New Strategies for Materially Sensitive People

This brings us from the architectural and material qualities to the role of the persons involved. Like we did before, we move from an attentiveness for the material world to possible strategies we could implement to raise said attentiveness. However, in this chapter I do not want to bring in a theological perspective as a corrective to a philosophical discussion on materialism. Rather, I want theology to learn from the perspective of practitioners.

Not only architects have changed their approach to building and public space to allow for a networked world to come to its own right and thus included the wholeness of living. Designers and community organisers likewise have done so and therefore can become role models for a renewed pastoral practice and practical theology as a whole.

The Architect: Material and Social Self-Formation

From the way Willy Brandt understood politics as listening and trying to understand, we can detect the need to make planning more open and inclusive, which applies not only to politics but to architectural planning and its emphasis on the star architect as well. Modern planning approaches focus both on the public as an independent actor and on the material as an important factor. It is an architecture that strongly connects the network approach in materialism with social theory. The architect Walter Klasz is an architect who puts this approach into practice.

Klasz' development as an architect and his relation to both the material and the social might best be described in reference to his book *in-between* in which he reflects on his artist residency in New Zealand and on his principles for con-

struction. The title *in-between* suggests that Klasz seeks out spaces in between: he is interested, as his colleague Wittfrida Mitterer writes in the introduction, in the "dialogue between humans and space and between humans and nature" (Mitterer 2017, p. i); he practices architecture "between research and practice" (Kern 2017, p. vii), as Christian Kern writes in the same book; and he works with students in the "'inbetween-phase' in their lives", a time "determined by insecurity but also by openness" (Michl 2017, p. v), as Thomas Michl notes.

From an architecture-theoretical perspective, Wittfrida Mitterer places Klasz also in the in-between: between the schools of high-tech architecture of e.g. Norman Foster, bionic architecture of e.g. Frei Otto, and the "age of parametrical design" (Mitterer 2017, p. iv) with its use of digital tools and CNC-aided production. The result is an architecture that the artist Paul Woodruffe characterises as "capable of creating a bridge between the unconscious and the conscious" (Woodruffe 2017, p. xi).

In order to do that, Klasz has developed a strong sensibility for the material with which he builds. Woodruffe writes

> [...] the nature of a material is encouraged to show itself through the designer's hand. Walter creates forms that have deep roots within human necessity: to provide shelter, social space and a connection to place, but, most importantly, these forms impart a sense of wonder, and demonstrate a respect for the natural world (ibid., p. xi).

The architect Christian Kern characterises Klasz' work along the same lines.

> Walter listens to the material inherent behaviour, trying to find a sort of melody in the continuously changing form [...] His research vehicle is the scaled physical model [...] using his hands – feeling real physical forces and limits in the material (Kern 2017, p. vii).

How this approach turns out in practice is what I shall be concerned with here. I want to focus on three practices: working with scaled models, referencing vernacular architecture, and working socially with the need of humans – as social and relational beings – in mind. Klasz describes his approach to find new architectural forms as one coming from manual practice. Thus we find him working with scale models of wooden structures during his residency.

> I am a practising architect. It's a fundamental sensation to watch forms emerge and to actively take part in this process. I worked for six weeks in the wood barn without any distractions, just listening to the material inherent properties of wood (Klasz 2017, p. 40).

In these "iterative experimental form-finding" processes the architect experiments with differently bent and joined strips of wood. From one form to the next, Klasz further and further reduces the complexity of his design and the additional aids, such as cables, that hold the form in place. He is "trying to reduce active design work in order to let the form emerge on its own, believing strongly in self-organised form-finding" (ibid., p. 73).

Figure 26: Iterative experimental form finding, Walter Klasz (2017)

> Walter Klasz's experiments with iterative form finding are documented in the architect's online publication "*inbetween*" on pages 52-53.

