IBA_ACADEMY Heidelberg
knowledge / base(d) / urbanism
Keynote Lecture March 21st, 2014

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What Cities Know About: Urban Spaces as Civic Labs

May be, it sounds solemn and pathetic, but this indeed is supposed to: Today we all are actors as well as witnesses of a revolution! – Of a revolution of our cities' public and cultural life! Everywhere the urban civil society seems on the move. And not only within the dramatic scope of political mass movements from Tahrir Place in Cairo to Maidan in Kiev. It rather and more often assumes unspectacular forms: green eco-initiatives or local civic forums, parents' networks or art happenings, fairs in the neighbourhood or tourist parties. You can actually find this everywhere, also in rather "placid" cities like here in Heidelberg, in Montpellier or in Salamanca.

However, this idyll shouldn't be mistaken. It often is about fundamental issues, too: about social spaces, public debates, political conflicts, and – at least "cultural" – revolutions. Since today the cities themselves are „on the move". They create new images and ambitious ideas of their situations and ambitions: their „local brand". And they search for a new „We": a new „local mind". So it is this new "self-awareness", which makes most of them appear extremely attractive and intégrative: as places with an own „local spirit".

Why that? – First and simple answer: Because *we*, the citizens, want it that way! Because we search for more social life, for more cultural variety and for more political participation in our cities. Because we now want to turn functional „working places" of the past into atmospheric "living spaces" at present. And especially: Because these urban spaces and lifestyles become an *identity lab* for us, too, as a design studio of new images also of ourselves as residents.

So: „Yes, we and the cities can! We can do our own urban thing!" This would be the guiding theme of the current „renaissance of the cities". This is also the solemn message of the "new urbanism". And this also touches directly our subject here in Heidelberg: „knowledge – base(d) – urbanism". In four short pieces I would like to explore now something more of those new perspectives on urban spaces and knowledge cultures:
1. looking at the historical paradigm shift of urbanity,
2. at the concept of urban knowledge,
3. at its social actors and representatives - and
4. at its practical effects and political framings.

1. Urban spirit: a paradigm shift!

How „revolutionary" this new urbanism really is, we actually can only realize, if we look back in time, too. Because: Historically the city evolved from the immigration of people, knowledge, ideas, and goods moving on to the urban market - thus, from social mobility and cultural innovation. This historical and principal dynamic however then concisely expresses in the ongoing formation and design of urban lifestyles, infrastructures, architectures, institutions. And in this way „city" always represents both: a migrant and a synthetic product! "Migrant", since the city is reliant on its foreign exchanges and its terms of trade. And "synthetic", since it depends on the integration of different social structures, cultural styles, and power architectures.

This is also the „genetic code" of the modern city of the 20th century. Since now, however, it evidently embodies stronger dynamics of growth. Because it systematically develops industrial forms of labor division and capitalist forms of knowledge exploitation. Even though urban spaces thereby become more heterogeneous, this growing social and cultural variety is still subjected to the *fordist* work regime and the *functional* planning regime. And that means, that all urban living forms remain subordinate to industrial production, modern traffic, and capitalist consume, that they are supposed to be effective "job worlds", not comfortable "life worlds".

The first then to break with this iron "fordist" principle – and that's what matters to me here – is now our late-modern urban life, which initiated the turn in many ways and radically indeed. Since today we carry out a sharp paradigm shift: from the old model of the city as work- and traffic-world to the very and new idea of the city as culture- and life-world. And this indeed means a deep *mental change*, too: Since urban knowledge and urban mind also redefine and express in new cultural styles and practises.

Without any doubt this paradigm shift is also the consequence of a previous policy shift. Because the dramatic and worldwide „crisis of the cities" - latest in the 1960s - forced a radical change of course in urban policy. As a reminder only: In 1961 Jane Jacobs released her dark diagnosis: „The Death and Life of Great American Cities". In 1971 the German Association of Cities demanded: „Save our cities – now!" And in the same year a New York art group produced a T-Shirt with that logo „I love New York". – We all know it. But we today tend to forget, that back then, in 1971, it was not the logo of a "hip" metropolis. It rather was a cry for help from a "dying" city. Of a city, which like many others at that time was on the verge of yielding to traffic, destruction, cement, crime and emigration.

