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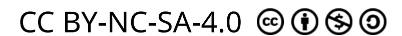
CC BY-NC-SA-4.0 

Making the Built Environment One's Own—In a Playful, Artistic, and Cartographic Way

A playful appropriation of space, artistic intervention in public space, and participatory cartography offer novel perspectives on the built environment (Baukultur) by challenging existing spatial conventions and making transformative processes possible. The following article demonstrates this through a number of examples. Playful approaches emphasize the negotiation of individual and socially formed ideas of space through inventive activities that reinterpret familiar places and charge them with new meanings. Artistic interventions critically confront social power structures and the ways space is used. Participatory cartographies create a space for subjective perception and offer marginalized groups a vehicle to determine their own perception and visibility. Together, these approaches promote a dynamic understanding of the built environment that encourages children and young people in particular to engage critically and creatively with a given space.

"Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 12). And nothing is more boring than an ordinary life dictated by others. This also means accepting the spaces in one's immediate environment as others built them for a predetermined use. But appropriating a space or place also means making it feel foreign to oneself and others, at least for a time. This is especially true for the space one lives in and uses every day as a matter of course. The question, then, is how exactly this living space can transform into free space, and the answer quite likely lies in its playful appropriation.

In the following text, I offer selected examples in an effort to examine the connections between playful appropriation of space, artistic interventions in public space, and participatory cartography. My aim is to work out how these approaches can together contribute to promoting an understanding of the built environment[1] and in particular an individual's social and cultural engagement with the space. A special focus is on the perspectives and experiences of children and young people and the development of their perception.

[1] In this text, the phrase "built environment" is offered as an equivalent to what is known in German-speaking countries as "Baukultur," i.e., a much broader understanding than the architectural quality of the built environment alone.

Playful appropriation of space

How a person uses their living space presupposes a certain understanding of space that changes and develops over the course of a lifetime. According to Piaget, Inhelder, and Szeminska (1948), a topological understanding of space crystallizes between the ages of two and seven, when the child understands spatial relationships from their own position in space. By the age of around eleven, a projective understanding of space begins to form, whereby children gradually comprehend relationships such as distances between fixed points other than their own. This is followed by the development of a Euclidean understanding of space, which makes it possible to relate various abstract elements to one another, such as those found on classic maps.

It is difficult to determine whether these different understandings of space that an individual acquires over the course of their lifetime replace one another, or whether they overlap and exert a simultaneous layered effect. It can be observed, however, that the Euclidean concept is a fundamental prerequisite for utilizing the capacity to abstract in order to recognize the built environment as an expression of other people's ideas. Over the course of our lives, we acquire the ability to view our living space as separate from our personal perspectives, needs, and circumstances; we learn that there is no one understanding of space. This does not, however, mean relinquishing our personal understanding of space, but rather recognizing perspectives different from our own and, if necessary, agreeing with others on common rules for occupying this space together.

The term "appropriation of space" is to be understood in this context. We can see it as a negotiation process in which a space or place is either interpreted, used, or redesigned in a way that was not intended by its original builders. Appropriating space can also imply a reactivation of the early childhood perceptions of space described above, in which the child always understands space in relation to their own position or another significant reference point. This is where the topological and projective understanding of space takes effect.

Appropriating space can, however, go beyond the individualization or "infantilization" of space and introduce a new understanding of how the embodied knowledge of both individuals

and systemically marginalized groups can question established and accepted ways spaces are designed and used.