The observer notices ever new forms emerging not from the addition of technical complications but from a further reduction of the inferences of the designer. In the experiments the attentiveness towards the material and its self-will is literally taking shape. They also connect to the work of Frei Otto, one of the pioneering architects of light structures. For his *Tanzbrunnen* pavilion for the *National Gardening Fare* of 1957, Frei Otto built a scale model of the structure's skeleton which he then dipped into a soap solution. The resulting soap membranes were the models for the tarpaulin membranes of the actual structure.

This working with the materials also bridges the gap between architecture as an art and as a craft. Danny Rowlandson refers to that as "knowledge which cannot be expressed as theory and can only be understood through experience" (ibid., p. 85) and links back to Heidegger's term "performative knowledge." Form finding through self-emergence and knowledge acquisition through experience are therefore closely linked.

The second aspect I want to highlight is Klasz' veneration for vernacular architecture. He includes both to the alpine architecture of his native country Austria and the Polynesian boat design of his host country New Zealand. Both architectures have in common that they use local materials, are designed with the needs of the users in mind, and "can be given up to nature when they don't work anymore" (Klasz 2017, p. 64).

Figure 27: Frei Otto: Tanzbrunnen (1957). From the "Werkarchiv Frei Otto" at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

> The bubble model of the "Tanzbrunnen" is featured in the 2020 exhibition catalogue "From Models, Media, and Methods. Frei Otto's Architectural Research" by the *Yale School of Architecture*.

Such an approach underlines the networked nature of architecture. Its materiality is rooted in nature – which is also allowed to take back what is no longer used – and its use is rooted in a user-centred social structure. The approach stems not just from a practical perspective but also regards the "huge emotional desire in our society to have a closer relationship to our environment again" (ibid., p. 64). Peter Zumthor showed a similar sensibility for natural materials, the integration of architecture in nature, and the human need to emotionally connect with the building – partly through its materiality. Christian de Groot aptly describes Walter Klasz when he works with his materials as also emotionally involved.

> I have got the feeling that you have had fun while experimenting in the wood barn. The emerging forms release a smile in our face. There is a difference between just being attracted by a shape and being moved by an aesthetical form in a deeper way (ibid., p. 79).

This joy of interacting with nature also makes the architect aware of his buildings' impact on nature. A lightweight design with both a small physical and carbon footprint is the result, such as in the project *A Cloud for Fresh Snow*, where a minimal-impact mountain shelter was constructed.

The third aspect I want to mention is the social dimension of the form finding process. Klasz himself teaches students, a practice to which his colleague, the academic advisor Hazel Redpath, refers in her pedagogical theory.

> I noticed that the beauty of your structures emerges when you set boundaries and then give freedom to the material; I would like to suggest that this might also be possible in an education setting, where the students interact with their environment – and the focus shifts, through "enabling constraints" to creating the conditions for emergence rather than managing for outcomes (ibid., p. 90).

Leaving the rooms of the university, Klasz' approach to form-finding can also be applied to the engagement with the community during planning and building processes. An example that goes beyond the mere gathering of ideas from a building's users during the design phase, is Klasz' project *Baetsch in the City*.

Figure 28: Walter Klasz and Paul Woodruffe: Baetsch in the City (2013)

> The hut built by Walter Klasz and Paul Woodruffe is documented on the architect's *website* in the article: "Ein Baech in Wien".

The architect had to delay the start of his residency in New Zealand, so he began, together with his project partner Paul Woodruffe, to transplant the experience of a Kiwi beach to the heart of Vienna. They chose a small park surrounded by streets, the Nietzscheplatz in Ottakring, as their project site where they constructed a structurally integer timber frame. Their idea was, as Woodruffe describes it in retrospective, "to get the ball rolling," hoping that local citizens would donate "old pieces of buildings and interior furniture" (Woodruffe 2013, p. 48) which would be attached to the substructure. The building thus was not constructed in its entirety in an architect's office but it would grow with the help from those who lived around it. Besides naturally attracting children, youth, as well as "drinkers from the edges of the park over" (ibid., p. 48), Klasz and his partner also held public meetings in which they would be "sitting in a circle on the new floor visualising what could be done with this space" (ibid., p. 48). The result was not just a building with a "warm wood interior with its books, chairs, donated paintings, odd glasses, cups and saucers, just like an old Kiwi bach [=beach; C.P.]" (ibid., p. 48), but also a social gathering space and the emer-

