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## From Urban Interventions to Urban Practice: An Alternative Way of Urban Neighborhood Development

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### Abstract

This text seeks to contribute to the topic of urban art from the perspective of urban development. It explores the qualities of urban interventions as a method employed by urban practitioners to emancipate people to fully appropriate space in the sense of Henri Lefebvre's right to the city. This practice has become more and more common among smaller groups of architects and planners, but is still predominantly used within the art practice as reflected in Assemble's recent winning of the Turner Prize. Even though the work of these urban practitioners can clearly be described as an alternative practice of neighborhood development (cf. Holub, 2010), it often still opposes official governmental urban development planning. The paper will therefore show qualities of urban practice differentiating it from urban neighborhood planning while adding certain values to communities, which could not be achieved in other ways.

**Keywords/ Tags:** urban intervention, urban practice, alternative neighborhood development, urban practitioner, neighborhood planning, urban art, urban art practice

### 1. The notion of urban intervention in urban planning

In art, architecture, and urban planning, urban interventions have become synonymous with temporary actions in urban space. Referring to Borries et al. (2012) in their glossary of interventions the term "urban interventions" is considered as a collective term for a "generous amount of different practices" and for "new subversive uses of space" in architecture, urban planning, strategic marketing, art, and also activist and socio-cultural strategies. In architecture and urban planning, urban interventions are considered as instruments in urban development attributed with the cultural reconstruction of public spaces, making the processual transformation of the city tangible and requalifying the location as well as creating a new image of the space (Akbar and Scholz, 2008). Since the research on "urban catalyst" (2001–2003) and "shrinking cities" (2002–2008) characterized the phenomena of creative appropriation processes and the potential of spontaneous urbanity of temporary architectural, artistic, and cultural interventions in vacant buildings or declining urban areas, interventions are regarded as adequate instruments to open new perspectives for structurally weak, low-investment areas (Oswalt, 2004; Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing Berlin 2007; Hayden and Temel, 2006; BMVBS, BBR 2008; Akbar and Scholz, 2008). However, their strategic development potential is almost exclusively linked to areas that are not covered by the usual development tools of city planning and real estate management (Oswalt et al., 2013). With the urban interventions award introduced by the Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing of Berlin in 2010, urban interventions were provided

with a promising innovative force encouraging new models for cooperation between different actors involved in the participatory process of designing urban development (Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing Berlin, 2010). Here, the definition of urban interventions in urban planning was extended to include cooperation and participatory design, in light of the fact that architects and planners have adapted urban interventions as tools for urban development but also as strategies for working within social space.

In urban planning, urban interventions are still predominantly used in the development of brown fields or declining neighborhoods—especially in the context of *Zwischennutzungen* (meanwhile uses) in areas lacking sufficient economic demand to develop projects with the usual real estate market investors. Used as part of the planning process, these interventions represent a welcome way of experimenting in a mostly “static” planning environment (Karow-Kluge, 2010). There are a number of major advantages associated with such approaches in urban planning. Firstly, urban interventions can often be implemented much more quickly than projects following the usual planning processes thus acting as starting points or indicators for change or new activity. The second advantage relates to the conventional structure of planning administrations, which is focused on outcomes. At the beginning stands a political goal, which an administration is then tasked to deliver. Almost all the steps to be taken in this process are predefined. An urban intervention follows a contrary principle: it’s only temporary, it’s a test, it’s a “laboratory”—it breaks with existing planning patterns. It provides an important tool for areas where planning is too restrictive to enable progress. And there is another, more practical aspect: as interventions are temporary. They can act outside existing policies and regulations or at least explore how much these can be stretched under the given circumstances. Sometimes interventions can even help to define and test new regulations. Using practices that relate to “art” can sometimes also make it easier to gain planning permission. Another important advantage of urban interventions is their participatory character. The German term *Mitnahme*, which is usually used as an important objective of planning processes, relates to this aspect. It literally means taking someone’s hand to leading that person through the process to a point where an agreement or at least understanding of the proposed goal is reached.

Further aspects of urban interventions in urban development are city marketing and social neighborhood development. In city marketing, urban interventions are used to develop the brand of a city, as they successfully produce images and narratives. In social work and neighborhood management, urban interventions are used to get in contact with people or gain easier access to certain projects or programs.

