Thoughts about Public Space

Space in Dialogue
– Memories from a project related to public space
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In a city like New York, where the density is high and public spaces on street level are fully occupied, a question arises: does it make a difference if spaces are either used by individuals who reside in the East Village or by corporations who sterilize downtown? There isn't any space left to target one's expressions and experiences anyhow. The option left for people is to inscribe themselves in already existing meanings. Do you need to inscribe yourself to have a public space?

'Public' is from the beginning a confusing term, that in connection with space, has created a myth of ownership by everyone. A 'public space' is really not a free space and has always been a space of territorial nature. No matter if the space is actually owned by private companies or limited by a majority's morality and control. The space is not entirely for everyone.

Private ≥ Public = Public Space
Private ≤ Public = Social Space.

So if the targeting of space either repulses or attracts, includes or excludes, the question becomes: what then can make a public space public? The meeting, and especially the possibility of meeting people who are not alike, is essential and a critical factor for making a public space into a social space. Direct meeting and dialogue are essential in all human relations and can solve numerous potential conflicts and can help us reach a larger understanding of ourselves and of others.

In this context, we researched two interesting self-organized projects both of which stemmed from a necessity to solve present social conflicts by producing spaces for dialogue to generate a truly social space. We recently revealed some of their visions for an audience at Sparwasser in Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art in Berlin.

The concept emerged from a crises in the cultural representation in a city like Berlin which consist of many 'alternative' structures, social movements and self-organizing institutions, which exist in the context of the 'Lebensreformen' (Life Reform) movements. These structures often work in levels that are parallel or in opposition to established economic and political powers, and therefore must challenge new aesthetical thinking around representation – but seldom get the chance to do so – in spaces like Hamburger Bahnhof. So we wanted in this project to involve the two projects in the creative process of self-representation, and in this context to questioning the ethical relations of power. This goal was not possible as intended and we met our curatorial limitations by the institutions. They where afraid of what our new partners would decide – Fusion and Lohmühle – to bring inside the institution. This experience just confirms that the art institutions sometimes still are afraid of loosing their territorial domination. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard if a system that doesn't absorb and make the critic its own may only have one course – to collapse. For the sake of giving the two projects some space, we compromised and ended up with a very minimal but precise presentation of visions made by the two projects.

The first project, called Fusion, is located in the Neukoelln district of Berlin and deals with the youth that the city gave up on. From a more common 'reclaim the street argument' they were able to have a street blocked for entry by cars and created a youth street. The street is slowly becoming occupied by youth. The organizers use the idea of carnival to express suppressed culture and generate interest by cultures of immigrants and low-income citizens that are socially and economically marginalized by the

surrounded society. The street does not belong to the cars anymore… all in support of the goal of social interaction, intercultural meetings, carnival preparations, barbeques, and street parties. Fusion was in this context aware that the street in itself did not fully achieve their purpose. They are now working to create their own source of economy for the area. One project they are undertaking is to establishing a youth hotel in an old, empty building that will offer the youth new jobs. The youth hotel that they will create will also bring-in youth from all over the world and give the residential kids a possibility to engage in new networks. Fusion knows that if they have to help the kids out of the social stigma that is a consequence of a segregated society, they have to create alternative jobs and new possibilities for networking.

The second project we researched for Hamburger Bahnhof was Gesamtkunstwerk Wagendorf Lohmühle. After the Berlin wall was demolished, a few people parked their house-wagons and occupied a small strip of the old 'no-mans-land' in Treptov Berlin. They started to develop the land from a dessert into a green and livable small community. There where several of these communities, which typically originated from squatter environments, that Berlin tends to be famous for. The idea to produce social spaces was a natural development for the residents of Lohmühle, and they also knew that they would gain from the established network and connection with the outside. Partly because of the illegal squatting, they knew that if they had to maintain the space they had to communicate with their neighbors and offer them something unique.

Lohmühle residents decided to make an area of the community space public by building scaffolding spaces that presented an open indoor space and cafe, Kanzler Amt, as well as a workshop and gallery named La Fabrica Lohmule. They invited their neighbors to participate. In addition to the physical spaces they created, the residents also made a range of cultural and ecological events that were open for all citizens of Berlin. By meeting their neighbors in a dialogue and engaging and participating in events, Lohmühle developed a common, positive relationship of dependency. The next step for Lohmühle, and the reason they took the name 'Gesamtkunstwerk Wagendorf Lohmühle,' is to get acknowledgement for their public space as a cultural site of importance for the city. They are also trying to keep their communication going by publishing a book about their ideas and findings. Lohmühle is an open and social space where readings are fluent and where the definitions of the space are still ongoing and where an illegal beginning with dialogue may turn legal.

In the context of these two specific projects, it is important to remember social space is not utopia that can solve every problem of a society divided by class that often is socially and physically segregated. But space can – if we pursue it like Fusion and Lohmühle does – minimize the gaps that prevent people from communicating. The question still arises: how can we implement this discourse in urban planning when the tendency in a range from urban renewal to suburbia avoids having people from diverse backgrounds meet and live together.

And furthermore, how do we design and produce public spaces – or even public art – that encourages people to meet and become involved in dialogue and social space?

In this context, the most interesting and important dialogue in universities doesn't happen in the auditoriums, but around the coffee machines and hallways. So… how do we build intriguing architecture that facilitates dialogue amongst diverse students (as Rem Koolhaas once posited in a lecture)?

These two self-organized projects are characterized by a concrete social reality that needed pragmatic solutions. Their way of dealing with public space by transforming them into social space may raise far more questions than solutions. One thing is for sure, the public spaces we know today are far too static and far too unlivable. We may have to recall some experiences, drawn from nomadic traditions, and count them into a more fluent urban planning where streets, squares and parks can change nature. All dependent on a socio economical condition that spurs the individual's participation and engagement in dialogue. We may start calling this a social space.

- Do you use public spaces?
- Where you ever refused access to one?
- Do you think every one has the same access?
- Who owns the public space you use?
- WHAT DEFINES IF A PUBLIC SPACE IS PUBLIC?
- How does a public space look like?
- Are you social in public spaces?
- Would you like to be more social in public?
- What do you learn from being social in public?
- IS PUBLIC SPACE A PLACE FOR INTERACTION OR FUNCTIONALITY?
- Do you think it is possible to plan and consider behavior of others?
- Do you think public spaces can be organized by volunteers?
- WOULD YOU LIKE TO USE PUBLIC SPACE MORE IN YOUR LIFE IF YOU COULD?
- Have you ever occupied a space?
- Did you ever see someone refused access to one?
- WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO GET OUT OF USING PUBLIC SPACE?
- CAN YOU IMAGING A BETTER INTEGRETION OF YOUR PRIVATE AND PUBLIC/social LIFE?
- Where you ever told as a child not to speak to strangers?
- Have you ever talked to a stranger in public?
- Did they look like you?
- Did they behave like you?
- Whom would you be afraid of to meet in a public space?
- Should they be denied access?
- Do you feel lonely?