Doris Gstach

CIVIL ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC OPEN SPACE DEVELOPMENT

ZAANGAŻOWANIE OBYWATELSKIE W ROZWÓJ OTWARTYCH PRZESTRZENI PUBLICZNYCH

Introduction

Civil engagement has a long tradition in open space development. It was already during industrialisation in the 19th century, when citizens around Europe organized and (co-)financed the implementation of public green spaces. Urban open space development was not an established public planning task by that time. German cities faced a fast and nearly unrestricted growth. Parallel to first professional voices, who called for keeping a minimum amount of space open for recreation and for climatic benefits within the dense city, citizens organized themselves to develop public green spaces. The creation of the Türkenschanzpark in Vienna/Austria[1] and Varosliget (city park) in Budapest/Hungary[2] and the Bürgerpark in Bremen/Germany[3] are based on such civic action. However, the relevance and modes of civil engagement in open space development have changed and are a common feature in many projects today.

A major move towards a more participatory urban development in Germany happened in the 1960s, when civil activists protested against established top-down politics and called for more democracy and, going with this, for a more active role in urban development. "The way into participative urban development started in Germany in the late 1960s when urban regeneration projects provoced protests, squatting and finally a broad range of self-help initiatives participatory wave (in terms of „citizen initiatives", social movements, self-help groups etc.) was still in full swing during the 1980s (and probably more pronounced then than in most other European countries)."[4] As one consequence to this, participatory elements were introduced to urban planning processes and formalized for example in §3 (participation of the public)

---

[1] Loidl-Reisch 2012: 349pp
[2] Nehring 1979: 42pp
[3] Bürgerpark Bremen n.d.
[4] Wollmann 2004: 11

in the German Building and Construction Law. In addition, a wide range of informal participative approaches have been developed and established in spatial planning processes over the past decades. Several cities actively promote such ways of civic engagement by providing information about options for volunteer work in various thematic fields. Websites support engagement and networking by offering information about various options of engagement and about initiatives and agencies working in the field of volunteer work in the district or city. In addition some cities have installed coordination offices for civic engagement, where people can get advice[5]. The involvement of civil society has become part of the contemporary planning paradigm, which is more and more based on a dialogue-oriented planning culture in formal as well as in informal processes.

1.   Towards participatory planning

A dialogue-oriented planning culture includes multiple links and alliances and manifold forms of co-operation.[6] Public open space, especially green space, however, seem particularly suitable for a dialogue with civil society . Open space related projects motivate people to get involved, as they are of high relevance for the quality of life of citizens, in practical terms of everyday use as well as in terms of places of people's identity. But, as Quayle and Driessen van der Lieck point out, a participatory and more democratic decision-making process is needed not just for the societal benefits of citizen involvement but in order to combat the development of an anonymous urban landscape in an increasingly globalised world. In their opinion it's just the creativity of many individuals, which can create the richness and diversity needed for a liveable urban environment[7].

The ways, how local authorities co-operate with civil society, can be distinguished along the level of influence of civil society[8]. On the lowest level, information, for example about a new urban development project, is given to the public, but no influence on the decision making process in this project is possible. Often, however, involvement in open space issues goes beyond that level. This can be observed well in complex and large development projects, where many planning aspects are just handled on the information level, whereas concerning open space related issues within the project, the public is involved in the decision-making process. People are actively involved and can

---

[5] For websites see e.g. Cologne: http://www.stadt-koeln.de/leben-in-koeln/ soziales/ehrenamt/informationen-und-ideen-fuer-ihr-ehrenamt and Berlin district Steglitz-Zehlendorf: http://www.berlin.de/ba-steglitz-zehlendorf/verwaltung /nga/buergerengage-ment_nga.html; for coordination offices see e.g. Berlin: https://www.berlin.de/buer-geraktiv/engagieren/
[6] Selle 2013: 13ff
[7] Quayle/Driessen van der Lieck 1997: 100
[8] See for example SenStadt 2011