gence of spontaneous interaction and creativity, "an impromptu concert from a man who once had a voice and a talent" (Woodruffe 2013, p. 48). At the end of the project the architects sealed the building with plastic wrap to protect it from the nearing autumn weather and left it in place as a social sculpture.

From my theoretical perspective I am drawn to the idea that the architect's – as well as the public intellectual's – task is to provide space and a substructure to which others can then add. I also want to highlight the epistemological premise, namely that knowledge is acquired in interaction with the natural and the social world, which are given the status as co-producers – like the performers of John Cage's music. This is an important learning for pastoral theology and its working structure.

The Designer: Subversively Changing the World through its Products

The second approach I want to introduce is that of the designer. Akin to architecture, design also works intensively with the material, especially product design, which is responsible for the material world – filled with things – that we live in. The architect and design scholar Friedrich von Borries attempts to define the ethics of design in his book *Weltententwerfen*, designing the world. Like Klasz, von Borries opposes the philosophy of company- or architect-knows-best and looks at the social aspects of his work.

He begins his book with a definition of the word "entwerfen," designing, and refers to the Heideggerian definition of "being thrown into this world" (cf. above) to describe humanity as born with the inherent need and ability to design. He adds to Heidegger's etymological approach the philosopher Vilém Flusser's position, who understands designing as an act of liberation as well as of becoming human.

> The central element of incarnation [...] is the designing, the path from subject to project. While the "sub-ject" (Latin *subjectum* that which has been thrown down) is subjected, the project throws or thinks forwards. When we design, we liberate ourselves* (Borries 2016, p. 13).[1]

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1   The play on words in German, i.e. "ent-werfen" as throwing, is not easily translatable.

On that basis von Borries distinguishes between design that liberates and design that subjugates.

What makes the act of designing unique and interesting in the context of materiality is the fact that it has a concrete object to work with. Again, von Borries – like Heidegger – looks at the etymological roots of the word: "Object has two meanings. The first refers to the materiality [...] but more fundamentally designing an object means that something stands against us[2] [...] which we have to object to make the world a better place"* (ibid., p. 15). This etymology refers to the liberating, and conflict-ridden, practice of designing.

But there is also a second notion, namely that the act of designing something turns an *abstractum* into a *concretum*. Through design, abstract concepts, such as the living conditions of people, become palpable. And it is through that palpability that we can understand them and change them (cf. ibid., p. 18). If we follow Marx and Adorno in that the post-industrialisation world is full of things, so much so that humans begin to treat each other as if they were things (cf. ibid., p. 17), then we can not only better understand the world by looking at objects, we can also change the world by designing them in a better way. Design will thus become a leading discipline for the future because "in design one does not just describe and analyse problems, but design is always geared towards solving problems"* (ibid., p. 135).

This notion brings von Borries to the conclusion that design is a highly political affair and that designers must recognise their responsibility both for liberating and for subjugating designs.[3] The ethical imperative penetrates the world of even the most mundane objects.

> A chair can be liberating as well as subjugating. [...] A throne is subjugating [...] But a chair can be liberating as well [...] With the cantilever chair the static sitting is dissolved into a dynamic swinging, into a moment of freedom that questions stable relations; a materialist paradigm shift* (ibid., pp. 28–29).

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2   Again there is a similarity in the German language, this time between object, i.e. "Gegenstand," and objecting / standing against, i.e. "entgegen stehen."

3   Von Borries refers to Bruno Latour who argues that materiality and morality are being fused into one. Thinking both together becomes especially important as designers start working not only with buildings but with genes and implanted chips.

