

Unplanning the City (Polylemma)

Markus Bader

I am co-founder of Raumlabor. We are a group of nine architects, working across the fields of architecture, urban design, art, and theater. »Doing things together« was always part of our working structure. We have worked a lot in public urban spaces, producing and co-producing prototypical situations for something that we could call urban transformation. We believe we need to work on a common understanding of the city. The city is not unchangeable like weather, and humans cannot be passive recipients of an existing status quo. We, as Raumlabor, consider ourselves co-producers of this big, complex entity that is the city. Because of that, we need to acknowledge that urban processes tend to take a long time, but by acting in an urban environment we can become co-producers of what we call the city. We conceive of the city as a place of diversity, where different ideas and modes of living coexist. We believe that the culture of living this diversity is a great value within the urban. We are working for an understanding that public space can be a place where we cross the boundaries of our invisible bubbles and echo-chambers; a place where we encounter the other, exercising our practice of

mutual tolerance, acceptance, and understanding as practices of life in diversity. With this perspective, the public sphere could be a place for negotiation or struggle, but also a training ground for living together in this world. As I speak from a perspective of a practitioner, I decided to bring three examples from our work: (1) the framework for actions; (2) the form of a conversation; (3) a proposal. I show these examples not with the intention to say »this is the way we should do it,« but as an attempt to inhabit something that we call the future. ¹ is a literal, self-referential take on the idea of inhabiting the future: you simply construct the word future, in large letters, and put them up, so you can literally inhabit the future. If it only was that simple, the way forward would be easy. Cities, however, are more complex than that.

The first example of our work is Berlin's recreational park and former airfield, Tempelhofer Feld. We were involved in designing a process. The area is located quite centrally in Berlin, next to Volkspark Hasenheide and Schillerkiez in Neukölln. Tempelhofer Park is a fantastic, enormous place with vast open spaces and a huge building. In late 2006, the Department of Urban Development was in a difficult situation, as they had no answer to the very simple question, »What should we do with this piece of public infrastructure once we stop using it as an airport?« This can be best illustrated with numbers:

¹



There are about 382ha of land, and 300.000m of building within central Berlin's perimeter of the S-Bahn. It is an enormous resource to redistribute, to renegotiate, to bring back into common urban use. Since it is public property, it should be used for a common purpose, as a commons, or Gemeingut as we call it in German.

But here, we face political difficulties, because the answer to the simple question of what we should do with the former airport, is not simple at all. A public call for ideas and an online participation process was a first attempt to share the responsibility in trying to give an answer to that question. A lot of ideas were produced, collected, catalogued, listed, evaluated, and voted for. Most of the people who participated voted for designing a lake, which we included in our drafts. We produced a slightly polemic image, featuring a lot of the ideas projected onto the airfield. It represents a collective image of possibilities, but we all know that reality is the very opposite. Berlin was bankrupt at that time, and forced to sell off its properties, not being able to afford any of the great desired changes of the public call for ideas. Instead, there were only very small interventions: A new skate park was built, and the old baseball fields left behind by the American forces after World War II were reintroduced. The large-scale decisions, however, were not to be taken with the participation of civic society but instead delegated to top-down expert-exclusive processes – in this case a competition for the park redesign. An open call for participation can turn out to be problematic at times. The residents might expect the ideas they articulate to be fulfilled by the city's administration: they are in power, after all, and should be in a position to fulfil these dreams. If expectations are not met, frustration grows. Misunderstandings like this can only be avoided through very precise and careful communication strategies, being open about the scale of the possible investment and the degree of power being shared.

In this context, Raumlabor together with Klaus Overmeyer of Studio Urban Catalyst and Michael Braum & Partner started working with what we identified as a time gap between the existing definition of the place as an airport

and the future role of the field as part of the city. Designing the transition process became our objective, using a method devised by Jeroen Saris an urban planner based in Amsterdam. Saris developed *The Strategy of the Venetian Bridge*, which basically describes an inductive process of divergence and convergence for creating urban ideas. He proposes a time of five years to create openness, stimulate ideas, find programs, support diversity, act temporarily, and to test plans. Only then one should start to decide which way to go, to condense, consolidate, determine and start investing. Planning usually works very differently: Urban planning mostly follows an already determined approach. Like a master plan, the future is clearly defined. The drawbacks of this strategy come to light when it occasions immediate rearrangements and adjustments to the initial plans. To accommodate local learning in the process of designing the city, we developed a new planning tool, called the »Dynamic Master Plan«. We understand the plan to be a very powerful tool to talk about futures. We try to open it up by introducing multiple layers, which can be changed over time while maintaining their basic relation to each other. In this way the Dynamic Master Plan could be a tool for collecting knowledge and projecting a future at the same time. We also produced process plans in order to project useful consecutive actions and talk about the implementation of an urban transformation within a reasonable time frame. These techniques were used to describe the appropriation process of Tempelhofer Park as based on the actual activities that occur in this space. Public space is not just there when you open a fence or lock, it grows through the interpretations and actions of the people using it.

