analysis* methods: map and document analysis (statistic data, planning documents, satellite images, and much more), interviews, media analysis, etc.—many of which are described in detail in this handbook. Site *visits* are methods used within the site *analysis* that are based on experiencing the site directly with your *own* body. This can be used as a data collection method for missing or obsolete data about a site. But what is even more important in this regard is that the direct confrontation with the site by means of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and experiencing it—accompanied by the constant, deliberate questioning of the observations—represents a source of unique knowledge and learning about the built environment: knowledge that would otherwise be difficult if not impossible to obtain.

"[T]he context and site determine the methods and tools, and on the whole, how and when the study should be conducted" (Gehl/Svarre 2013: 11). Accordingly, the approaches for site visits are quite diverse. Therefore, this article does not offer a systematic overview of the concrete techniques or instructions for an individual method. Instead, it is in-

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tended to serve as a guide for the different points of view that can be applied when designing site visits with regard to the envisioned research and design objectives. Furthermore, the text contains many references to concrete techniques that are meant as inspiration for designing a detailed site visit.

1 Problem-oriented site visit and analysis

Every site, even the smallest, consists of virtually limitless parts. However, our time and resources are limited. Therefore, it is necessary to narrow down the scope of the investigation by clearly defining the objective of the site visit. Thus, the scope is "reduced from the start to the key aspects for resolving the problem in question, aspiring for a problem-oriented inventory survey" (Curdes 1995: 47, own translation).

Simply put, if the objective is to build a dense housing complex, the planners will be less interested in the flora on site as it will usually be removed in any case. However, the existing flora could play an important role for planning a playground in order to integrate it into the design. Nevertheless, many trees are cut down for new playgrounds, and some housing complexes are built carefully around existing trees. This illustrates that the definition of the *problem* and thus the scope and focus of the site visit are part of the design.

Recognizing that these design decisions are not preordained or set in stone is imperative:

> In the case of complex relationships, the chosen methodology—for selecting and analyzing the contents—depends on the educational background, experience, and personal views of the researchers. In addition, advances in expert discussions lead to changes in the study objectives and methods. Although the results are partly determined by reality in the sense that key problem areas can rarely be ignored, the view of the problem strongly influences how individual studies are conducted, how they are differentiated from one another, and to what end. (Curdes 1995: 44, own translation)

This logic also defines the spatial scope of site visits. The central area of the design or research space should be studied thoroughly, but exploring neighboring areas (albeit in less detail) can also provide relevant knowledge. It is not unusual for the design to take these areas into account and consequently to expand the actual site of the intervention.

By the same token, the knowledge acquired during the site visit should be allowed to influence the changing view of the problem. A fruitful site visit is dialectical: The defined problem determines the direction, but it is also changed based on the newly acquired findings from the site visit, which in turn impacts the design of the site visit. Therefore, if you hope to reap the rewards of the site visit method in full, the site must be taken seriously instead of only being recognized selectively and instrumentalized for predefined objectives.

This serious consideration of the context, instead of simply changing it radically, plays an increasingly important role in the current socio-ecological crisis. Many projects in the publication *Critical Care: Architecture for a Broken Planet* (Krasny/Fitz 2019) illustrate

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the key role played by places in sustainable spatial transformations. Another project, *Never-never School: Mapping the In-between* (Grešáková et al. 2020), also demonstrates that site visits can serve as important catalysts for ideas about cautious urban development that would otherwise be inconceivable. Thus, the challenge with site visits is keeping the discussion with the site alive: keeping an eye on the research and design problem, while at the same time being open to changes.

2 Site elements and the site as a whole

By being present at a site, we experience it intuitively as a coherent *whole* that consists of countless different *elements* and *aspects*. The latter clearly shape the former. At the same time, the whole also influences our perception, our interpretation, and thus our understanding of the parts. After all, the *overall image/atmosphere/genius loci* of the site possesses a unique quality that is more than the sum of its parts. Hence, every site visit must fluctuate between these two poles—the whole and the parts—understanding one by means of the other (for more details, see Pelger et al. in this handbook).