– to a certain extent – influence the decision making process and therefore the product, the open space. Typical approaches are, for example, local residents participating in a planning workshop to re-design their neighbourhood park or square or plan a new yard for the school of their kids. Involvement goes even further, when citizens do not just share their ideas and wishes but take over certain duties. In open space projects these can cover construction work and plantings in a new design as well as longer term responsibilities such as watering young trees, maintaining roadside green or flower beds in public parks or maintaining playgrounds. The activities shall foster identification with the neighbourhood. At the same time, this kind of co-operation is an expression of financially struggling municipalities.[9] Civil actors take over responsibilities, which would originally have to be fulfilled by local authorities themselves.

Parallel to local authorities who involve the public on different levels, citizens continue to be active themselves in bottom-up driven processes. But rather than protesting against a certain situation, which was a main motor for such activities in the 1960s, these activities are nurtured by an individualised society, which looks for possibilities for self-determined activities and for shaping their own living environment. This includes a position moving away from asking public authorities to do something for their citizens - to fulfil their need in a demand-supply manner - towards a self-organized fulfilment of "spatial wishes" and needs. This can be understood as the open space related expression of the overall societal change towards a pluralistic ideal, which accepts diversity in needs, attitudes and expressions. Terms like do-it-yourself culture (DIY) and hands-on-urbanism illustrate such attempts. The rapidly growing number and variety of urban gardening project, which can be found all over Germany, are especially well illustrating this kind of self-fulfillment of demands. This overall trend has raised the question, how far existing types of public open spaces such as conventional parks are able to cover such demands. Some professionals argue for an extension of the spectrum of the typology towards more indeterminate open spaces, which would allow for more freedom of self-initiative of civic actors[10].

2. Some examples of participatory planning and design

The following projects illustrate different ways and levels of self-initiative of civic actors in the production of public open spaces and in which types of open spaces they are implemented. All of them are based on some kind of co-operation between local authorities and civil society, but with co-operation going beyond the widespread levels of information meetings or the collection of ideas and wishes from residents. Instead, citizens take over an active role in defining an open space, its meanings, functions and appearance.

---

[9] The maintenance of public green spaces is especially suffering from financial cuts in Germany, as this belongs to the 'voluntary tasks' of local authorities.
[10] Ward Thompson 2002

The first example shows a way how to combine civic engagement in maintenance work (fulfilment of public duties as a form of civic engagement) and the wish for self-defined action. The Kantpark in Duisburg/Germany[11] is an example for a citizen initiated co-operation between civic and public actors. Starting point was the situation in the Immanuel-Kant-Park, a historic public park of around seven hectar in the city centre. People with kids from the neighbourhood who frequently use the park were annoyed by its appearance (problems with low maintenance, alcoholics, drug dealing and consumption) and wanted to create a place where their kids could play safely and could get in touch with 'nature'. In 2013, the families organized themselves in a loose, informal group of around 30 people and got in touch with city administration. In co-ordination with the environmental department (responsible also for the public parks in the city), Kants Gardeners planned and implemented a gardening area with raised beds in the park, which they maintain themselves since. They further help in the maintenance of the public playground in the park.

Figure 1. Garden beds in Kant Park/Duisburg, installed and maintained by citizens.

Source: Doris Gstach

---

[11] http://kants-garten.de/

Discussion and agreement upon the design and planting ideas of Kants Gardeners were verbally arranged with the city department responsible for the park maintenance. The environmental department supported the work of Kant's gardeners in the beginning by preparing the soil (including the use of machinery) and in a continuous process, by giving advice on planting material etc. During 2015, a redesign plan for the park was developed in a wide participatory process, including Kants Gardeners and their ideas. As the collaboration between the volunteers and the city showed to work very well in this park, the city plans to initiate similar activities in two other parks. Similar forms of co-management between public and civic actors in existing public parks can be found in other cities and projects.