Today this logo "I love NY" represents a kind of an „urbanistic" declaration of love. And it is not only produced in and for New York anymore, but in many cities all over the world. So this „Heart-Shirt" is imaginatively varied, too. Like to a button for example: „I kiss Neukölln". It´s a self-ironic declaration of love to a former prole district in Berlin, which is now on the move to a new hipness" - also because of those t-shirts, kisses and logos as new iconographical and biographical urban textures.

Since this crisis however our cities have sustainably changed. A lot of old industrial productions and infrastructures disappeared. And in favour and in the 1970s, new spatial and cultural structures arose. In this regard especially municipal „top down" programs were launched to institutionalize and festivalize *culture*: in the shape of new urban museums and art galleries, of music- and theatre festivals, of libraries and

literary coffee shops, of parks and plants. And at the same time countless „bottom up" culture- and citizens' initiatives developed, which took care of schools, trees, traffic and playgrounds. Thus, a dual process began: of *culturalising* urban spaces and of *communitising* urban groups. - And in the meantime our contemporary civil societies arose from this, where we actively "re-build" our urban landscapes and we "re-design" our urban mentalities. Since today we simply *know*, that here we can live differently and better. And this is about this new urban parole: "Yes we can!"

This also makes us realize, how important this new and intense interaction of spaces, actors and knowledge in the cities is. Because thereby economic developments connect with social experiences and with local movements to form urban creative groups and clusters. And also because urban spaces more and more turn into social *contact zones* and into *public stages*: Ecologic movements demand a policy of the „green city". Local citizens' initiatives regard urban spaces themselves as „commons". Start ups develop their "Smart City Apps" here. And architects want to design the urban landscape even more "humanly" in terms of „anthropologically oriented aesthetics". (Der Architekt 6/2013, 32).

In this regard, the question „Who owns the city?" does not seem to be a rhetorical phrase anymore. Much more, even urban utopias seem "thinkable" again.

But at the same time, we also notice, that these new urban spaces, movements, and knowledge based cultures are manifoldly threatened: by the consequences of social inequality and segregation, by centralist and functionalist plannings, by the impacts of gentrification and capitalization.
An artist initiative in Berlin catches this ambivalence of the urban space situation and plays with it. Again in the form of a T-Shirt – New York calling. However, the Berlin T-Shirt doesn't argue with "Love" but with "Fear". Since it says „Fear of Hermannplatz" – symbolically spoken with a question-mark. Let me explain: Hermannplatz is a central shopping spot and traffic junction in Berlin. Furthermore it is located at an intersection of social weak and migrant residential districts. And it is also considered to be a „dangerous place" with crime and drug dealing.
Now, the T-Shirt very consciously plays with this social and cultural ambiguity of the places images, with imaginations and stories, with fears and stereotypes. And by doing so, it virtually invites natives as well as tourists to the Hermannplatz. So: On the one hand, it provokes the visitors: „Are you too afraid to come to our ghetto?" On the other hand and at the same time, it invites us. And it declares the place to be an "urban common": an urban space for everyone. But indeed a specific social and exotic space!
And this provocation works even twofold: Since then the T-Shirt sells excellently. And the Hermannplatz little by little turns into a „hot spot" in Berlin. Hence, the artist initiative smartly applied its „urban knowledge".

To me, this seems to be an excellent lesson, regarding the interaction of urban knowledge and urban culture. Because today our knowledge-based society works in its daily routine just like the Hermannplatz example: mostly playful and creative, often ambivalent and unclear, sometimes mixing party and policy. And that means: in a post-traditional urban spirit and style.

