



THE LUXURY OF EMPTINESS

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The title of Wolfgang Kil's book 'The Luxury of Emptiness' accurately describes the situation of public spaces in shrinking cities. Given the huge amount of mediocre architecture in our cities, it would not be difficult to philosophise about its removal and the resulting freedom for the creation of public spaces. But this is not the real issue. Empty, boarded up buildings; windows covered with posters as alternatives to billboards in urban spaces; derelict buildings beside restored 19th century facades; gardens and plots that have run wild and resemble primeval forests more closely than well groomed residential areas – these are sights in our public realm that arouse negative, or just unusual, associations. There is simply too much building stock, too much infrastructure, too much that is no longer needed and can no longer be afforded. People's needs and requirements have changed, and there are fewer people around. Since German reunification in 1990, people have moved from the cities out into the suburbs, have left for more prosperous regions where there are jobs to be had, and have had fewer children. Combined with industrial restructuring and changes in service industries, this has meant that increasing numbers of properties – of various types – are being left vacant. In some places, the freedom this offers to change the use of the buildings or to remove them altogether is too much for both the population and for planners to handle. What should we do with so much space? Inevitably, the inverse question also crops up, a question that the city of Halle has been asking itself as part of the IBA Stadtumbau in Sachsen-Anhalt: how much public space do people need? And how much can we afford? We can identify three major trends in this regard:

GREEN SPACES AS A 'PUBLIC PATIENT'

Given current constraints on municipal budgets in Germany, attempts are being made to reduce the monies spent on the maintenance of public space. The level of care given and the total acreage looked after are both being reduced in order to minimise financial burdens. Municipalities are planning low maintenance public spaces, for example by creating forested areas when redeveloping former high density housing areas. Forests are the most economical way of using space to

create green areas; they are cheap to create and also economical to maintain. An example of this can be found in the Halle district of Silberhöhe, where a large scale residential development which already contains a large number of green areas is being transformed into an urban forest. Urban public space is thus regaining ground in our cities.

CITIZENS ANNEXING PUBLIC AREAS

The use of open spaces is also changing. Land freed up by former supermarkets or housing that is no longer needed is being converted into semi-communal agricultural or horticultural land at the edges of the city, where it seamlessly adjoins existing farmland. However, the land made available has been annexed by a variety of groups. One family set out rows of tomato plants; a Japanese martial arts enthusiast laid out a Zen garden; and people who enjoyed gardening or simply being in the fresh air occupied their own zones. The first act of the new occupiers was to create a boundary between their areas and the remaining public space, marking their territory and making private space visible. The reaction of the people of Halle was mixed, with some protesting against the privatisation of parts of the newly created public spaces.

CREATING SEMI-PUBLIC SPACES

In inner cities, the demolition of the second row of buildings in a block is seen as a liberation from excessive density, especially in the closed courtyards of 19th century districts. Often, the old auxiliary buildings or servants' quarters now lie vacant. They are being replaced with open spaces and green areas, considerably increasing the residential quality of life in cities. Buildings constructed along major traffic arterials or at problematic corner locations do not retain residential functions. Given the large number of properties available, tenants have the freedom to avoid occupying those which they regard as inferior. The vacant buildings are re-used to house infrastructure that is lacking, such as parking spaces or garages. They are also converted into commercial units, as although traffic creates noise it also offers passing trade. The gaps created by demolition are also used for recreation, by the neighborhood or by those living next door. Another

trend is ‘Turning three into two’, purchasing an adjacent plot and dividing it up between the two neighbours, allowing improved access and increasing the amount of light available to residential units. Thus although a large number of residential buildings are due for demolition, the way in which these spaces are being reused is not satisfactory. The constructions seem temporary and spontaneous rather than demonstrably permanent. One has the impression of pioneer plants which are subjecting themselves to an unreliable experiment, and are observed by all with suspicion.

PUBLIC SPACE: AN OUTDATED CONCEPT?

Increasingly, the way inner city open spaces (or ‘gaps’) are used is being affected by artistic interventions or citizens’ interests (‘The Night of Vacant Lots’: walks through empty lots or derelict sites). These gaps are occupied by temporary uses such as (temporary) car sales areas and election campaigning, so as to realise any possible economic benefit from the spaces. In a city whose population is decreasing, the sense of responsibility for open spaces and people’s identification with them are also decreasing. Ideas such as a ‘public room’ in urban spaces are increasingly attractive as providing quasi-public spaces, areas where the public can take a break, or informal locations where teenagers and children can play and be adventurous. The borders between public and semipublic are disappearing in some areas undergoing transformation. Space, formerly at a premium, is now regarded as a burden. In part, only increased space for private use is regarded as positive. Public space as a public asset is on the decline, and is being concentrated in a few central locations. When will we start to miss it?

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