

Interview: Stadtlücken e.V.

*Sebastian Klawiter, Hanna Noller, Sascha Bauer for Stadtlücken
interviewed by Eva-Maria Ciesla and Hannah Strothmann*

Eva-Maria Ciesla, Hannah Strothmann | *How would you describe your collective work and intervention in urban space?*

Sebastian Klawiter, Hanna Noller, Sascha Bauer | Stadtlücken is a non-profit organization initiated by designers from various disciplines. It was founded due to the need to raise awareness of the importance of public space as the basis for our democratic coexistence. The aim is to promote a digital–analog network for the joint development of a city worth living in. Urban voids are potential starting points, as well as opportunities to take the initiative in a speculative urban system (Building voids, knowledge voids, legal voids, communication voids, social voids, etc.). Using creative methods and strategies of cooperative urban design, we try to make these voids visible and raise awareness of those places and related issues, to open up unused spaces to make them accessible to projects oriented toward a common good. Stadtlücken was founded in Stuttgart and is now active far beyond the city limits.

Where do you see the potential for working as a collective to intervene in urban environments and in political and economic forces that shape architecture and contemporary cities? To what extent does working as a collective shape and influence your practice?

To create a diverse urban environment, we need a variety of perspectives working on different topics, scales, and themes. To find common ground it is always easier to discuss ideas and designs collectively to create a culture of trust and openness. More eyes see more possible futures that can open up new windows into alternative realities. Exchanging ideas without

mistrust and being able to speak openly with one another is the basis of a daily practice of remaining open as a common collective. Our projects wouldn't have been possible alone. Only together as a group, embedded into a deep network of urban participants, politicians and other engaged citizens can we set those movements in motion. In the process of creating collective interventions, we generate knowledge related to place, environments, history, narratives, relationships, and modes of action. Through these sensitive processes of creating interventions, we can arrive at hidden insights and use the co-creatively and co-productively collected knowledge to work with a new urban narrative. The participatory workshop format Fairytale Dinner could be used as an example here. This format brought together various stakeholders from the city of Stuttgart around a dining table created as a 1:25 scale model of the Österreichischer Platz and together they developed an alternative fairytale of the Österreichischer Platz combined with a self-made five-course menu. This was an alternative vision of the urban development of the square.

Can you tell us about some of the results of your interventions?

Our projects are created on different scales, in various constellations, and on the other side they do work in different time spans. One central thing that we learned is that projects which aim for long-term urban transformation have a much longer time frame than expected and need much more care and durability than others. One specific urban space that we have worked on is the Österreichischer Platz which transformed in seven years from a parking lot with a flyover for cars to a place in the heart of Stuttgart where young people can now try out and learn different sports for free. With an urban focus on kids, working people, and older individuals, young people often have no places to go. They search for places where they can hide from society, create their own spaces, and test relationships with each other. The Österreichischer Platz is now such a place, curated by the city and containing various sports and social activities, a bicycle workshop, a hire station for skateboards, and much more.

What roles do architectural knowledge and design play in your practice and interventions? Which techniques and instruments are important for your work?

In our architectural practice, it is crucial to develop a robust spatial vision, create and test future atmospheres, effectively present and communicate these ideas, and devise a feasible plan to help this vision become reality. For that we need as much spatial knowledge as possible to be able to communicate these ideas in the following process. Our strategy of »activation instead of participation« enables us to engage a diverse group of citizens. The aim is to include even those who typically do not participate in these negotiation processes. To communicate with large groups of people with different backgrounds, we developed various methods and formats to do so. A simple and respectful use of everyday language is our most powerful tool to discuss issues and ideas at eye level. By combining digital and analog formats with graphic elements that raise questions rather than provide answers, we aim to communicate effectively and purposefully. Being on site, consciously taking time, and hanging out at these places again and again on different occasions is helping us to build connections, not only to the space itself but also to people who actually use these spaces. Regular open access events foster dialogue on relevant topics, support informal and open-ended concepts, and provide opportunities for cooperation. Interventions in public space that are easy to access and understand encourage people to think and participate in further collaborations.

As cities are increasingly built up, spatial gaps are filled, places are commodified, and formerly »abandoned« spaces have become a rarity – where do you see the potential for building alternative cities today?

In cities, there will always be buildings and infrastructures that become obsolete. This has always been the case and will certainly remain so. Recently, there have been increasing numbers of vacant properties and

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Stadtlücken-Sommerkino, Österreichischer Platz, Urbanes Experimentierfeld, Stuttgart, 2018–2019. © Stadtlücken e.V.

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spaces in all city centers, raising frequent questions about the possible futures of these often centrally located prime locations. On the other side we shouldn't forget the urban peripheries because if we are honest, city centers and old towns are no longer the places for everyday life. Most people spend the majority of their time in peri-urban areas. They live in suburbia, work next to a motorway junction, and spend their leisure time in and around the shopping center. And yes, there are some cities where there seems to be no more free space. But there are whole regions that are empty and would be happy about interventions and new people to bring more daily life into these places.

Where do you see the possibilities for transferring your ideas of intervention to everyday architectural practice and the building professions? What are the difficulties of this transfer? What should change in the profession?

Interventions generate knowledge related to place, environments, history, narratives, relationships, and modes of action. Through sensitive interventions, designers can arrive at hidden insights and use the co-creatively and co-productively collected knowledge in spatial design. The design activity is thus given substance and legitimization. Interventions can be used to test spatial situations and people's ways of acting together. This is particularly helpful when it comes to remodeling buildings and cities, especially when the future is uncertain and we don't know exactly whether we should plant a new sports field, 25 trees, or leave it as it is. We should ask the question more often: What is actually architecture? Architecture is more than building buildings, it's about people and how they use, create, and think about space. It's more important to think about architecture from the space between people, than dancing around commercial and financial constructs remodeled by others. Seeing architecture as a series of small, provisional, and temporary interventions in the present that can sketch out larger scenarios for the future can become a weapon to produce the future, and as with every weapon, we should think a lot about how we want to use it. However, the intervention can also be the opportunity to join forces in order to change something, a chance to regain the courage to get involved in our everyday design processes. They are not the only solution, but they are an empowering tool that it is worth thinking about using on an ongoing basis in architectural practice.