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Name Prof. Philipp Oswalt

Less Is More

Experimental Urban Reconstruction in Eastern Germany

A Study by Philipp Oswalt and Klaus Overmeyer (Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau)

Translation

Tas Skrupa

How to Plan?

How can shrinkage be planned? Planning traditionally took growth as its starting point and depended on massive investments. Yet in regions with shrinkage there is hardly any investment—neither from the economy, nor from the state or from private hand. How can planning start here, and how can it be effective?

Planning shrinkage is based on existing resources instead of investments. The easiest way to explain this opposition is by comparing motorboats and sailboats. Traditional planning is comparable with a motorboat. With little regard for existing weather conditions, motorboats can be propelled by an artificial energy supply (investment) and steered to any destination. A sailboat, on the other hand, needs no energy supply, since it is moved along with the help of existing resources (wind). In order to steer the boat, close attention has to be paid to the wind conditions. Only then is it possible to reach a certain destination.

Urban planning today cannot change the trend of urban development. However, urban planning can modify and qualify processes. In eastern Germany the question is being asked today: how can qualities be gained from shrinkage or be imposed on shrinkage?

Initially it is important to recognize the existing resources and potentials. First of all, the 2.6 million people living here in the state of Saxony-Anhalt are to be considered participants who can activate the unused resources. These include:

- waste lands in cities, peripheries, and in rural areas
- extensive infrastructures, some of which are quite modern (road and railway networks, energy supply, telecommunications, etc.)
- vacant buildings (about 200.000 apartments in Saxony-Anhalt in the year 2000)
- in spite of unoccupied buildings, considerable construction, especially of single-family homes (new single-family homes in Saxony-Anhalt 1990–2000: 48,000; expected increase 2001–2030: 139,000)
- planned demolition in the next decades as possible design invention (demolition of 45,000 housing units in Saxony-Anhalt until 2010)

The planner's role is to make the dormant resources accessible and to kindle dynamism by creating links: How can unoccupied buildings and inhabitants, demolition and construction of new buildings, or infrastructure and waste lands be linked with each other? A planner becomes an enabler who initiates processes which develop by means of their own energy. In this way, a maximal effect can be achieved with minimal intervention.

Tools

What are the possibilities for action in a shrinking city? What are the alternatives to the existing models of waiting or demolishing as destruction of housing surpluses? How can existing resources be activated?

A toolbox containing six tools shows basic options for action. The first four tools – extensification, demolition, turning over, freezing – start with shrinkage as a fact and show ways of qualifying this process. On the other hand, the last two tools – bonding and stimulating – influence shrinkage and growth themselves.

Tool: Extensification

This tool is based on the idea of spreading existing activities over more space and thus reoccupying wasteland with uses of unusually low density and intensity. By “thinning out,” the programs develop in new ways and also generate new activities.

Extensification of Open Spaces

New forms of extensive use activate inner-city wastelands, making them a part of the urban spaces in everyday use once again and forming a new spatial context in urban areas which are badly fragmented and perforated due to shrinkage today.

Some examples of extensive uses of open space are:

– land tended privately by field keepers and partially accessible to the public.

Private individuals are offered the luxury of large inner-city open spaces for free, on the condition that they agree to tend them and make them accessible to the public from time to time;

– agrarian open spaces (such as sunflower fields, meadows, cornfields, etc.) which are turned into extensive public parks by enriching them with elements such as picnic fields, refreshment stands, labyrinths, children’s farms, adventure playgrounds, plantations where visitors can do their own picking, paddocks with horses, etc.

This creates a new type of urban open space, a hybrid of agricultural land and urban uses.