2. What does urban knowledge mean?

First of all it means, that today our knowledge-based societies are not only dependent on academic and technical knowledge and on the corresponding formal educational qualifications. This means only one source. Since the *knowledge systems of everyday life* are at least equally important, too. Because they store, condense and pass on amazingly "divers" and "varied" social experiences. And because a lot of models of *applied* knowledge and of *social* creativity originate from it: namely concrete local initiatives, social practices and cultural experiments.

In this regard, knowledge-based sociological concepts consider *society* as a complex configuration, in which knowledge substantially structures and designs our social spaces, its orders, its groups and its balances of power. Since on the one hand the access to knowledge determines, which possibilities of social representation and of political participation people, groups and ideas have in society. Every knowledge privilege establishes and cements social exclusions and hierarchies. On the other hand knowledge defines our belongings in everyday life. There we know our ways around, and there we know each other – or not.

In this respect, our everyday knowledge navigates us through the social landscape like a „GPS". It helps to identify its spaces and groupings and to differentiate it as *own* and *alien*. And some urban practices even support just that: like for example tourist bashing graffiti in Berlin or in Rome – with their political message: "You´re not welcome!"

In this sense, our urban spaces today involve a very own and complex *geography of knowledge*. That means: place- and space bound cultures of knowledge, collected in local constellations and organised in social configurations: for example, in the local interaction of urban trade and handicraft, of regional architecture and urban design. Or regarding the symbolic mapping of civic, migrant and tourist „zones" in our urban spaces. Or like those countless Apps, which open up urban "to do´s": club scenes, food cultures or art galleries.

What David Livingston recently diagnosed for the *scientific* knowledge, also generally applies to *societal* knowledge: „Science is concerned with both: ideas and institutions, with theories and practises, with principles and performances. And all of these have *spatial* dimensions." (David N. Livingstone: Putting science in its place. Geographies of scientific knowledge. Chicago 2003, 12)

„Spatial dimensions": This especially applies to urban knowledge. Because in the condensed and compact city area spatial and cognitive textures are traditionally tightly intertwined. Carnival in Venice or in Cologne, Art Nouveau buildings in Vienna or in Prague, citizens' initiatives in Berlin or in Basel: All those versions represent *general* as well as specific *local* knowledge traditions at the same time. And by doing so, they represent a historically-based local knowledge, which is stored in the urban spaces and in the urban society: in form of *knowledge communities* and *knowledge zones* – namely as local initiatives, clubs, neighbourhoods, internet blogs, profession groups.

This urban knowledge is thus communicated, circulated and practised in quite different social and spatial configurations, be it in the everyday mode of a conversation or in the digital medium of the internet. However, if it is involved in

concrete and sustainable local practices, an own knowledge culture evolves: numerous *social communities of practise*! - And now it is them, who form a partly collaborative, partly competitive structure parallel to the local administration. Because they organise different knowledge in different forms: in civil talks and backyard meetings, in open databases and media services, in new social forums and net-works. So, all this is indeed about: *civic science*!

Since, what matters is: These are mostly *heterogeneous* groupings – socially, generationally and culturally mixed, often with controversial opinions and rather informal structures. And especially this structure makes them „smarter" in a way, because they permanently negotiate and arrange their social perceptions and their styles of reasoning anew. Hence, it is this specific mode of social and processual knowledge, which acts as *urban knowledge* and as *civic science*.

3. Who are the social actors and representatives?

Those activities of civic movements introduce completely new dynamics to our political-administratively "barricaded" societies. Since urban spaces thus become a permanent *civic workshop*: namely as places of social contact, of cultural experiments, and also: of new concepts of „society". Of a society, which increasingly wants to consider itself as a *civic society*, organised in specific local terms. And that means: although diverse in its experiences and lifestyles, yet referring to common values, gearing to the common good, aiming at self-organisation, imagined as a landscape of communities, and obliged to a local mind and a public spirit as a habit of *civic ethos.*

Therefore „urbanistic" attitudes today more and more rapidly feed into „actionist" forms: The amount of local occasions as well as the variety of the civil models obviously keep lowering the threshold to activity. In this respect, this "mode" of taking part in protests, in round tables, in initiatives or in lists of signatures almost belongs to a „civic habitus" – almost used like "friendships" on facebook, but with totally another obligational force. Since this habit then is about *urban identity-work* and *local networking* at the same time.