The following project goes one step further. It shows, how co-operation can act as fundament for the co-production of a new kind of park. Again, citizens started activities in a bottom-up process. This was the starting point for a process oriented co-production by civil society and local authorities [12]. The so-called Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz ('Citizen Station Plagwitz') in Leipzig/Germany is developed on a former railyard. In 2009, the 'Initiative Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz' – IBBP, (Initiative Citizen Station Plagwitz'), an initiative of citizens, living in the neighbourhood, artists, business people and associations was founded with the goal to develop and implement ideas for the future use of the area. IBBP understands its approach as urban laboratory. The initiative works on an informal basis. There are no memberships. Decisions are, as much as possible, made in consensus. Project teams develop individual topics or ideas. The overall coordination is done by a team of three people. Supported by the publicly financed neighbourhood management office, which was already active in the district before, the initiative first launched various activites in the railyard area (joints walks, breakfast, evening events etc.) to raise awareness concering the potentials of the place with a broader part of population and to collect ideas for future uses. The group also initiated a planning workshop, bringing together actors from the public sector and citizens. The role of the intiative as a core actor in the development process was strengthend over the years. The initiative became part of an inter-departmental coordination group within the local administration. As during the past years, more and more old uses in the area do shut down and built structures are to be demolished, the initiative - partly successfully - negotiated the conservation of historic features and the development of areas for public instead of commercial uses.

---

[12] see http://www.buergerbahnhof-plagwitz.de/stadt_gestalten.html

Figure 2. Public playground including features of the former use as part of the Bürgerbahnhof Plagwitz/Leipzig.

Source: Doris Gstach

Representatives of IBBP also became jury members of an appraiser-based architectural competition for the area and a member of the official steering committee for the development of the area, installed by the city. Based on their initiative, an area of around 8.000 m² got reserved for citizen projects in the draft concept. First ideas such as a boulder area, a community garden and a construction playground have been implemented in the mean time, based on collaborations of various actors. Other ideas such as a camping area for scouts, urban agriculture, an orchard etc. shall be realized over the next years. And there is space for further, new ideas. The whole project is based on an intense, ongoing dialogue between different actor groups. Citizens take over a crucial position in the production process. This intense form of co-production is not common and goes beyond widespread modes of .co-operation. The fact, that various open space related projects in Leipzig, especially interim uses, were developed in a co-operative manner over the past years, might have supported this success. It has trained certain communication skills in civil society as well as in public administration and trust that such processes might lead to a successful result. The project has recently become a case study in a running

research project about co-operative approaches in urban open space development in Germany[13].

In the search for possibilities for self-initiative action of civic actors in public open space development, interim uses of vacant lots for open space uses have gained a certain popularity since the 1990s in Germany and beyond. The "emptiness" of vacant lots, meaning the lack of design and defined uses and functions seems an ideal starting point for many ways of appropriation. Their temporary character also promises tolerance towards mistakes and failures. The Austrian architects and urbanists Robert Temel and Florian Haydn[14] see interim uses as symptoms of an alternative understanding of urban planning. Instead of leaving the development to public authorities and the business sector, interim uses would explore the possibilities to appropriate the city. The interim project „Mach was (T)Räume" demonstrates such an exploration. It was initiated by an architect in the frame of the documenta12, an international arts exhibition in Kassel/Germany in 2007. His idea was to promote self-initiative action of local people by stimulating them to appropriate unused public open spaces in the city. The concept was developed and implemented together with a group of students and in co-operation with the local advisory board of the documenta and the local environmental and garden department. Four places were chosen for such activities. A construction of red bars to sit on was installed at each place. They symbolically marked "territories" available for appropriation. Further, a range of initial activities such as art performances, painting workshops and games for children should draw the attention of the citizens to the places.

---

[13] For further details about the research project see http://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/FP/ReFo/Staedtebau/2015/UrbaneFreiraeume/01-Start.html?nn=1186136
[14] Haydn, Temel 2004

Figure 3. Art performance as initial activity, "Mach was (T)Räume" Kassel.