Extensifying Buildings

The available unoccupied buildings are offered to occupants for free, i.e., at the running cost. In order to additionally protect the landlords from cheap competition, this is allowed only in cases in which an apartment is rented at regular conditions or is owned by the user. The additional space allows the expansion of existing uses or the development of new uses. In ground-floor apartments, which are typically vacant, there is room for small businesses for supplementary earnings or self-employment, or for social services for the neighborhood, be it offerings for children, youth, senior citizens, or the general public. The upper stories, which are also often vacant, are especially suitable as hobby rooms, guest apartments, or for use by community institutions of the inhabitants of a building. In the same way, the occupants are offered the open spaces close to the apartments for their own private use: for gardens, breeding animals, or also as an outdoor employment opportunity, such as café terrace, etc. In this way wasteland is given an active use again. Structures which were previously rather anonymous develop clearly recognizable signs of appropriation and form clearly different sides, acquiring a public character on the street side and a private character on the back side. A mediating agency located in the neighborhood allows access to spaces without a great deal of red tape, even in small units and short time periods. This type of office can be financed by the municipality and can represent several owners. Small changes in the buildings such as removal of individual parts of the building – for example removing elements of the façade or adding openings in the interior – as well as adding “furniture” such as stairs, terraces, and ramps make it easier to give buildings which were once monofunctional new types of uses. Homogenous districts become lively urban districts with a large number of uses. New informal economies are created which offer new perspectives to unemployed occupants. By

linking the resource space (unoccupied buildings) and the resource time (unemployment), self-initiative and a new economy are encouraged from below.

Extensifying Infrastructure

Due to the drop in population, especially in small and middle-sized cities, important infrastructures and urban functions can no longer be supported. Temporary offerings can take the place of permanent institutions here on the basis of a mobile infrastructure which is especially oriented towards the less mobile parts of the population such as children, youth, and senior citizens. This is less a matter of basic needs than of cultural offerings and special uses.

Instead of merely taking the place of programs which formerly existed and were cancelled, the mobile institutions are especially capable of offering up-to-date programs with little expenditure. Aside from mobile elements, telematic institutions such as internet portals in combination with delivery services and computer education as well as temporary events form the basis of an urbanism without substance – urbanism lite. In this way the reduction of mass is linked with an increase in urban quality of life.

Tool: Demolition

Demolition is an act of design. The partially necessary reduction of the number of existing buildings allows the introduction of new qualities to the remaining buildings. This can happen in entire districts as well as in individual buildings. On the level of urban districts, demolition creates new urban structures. For example, isolated districts can be linked with their surroundings by strategic demolition; homogenous districts are given a distinct structure.

In the same way, partial demolition creates identifiable units and “addresses” in monotonous building structures, and thus makes new types of living possible.

Partial demolition leads to a close linking of urban building types with open spaces and thus realizes new qualities of living.

Tool: Turning Over

Inner-city wastelands which were once used intensively are reactivated by new low-density building. The trend towards new building typologies (such as switching from multiple-story rental housing to single-family homes) is being realized on the former location, without moving to a new district. In this way, existing building land and infrastructures (such as streets, energy supply, day nurseries, and schools) are recycled and a social mixture is achieved in the districts.

New building is done with innovative building typologies which link urban and suburban qualities as well as suburban and rural qualities. This could conceivably lead to hybrids, for example, of single-family homes and barns or hunting lodges, or hybrids of garages and small gardens or field keeper houses, that is, very small houses on large plots of land.

Tool: Freezing

Trends can reverse or change on a medium-term basis. The example of America has shown that a revival of city centers has begun after an exodus from the inner cities in the seventies and the first half of the eighties. Wastelands and areas of unoccupied buildings can come back to life after decades of depression. Once their structures have been secured, specific locations with long-term potential or high cultural value which temporarily have no use can hibernate until their second spring.

Besides the securing of building constructions, measures of design are also important which turn the frozen buildings into carriers of hope for the surrounding district and radiate this in a positive way. The buildings and the surrounding open spaces are given active external surfaces which change optically and which can

also be used. Elements for street ball or climbing, ivy coverings, film projections, or materials with a changing reflection behavior are conceivable.

Tool: Bonding

Less people move away when the inhabitants are given the possibility to actively participate in designing and when qualities of life are realized in existing buildings which offer an alternative to single-family homes. Tenants are granted rights similar to ownership which allow them to make changes in the building structure and open spaces, such as renovating, modernizing, and remodeling apartments or using and designing the exterior grounds. Allowing them to participate in the design of their apartment and surroundings leads to a strong identification and bond with their living space. This can also promote ownership by the inhabitants – in addition to classic single ownership, especially new forms of ownership such as cooperatives or joint-stock companies comprising citizens and the city.

