

The role of interstitial spaces in the growing urban region of Hamburg

*An interview with Michael Ziehl, conducted by Mai Anh Ha, Meret Batke
and Bastian Lange*

‘Urban upcycling’ is involved in various projects that contribute towards the sustainable transformation of cities. Such projects include the promotion of social innovations, new forms of cooperation and implementation processes. They are user-driven and therefore suitable for contributing to the common good.

www.urban-upcycling.de

What does urban upcycling mean to you?

Michael Ziehl: For me, urban upcycling is a practice in which I focus primarily on two resources: first, on the built fabric where instead of demolition and new builds it is more about the conversion and repurposing of existing buildings; second, on locally embedded networks in the neighbourhood and communities of users, for instance, artists, makers and activists. In many cases, these networks need to be developed or at least strengthened. Overall, I guide and support such user-driven project development for existing buildings.

What is special about the activation of brownfields or interstitial spaces?

Michael Ziehl: From a spatial theory perspective, this is not about space as a container but rather about social processes. I act primarily as an advisor and intermediary between the various actors that are relevant for user-driven development processes. These actors normally include the users themselves but also political and administrative stakeholders, investors and residents.

Would you describe yourself as a kind of initiator of such developments?

Michael Ziehl: When I first started working in this field, then I initiated these sorts of developments myself. In the meanwhile my activities have shifted somewhat. These days, I initiate fewer concrete projects but focus rather on platforms or agencies like 'urban upcycling' that support user-driven developments.

How do agencies and initiatives of this sort operate?

Michael Ziehl: Every project's different of course, but there are still parallels between them. Normally a relatively loosely knit network or fixed group of people have a specific place in mind where they want to implement something.

What sort of places are these?

Michael Ziehl: Often they're buildings that are empty and are meant to be developed. My clients feel the need to have at least some input into these developments or to develop the entire property in line with their own ideas. This means that guidance is needed in many areas.

What does the advisory or intermediary service of the agencies and initiatives consist of?

Michael Ziehl: What is important here is the self-organisation, how a group can get organised so that it is able to act and how it maintains that ability. Often, the group lacks a legal form, or existing structures need to be professionalised. As urban development also always involves conflict about access to and the use of space, it may be important for such groups to gain a better negotiating position vis-à-vis other stakeholders. Later on, guidance about dealing with buildings and the authorities is required, especially in connection to building permits and use permits. Financing these projects is also a challenge. Public funding often plays a key role, but foundations and private investors who are concerned about sustainable urban development are also important. In many cases they're not seeking maximum returns but of course they don't wish to lose money either.

Can you name a concrete example here, also with regard to Hamburg?

Michael Ziehl: A good example is the 'Zählerwerk' ['Meter Works'] on the site of the former power station Bille in Hamburg-Hammerbrook. This is an on-going project that is just coming into being. The users first approached me because of construction and licensing issues regarding the utilisation of the 'Schaltzentrale' ['Control Centre']. Then an idea emerged about combining community-oriented uses with new forms of work in the much larger 'Zählerwerk' which is directly next door. At the moment, I'm working with the initiators on a development concept of this kind and on the specific objectives that they wish to achieve with it. In many cases, formulating a concrete strategy for implementation is one of my tasks. We're currently holding talks with political representatives, the city administration, the owners and the neighbours so that these stakeholders are involved at an early stage.

Who else is involved and contributes other expertise to the projects?

Michael Ziehl: For 'Zählerwerk' the Heritage Office is also important. For instance, they contribute technical expertise when it comes to types of renovation or conservation. As a rule, architects also play a central role, especially in planning and construction processes. During construction work, all sorts of building firms are naturally also involved. In addition, numerous authorities contribute their expertise. For my work, the urban development authorities are also relevant because the focus is often on areas in transition, urban development areas. I often also work with the 'Hamburg Kreativ Gesellschaft' ['Hamburg Creative Company']. They're owned by the city and have experience in supervising real estate projects. Even though they're primarily interested in promoting the creative economy, they can be an important intermediary between users and relevant stakeholders in politics and administration.

How does the practice of repurposing match to the context of the city of Hamburg, where the focus is on growth and expansion?

