

Designing living spaces together in open-ended approaches

Participation in spatial development for a good life

An interview with Torsten Klafft, conducted by Martina Hülz

Torsten Klafft is an architect and sociologist-in-training. He works in the architecture agency 'nonconform', which states that it is 'technically an architectural firm. But only technically'.

<https://www.nonconform.at/>

How are post-growth or ecological, sustainable aspects of designing space – i.e. growth-critical planning in the broadest sense – reflected in your work?

Torsten Klafft: They're reflected in our core themes. In principle, the current 'nonconform' came about in reaction to the sudden resistance from the public that we encountered in projects – resistance to planning by us and by those responsible. That puzzled us because we actually thought we were doing something good: using land frugally, focusing on local and urban centres or open-use building for communal utilisation to conserve resources. Why is there opposition to such approaches when they should be in everyone's interest? Then we had the idea of involving the residents from the outset and letting them discuss what should actually be planned. The '*nonconform ideenwerkstatt*' ['nonconform ideas workshop'] was then developed and has since been implemented dozens of times. Participation in combination with sustainable planning principles has become a self-sustaining field of work.

We often deal with development in rural areas. For us, this primarily involves the development of village or town centres. Communities regret that their town centres are wasting away, the small shops are closing, the main street is more and more deserted, and the church is seldom able to

bring life into the surrounding square. And then we're asked to contribute our expertise. Our initial recipe is quite simple: we invite the locals to talk to us about these developments and to develop solutions. The '*nonconform ideenwerkstatt*' is a form of participation that's kept very concise. It has a sort of event character: we arrive, are on site for three days and invite everyone to our open 'ideas office'. Anyone can come and join in the discussion and develop strategies in various formats that we facilitate. The goal is to find a solution path that's individually tailored to the village or small town.

Is it reasonable to assume that, with the focus on the development of local town centres, there's already a certain awareness of sustainable spatial development among your clients and the local residents?

Torsten Klafft: Many of the municipalities involved do already know about town-centre development, and we're brought in to accompany them on this path. We can add the experiences of other municipalities to the process and there is much that can be learned here. Improving what exists is often not as 'sexy' as creating something new on a greenfield site. We provide answers about how it is possible to take the public along the path to sustainable town-centre development.

But the starting point is never the same twice – in terms of what motivation and ideas are available locally, what projects have already been implemented. Sometimes people are aware that the town centre has a problem, but this hasn't been linked to the new retail park on the outskirts that's attracting people out of the town centre. Or not everyone accepts these conclusions yet. Often there are local protagonists who've already initiated a few good projects and now want to take the next step with us, together with the local residents. Then it's our task, depending on the situation, to adapt the process appropriately. We have to accept what we find at the time. After all, the idea is to engage and convince people, we want it to happen *with* them. There's no universal recipe for this.

What exactly do you want to achieve in these places, what motivates you? Participation is actually the instrument or the method that you use, which has proved successful.

Torsten Klafft: I think that, on the one hand, it's the instrument we use to get necessary transformative processes going. But, on the other hand, it is in itself precisely what we think is important: it's about what people have in common in the village or town – around it and within it – because they live together in one place. That's always the central idea behind it. How can local people improve their lives and shape them together?

So your philosophy is the joint search for a good life with local people? What message do you bring with you?

Torsten Klafft: We bring our experiences from other places with us: that in fact there are always many local people who get involved very constructively. Even if one person says: 'I don't need the village, I just want a bit of peace in my own home', there is always someone else who thinks the village or town centre is important because it connects people. You can trust in the power of shared stories if everyone's involved in the process. Then many more ideas come together about what can be done for the town centre. There's simply a lot of potential that we can filter and process. To do this, we look for good examples that have worked elsewhere and put these approaches together with the images that exist locally. Together, we then create a local story, one that emerges from that place.

There's a general feeling that rural areas are once again being perceived as living spaces for very many people and are seen as important. That's why more funding is being created to encourage participation. There's often still a strong idea of community in rural areas. This makes it possible to tell a different story. If this is then linked to committed, open-ended participatory work, it also makes it possible to hold more difficult discussions. Too often, the critics don't get their message through when plans are being made for the next development of single-family homes. With the '*nonconform ideenwerkstatt*' we create a space where people can openly discuss the future of the village, encourage each other and develop new energy locally so they can then move on together. This doesn't always work, but often. At first, it's 'only' about the town centre, but active communities can grow out of this, ones who continue to discuss their plans together and perhaps also convince others with their reflections on spatial development.