Though a new configuration in city planning and in urban policy thereby evolves, too. The *individual* expert and his certified knowledge is now confronted by a new *collective* expertise, which represents another, a social and practical knowledge, and which receives its mandate from the civil movement. A new "amateur-expertise" via urban citizenship: This now questions both, the old top-down mode of city planning as well as the old nimbus of administrative experts.

And alongside this civic expertise a new form of strategic *moralisation* finds its way into urban policy, too. This corresponds to the general societal development. Since vegetarianism and fair-clothing style are just as "moralised", thus declared to be *ethically* superior attitudes, as the correct social or sexual identification or as urban bikeways and street trees. So, everything is thereby put in a greater ideological context, which symbolically elevates a specific decision, and which declares it as a question of principle.

Civic groups use this strategy, too. They also „moralise" political positions and thereby create a new urban political correctness. On the one hand this adds up: the

exchange of collective value measures in planning and policy is indeed necessary. On the other hand, however, this takes place with certain value debates in mind, where own ecological, political or aesthetic convictions are likely to be made absolute. Architecture-critics warn against a new „mediocrity from below", which easily finds its way into the "participative" organisation of public buildings. And „moralising" also means, that other arguments get de-moralised and marked as out of question.

In any case, urban policy shall now be organised as an open process: transparent, participative, integrative. And this turn from top down to bottom up takes place against a sociologically enlightening background. Since recent studies – for example in Switzerland and in Germany – indicate, that our civil-societal movements are recruited considerably more often from *middle class* members, than expected. And also, that especially those middle classes form urban projects and initiatives and vote at a petition for a referendum and at local elections. – Certainly it is not only them. However, the wishes and values of the civil movements apparently express especially this: spatial perceptions, educational concerns and the cultural styles of urban middle classes – which often already belong to the generation of "digital natives". At any rate, members of the lower classes as well as of migrant groups or older generations are considerably under-represented.

So, on the one hand, the social *carrier-groups* are indeed, what the economist Richard Florida described as mobile "creative classes". Namely, high earners in technological industries, in the media and the cultural sector, who often move and want to discover an attractive life world at their current work place. On the other hand, many „native" groups also already prefer such a „new" city world. They also appreciate cultural variety, attractive leisure worlds, and plural lifestyles and they also visit theatre and opera as well as clubs and urban beaches.

Insofar the lifestyles of residents and mobiles, of migrants and tourists have converged within the past 20 years in most of our cities. At least much more, than those „local tribes" want to admit, who complain about a swamping by foreigners infiltration of their cities – like actually some populistic movements in Germany, Denmark or just now in Switzerland do.

But despite those limitations the wide spectrum of actors, ideas and projects remains still impressive. Especially compared to these desolate urban landscapes of the 1970s, the contrast is downright breathtaking, since we as today's' urbanists get enthusiastic about free urban spaces, urban commons and local citizenship.

4. What does this knowledge induce in our cities?

First of all: „Urban visions" are in demand again! Urban spaces as cultural life worlds, business parks as creative districts, city centers even as green leisure resorts: These are perspectives of a new *mental belonging* to our cities, too - images indeed of a new urban home and citizenship!

In this process now urban research has a double function: On the one hand it has to „empathically" accompany the urban movements and developments. On the other hand it has to act „praxeographic": It has to observe urban space- and knowledge

practices within their concrete processes and fields of action. Since only this interplay of closeness and distance can help organise sustainable *knowledge transfers* in urban politics.

Of course, I can't present such detailed "praxeographic" analyses here, given the short time span. Anyways, I would like to outline some fields, where the strong social dynamics of urban movements and the amazing cultural creativity of urban knowledge cultures become apparent. And in doing so, I thereby will consciously single out a cross section of grand and political as well as of small and everyday topics.