This is where von Borries sees a new role for designers: They are designing mundane objects – and even participate in the design of subjugating products to make a living – but they are "despite all pragmatism [...] working in secret on projects that turn the existing conditions upside down. These projects are the subversive potential that drives their work in and on the social realities"* (Borries 2016, p. 127). But in order to change the world through design – hence the title of the book *Weltentwerfen*, designing the world – the designers also have to change their own life: "Designing the world always means to design one's own life but [...] in the sense of a positive porousness – to accept one's own inadequacies as well"* (ibid., p. 130). This design philosophy is thus not only a political one, it is also a personal one that is open, porous, and never finished.

If we relate von Borries' world design to Klasz' social form-finding, we refer to a rich tradition of conscious and social designing small and mundane things but also developing architecture on the large scale. On that basis we can see a counter movement emerging against the all-encompassing fantasies of earlier city planners and laboratory designers.

The Community Organiser: Listening to People's Voices as Co-Creators

The last role model I want to mention is one I call the "community organiser," which includes city planners, researchers on the ground, social workers, and committed citizens. These people run the social laboratories that give the name to this part of the book. I therefore want to introduce the idea of social laboratories first before giving voice to a prominent representative of community organisers, the German-American priest Leo Penta.

As mentioned above, form-finding processes are experimental in character. Therefore, it is only natural to connect the idea of social and material form-finding with the idea of the laboratory. The laboratory in question, however, differs from both corporate campus architecture and the scientific university laboratory that Latour and Woolgar visited. Social laboratories are not only rooted in a different approach to architecture but also in the theory of science, in particular in theories on the relation between university and public. In the face of large societal transformations, the university and the company can no longer seclude themselves as independent producers of knowledge – scientists claiming the same independence and power as the star architects we discussed be-

fore – if they want to play a role in the transformative processes that happen at their front door.

Building on the long tradition of research on civic engagement (i.e. service learning), action research, and the public co-creation of scientific knowledge, there has been an increase in research on social or *open* laboratories over the last 10 years. The term real-life laboratory, Reallabor, has been used to characterise projects, that open up the university towards the public to discuss societal transformations and the role of science and research in shaping these transformations. Niko Schäpke et al. have compiled a list of research approaches and of projects that have opened such laboratory spaces (cf. Schäpke et al. 2017, pp. 29, 63–67). Many of them deal with research on the transformation of mobility, of how public and private transport must change in ever growing cities and how science, politics, and the general public can develop working solutions for these transformative processes, cf. the real-life laboratory for a sustainable culture of mobility in Stuttgart.

Schäpke et al. have also sought to single out the common characteristics of real-life laboratories: They are based on the idea that science does not just produce knowledge about the state of the world or normative claims of how the world ought to be, but that it also produces transformative knowledge about the path from the current state to a future state (cf. ibid., p. 9). Real-life laboratories are therefore part of transformative research which looks into the transformation of physical and of social structures (cf. ibid., p. 11).

Their research method is the real experiment, Realexperiment, a type of public experiment which understands the setup and the execution of experiments as a participative endeavour between scientists and stakeholders from the public. Experiments are not set up in a controlled laboratory space and cannot be executed in one day. Rather, over the course of several months, these experiments move back and forth between scientific research, public participation, and real-world implementation. They are more a type of scientifically controlled public intervention than a laboratory experiment. The aim is to take the learnings at the end of the experiment and either look more deeply into what made the intervention successful or to broaden and scale up the intervention so that it can be applied in other contexts as well (cf. ibid. 39-40).

Figure 29: The process of real experiments (Schäpke et al. 2017, p. 23)

A graphic illustration of the different phases of real experiments can be found in the source mentioned above on page 23. It shows both the different phases from "problem definition" to "implementation" and the different levels of involvement during the different phases from "information" to "empowerment".