## 2. A broader understanding of urban interventions as art in the public interest

The notion of urban interventions as a practice of urban art is lost, however, where it is simply used as an instrument or tool. Urban interventions in the field of architecture and urban planning have hence sometimes been criticized as “pocket revolutions,” producing micro solutions for everyday problems of marginalized communities (BAVO, 2007). Interventions should rather be understood “as a self-reflexive and a culture of change promoting practice of urban art that understands the given as generated and thus transformable” (Krasny and Nierhaus, 2008). As urban interventions are a practice of urban art and thus as art in the public sphere one can expand the term urban art into public art (Hildebrandt, 2012). The term public art summarizes art practices interfering with urban development processes by involving the art viewers into the third paradigm of public art practices: *art in the public interest* or *new genre public art* (NGPA) as Miwon Kwon (1997 schematically distinguishes it.<sup>1</sup> Her definition is based on Suzanne Lacy’s widely known publication *Mapping the Terrain* (1995):

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1 - The two others paradigms are (1) art in public places and (2) art as public spaces.

It actually is a genre of public art work, not in the traditional sense, referring to a monument places in a central area of the city, but because it deals with the public in an interactive way. [...] This construction of a history of new genre public art is not built on a typology of materials, spaces, or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationships, communication, and political intention.

Kwon (1997) defines “art in the public interest (or ‘new genre public art’), [as] often temporary city-based programs focusing on social issues rather than the built environment that involve collaborations with marginalized social groups (rather than design professionals), such as the homeless, battered women, urban youths, AIDS patients, prisoners, and which strives toward the development of politically-conscious community events or programs.”

The following terms in the two citations warrant a closer look: city-based programs, social issues, collaborations (with marginalized social groups), development of politically-conscious community events or programs, deals with the public in an interactive way and concepts of audience, relationships, communication, and political intention. Such descriptions indicate that urban interventions are potentially *the* main practice of urban art widely discussed among all disciplines working in an urban context and within the field of public realm.

When looking at the transformation of actual space, the previously cited definition of Krasny and Lierhaus (2008) offers another interesting perspective: If we take the urban as generated and transformable—then transforming the actual space may be the key intention. If that is the main point, the question that arises is: how do artists actually achieve it?

### **3. urban interventions – a methodology of urban practice**

In the following, the qualities of urban interventions are highlighted as a methodology employed by urban practitioners to create self-determined and appropriated space within the public realm. This art of urban action can be considered a common urban practice, which is no longer applied exclusively by artists, but by multiple disciplines intervening in urban space. It is indeed those qualities of urban interventions that originate in urban art, which make them a methodology enabling urban practitioners to produce urban space in the sense of Lefebvre’s right to the city.

The idea of urban practice discussed in this paper has evolved from urban art and has shaped a type of alternative community-led development, which is operating in parallel to municipal urban planning. This kind of practice creates a neighborhood driven development, which is both locally specific and truly participatory, as it provides strategies that respect and fulfill local needs while allowing space for the community to fully appropriate the spaces. However, this practice is often still associated solely with the fields of art and culture. This is also reflected in the funding sources for such projects: they are often financed by cultural institutions in the context of biennials, art festivals etc.

“Urban practice” can be defined using four categories originating from art, which are all rooted in art history, but could qualify neighborhood planning alike. There are four characteristics associated with urban interventions as a method in alternative neighborhood development: co-production, local specificity, alternative reality, and positive moment.

#### **3.1 Co-Production**

Silke Feldhoff (2009) describes the deliberate inclusion of recipients of art or the local population as co-thinkers—and thereby co-producers—of an artistic project as follows: “As a result, ‘participatory’ means the unintended, for the time being only potentially enabling active participation, and ‘social relations’ describes the objective of a work. ‘Participative’, however, means an active participation that has actually taken place, thus describes the result of

an action of a project“ (Feldhoff 2009, own translation). While the term ”participatory” describes the possibility for involvement in a project, ”participative” refers to active participation, functioning as a main driver in the process, without that a project could otherwise not have been realized.



Fig. 1 - Große potemkinsche Straße: a project by Ton Matton et al“ ©. Photo: Michael Kockot.