Like – my first example - the struggle for a *new public* of spaces within the city. Namely, for "open" spatial structures, where private practises and civic actions as well as commercial events can evolve: neighbourhood banquets and street concerts, soup kitchens and trade markets, play streets and urban gamings – and also Caribbean carnivals as in London or Jewish Meschugga parties as in Berlin. All this shows us both: the "rediscovery" of urban space as a zone of public life – and at the same time its new "invention" as an intercultu-ral space, as a stage and as a playground of divers urban styles and groups. Since only here, in those „shared urban contact zones", these groups can face themselves by the experience of their heterogeneities as well as of their similarities. So this "reclaim of the city" turns public space into a local *identity lab* indeed. And this thereby makes an intelligent urban space management a highly lucrative symbolic investment.

Or – second example: The increased architectural attempts and programms to save the constructional *urban heritage*. Namely, to only carefully renew it, to preserve its substance, to variably design its spaces. Since also the post traditional city does certainly not say "goodbye" to its history. It rather tries to organise an active historisation and authentification of the urban life worlds. That´s, what faces us everywhere and every day: On their menus many restaurants talk about the building's history, about the family's Bavarian or Indian origin, about the kitchen's tradition. On big site fence signs local restoration projects inform the public about the historical place and the reconstruction plan. And actually a lot of in memoriam notices on walls as well as on the internet announce the „death" of historical buildings or of trendy bars.
All these little texts are elements of a great and strategic urban narrative: Since they refer to the "common capital" of urban knowledge and local menory.

Or – third example: The rediscovery of urban quarters and *neighbourhoods*. Especially this „intimate life" of the streets and quarters seems to convey an urban home-feeling as a new element of urban representation and identity. A few years ago, this was quite still different: Affiliation to a certain neighbourhood often meant social discrimination. Since "hood" – in Berlin called "Kiez" - described an urban territory of lower class and migration. Today placing in a specific hood vice versa means a kind of urban "nobilitation": to socially be located and rooted. And you don't even have to be born there anymore. Today, even immigrants are rather very quickly turned into „avowed natives". You thereby join a rather symbolic local *we-group*, which however declares itself as well as all of its members authentic: as the real member of the local "tribe" in Heidelberg or Neukölln.

Or – fourth example: The *gentrification* of urban quarters, where local knowledge and local networks are of increasing importance. Because it is the collective urban knowledge, that helps observing those spatial-social processes of displacement, which come along with the cultural upgrading and the growing capitalisation of urban spaces. Therefore quarter groups, neighbourhood networks, intercultural clubs and tenants' initiatives are important partners for responsible urban policy. Only they can indeed notice such processes within their social environment and in the concrete course. And only they also can actively mobilize against them.
But at the same time however it becomes apparent, that urban knowledge can un-intentionally contribute to gentrification, too. Since also the maintenance of urban history and quarter culture, of neighbourhood and urban parks makes urban spaces saver, more attractive and thereby more precious. - This is an actual dilemma, which also affects city planning and urban research and on which we will have to thoroughly reflect.

Or – fifth example: The *mediterranisation* of our city centres, namely the installation of café terraces and urban beaches, of palm trees and oleander on the riversides and in pedestrian zones, to imagine an urban "open air resort". As I´ve seen this afternoon, Heidelberg also experiences a makeover these days: the "palm-treeing" and the "beaching" of the city. Thousands of pot plants, of deck chairs, of parasols are put outdoors, to stage "Riviera on the Neckar" – in aesthetical as well as in atmospheric terms. Here, migrant traditions are just as important as our own tourist experiences: Both forms of "mediterranean" knowledge come together. And this combination then enables us to "southern" imaginations and scena-rios – dreamed "at home".
However, this aesthetic concept of mediterranisation also includes a certain affinity towards self-irony and masochism. Because we all know, that it is not always a real pleasure, to attend beach life and terrace culture in northern cities. And at the riverside of Neckar or Thames at 12 degrees temperature, even caipirinha and salsa-music don't really convey a "southern" sense and taste of life.