2.1 Individual elements and references to them

"One could extend this list of observable physical indicators almost indefinitely" (Jacobs 1985: 79). Such a list is therefore more an important source of inspiration than an exhaustive overview. A comprehensive list can be found in Gerhard Curdes's book *Stadtstrukturelles Entwerfen* (1995, English: *Structural Urban Design*) (see Fig. 1) or in Allan Jacobs's book *Looking at Cities* (1985). But also less extensive lists, such as those in *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch (1960: Paths, Edges, Districts, Nodes, Landmarks, can be used as an analytical prism for exploring the built environment. When studying individual buildings, other more detailed lists can be consulted, such as *Elements of Architecture* (Koolhaas 2018). It is important to keep in mind that the elements in these lists can and should be observed visually, as well as smelled, heard, and experienced tactilely.

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Aspects of the urban space and urban structure analysis

- Ground
- Topographic elements
- Climate
- Landscape
- Land use: Large-scale/use in buildings/in public space/in open space
- Environmental impact
- Morphology: Positive structure (built spaces) / negative structure (unbuilt spaces) / connecting elements
- Urban and settlement setting: Macro-quality (visual orientation) / micro-quality (features of public spaces)
- Infrastructure
- People: Quantitative and qualitative aspects/social spatial usage

Fig. 1: Aspects of the urban space and urban structure analysis. List by Curdes (1995: 48, own translation) as possible checklist for site visits (see ibid. for more details).

Each of these aspects can be analyzed *quantitatively* by means of *counting/measuring* (e.g., the number of bikes riding by or the width of the bike path) or *qualitatively* by means of *valuation* (e.g., the type of bikes or the condition of the bike path). According to Jacobs (1985), the meaning of some aspects, or the *clue* that they offer about a site, is obvious. The architectonic style of a district, for example, tells us when it was built. But other aspects can only provide reliable information if they are analyzed in relation to other aspects, *clues*, and *patterns* that they constitute. In this case, both the multisensory perception of the site and the general knowledge of the built environment and of the relevant site come into play. A construction site, for example, can be a clue for the prosperity of the area, but it can also be an indication of economic decline: Does it smell like fresh concrete or damp mold? Do we hear workers chattering, or do we see the vegetation taking over?

Knowledge about the built environment, in turn, enables us to recognize patterns and potential fractures. For example, it is possible to recognize imminent gentrification at a site if the pattern of a cheap shopping street is broken by a few new, expensive cafés. Such knowledge is acquired from practice, but it can also be gained by means of other site analysis methods. If, for example, we know from other sources that a certain area is full of nightlife and bars stay open until late into the night, we will not be as quick to mistake the many closed shutters in the afternoon for vacancy. This knowledge is especially important if we set foot in other cultural contexts. Closed shutters in Italy generally do not imply a lack of inhabitants but rather protection from the heat. However, prior research is helpful even for apparently familiar places. Not least because this research can show what information is already available about the site (e.g., extensive mapping of the trees) and thus does not have to be collected in detail on site. This can save valuable time for what matters.

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2.2 The whole as an atmosphere

All places possess a special coherent quality that is unique to them: the atmosphere. Therefore, some places are peaceful—or better yet, they feel peaceful—while others feel shabby and still others vibrant. The presence of large trees, trash, or people certainly contributes to the creation of a certain atmosphere or another. However, our own experiences, memories, and associations with what we observe also account for the atmosphere. For example, a park with graffiti and empty bottles can feel run-down for some and lively for others. Thus, atmosphere is also an interaction and interplay between observer and place: an "intermediate phenomenon" (according to Schmitz in Hasse 2012) that can be found in our interaction with the place. Consequently, the atmosphere can *only* be felt directly on site.

Atmosphere can best be characterized as an "envelope" or "medium" through which we experience the elements (Hasse 2012). Just as light makes it possible to perceive objects, we can only perceive the quality of these objects by means of observation:

> Atmospheres [are] in no way objects of perception. Instead, they define underlying conditions for the perception. In other words, we do not perceive an atmosphere, but rather we perceive *in accordance with* the atmosphere. (Thibaud 2003: 288, own translation, emphasis in original)

This makes it difficult to understand atmospheres or that which we perceive in cognitive terms.