Feldhoff also shows much more detailed than I can describe it now, how the concept of the art viewer as a co-producer has developed throughout art history. Due to the changed visual habits and art conceptions triggered by Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* in 1913, the discussion with the art viewer has become a subject of artworks. With his ready-mades, Duchamp challenged museum visitors, who had to learn to perceive an everyday object as art, due to its placement in the context of a museum. The next challenge for the art recipient came with Concept Art, in which the relationship between the artist and the viewer is discussed even further. The conceptual artist Timm Ulrichs speaks of the co-producer (Ohff, 1971, own translation) because art is created in the mind. The social debate on participation in the 1960s and 1970s also led to artists examining participatory practices. The artistic aspect of happenings and environments are other forms of the inclusion of the art viewer in the art production. However, through the social upheavals of the 1970s, urban regeneration processes also became the focus of artistic urban practices. Trisha Brown’s *Roof Piece Performance* (1973) and Gordon Matta Clark’s *Cuttings* (1974/75) are commonly referred to. In the years that followed, the debate about the city and social conditions played an important role. In 1995, Suzanne Lacy introduces the term “New Genre Public Art” for so-called art in the public interest (in addition to art in the public space and art as a public space). And Paula Marie Hildebrandt (2012, own translation) describes it as “socially engaged, participatory, relational, dialogical, situational and collaborative art practice,” which is associated with the politicization of art.

The long-term discussion with the artist’s own role as well as with the role of the art viewer leads to intervening on the same level or as actors or representatives of equal interests. The urban practitioner’s own interest is of no more importance than the interest of other (informal) space users. In stark contrast to “co-producer” the term *Mitnahme* is

often used in urban planning participatory processes. The first means to cooperate with someone: you contribute in a shared work with someone in a self-determined way; whereas the latter means to get an opportunity to act: one can take action, and it is nice if one does, but it's someone else who provides the possibility to do so.

### 3.2 Local Specificity

In his lecture on *Urbane Praxis*, Frank Eckardt (2013) unfolds three structures that determine urban practice. An intervention becomes authentic by connecting to the local in three aspects: firstly, the political structures, which form the circumstances one is working in, secondly, the material structures, the local material and conditions—the autochthonous—one uses and reacts to, and thirdly, the perception, which interprets the structures within the project and puts them into a narrative.



Fig. 2 - Große potemkinsche Straße: a project by Ton Matton et al“ ©. Photo: Michael Kockot.

As a structural condition of urban practice, Eckardt (2013) introduces the “structure of the material,” which he describes as autochthonous. The term autochthonous originates from ethnology and refers to the “found at the present location” or “at the found place originated.” The examination of the found or found on the site is a central property of urban practice. In urban interventions, the improvisation found on the spot determines the improvisation. Spontaneity and improvisation are not arbitrary, but arise in response to the specificity of the premises, to existing local materials, and the prevailing conditions on the ground. The intervention thus acquires its authenticity through the uncovering

and displaying of local conditions. This perception allows new interpretations of the created structures telling the process. The urban intervention is embedded in the narrative. This is all the more supported by the fact that the local knowledge of the inhabitants of a site is included within it. Through the narratives, the different perspectives on a place change—and in return, the latter change the narratives. Eckardt (2013) describes this as “the production of meaning and reinterpretation in the aesthetic, the emotional as well as the functional at the same time” (own translation). This reinterpretation occurs chronologically and linearly as a kind of chronology of urban practice from idea—experiment—experience—knowledge. Through the repetition of that chronology—the circuit of improvisation—a new knowledge is created at every step of the project: the localized and personalized knowledge of the urban practitioner. The result is a subjective, localized, and spatial knowledge that is enriched by the continuous circulation of improvisation in the intervention and has its origin in the inherent knowledge of the local (the knowledge of the inhabitants) as well as the creative, spatial knowledge of the urban practitioner. This is what makes urban practice authentic and offers the opportunity to really embed local specificities in the proposed solution.



Fig. 3 - Große potemkinsche Straße: a project by Ton Matton et al“ ©. Photo: Michael Kockot.