Or – sixth and last example: Art events, which increasingly enter in public spaces as aesthetic intervention and as "creative common". These days, from Beijing to Berlin, concepts like urban knitting, urban gardening or urban art attempt to actively shake and break the routines of urban everyday life and the isolation of urban spaces. Since "Interventions" as unusual ideas, unusual uses and unusual aesthetics are supposed to stimulate fantasies, to change the taste of urban spaces and to create new forms of event communities. And here again many actions operate with methods of self-irony: When urban spaces are re-decorated as village idylls, as gardening fields or as vacation landscapes. „Go alien - to come familiar": That is an old and now also anew strategy of urban avantgardists, to re-open urban spaces and minds.

Now, I will stop here and come to an end. All these examples were mainly supposed, to demonstrate the widespread spectrum of *civic* actions and movements. And therein expresses especially this: a real dramatic change of „urban culture" and of „urban mentality"!
Since it is not only about a vanguard fantasy concept of the city. No: These new and other conceptions of spatial use and city design, of lifestyle and creativity, of pleasure and party, of networking and communifying: They rather already became „everyday" demands and „popular" attitudes – namely *public* movements and *civic* practises.
And that´s it precisely, what gives them a new historical and cultural legitimacy!

And this legitimacy in particular makes the grave difference towards the urban everyday life of the 1980s, when "fordist" work- and life ethics still dominated. When shopping, promenading, jogging, chilling, partying in the cities afternoon still were deeply „illegitimate" needs. When ice-cream, aperitif and espresso in the local Italian Coffe Shop named "Venice" had to be consumed inside, behind curtains: no "dolce vita" in the bright and public afternoon! When rigorous textures of work, stress, traffic, anonymity were still inscribed into the urban spaces – and no messages of a „free" urban life.

Today, it is that, what we first and foremost have to commemorate: that this open urban culture in its diversity and polyphony is indeed something new and great. Since it rapidly changes, it consistently re-invents itself. And it permanently incorporates new ideas, new people, new groups. Since it concentrates in collective knowledge- and practice forms and thereby makes the city itself appear as a „collective actor". - And since especially its increasingly civic character creates completely new dynamics of identification and integration.

During this actual transformation of the urban society old clichés disappear, too: Confrontations for example of "native" and "migrant" make just as little sense as those of "private" and "public" or of "party" and "policy". Since the boundaries in between become blurred. And in the open spaces new "inter-cultural zones" and "hybrid mixtures" come to the front.

So, I guess: In our cities it becomes apparent, how quickly we move towards "trans-local", "post-industrial" and "post-migrant" times – to societal times however "beyond" the fordistic urban screen. And the new urbanism provokes to use the „city-lab" as a societal field for experiments: namely, to further develop urban landscape and urban society alongside more in-conventional as well as sustainable cultural ideas:

- As for instance developing the concept of the *social city* further on, by regarding its working-, living- and educating facilities as corporate resources, as urban commons, which have to be „fairly" distributed and used.
- Or the concept of the city as growing *intercultural space*, where variety and encounter push the further cosmopolitanization of the urban cultures.
- Or the concept of the *green city*, which wants to sustainably improve the health as well as the aesthetic qualities of the urban landscape – especially via ecological and energetic plans of architecture and transport.
- Or the concept of the *creative city*, which draws its cultural capital from the immigration of mobile groups and from the presence of tourists. Since it thereby receives new impulses for intelligent product- as well as service economies.

But I also guess, that none of these „great" objectives, however, will be achieved, unless they are built on the base of "little" civil-societal initiatives. - Unless „urban heritage" does not only mean architectures, city theatres and museums anymore, but especially also the social knowledge resources and practice forms of the city. - Unless the „civic" knowledge-based cultures and energy potentials aren't even more intensively integrated as tools of an „everyday steering" into the urban policy. - Unless it is finally understood, that urban space and urban knowledge are just as valuable and inalienable "commons": our "urban crown jewels"! –

And in order to design and to polish these "cultural urban jewels" furtheron, an International Building Exhibition here in the city of Heidelberg could indeed be the perfect "civic" place and formate!