In order to facilitate reflection on which parts of the environment constitute the atmosphere (and how), Hasse's non-exhaustive list of "agents of feeling" in *Atmosphären der Stadt* (English: *Atmospheres in the Urban World*) can serve as a starting point (Hasse 2012: 20 et seq.). Here, he defines the following segments of the whole: *Baukultur*, smells, light and shadow, sounds, air, rhythms and movement, looks and sights, the clothing and appearance of people, the presence of animals, and the presence of object families (ibid.). Although it is difficult to analyze atmospheres with precise methods, we perceive them—deliberately or not—merely by virtue of our presence in the space. It is then a question of practice to direct our attention and reflect on what we perceive in order to explicate the implicit knowledge we acquire in doing so. The act of communicating atmospheres also escapes simple rationalization; instead, artistic tools are a much more effective approach, as discussed later in this article.

2.3 Places change

The streets that are empty during the summer break can be extremely full and loud on afternoons when school is in session. During the warm months, parks are noisy and vibrant, but they become dark and gloomy when it is raining. And a shopping street can appear deserted during the hour of prayer. These invisible temporal aspects, which are often connected to certain cultural conditions, have a strong influence on the presence of elements and atmospheres that can be observed, and especially on the conclusions drawn from the observations. Furthermore, some aspects of the place appear and disappear as

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a result of changing environmental conditions, such as light, precipitation, or wind. On wet days, smells are more distinct, but the wind can blow them away or bring others from far away. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the different possible conditions at the study site and to visit the site multiple times. The observation conditions should be noted in detail in order to allow for better reflection later on.

3 Methodological approaches and tools

The explications above indicate *what* and in part *how* to observe. Therefore, the following section will build on the preceding methodological considerations and concentrate on how to interact with the site by using the most important research tool available: your own body.

3.1 Systematic or exploratory

Instead of following a systematic approach—for example, creating and working through checklists—we can simply venture out and allow ourselves to be guided by encounters and curiosity. This approach can be traced back to the flâneurs of the 19th century. The term was coined by Walter Benjamin, who described himself as a flâneur: "[The flâneur] searches for asylum in the crowd. […] The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city waves to the flâneur like a phantasmagoria." (Benjamin in Tiedemann 1991: 52, own translation). On their strolls through the metropolises of Berlin, Paris, or London, flâneurs did not rely on a strict methodology but rather on the curiosity from which their explorations originated. Such an exploratory approach was also praised by Allan Jacobs as a method for site visits:

> In urban diagnosis the observer looks for patterns, breaks in the patterns, and deviations from the norms. Perceiving new or foreign elements in a field, one asks why and how and what are the meanings? The similarity to detective work may lie in openness to seeing relationships and in a questioning way of thinking. (Jacobs 1985: 83)

The guiding detective questions play a similarly structuring role in exploratory site visits, just as the problem definition discussed above. The flâneur methodology was developed further by *Situationist International* in the middle of the 20th century in response to the modernistic capitalist development of the city. Using methods such as *détournement* or *dérive*, which are based on play, chance, and alternative perspectives, the situationists hoped to break away from the traditional patterns of perception and action. In the case of *shadowing*, for example, which involved following someone, it was the route of the person being followed and not that of the observer that determined how the city was explored. These methods have been developed further and appropriated since then, becoming accepted research and participation methods. For instance, *shadowing* appears in sociology as the *go-along* method. Even the science of strolling or promenadology, developed by Lucius Burckhardt, was inspired by the traditions described above, proposing a theoretical approach for a playfully reflective means of exploring the city by walking through it con-

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sciously (Burckhardt 2011). Walks have since been used as a research method in different forms and are used today primarily in participatory processes, where they are refined based on the defined topics and research questions.

Hence, exploratory approaches are structured according to the rules of the study, the personal interest of the researchers, or the topics outlined in the problem definitions, while structured checklists are revised when we discover something unexpected during our encounters with the site. Exploratory approaches are generally more fun, but observers require a certain degree of expertise and pronounced sensitivity in order to understand what they perceive. In contrast, although strictly structured site visits might seem boring, they make it possible to understand what is observed more easily. All site visits can be classified along a spectrum ranging from structured to exploratory, although the extreme ends are rarely, if ever, reached.