Source: Heidrun Hubenthal

After these initial interventions, which were organised by the project team, the places should become appropriated by local residents in form of self-initiative activities. In the further course of the project just two of the four available places became actively used in the promoted way. At one of the places some local groups from the nearby estate began to use the site for gatherings from time to time. Another place was accommodated by two artists. Their activities on the site became more and more provocative and became subject of heavy discussions in the city and in the media. The site was increasingly occupied with a variety of furniture and other things and started to get a messy appearance.

Figure 4. Artists' intervention on one of the "Mach was (T)Räume" sites.

Source: Heidrun Hubenthal

When the users dug a large hole and wanted to set a car in concrete on the site, the activities were brought to an end by the police and the place was cleared. The clearance caused a sort of disillusionment about the potentials of open and self-initiative action.

This project is especially suitable to take a critical look at the aspect of freedom and openness for civic engagement and for self-defined activities in open space production. In a truly open process the results are unpredictable. But as the example demonstrates, the results might not necessarily be tolerated or accepted. In this case, critique and finally the end of the project were set because of the appearance of the site and because of safety risks going along with the large hole in the ground. While safety aspects are always a critical point in public space (however, depending on the tradition and existing regulations concerning certain standards), the appearance of a site might be a point of discussion. The example makes clear that the call for self-defined action, for more freedom for civic action is a big challenge. Leaving routines in the production of open space and allowing for a high level of civil engagement, causes uncertainty with public actors as well as with citizens about how to act, what is possible, and what to tolerate. All kinds of dialogue-oriented planning processes require the definition of crucial aspects such as an agreement on framing

conditions and decision making processes and the scope of action[15]. But a high level of 'self organisation' of civil society, Selle points out, can just be reached, if it is limited in certain concerns. Projects tend to be successful, when they are time restricted, related to a certain group (demographic) of people, a specific topic and/or related to a specific place.[16] But in addition, the example makes clear as well, the more open in terms of results the development of open spaces is, the more it needs an ongoing and intense dialogue between the involved actors.

3. Perspectives of civic engagement

As much as we might see the need and advantages of civic engagement in open space development, as much we have to be aware of some critical and limiting aspects. It has to be realized that it is not just about two parties, public authorities and civil society alone. In fact many actors are involved in open space development processes and also civil society itself plays manifold roles. Public authorities are just one actor out of many and often they are not the most powerful one. As they just can share the power they have themselves, their options to involve civil society is limited to their own scope of influence. This influence, which is already limited, is supposed to be in further decrease [17]. Especially projects with major economic interests limit the openness for real dialogue oriented processes including civil society.

Further, the willingness and ability of civil society to become active is limited. This touches the fundamental question, how far civic engagement, especially self-defined appropriation processes can fulfill our idea of democracy in planning and the goal to plan for the public good. During the last decades a lot of experience has been gained concerning participation processes. It has become obvious that it is always just a certain percentage of people who are able and/or willing to get involved, to express their ideas and wishes. This is true for common levels of involvement, but it is even more the case in bottom-up driven activities. Undetermined open spaces do not just offer freedom for self-definition but actually demand for this. This, as the sociologist Wulf Tessin[18] points out, needs a certain courage and ability to define the meaning and function of a place. The result might be a place which stays empty or is being appropriated by people who are strong enough and capable to do so. The latter, as the last example described above illustrates, might lead to a much more exclusive form of place and use than a public space which would be produced in a conventional planning process.

---

[15] Various publications point at crucial aspects for successful dialogue-oriented approaches – see for example SenStadt 2011
[16] Selle 2007: 65f
[17] Selle 2007: 68
[18] Tessin 2004: 39

Finally, civic engagement also needs space which is open for self-defined action[19]. Activities of this kind can produce interesting places and enrich the public realm. But as public space is a limited resource in most cities, also the freedom for self-defined activities are limited. Care has to be taken that a balance is kept between individualized demands and the wish for self-fulfillment on the one and for common interests of the broad public on the other hand.