Are people always willing and open? Or do you sometimes encounter resistance and scepticism? Or do you meet a certain type of person who's open to topics related to sustainability?

Torsten Klafft: It's more a case of having individual proponents in the towns, people who support the process and say: 'I've understood this for myself and I believe in it and think it's good'. If that's the mayor or members of the local council, then it's very helpful of course because they're the ones in charge. And even if some people are sceptical at first, most of the participants quite quickly say: 'Ah yes, that's right, it's kind of fun to discuss this together with everyone else, and I hadn't seen it like that before'. Spaces of possibility are opened up and often a spirit arises that overcomes any initial doubts or inhibitions. And then comes the real challenge, because people have to stay on the ball and those responsible locally have to implement the ideas – even if there are then discussions because the car park next to the church is moved out of the very centre. It's then important that the focus continues to be on the jointly developed vision of a lively church square as a meeting place and that this motivates people and gives them the courage to implement even unpleasant decisions because they believe in the *goal*. Especially at such moments, it helps a lot if the vision was not only passed by the local council but was worked out by many people together.

Do you follow up on further development or what happens afterwards?

Torsten Klafft: First we document our work, write a concept and hand it over to the municipality for further follow-up. In the best cases, there's an immediate opportunity for further cooperation, perhaps because small workshops have been arranged or because a competition is planned that we can help with as process designers and facilitators. Or we support the work of a local individual who has taken on responsibility for the process, like in Trofaiach in the Steiermark region. There we agreed to communicate closely with them, and if there were any problems, we worked together to find a solution. If this spirit flows into continued joint work, then of course we're closely involved in the process, but that's not decided or fixed from the outset – it may just develop. It's up to the people on the ground whether they want us involved.

All of the projects are potentially exciting, and we could spend ten years working on each of them because town-centre development requires contin-

ued work, even if you usually don't see the results for a few years. In an ideal scenario, we're invited for the awarding of a prize for rural building culture. But many communities continue on their path without us, although even then we always keep an eye on them, following developments and staying in touch.

The topic of 'participation' has become increasingly important in recent years and has been legally anchored in planning processes, so that public participation has become a necessity. Would you say that this is basically the right way to approach more sustainable spatial development? Or what are your experiences? What else is needed?

Torsten Klafft: We are very much in favour of participation being more strongly anchored, especially in spatial development processes – but not only anchored, it must be practised! Because, on the one hand, these are the topics that can encourage people and arouse their interest. On the other hand, we still too often see that it's only half-hearted and descends into a kind of 'alibi participation'. That can be counterproductive. I'm always amazed when people talk about the 'spectre of participation' or about the negative effects that can emerge. There are events where the visitors, the participants, are asked almost fearfully: 'What do you say to this?' Is the storm about to break? There's a risk that inviting the public is only seen as a duty and that the dominant emotion is one of fear that the work of recent months is going to be destroyed. This shouldn't become the defining experience, because good participation is important, even if it involves really demanding challenges. The language of planning must be translated in a way that everyone can understand. But the needs and statements of citizens must also be properly understood and translated into possible planning interventions for those responsible. In other words, in both directions. Many citizen participation processes are still affected by an attitude of getting them done because they're prescribed by law. If planners try to push through the plans or only half-heartedly involve the public, then this tends to lead to more doubts about the plans. If the procedure is only intended to let people get to know the planning process and the arguments, then this must be clearly communicated. If people are lured to an event with false promises so that as many of them as possible take part in an elaborate public participation process, then this tends to be counterproductive.

So, are you now taking away our hope for post-growth, sustainable spatial development through citizen participation?

Torsten Klafft: No! For the highest political level to say: 'Participation in such procedures is important' is a significant political statement. There's space, time and funding available to try out many things. But we have to ask ourselves how we go into such processes with our planning language. Do we really want to engage people because that makes the processes better? There are processes that are just understood as fulfilling requirements, but there's increasingly a belief that projects are really improved by participation. Some people enjoy using walks or cooking dialogues as formats. We have to try out new things and tackle them wholeheartedly, but also have the courage to accept there may be failures. We already have a few good recipes, and we're not the only ones who have repeatedly used them successfully. For example, people don't always have to be seated like an audience facing the organiser. Sometimes you need to liven things up a bit so that everyone moves around and comes together in different constellations. Some people might like to stand in the middle and talk in front of everyone, but many others say: 'Well, if there are a hundred people sitting here, I don't need to add my two cents'. In smaller groups of six or seven, discussing around a table, everyone gets a chance to contribute. It's important to find these ways of reaching participants. Our 'ideas office' is one access point, where anyone can drop by during the day and look at what was discussed the evening before on the flipchart. In a personal conversation, these people then also say what they think and what they want for their hometown.

