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“We must dare to think ‘unthinkable’ thoughts. We must learn to explore all the options and possibilities that confront us in a complex and rapidly changing world.”

J. William Fulbright

The city and the citizen – rethinking traditional roles

by Tilman Schenk und Thorsten Mehnert

The relationship between the city and its citizen can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle described the citizen as *ζῶν πολιτικόν*, a natural member of an urban community. Modern social sciences examine urban societies as a whole or in its parts as networks of interacting individuals. Only recently has a new view on the citizen emerged that attempts to understand the citizen as an active stakeholder in shaping the urban form. This implies both new rights and obligations: taking a more active role in urban development, citizens have the opportunity to directly influence the shape of the environment in which they live. For urban administrations however, it is tempting to transfer to the active citizen those tasks that most of us have become used to regarding as public domain. In the following, this new concept of urban planning and development is briefly discussed in general and subsequently embedded in a local context with an example of community activism in Leipzig.

Changing paradigms in urban planning and development

From government to governance, it is this pair of terms that is most often used to describe the changes in the understanding of the citizen’s role in urban development. The term ‘government’ refers to the city as a system that is shaped by the decisions of a relatively small group of technicians – the planners – led and controlled by political representatives. Although strictly democratic, this arrangement has in the last four decades been increasingly criticized and eventually challenged for being detached from the will of the citizen as the user of the urban space. Under the impression of growing

resistance, legislators have introduced opportunities for the public to react to plans before they are implemented.

The notion of ‘governance’ is more far-reaching and puts community participation first. Not only the planners but also the residents are regarded as the local experts when it comes to community planning decisions. What’s more, the citizen takes a stake in shaping the urban form; community gardening as practiced in a number of large cities worldwide is just one example. These highly motivated citizens not only participate but also take responsibility for their environment as well as providing new options to urban administrations. Tight budgets and low tax bases are forcing municipalities everywhere in the Western world to cut down on expenses for public services – while the citizen is just as glad to take over. This also raises the question of legitimacy: while planners employed by municipalities were often regarded as disconnected from the people, they were at least theoretically under the control of elected politicians. Governance approaches, on the other hand, promise to integrate anybody interested regardless of who they represent. Furthermore, it has never been possible to integrate such a large number of citizens in processes of public concern as under governance principles. The following describes a project in Leipzig, where participation focuses on civil coproduction.

Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz – Reviving an urban blight

Since the fall of the Wall, the Leipzig-Plagwitz industrial railway terminal has endured an urban blight existence. In its



The IBBP dismantling the Wilhelmian steel construction; photo: Gunter Binsack

current state, the site covering approximately 17.5 hectares represents an obstacle to further urban development and implementation of a wealth of ideas for reuse. What’s more, vandalism, dumping and other negative implications of disuse and poor social control lead to significant disadvantages for nearby residents.

We – residents, creative artists, traders, home-owners, associations/foundations in the vicinity of the site – want to change this situation. In early 2010, we therefore established the Initiative Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz (IBBP). Together with the City of Leipzig, we have since pursued the common goal of revitalizing the site, thereby attributing the west end of the city a new impetus for development.

First of all, we supported the City in its negotiations with the site owner, Deutsche Bahn AG. Transferring ownership of the site to the City of Leipzig – something which has already failed several times in the past – is a decisive condition if this site is to have a future. Only with coordinated responsibility for development on the part of the City is it possible to ensure that the social, cultural, economic and urban aspects are synchronized and channeled toward comprehensive development.

Parallel to this and in cooperation with the neighborhood management, we began to interest other citizens in this project. Against the backdrop of two theme nights, approximately 200 citizens were informed of the development plans and possibilities of getting involved. During tours of the site, initial design

ideas were presented. Breakfast organized on the tracks and supported by mini performances enabled those citizens involved to experience the site in an entirely different manner. As a result of these events, other stakeholders joined the IBBP. Work commenced on the concept, culminating in a list of around 50 ideas for utilization in the areas of culture (e.g., summer theater, sculpture park), recreation (e.g., construction playground, climbing rocks, scout camp), education (e.g., history path, green classroom), tourism (e.g., sleeping car B&B, camp site), ecology (e.g., urban forest, citizens’ gardens) and business (working & living, workshops). Ten ideas were prioritized from this list and concepts developed by groups of citizens.

But it is difficult to maintain motivation within a citizens’ group on the basis of conceptual work alone. We don’t want to simply plan – we want to actively implement our ideas. While waiting for final approval, we started actions for a lively urban area in the vicinity of the property: we built a beach volleyball court on another wasteland area, dismantled a Wilhelmian steel construction at the former passenger station for later use, e.g., as a glasshouse in the citizens’ gardens, started to restore an old reception lodge, and much more.