### 3.3 Alternative Reality

Art has a special role in society that differentiates it from other human practices. This is mostly due to the self-purpose of art. Art has no other purpose than itself. Although this quality is essential for art as it allows free creation, art is also a “highly productive reflexive practice” (Bertram, 2013, own translation). Niklas Luhmann explains “self-referentiality” in

art as follows: art creates its own value system by creating specific conditions that apply to it. Through the consistent implementation and pursuit of these conditions, artists create works of art, which are subject only to these, their own laws. This creates a reality parallel to everyday reality. The reality of everyday life can be reflected by not only recognizing the reality of an artwork but also by recognizing another reality. As a result, one can suddenly see his or her own reality abstractly and as only one of different possibilities. Art thus produces alternative possibilities of reality and visualizes prevailing social conditions. Through the artistic process, those conditions become visible and—once visible—can be interrogated (cf. Baraldi et al., 2008).

Urban interventions also show an alternative reality by offering new spaces for a limited period of time. They allow other uses and offer new functions and thereby a different coding of a space. From now on, this space tells a different story, in which other things are possible. Urban interventions enable this alternative reality not only through reflection, as it is the case with works of art in, for example museums, but also through immediate experience and appropriation. As a result, the interventions are not only a form or an object, but they become a possibility. Thus, urban interventions are developed in a participatory manner and through the collaborative and active creation of places of spatial production. They therefore represent a method to produce space and serve as an instrument for a participative approach.



Fig. 4 - Große potemkinsche Straße: a project by Ton Matton et al“ ©. Photo: Michael Kockot.

### 3.4 Positive Moment

Positive moments describe a crucial turning point within processes. The “moment” has come, when a particular interest meets a wider context, a wider understanding. This moment is often connected with the gathering of people,

for example at a neighborhood party, a neighborhood assembly or any kind of platform, which launches a broad and fruitful discussion of interests. The “positive moment” is also important for legitimacy issues and democracy discussions of urban practice, because it testifies, that a topic is of broader understanding and support in the neighborhood and no singular interest any more. David Harvey (1996) refers to the concept of “militant particularism” by Raymond Williams to explain a positive moment within a political process, when societal values are developed from a particular set of interests:

This idea suggests that almost all radical movements have their origin in some place, with a particular set of issues which people are pursuing and following. The key issue is whether that militant particularism simply remains localized or whether, at some point or other, it spills over into some more universal construction. [...] In other words, in this view foundational values and beliefs were discovered in particular struggles and then translated onto a broader terrain of conflict. It seems to me that the notion of community, viewed in this way, can be a positive moment within a political process. However, it is only a positive moment if it ceases to be an end in itself, ceases to be a thing which is going to solve all of our problems, and starts to be a moment in this process of broader construction of a more universal set of values which are going to be about how the city is going to be as a whole.

Urban practice thus employs urban interventions to identify spaces of opportunities, to address questions about the design of reality in a comprehensible and low-threshold manner, and to transform a given place from the conceivable to the nameable and the feasible. In this process, addressing a singular problem can lead to a common understanding of the development goals of the district. And affected individuals can be encouraged to get involved from the start through the platform building process.

#### **4. Urban practice in the realm of neighborhood development**

Urban practice uses urban interventions as a methodology, and therefore offers qualities that are crucial for successfully implementing a truly local, supported, and successful neighborhood planning process. I would like to conclude with the statement that urban practice shouldn't be absorbed by urban planning administrations but should be acknowledged as a neighborhood development strategy with an outcome that has the same relevance and importance as an urban development concept or master plan commissioned by the municipality.

In urban practice the integration of local people, their knowledge and approach is just as important as the artist's own. Due to that the project is developed in a way that it allows the people involved to actually decide on how the space is going to be determined and used. They decide about the function and what the project is going to be like. Sometimes they even build and construct it. They transform the existing—and with the first dinner or party they also use the space. So already during the implementation of the project the space is used by the end users in the way they decided to use it. To summarize again: they first determine the space, then transform it themselves and are finally the ones who use the space.

These three steps describe a process of space production in the sense of Henri Lefebvre's right to the city (Anderson, 2011). This process is what actually connects all the urban interventions I understand as important for urban neighborhood development. They all share the understanding of how to produce, change or create an urban space. In this sense, urban interventions are not a kind of art practice that happens accidentally somehow, somewhere, and sometimes, but instead are a method<sup>1</sup> for urban practitioners to reach the particular kind of space production in the sense of Lefebvre that I mentioned before. Therefore, this urban art becomes *urban practice*, a practice that

investigates and highlights issues and produces relevant effects for neighborhood planning in an alternative way and sometimes in parallel to municipal neighborhood planning.

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