3.2 Observing or interacting

In most of the approaches discussed above, the role of the observers is not participatory. They should act like a "fly on the wall" (Gehl/Svarre 2013: 5) and fade into the crowd in order to avoid disturbing the site with their own presence. However, if we acquire knowledge about a site chiefly by means of active engagement with it, then participatory observations and even targeted interventions can be considered relevant approaches.

Fig. 2: Site visit as a collective walk to discuss new planning (top left); intervention at the schoolyard: can it serve as a public place? (bottom left); performative mapping to become one with the site (right). | © Photos: Dávid Hanko, 2018 (top left), Lukáš Katriňák, 2016 (bottom left), Diana Lucas Drogan, 2019 (right)

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This can involve somewhat ephemeral performances with your own body (e.g., the events organized by *Situationist International* mentioned above) or even permanent physical interventions. This technique is often used as part of tactical urbanism, where interventions are utilized to study spatial changes (Lydon et al. 2015). Installing a parklet (a piece of street furniture that replaces a parking lot) or closing off an entire street for neighborhood activities are two of the most common examples. If these interventions are accompanied by systematic data collection, they can generate valuable knowledge about the site.

3.3 Using the body as a research tool

The main tool used by observers during the site visit is their own body. They perceive the environment with their physical senses, while experiencing it consciously and unconsciously at the same time. Therefore, subjectivity emerges not only in their interpretations but also in their perceptions. In order to better understand and minimize potential distortions resulting from this "tool" and thus the site visit method, it is essential to be aware of the different ways in which the body communicates. Therefore, it is crucial for us to pay attention to the diverse range of perceptions and at the same time to follow them back to their origin. Because we are shaped by a visual culture, we tend to pay a great deal of attention to what we see, while the other aspects fade into the background. However, sites are multisensory. As such, conscious observation entails reflection on not only our interpretation of the perceived but also on what we perceive and what we omit. Consequently, we should strive to diversify our perceptions completely by directing our attention to what we hear, smell, taste, and touch as well.

The physicality of the body both facilitates and restricts the experience of the observer. Maybe I am nearsighted or my hearing is temporarily impaired due to a cold, maybe I am too cold or too tired to really perceive the environment. Some of the faculties can be improved by technology: for example, with the help of glasses or a tally counter, which can help count large numbers of bicycles riding by. But serious restrictions must be accepted, and the site visit must be designed accordingly. An honest answer to the question "how long/far can I actually walk" cannot be omitted when planning a site visit. Furthermore, our mood influences our observations. When we are happy, we draw an optimistic picture of an area, while irritating factors tend to come to the fore when we are stressed. Therefore, as with the conditions of the site, which change over time, the changing conditions of the body should be taken into account in order to better categorize the observations.

However, the feelings are only *our personal* point of view. This subjectivity of the experience can impair our understanding of the perspectives of other spatial users. As a result, many spatial aspects, along with the users themselves, are not taken into consideration in planning and research projects. Nevertheless, we can and should look beyond the limits of our unique experience. The methods mentioned above, such as *shadowing*, collective strolling, or *dérive*, are one possibility. We can also directly alter our own physical experience of space and put ourselves in "someone else's shoes," at least in part, by blindfolding ourselves or simulating the spatial experience of different populations with a wheelchair or stroller.

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Whether it is our body or the body of others, site visits usually focus on human experiences. But our world is more than just human. Therefore, the perspectives of non-human actors should also be taken into account. As illustrated by the current global crisis, it is dangerous for everyone if we neglect these actors. Incorporating non-human perspectives would be the first step toward transcending the anthropocentric viewpoint of our built environment, our cities, and the world in general. The field of spatial research that studies more-than-human actors is relatively young and is still in an experimental stage. But initial approaches, such as those presented in the anthology *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds* (Bastian et al. 2016), could serve as a useful starting point for exploring new methods, techniques, and sensibilities—including for site visits.