One such real experiment that happened at the real-life laboratory in Stuttgart was the construction of *parklets*, small wooden structures that replaced parking spaces in the city with public areas where people could sit and enjoy a green and social outdoor space. These were designed in a collaborative process between researchers and the public and they were also discussed both on site and on the internet. The researchers designed multiple *parklets* while closely monitoring and engaging in the conversations that erupted on the project's facebook-page.

Figure 30: Parklet Stuttgart, Reallabor für nachhaltige Mobilitätskultur (2018)

The "Parklets" in Stuttgart are documented on their own website *Parklets für Stuttgart*.

This hands-on approach to space and the material realities that is characteristic for a real-life laboratory is important if we want to implement a new type of socially responsible laboratory. In fact, experimentation alone lets us get in close contact with the material.

One way in which this experimental approach can be brought to the praxis is the idea of *community organising*. Albeit much older than the real-experiment, its proponents can tell us a lot about the personal involvement it takes to engage with urban spaces and the people therein. How that is realised in practice is best described by Leo Penta, who is one of the theoreticians behind Christian community organising. As a Catholic theologian he started to initialise citizens assemblies in the U.S.

Penta followed the tradition of Saul Alinsky, the father of community organising in the United States, who founded the *Industrial Areas Foundation* in Chicago and went on to organise civic participation in many parts of the U.S. The main idea behind Alinsky's organising was to form a stable and powerful

coalition of citizens who were living in a particular part of a city or town and who were directly affected by political and economic decisions in that area. Community organising starts with the needs of those who are affected, which is why professional community organisers are engaged in a lot of door-to-door listening campaigns. After listening the organisers try to bring citizens together and enable them to publicly voice their problems and to set their own agenda for change (cf. Alinsky 1971).

Leo Penta tells his journey as a community organiser as that of a young priest who came to Brooklyn in 1987, then one of the poorest areas of New York. That poverty showed in burnt down and neglected houses as well as unkept tenement houses that resembled dangerous prisons rather than places for living.

> Soon after my arrival it became clear that the common methods of pastoral care and social work would not be sufficient to deal with the situation. Not only the poverty and the variety of social problems resulting from that questioned everything, but also the obvious fact that that part of town was on the verge of total decline* (Penta 2007, pp. 55–56).

The clergyman rallied leaders of other faith communities who were facing the same problems and were often the only remaining institutions in that part of the town. The key to his success was, as Penta later understood it, that he organised his response based on the principles of community organising as set forward by Saul Alinsky and his successor Edward T. Chambers. The community leaders around Penta "did not want to just add another patch to the wound – just another soup kitchen, warm room, or a homily on eternal life […] they looked in earnest and systematically for new ways to act"* (ibid., p. 58). So they started to build long-term relations in the neighbourhood, started listening to key persons within the community, and also left the comfort of their own social group: "I was asked for instance to get in touch with a young black baptist preacher. I realised how difficult it was at first for me to look beyond my own solidified white world and empathise with his world"* (ibid., p. 59).

The leaders of the diverse faith groups in Brooklyn formed an organisation – the East Brooklyn Churches – and began to build a large-scale accessible housing project. They were able to turn their neighbourhoods around: "The neighbourhoods pronounced dead rose again and with them their church communities"* (ibid. 63).

There is much to say about the rise of community organising in the 1990s and the challenges it faces today as cities grow and neighbourhoods break apart.[4] But what is important for the scope of my book is that Penta describes a personal strategy of paying close attention to how his neighbourhood looks, even sounds and smells, in order to take care of its wellbeing. Furthermore, as a pastoral worker he was not content with abstractly analysing a situation but rather took on the role that Friedrich von Borries imagined for the designer: work out concrete – as in material – solutions for seemingly abstract and insurmountable social problems.

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4   The link between affordable private housing and the growth of a new community around a church reminds me of housing development in Germany after the war, when church officials were full of optimism that their model of church could go on forever thanks to an ever-increasing Catholic community. I will come back to that in the fourth and final part of the book.