A prime example of a playful appropriation of space is the Leut'Werk group's *Bauvorhaben Mitmachstadt* (Hands-On City Building Project) from 1979–1981 (see Fig. 1). Carried out in the context of cultural festivals, several tons of clay were deposited in public areas in various West German cities (cf. Hummel 2019, pp. 298 ff.; Hummel, 2023, p. 75), and over the course of a few days, people were invited to take part in constructing a city and, in a playful process, to engage with issues of the built environment. The miniature cities they built not only reflected the real environment, discourses, and interests, but also, for people who have no say in the usual urban planning discussions and decision-making processes (cf. Hummel, forthcoming), became a way to negotiate utopian visions. On the initiative of Claudia Hummel, the project was carried out again in 2015 in Bernau, a small city just northeast of Berlin under the title *Mitmachstadt Bernau*, this time in an interior space (see Fig. 2), with around a thousand participants and over a period of three months. Here, too, the question was raised as to how the participants' own city could look. Due to an ongoing changeover in active builders—the majority of them being children, but there were also adults—existing structures were repeatedly rebuilt or demolished. It also happened, however, that schoolchildren who had come with their class during the week returned on the weekend to at least partially prevent their buildings from being demolished (cf. Hummel, 2020, pp. 77 ff.).

Fig. 1: *Mitmachstadt* (Hands-On City) in Kiel. Photo and ©: Leut'Werk group, 1979. (Image is exempt from the CC license)

Fig. 2: *Mitmachstadt Bernau* (Hands-On City Bernau). Photo and ©: Mitmachstadt Team, Dagmar Lesiak, 2015. (Image is exempt from the CC license)

Playful appropriation can help reinterpret a familiar place by questioning rules and conventions and devising new ways of using it that are more in tune with one's needs or energized by new, exciting challenges. It's also a matter of discovering and

exploring urban (and rural) spaces that are often overlooked in everyday life or considered "unusable."

The transformative power of these playful approaches lies in the fact that they introduce an alternative perspective on space. In a place where all one saw previously were functional buildings, traffic arteries, and squares, play gives rise to new meanings and possibilities for use. In this sense, the playful appropriation of space can be understood as an inventive form of resistance to the fixed structures that shape the modern cityscape. It lends the individual the power to change a space and give it new purpose.

This is in particularly stark contrast to the lack of opportunities and available spaces where children can still play in an unregulated way, unaccompanied and unsupervised, such as in children's republics or on Robinson playgrounds. The *Mitmachstadt* project embodies this tension, in which the dynamics of self-perception and social interaction unfold. Free play, which is based on negotiating with others, creates a space where children can reflect on social demands and their own position. These interactions not only promote understanding the perspectives of others, but also the ability to reassure themselves and to consciously distance themselves from outside judgment. In this form of playful interaction and social negotiation, individual and collective processes become visible and tangible.

The practice of artistic intervention in public space

In addition to the playful appropriation of space, artistic intervention is a way of questioning and changing existing places. Artistic interventions often make use of unusual strategies, techniques, and staging to redefine public space, as the following examples demonstrate.

Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1981–1982* is a radical work of art in which he followed a strict rule: for the duration of one year, Hsieh lived on the streets of New York City without shelter or protection (see Fig. 3). He vowed not to enter a building or take refuge anywhere, which meant that he was completely exposed to the weather. This work underlines the precarity of social and spatial privilege. With its outward appearance as an auto-experiment, it illustrates the invisibility of marginalized experience in an urban context. For viewers, the performance provoked confusion, empathy, and reflection. Here, too, a reevaluation of the familiar took place. By intensifying a certain type of experience

and practicing it with all its consequences, uninvolved people were also able to understand. "You have to make the art stronger than life, so people can feel it." (Hsieh, 2009)

Fig. 3: Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1981–1982 (Outdoor Piece).* Photo and ©: Tehching Hsieh, 1981. (Image is exempt from the CC license)

In 2003, the Italian artist group *0100101110101101.ORG*, in collaboration with the Viennese media institution *Public Netbase*, set up an "Infobox" on a traffic island at Karlsplatz that looked like a *Nike* marketing campaign (see Fig. 4).[2] The name Karlsplatz was replaced with "nikeplatz," and the Nike logo and plans for a large-scale Nike sculpture were displayed. The action, which attracted public attention and protests in the Viennese media, was later revealed to be a critical piece on the privatization of public space and the influence of corporations on urban locations. Although *Nike* sued *Public Netbase*, they were unable to have the art project banned. This example shows how artistic interventions can feed an understanding of the built environment by ironically pointing out the corporate commercialization and appropriation of public space. The fake action at Karlsplatz made citizens think about the existing influence of private companies on urban structures and

[2] Cf. https://0100101110101101.org/nike-ground/ [14.11.2024]

public space. It was only through making a familiar environment seem foreign that subliminal interests and fears became visible and negotiable.