Michael Ziehl: The projects I'm involved in are of course always in the context of the growing city. I understand many of them as alternatives to an urban development that's largely dependent on growth, because they attempt to

find an alternative way of approaching urban growth and its consequences. At the heart of many of the user-driven projects is that the protagonists want to mitigate socially negative effects on the neighbourhood level, by creating public spaces with rather low rents and by trying not to encourage gentrification processes.

How can processes of urban upcycling contribute to a post-growth society?

Michael Ziehl: To become a post-growth society, in my opinion we actually also need growing economic sectors and areas of society. Areas must grow that are really sustainable and that contribute to the resilience of cities. In relation to urban development, what should not be promoted are rather practices that rely on demolition and new builds. So I think that user-driven projects in existing properties can contribute to realising alternatives to growth-focused and profit-oriented project development. Their impact on growth-oriented urban development is hard to evaluate, but I often observe that users who say, 'We want to do that ourselves, we want to take on more responsibility in urban development,' are motivated by exactly that, even if they wouldn't express it like that.

Is there an example in Hamburg where it was possible to conserve structures of this sort?

Michael Ziehl: It's not primarily about conservation but about development paths that offer an alternative to the logic of growth. Many contradictions arise here. That can be seen in the example of the 'Alte Bahnmeisterei' ['Old Railway Depot']. The building is in the 'Kreativquartier Oberhafen' ['Creative Quarter of Oberhafen'] and is part of the Hafencity [waterfront urban development area]. It's been repurposed and ateliers, collective workshops, a co-working space and a large club have been developed, all as interim uses. Of course, this creative quarter is part of the growing city of Hamburg and is intended to make it more attractive for creative talents from elsewhere, who often appreciate a tolerant environment. It's thus also a positive location factor for internationally active companies looking to locate in Hamburg. At the same time, the 'Alte Bahnmeisterei' is a place with low rents where people can risk experimenting – in this concrete case, for instance, by putting a great

deal of voluntary commitment into running a club there, which is seen by many as a rare creative space in Hamburg.

What contribution do projects like the creative quarter of Oberhafen make to Hamburg?

Michael Ziehl: I think that an important aspect is that these spaces are used to negotiate what kind of future urban development we want to have. In Oberhafen there have been, for instance, conflicts about how exclusive and expensive it should be allowed to become there. Should it be more of a productive place or primarily an event location? From my point of view, the users of the 'Alte Bahnmeisterei' make their presence felt positively in these debates. Whether they can actually be successful with their aims is another question.

Are there other challenges?

Michael Ziehl: Especially areas that are in transition often only make temporary contributions to urban development: interim uses that are then often displaced by more expensive, economically more conventional projects. Especially because of this, an important aspect of my work is to get away from just interim uses to projects that have long-term security and development prospects for users, e.g. through leasehold contracts or the purchase of property.

Are there successful examples of that in Hamburg?

Michael Ziehl: I view the area of Gängeviertel with its recently adopted 75-year leasehold contract as a very successful example. Another example is the Viktoria barracks which the users bought as the fux-cooperative and are now developing for the long term. In the immediate proximity of the 'Schaltzentrale' mentioned above, there is the flood basin area where the development process was initiated and managed by the 'Hamburg Kreativ Gesellschaft'. There at least it was possible to get 20-year contracts of use.

What opportunities do you see in these niches, abandoned or precarious spaces in relation to safeguarding urban space?

Michael Ziehl: The niches provide opportunities to try out models of alternative project development, which then must not remain restricted to the niche. Upscaling and outscaling definitely have to occur. Especially with the Gängeviertel there's a hard fight going on to ensure that it doesn't remain a one-off exception but is the opposite: a model project. The stakeholders involved in the 'Zählerwerk' also have this aim. My concern is to further develop the diverse user approaches to models that support other user-driven projects. That doesn't in any way mean that it should all be like, e.g. the Gängeviertel, because people's needs vary greatly. Fundamentally, for me it is about working with people locally and with the material potentials of places to circumspectly develop our cities. In my view, thinking about urban and neighbourhood development in this way is an important key for a post-growth society.