This plan [2](#) shows the areas for pioneering uses of this space, and while it is not very pleasing aesthetically it is of key importance strategically as it was the foundation of the agreement reached between Raumlabor as the proposing party, the administration and the politicians. »Pioneer Users« are people bringing ideas, time, and maybe even money to a place – as laid out in *The Strategy of the Venetian Bridge*. In Tempelhof, it was about giving away land for free to people to just do what they want. The precondition was that

the park should be available to the general public, and that, in turn, the public should try to contribute an interpretation of this open field as a public park: a paradigmatic change to ›unplanning‹ the city, to open the definition of a collective urban future to experimentation and experience in use. With the activities inscribed into it, a park is more than a bench, a field of grass, and a little path to walk on. A park confronts us with a far more diverse spatial experience. This process is not determined towards predictable results per se.

Then, however, a conflict arose: After our expertise was handed in and the airport use was stopped, the fence remained closed and the future of the site seemed unclear. The mood in the city took an unhappy, discontented turn, and in June 2009 an initiative called for squatting the airport, a year after its closure. This kind of thinking solely in black-and-white terms is very typical of Berlin. Its citizens and the people who are using the city, making the city, are seen as aggressors, strange people intent on committing crimes and doing illegal things, when in fact they only want to use their own space. The claim »It's a public property, so why can't we use it?« was the watchword of the day then. In May 2010 the fence and the park were finally opened to the public, and people immediately realized the enormous potential of this space. Finally, the pioneer process was kicked off, too, and I liked that



very much indeed: People started to do all the things that they had wanted to do. Urban gardening became very popular and prominent. There is the Allmendekontor, which is not only a project about gardening, but about bringing people together. Approximately eight to nine hundred people from the neighborhood united in a frame of a social condenser which produces this super-non-standard, heterogeneous surface as a public place of gathering, of interpretation, open to everyone else in the city.

The second example in this text is the Urban School. It is a project that is not primarily physical but that really invests its time in creating a conversation. The project is a response to an invitation by Urbane Künste Ruhr, to work within the on-going transformation of the Ruhrgebiet (Ruhr Valley area, the historic industrial core of the country). We decided to introduce it in the context of a school as an existing protocol that invites people to join the conversation about urban transformation in order to propose a school of urban practice. Our goal was to bring people together throughout Europe with practitioners active in the field between art, theatre, performance and urban planning, a field we like to identify as urban practice. ³

We (Raumlabor) started with a series of research trips to Paris, Marseille, Liverpool, and Athens. We explored the diverse local conditions and interviewed practitioners responding to these contexts about their strategies and experience. In the second half of the year, we located the urban school in the city center of Witten (Ruhrgebiet), opening our shop school, in an empty retail space in a dying part of the pedestrian zone. A central question of urban transformation in the Ruhrgebiet became immediately tangible: if retail is not the future, as today everybody goes shopping in malls or does shopping online, what then is our vision for the inner city? Next to building a discourse, the Urban School encouraged a discovery of ideas and testing some of them. A hot bench created by artist Valentina Karga was placed in the center of the public sphere, right where people pass by and can get in touch with this strange way of thinking about the city, questioning urban conditions. By becoming part of the construction of this intervention, people



3

4



can cross the boundaries from being a consumer of the city, to becoming people who talk about transformation, maybe starting to imagine themselves also as contributors.

The third project is placed in Montréal. It is a little pavilion placed right in the center of the city, dealing with the resource water. The pavilion, Fountain House ^[4], collects drinking water in a small basin and has a string of nozzles that create a thin water cloud in its heart, keeping the water continuously running and perpetually producing a subtle, rippling sound. The proposal here is: »What if we reshape or create completely new ends to our public infrastructure?« Fountain House can be seen as celebration of the public good of the clean drinking water which we all use every day. This running water tap raises questions: »Isn't this fantastic that we all have these infrastructures? How do we value them?« This public installation creates a friendly, warm and welcoming common room where people can take in the atmosphere, pause for a moment in time, breathe freely and be by themselves. It is right in the heart of the pedestrian zone, so that people might feel themselves directly becoming a part of the city, with fewer challenges and more mutual respect and acceptance. Are not these the core values of what a public space is about? A place to be human, a place to co-exist, and to view and encounter the other as a person next to me in all his or her difference and uniqueness? In conclusion, we can refer back to the title of this essay, the idea of Polylemma. We understand cities to be complex structures. They are formed by our collective actions and through these cities are turned into procedural entities. As these complexities just cannot be fully pictured, all professional modes of city-making and urban planning are currently using fragmented perspectives with preconceived priorities. With this text and the examples provided I suggest a strategic shift from deterministic planning to a navigational and explorative approach, understanding both the profession and the city as a field to be navigated rather than controlled and determined. To get there, we need to »unlearn« some of our professional protocols, and learn how to bridge differences, and build trust between people. This begins with a good conversation.