Civil coproduction instead of civil participation

These activities were only possible thanks to intensive collaboration with the City of Leipzig – in planning discussions and workshops, cooperation within the City’s inter-departmental “Bahnhof Plagwitz” coordination group and thanks to a wil-



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lingness to display open, constructive cooperation on the part of progressive city employees. But why are citizens getting involved here in the first place? The experience gleaned by the IBBP indicates that there are enormous potentials for society when citizens are actively involved, transforming them from consumers to co-producers of urban space:

- **Better solutions:** Those who live in the area are aware of the problems and are often capable of finding more appropriate solutions than an urban planner working alone.
- **Higher identification:** Those involved in design develop a stronger identification with and responsibility for their surroundings. This increases a willingness to get actively involved and appreciate local environments.
- **Wider knowledge base:** Citizens represent diverse professions and can often provide urban planners with support in their work. A multidisciplinary approach often points the way toward more feasible solutions.
- **Easier implementation through local networks:** Many personal connections within a neighborhood can be used for discussing and overcoming obstacles.
- **Stronger local communities:** Working together to develop common surroundings and experiencing personal creative potential strengthens local communities and encourages more self-organization.
- **Great potential:** Municipal budgets are attributed an interesting lever by voluntary involvement. The IBBP generates a value of approximately 10 Euros from one municipal Euro.

Citizens do not change from consumers to co-producers overnight. A new distribution of roles needs to be designed and tested. There are still many reservations against active forms of citizen involvement as well as doubts concerning its effectiveness and legitimacy. On the basis of reference projects, doubters must be shown that this is not about an inefficient and time-consuming form of citizen involvement but that it has actually been possible to create specific added

value when compared to methods pursued in the past. Such projects should be organized as an “urban laboratory” which develops new forms of division of labor between administrative authorities and citizens in an application-oriented manner. Collaboration on equal terms, sharing responsibility, avoiding duplication of effort, target-oriented and efficiently organized work by citizens for citizens, activation of voluntary commitment – these are only some of the issues in which the IBBP wants to develop practical forms of division of labor between citizens, administrative authorities / politics and business.

Plans for the first construction stage on the Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz site, the so-called Northern End, are largely complete. Citizens and some initial supporting companies are ready to implement the tasks defined in the planning process (restoring walls, building a bouldering wall, gardening, etc). In March 2012, the IBBP asked Leipzig’s Lord Mayor Burkhard Jung to declare conclusion of this contract a priority and provide a stimulus for a decisive future for the Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz. The IBBP has already supplied the Lord Mayor with one key instrument for concluding the contract:



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National Games Munich 2012: volunteers escort athletes after their competition; photo: Wiltrud Hammelstein



Special Olympics

by Wiltrud Hammelstein

“Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt”

This is the oath of Special Olympics, which is spoken by an athlete at the opening of every Special Olympic event, be it local, regional, national, or international. I have heard it so many times in the past 18 years since I started as a volunteer for Special Olympics in Berlin. And it still brings a shiver to my spine when I hear it, no matter in what language. It summarizes the very essence of the goal of Special Olympics: the passion and devotion of the athletes to give their best every time they compete. And the pure joy they show and share when they excel seems unprecedented. It draws you in and, once there, one cannot help but return again and again, for the experience elevates the soul.

Special Olympics came into my life as another task at work. In 1994, I was working for Otis in Germany, in the Human Resources Department, in charge of international projects and internal communication. One day, my boss came to me and asked: “Do you want to get involved in community work?”, and I replied, “What do you want to drop on my desk now?” He explained that he had received a letter from our then CEO who asked the countries to get involved with their local Special Olympics programs. The goal was twofold: to see what they needed to get their team to the 1995 World Games, to be

held in New Haven, Connecticut, not coincidentally within reach of the home of Otis Elevator. The second goal was to build “Team Otis”, composed of employees who volunteered their time and expertise to the local Special Olympics organization.

What a challenge! In the US, everyone is familiar with Special Olympics, founded in the 1960s by the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver*. In Europe and Germany, the Paralympics are much better known. While the Paralympics are for elite athletes with physical handicaps, Special Olympics is open for all people with intellectual disabilities (ID), no matter their skill level. It is acknowledged by the International Olympic Committee, granting the coveted use of the word “Olympics”.

At that time, I personally had had no exposure to anyone with ID except occasional encounters in the Berlin streets or subways. And frankly, how do we perceive people with ID: sometimes as loud, sometimes as strange, and sometimes as funny. They may mumble or move about in an uncontrolled manner. At times, most of us look away, feeling awkward upon meeting a person with ID. I admit, I did the same. So I told my boss “I don’t know if I can do it”.

This is a reaction the people of Special Olympics hear often from others and all they say is “Come and see for yourself”. This is what I did when the Executive Director of SO-Deutsch-