You're so convinced that you're convincing me! Where does that come from? Did your training as a planner and architect equip you to do precisely this job with such motivation?

Torsten Klafft: After studying architecture, I worked as a traditional architect for two years and found that I didn't know anything at all about what constitutes social space. That's why I started to do a master's degree in sociology, to understand how society actually functions, the society that uses the spaces that we blithely design. Architects actually always design society, but it often looks different from the utopian image of society in magazines, where everyone happily walks around with a pram and a parasol. In real-

ity, questions are rarely asked about how people are supposed to get there or why they should go to the glitzy magazine places designed in the isolated offices. I've become very critical of planning and planners' discourse. Many discourses about the people who use the spaces – who live in them – take place among planners' circles. I think it takes a lot of courage to say: 'Alright, let's find out *how* to find out if people want this or if people agree with the needs we're designing for or what spaces they want to use or maybe what spaces they need to design their own living space'.

In retrospect I find it rather shocking to think how little attention my training gave to such questions, because there's a lot of knowledge about this available. I think a great deal can come from broader exchanges between architecture and the humanities. As well as considering the functionality of spaces, it should from the outset be more important to ask how the newly planned space will be used, whether it will work well and how it fits into a holistic sustainability debate – the appropriation, repurposing and diversity of spaces for different user groups who create the place for themselves and make it their place. Urban planning is already a bit ahead in this area.

This is a fundamental problem of science and practice and of linking the two and also of the old debate about universities doing science and not training.

Torsten Klafft: Yes, but I studied architecture at a technical college. There we were trained to deal with the practical demands of an architect's job, i.e. the requirements encountered in an architect's office. But the professional image of an architect in practice that was reproduced at my architecture school was one that was limited to architects carrying out planning for the clients. Of course, it's difficult to implement social ideals in everyday life or to negotiate them with clients, but I think it's important to develop a position on this and to include it in the planning processes. In retrospect, for example, I would have liked to have had critical discussions at university about established housing standards. Does a flat that you can get with a housing entitlement certificate have to comply only with the minimum standards, when findings in social research show that these minimum construction standards are rather arbitrary definitions that actually contradict how people deal with spaces? If you want to develop 'good' social housing as a young architect, you don't just need courage and conviction, but you also need access to critical discourses – and these are still not heard enough at many architectural col-

leges. It often seems to me that architecture is a little slow to discuss scientific findings that contradict its self-image. Often, architecture training is characterised by a very generalist habitus of modernism, which also means that many of our most exciting colleagues initially had to deal very critically with their own training. There is still a lot of potential here, which could lead to more young planners being able to identify with their work and to many innovative approaches emerging.

With this society-centred view that you've just highlighted, I would like to make the connection to post-growth, sustainable spatial development and sustainable spatial design: How can geographers, planners and architects implement these ideas?

Torsten Klafft: First, we need courageous planners who believe that collaborative approaches are a good way of designing coexistence. Then we need courageous people in positions of responsibility who support this and who provide the instruments – such as funding – that make it possible. We need open processes and experiments. Each place needs its own experiment, but it has to be possible to put these experiments into the necessary funding forms. And of course, the best thing would be if the regulars in the pub held active, differentiated and heartfelt discussions about post-growth ideas – in language that doesn't exclude anyone from the discussion – and talked about how we would like to live together.

At 'nonconform' we like to talk about the 'best common denominator' between local citizens, those responsible, the administration and everyone with an interest, basically all the stakeholders. When people don't just talk about what they're *against* but try to understand the needs of the other party, you get more than the lowest common denominator. If it's possible to bring everyone together and develop a solution together, then there's added value for everyone. The 'best common denominator' is greater than a grudging compromise.

That fits in with post-growth, which is not fundamentally about less growth but about growing the right things, like in your case with finding not just a common denominator but actually the best common denominator for a good life. This attitude fits into this debate very well.

Torsten Klafft: Exactly. What can we all gain if we all focus on our commonalities?

That's a nice conclusion. Let's keep experimenting to find out and then spread the message. Thank you very much, Torsten.