Conclusions

A dialogue-oriented planning culture is hard to reach. A broad perspective is needed from all actors being involved as well as a broad consensus and openness throughout all parts and levels of local authorities towards a dialogue oriented role. All this has to be exercised in many steps and projects. „Strategic action, which creates new modes of governance, works through lots of small interventions around particular projects and initiatives, in networks, in discourses and practices."[20] Some current open space projects show perspectives in this direction.

Bibliography

1. Bürgerpark Bremen (n.d.): http://www.buergerpark.de/. Accessed on 08-22–2016.

2. Haydn F., Temel R., 2004, *Tempo..Rar. Zur Erforschung der Möglichkeiten beim temporären besetzen von Orten,* "dérive, Zeitschrift für Stadtforschung", volume 14, Jan–March 2004, pp. 5–11

3. Healey P., 2004, *Creativity and Urban Governance.* In: DISP 158, 3/2004, Creative Governance in City Regions. pp. 11–20.

4. Loidl-Reisch C., 2012, *Türenschankpark,* In: Hlavac Ch., Göttche A., Berger E., (Ed.s): Historische Gärten und Parks in Österreich. Reihe "Österreichische Gartengeschichte", Band 1. Böhlau Verlag: Wien.

5. Nehring D., 1979, Stadtparkanlagen in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts: ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des Landschaftsgartens. Geschichte des Stadtgrüns, Band IV, Patzer: Hannover.

6. Pätzold R., 2016, *Stadt. Land. Umland. Neukonfiguration einer konfliktreichen Beziehung,* "Planerin", volume 3/16, pp. 5–7.

7. Quayle M., Driessen van der Lieck T. C., 1997, *Growing community: A case for hybrid landscapes,* "Landscape and Urban Planning" 39/1997, pp. 99–107.

---

[19] Pätzold 2016: 7
[20] Healey 2004

8. Selle K., 2007, *Stadtentwicklung und Bürgerbeteiligung – Auf dem Weg zu einer kommunikativen Planungskultur? Alltägliche Probleme, neue Herausforderungen*, BBSR (ed.) Informationen zur Raumentwicklung, volume 1.2007, pp. 63–71.

9. Selle K., 2013, *Über Bürgerbeteiligung hinaus: Stadtentwicklung als Gemeinschaftsaufgabe? Analysen und Konzepte*, Verlag Dorothea Rohn, Detmold.

10. SenStadt – Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt Berlin (ed.), 2011, Handbuch zur Partizipation. Kulturbuch-Verlag: Berlin.

11. Stadt Dietzenbach; Büro Topos , 2003, Dietzenbach 2030 definitiv unvollendet. Final report of the research project. Darmstadt.

12. Tessin W., 2004, *Freiraum und Verhalten. Soziologische Aspekte der Nutzung und Planung städtischer Freiräume*. Eine Einführung. VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften: Wiesbaden.

13. Ward Thompson C., 2002, *Urban open space in the 21st century*, "Landscape and Urban Planning" 60/ 2002, pp. 59–72.

14. Wollmann H., 2004, *Local Government Reforms in Great Britain, Sweden, Germany and France: Between Multi-Function and Single-Purpose Organisations*, "Local Government Studies", Vol.30, No.4, Winter 2004, pp. 639–665.

Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje zjawisko zaangażowania obywatelskiego w kształtowanie otwartych przestrzeni publicznych w miastach. Rozpoczyna się rysem historycznym zjawiska, przechodzi do kwestii planowania partycypacyjnego, a następnie wyjaśnia zjawisko zaangażowania obywatelskiego. Artykuł jest wzbogacony o szereg przykładów z terenu Niemiec (m.in. z Duisburga i Lipska), ilustrujących opisywane zagadnienie i kończy się wnioskami autorki.

Information on the author:

Prof. Dr.-Ing. **Doris Gstach**
Erfurt University of Applied Sciences
Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning,
Urban and Spatial Planning Program
e-mail: doris.gstach@fh-erfurt.de