Well-directed changes to the existing buildings and limited additions create qualities similar to home ownership and also create new types of living for specific target groups. This includes on the one hand the creation of two-level living spaces, individual apartment entrances, garages, and gardens assigned the apartments, and on the other hand, the realization of specific qualities such as penthouses, projecting or multi-level interiors, and extra-large balconies. Additions to the buildings are made in the form of injections and plug-ins:

highly concentrated activation elements which radiate on the existing buildings, without these having to be fundamentally redesigned.

Tool: Stimulation

If in the given prevailing conditions there is no longer any growth, new growth can be stimulated by changing the rules. In view of increased conformation of state, legal, and economic systems in united Europe and in view of the age of

globalization there is a need for niches with special rules for specific life styles.

Regionally limited zones with regular works are planned which do away with rules normally in effect or add to them in order to stimulate clusters of special use. The following are some examples of our suggestions for topical zones:

a global village as a free-trade zone, a high-risk area with a free game of chance, banning of speed limits, and other safety rules, an ecological village where individually-owned cars are forbidden as is the use of fuel and chemicals, a nostalgic village with radical landmark preservation and a ban on modern industry and architecture, or a free city called "Christiania" as an area without any form of basic ownership whatsoever. Each of these islands would attract participants who would recolonize the area and initiate new programs.

On a national and European scale, the question of immigration policy is raised in this context: should the specifically European rule of banning immigration be maintained? Or should the immigration policy be reconsidered in view of the shrinking and aging population of Europe? The immigrants in classic immigration countries like the United States and Brazil have stimulated new economic, social, and cultural developments. What effect would a new immigration policy have on Europe? Where would the immigrants settle?

Immigrants usually settle in urban agglomerations, mostly in rental apartments in multi-story housing and not in single-family homes. At the same time we have to assume that— differently than in the post-World War II period — it is less a matter of the influx of poorly qualified labor than of the possibly only temporary immigration of highly qualified labor.

Tool Scenarios

The tools indicate possibilities for action. Scenarios are to be developed for specific locations using an analysis of local conditions. According to demands and possibilities, multiple tools can be combined.

Urban Model

Until 1989 cities in eastern Germany were rather compact in appearance: on the one hand the historic city centers and high-density urban districts, on the other hand the rather compact housing complexes of industrial mass housing. The individual phases of development were clearly marked, and the urban ensembles were highly homogenous and had clear contours.

Since 1989 a double dispersion of the development structure has taken place: due to the decrease in density of use in the existing buildings and the construction of new housing developments with far lower density. The traditional urban structures have eroded; the contours have dissolved. This does not only call into question our idea of the classic city, but it also endangers traditional urban functions and qualities. In the context of the prevailing conditions in today's society this process will continue, even if it can be modified by measures of planning. The question which has to be asked is: What does a high quality low-density city look like?

We see the new city as a hybrid of extensive landscape space (prairie) and the city as a compact form of development. It is characterized by a small spatial mixture of different types of buildings and open spaces. In a small area, multi-story rental apartments are found next to new individually owned homes, and punctuated by agrarian open spaces which are enriched with urban elements.

This hybrid urban space leads to a transformation of building typology: housing in turn-of-the-century buildings and prefabricated housing complexes are given individual entrances, private gardens, and additions with spaces for working, recreation, and social activities.

New buildings are built as mix-forms of agrarian with suburban or suburban with urban types, such as a combination of barns, dachas, and country houses with single-family homes.

A city of offerings is created in which the inhabitants can choose between different new and old housing and urban types.

As a city of edges, there is an abundance of transitions between high-density building, open spaces, and extensively settled areas. Spaces rich in contrast and filled with tension are created by the close procession of high and low buildings, of high-density, low-density, or unsettled areas.

The city becomes a dynamic system in which new areas are always falling to waste, being recolonized, and intensified.

While some programs retreat and concentrate spatially on cores, others spread out or develop in new directions and occupy unoccupied spaces. An urban three-field system is formed in which wastelands are not a sign of loss, but zones of the future. The inhabitants here are urban pioneers who colonize spaces, initiate new programs, and actively design the city. The large availability of space allows new forms of use which can develop freely. The prairie city is a city of experiment, one which is open for the new and the other.