4 Documenting the site

Scientific observations and experiences of the site must be accompanied by documentation, regardless of how incomplete. Places are multisensory and multidimensional. The manner in which the observed experiences and data are recorded and presented should reflect this in order to better understand the unique characteristics of the site.

4.1 Recordings

A camera, audio recorder (both of which are integrated into smartphones these days), and a notepad are good basic equipment for a site visit. However, the field of available media is enormous. Each medium measures in its abstraction a different facet of the site, which is why a wide range of media is beneficial. This does *not* mean that every aspect has to be documented in the "format" in which it was experienced: Sound can be recorded using an audio recorder, drawn as a map, or captured in gestures. The considerations mentioned above regarding conscious observations apply here, too: Do I draw an individual element (which characteristics of it?), a pattern, or the entire atmosphere? Thus, the recording process is also a moment of analysis and interpretation. The media used will change accordingly. Do I try to record the entire soundscape, or should I concentrate on a certain sound or a group of sounds and categorize them already during the recording? In addition, skills and experience in the use of different media are important. Each medium has its own technical requirements, which must be taken into account in order to capture the aspects of the site as precisely as possible.

Regardless of the medium, the documentation should take place directly on site in order to record the perception created by the direct experiences better. Obviously it is not possible to record the sounds of a place if you are not on site. However, it is just as difficult to find the right words if we search for them only in our thoughts. Moreover, documentation directly on site makes it easier to mark the exact spatial position of different elements, which is important for documenting the three-dimensionality of the place. Nevertheless, observations and experiences should be separated from the documentation and should ideally not take place in parallel. There should be enough room to experience the site and then subsequently to record it.

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In urban design and urban planning, the methods for recording a place are typically visually based and concentrate on three-dimensionality, which is inevitably reduced to the two-dimensional level of a piece of paper or computer screen in the documentation process. A wide array of approaches have been developed in the spatial disciplines to carry out this abstraction process. Handbooks such as the one written by Ching (2003) offer good advice.

Artistic techniques also play an important role in terms of recording places and their qualities. For example, Hasse writes in *Atmosphären der Stadt* (English: *Atmospheres in the Urban World*):

> Communication about atmospheres (using language, as well as gestures, facial expressions, painting, sculpture, music, and architecture) takes place in a special way by means of synesthetic qualities that connect the feeling "produced" by an atmosphere with complementary symbolic meanings. […] Poets and writers "preserve" their impressions, ideas, and fantasies for posterity with metaphoric or synesthetic "precision." In contrast, the language of public authorities, administrative experts, and civil engineers who build the modern city is vastly neutralized in terms of the emotional qualities related to space. (Hasse 2012: 12, 56 et seq., own translation)

Across time and cultures, there are countless portraits of cities, villages, and landscapes that can serve as infinite inspiration for documentation and communication. But we do not have to be Perec (see, for example, his *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, 2010) to apply artistic methods, as demonstrated by the project carried about by B.A. students of urban and regional planning (Fig. 3, Million et al. 2019).

Fig. 3: Atmosphere of a place represented by a haiku and accompanying photo (Million et al. 2019: 6 et seq.). | ©Photo: Oskar Schmieg, 2018

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4.2 Synthesis

The recorded raw information, data, and experiences are often analyzed in synthesis with other information from the site *analysis* and combined to create a model of a site. This model can be created in any manner of shape (see Fig. 4). In planning practice, however, the model is generally created using maps and plans, accompanied by text, photos, and images. Representation by means of maps allows for easy orientation in the geometric space and practical comparability with other available data. Various analytical methods can be used to help create these maps: for example, the urban layer analysis (see Bentlin in this handbook) or the deficit-opportunity plan (Curdes 1995), where the strengths/weaknesses and opportunities/risks are mapped spatially, similar to a SWOT analysis (see Fig. 5).

Whether using a recognized methodology or intuitively, the process of constructing spatial representations as maps, plans, texts, collages, performances, or sculptures brings about a further abstraction of the site. As a result, the subjectivity of the defined problems discussed above comes to the fore yet again. In the end, such models are always simplified representations of reality. This also applies to digital formats, which make it possible to represent large volumes of data and their correlations, thus seemingly depicting reality perfectly. No abstraction can evade the decision-making process. Namely, the "model makers" are the ones who decide (consciously or unconsciously) what will be part of this model and thus counts as reality and what remains unseen.