Fig. 4: *Nike Ground.* Photo and ©: Eva & Franco Mattes, 2003. (Image is exempt from the CC license)

Participatory cartography and spatial understanding

Another approach to appropriating space is cartography. Traditionally, cartography is an instrument of power. For a long time, the production of maps was based on technical and geographical knowledge that was only accessible to a small set, in particular the military or state. Since the 1980s, advocates of critical cartography have been questioning whether maps can be understood as objective representations of reality. They view maps as discursive constructs that generate and reinforce prescribed social and spatial beliefs. Brian Harley (1989), influenced by Michel Foucault, left his mark on the discipline by interpreting maps as "power/knowledge complexes" that reflect and shape social reality. In this vein, maps are understood less as neutral documents than as clusters of information that highlight certain features and hide others, which has political implications.

Experimental approaches break with cartographic conventions by allowing and promoting subjective and differing perspectives on space. Participatory cartography in particular has developed as a method of handing the power of mapping over to mar-

ginalized groups. This enables indigenous communities, for instance, to make their understanding of space, their knowledge, and their perspectives and interests visible to their own group and to others through communal processes. Maps of this nature not only help to preserve cultural knowledge, but also to document political concerns and land rights—unleashing an emancipatory potential that gives these groups more influence and self-determination in social discourse and ultimately contributes to having their claims recognized (cf. kollektiv orangotango 2019).

Since the 1970s at the latest, maps have also served as an important artistic subject and medium (cf. Watson, 2018). Art has continuously questioned the materiality of the map and the medium's conventions. Artists like Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, to take one example, have created audio walks that guide participants through a room or a city while listening to a soundscape that conveys memories, stories, and emotions. This allows the space to be experienced in an intimate and individual way that is very different from a classic city tour or conventional city map. Maps like these show that spaces are not static or objectively "given," but are constantly being reconstructed through individual and collective experience.

These forms of participatory cartography and artistic approaches to it are particularly interesting in an educational context, as they challenge children and young people to engage with their living space, to make what is familiar suddenly feel strange, and to critically question and redesign it. By subjectively mapping their own space, they learn early in life that places are shaped by social interactions and experiences and thus acquire an individual character. As part of the *Commoning ländliche Baukultur* (Commoning Rural Built Environment) project, which was initiated by the Schwyz University of Teacher Education and in which I was involved as an artist for several months in 2023, the aim is to sensitize children to the building heritage and possible future prospects of their Pfäffikon community. The third-graders explored their living space with their own personal questions and those provided to them, collected artifacts, gathered them together, and, in a multi-part process, chose various places that hold meaning for them in their current or changed form. They then reconstructed these places in three dimensions and placed them on a map they made themselves, the size of the classroom. The result was photographed and presented to politicians as a fold-out map wi-

th descriptions (Fig. 5).[3] Below is a selection of the questions we suggested to the children for their site exploration. The idea of the joint walks was to render the familiar public space unfamiliar, i.e., to intervene in ordinary perception:

Where is it the warmest? • Where is it the coldest? • Where is it the windiest? • Where is it the loudest? • Where is it the quietest? • Where am I not allowed to enter? • What place is not accessible to anyone? • Where are adults also not allowed? • Where does it smell good? • Where does it stink the worst? • What place makes other people feel sad? • What place makes me feel sad? • Where would I like to lie down? • Where do I feel uncomfortable? • Where is it the most boring? • What place do I not understand? • Where would I like to go in/on/under? • Where would I like to celebrate my birthday? • What place do I find ugly? • Where do I find it particularly beautiful? • What place has a secret? • If I could make a place melt (yes, melt, in the sense of a superpower), which would it be? • What place should you only experience by running? • What place should you experience very slowly? • What place would I like to see from above? • What place scares me? • What place would I like to observe if I were invisible? • What place is important to my parents? • Where can I hide something? • Where would I hide if I didn't want anyone to find me? • Where do animals feel particularly comfortable? • What place has a long history? • What place is home to ghosts or other beings? • Where is there no cell phone reception? • Where can you look especially deep down into the earth? • What place can you only rarely go to? • Where can you hear a particularly large number of languages? • What place is never cleaned? • What place would I most like to gobble up? • What place looks good on a postcard? • Where have I gotten lost before? • What place would I show someone visiting Pfäffikon for the first time? • What place gives me hope? • What place would my grandparents like? • What place would be particularly good for painting on (regardless of whether it's allowed or not)? • What place has a story that no one has ever heard (and that I have to first think up)? • What place have I dreamt about and why? • What place do I know better from the internet than in real life? • What place is better in my imagination than in real life? • Complicated question: If I were to have children, what place could become very important to them that doesn't seem at all important now?

The questions were chiefly aimed at addressing feelings and needs and connecting them to real and occasionally imaginary places. They pick up on existing ideas, but also invite children to

[3] Cf. also the article by Weniger/Pinheiro Batista/Kolb in the same issue of this e Journal.

draw completely new connections to see and explore their living space differently in the future.

Creating a printed map was crucial because the aim was to make the children's perspectives of space, which can differ widely from those of adults, tangible for them.

Fig. 5: Front of the folding map *Unser Pfäffikon – Die Baukultur-Expert:innen von morgen* (Our Pfäffikon—The built environment experts of tomorrow). Design: Mirko Winkel, 2023. Full version available at: https://digital.phsz.ch/pub/CLB/WebHome/Karte%20unser%20Pfäffikon.pdf [02.11.2024]

Concluding considerations

At this juncture, I would like to discuss the potential and risks of playful and artistic approaches to addressing space.

As described above, games provide an opportunity to set up new rules and, within these, to offer players new perspectives and new ways to socially negotiate the familiar environment. Play and art are closely linked here. In particular, artistic interventions in public space and experimental mapping practices, especially participatory ones, can change people's perception of space in the long term. There is also, however, a risk that certain spatial images will simply be reproduced when it's not entirely clear whether the same expectations will once again creep into spatial perception. After much discussion, the participants in *Mitmachstadt* said: "Ms. Hummel, we took a vote. We don't want to build apartments, we want to build an amusement park." They put together a concert stage, sports field, and film studios from the *SpongeBob SquarePants*

series (cf. Hummel, 2020, p. 79). Something similar happened with the project in Pfäffikon. There is, in other words, no uninfluenced view of a city or district; the narrative always consists of the subject matter and media that participants consume. This especially happens in the above-mentioned interplay between self-perception and social interaction, where artistic intervention differs from free play. In art, altering and responding to the environment always serves to cast urban space issues into higher relief.

Participatory mapping, in turn, is a way of relating subjective perceptions of space to other spatial perceptions, i.e., pluralizing them. A playful appropriation of space, artistic intervention, and participatory cartography demonstrate that the built environment, along with the physical design of buildings, squares, etc., always includes the individual's social and cultural engagement with space. It is precisely in this interplay that I see special opportunities for artists, children, and young people to not only understand a familiar space differently, but also to make themselves and their perspectives visible and open to discussion. This shows that spaces are not unchanging and static, but that artistic action and reflection always reveal their limits of understanding and, in the best of cases, reinterpret and redesign them.

English translation: Andrea Scrima

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