Fig. 4: Multidimensional representation of a place. Excerpt from the findings of a summer school course on the topic of site visits (full version in Grešáková et al. 2020). | ©Photo: Poppy Illsley, 2019

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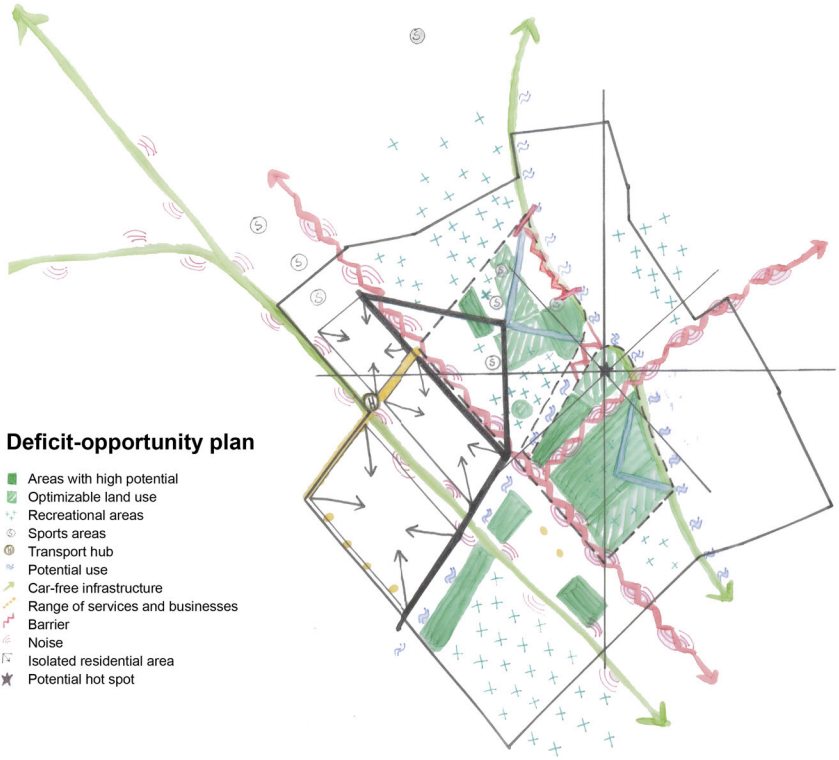

Fig. 5: Deficit-opportunity plan | ©Lukas Athmer, Svende Nitsch, and Elena Rhode, 2018/2019, own translation

Reflections from critical cartography on the power of maps (applicable to other formats as well) are useful in this regard (see Kollektiv Orangotango 2019). After all, the models then serve as the basis and above all the justification for future steps in terms of research, transformation processes, and political action.

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Fig. 6: Critical map Eigentum und Alltag in der Oranienstraße (English: Property and Everyday Life on Oranienstraße) shows the consequences of privatization for the businesses in the neighborhood (nGbK 2019: 16f.). | ©Stefan Endewardt, Dagmar Pelger, Franziska Bittner, and Nija-Maria Linke

5 Using site visits to establish a relationship with a place

Although site visits are anchored in reality, they are subjective interactions with a place. This subjectivity must be recognized and treated accordingly. "Ensuring completeness, accepted data and methods, and consensus among researchers and participants can mitigate this dilemma, but ultimately cannot solve it objectively" (Curdes 1995: 44, own translation). The demand for objectivity can also be met by means of the plurality of approaches mentioned above, although the specific positionality of the observes must always be recognized and reflected. This approach can be found in Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988).

Site visits enable us to learn a great deal about the built world and to acquire and explain unique implicit knowledge. Furthermore, we can develop a certain sensibility for a place and its many elements and aspects thanks to the time we spend with the place and the attention we devote to it. As Allan Jacobs puts it:

> In the end, the whole process of looking, questioning, trying to gain understanding makes a person a more intimate, respectful part of any environment and therefore more likely to be caring of it. That is the basis for good planning and beneficial action. (Jacobs 1985: 141)

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