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Frappant Altona: a contribution to urban development

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Hamburg, Germany, has always been a socially bipolar port city of rich shipowners and poor dock workers, elitist business tradition and alternative protest scene. This dual identity is part of the self-image of the Hanseatic society. In Hamburg upperclass and underclass traditionally live in parallel worlds – the former in bourgeois city villas, the latter in dense blue-collar worker housing blocks. In between: myriad nuances of middleclass milieus. While the mixed neighborhoods interact habitually, the social poles get in contact only occasionally. But, in conclusion, all social groups constantly ascertain their differentness to each other. In this way they outline their particular characteristics – and their interdependence; they need each other in some way. And finally, all social aspects in total produce Hamburg's specific quality.

Today, Hamburg endeavors to develop from an exemplary port capital to a sustainably growing metropolis. Promising conditions for Hamburg's mission statement, "growth with foresightedness", are set: its economy is already well-diversified and marked by a growing tertiary sector. Educational opportunities are ample and the quality of life is high. Hamburg is wealthy and among the few growing cities in Germany. In order to guarantee a positive development, in Hamburg politicians don't enable development, they try to ensure it. Thus, the city concentrates on attracting qualified prime-age workers. For instance, they beautify touristic locations and build numerous homes for these profitable residents: beside new family-

oriented residential areas in the suburb, Hamburg's inner city is to be densified and strengthened systematically – in large part at the expense of poorer people.

In the course of the inner city development, the original workers' residential areas become more and more gentrified. Closely related to the upgrading of buildings and living environment there is a transformation of the social constitution, an exchange of residents. The immanent urban category "difference" modifies: the social disparity shifts from a large-scale segregation to a mixed coexistence on the small scale. The quarter's so caused new diversity is characterized by cultural dynamism and a high density of various interactions and innovations. Hence, the site often emerges as a "creative and positivistic melting pot" (Kees Christiaanse, interviewed by VAN DEN BERGEN, M., VOLLAARD, P., 2009) with improved economical conditions. These interesting facets of urban development are accompanied by critical aspects such as forced relocations and social repression, i.e. spatial segregation, caused by a rising rent index. Unfortunate consequences are: civic standardization, cultural depletion and a dwindling solidarity. The latter occur when gentrification exceeds its initial phase and the "self-destruction of diversity" (JACOBS, J., 1992, p.241) sets in. Then, opportunities and tolerance normally fade away and finally the cultural innovation based on diversity slows down again.

In spite of its disadvantages the complete gentrification process is often politically planned. In Hamburg there are numerous quarters which are designated to be upgraded and one does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to get the idea that in these areas not only an antisocial development is tolerated, but also a population exchange is to be stimulated in order to boost the quarter's financial potential. Thus, politicians supply various building projects, for example, or try to entice artists in neglected inner city districts; their talent to value rubbish or to activate passive areas is to be used to initiate a local progress.

Lately, especially in the last two years, a multi-sided protest against the policy and urban development of Hamburg grew rapidly and extended to a movement called "Right to the City". The people accused the executives of acting antisocially and being near-sighted. They criticized the raising costs of living, i.e. the lack of affordable flats and workplaces, the instrumentalization of artists as gentrifiers, the disappearance of cultural niches, the privatization of space and organizations et cetera. The crucial fact is that not only the politically left scene or progressive art milieus but also the bulk of the local society share these complex critiques; all kinds of people join the protest with moderate to radical activities: there are vivid debates, countless art actions, various demonstrations, squatting of houses and even burning cars. One focal point in this protest movement is an abandoned shopping store called Frappant in the district of Altona. In order to understand why it became a political issue, one has to look in the past.

After the Second World War, a central part of Altona was completely rebuilt with small blocks and continuous rows of houses. Along the central street Grosse Bergstrasse an old and coherent quarter was demolished in order to generate a new commercial center for the West of

Hamburg. An organically evolved small-scale fabric with a lively milieu and different businesses was utterly replaced by huge optimized hybrid buildings for offices, shopping and standardized habitation. At that time, in the 1960s, urban planning meant total planning and to believe in the capability of regulating everything. Thus, Altona's future was to be controlled and not left to its own devices. Henceforward, its destiny depended on planning concepts and was closely linked to the success or failure of the commercial center – and less to its socio-cultural potentials.

In the beginning, from 1950 to the early 1970s, the newly rebuilt district was popular and prosperous: the quite residential area with its comfortable modern flats was centrally located and connected to local and national public transportation. In the neighborhood there were various types of social infrastructure and a lot of green space. But the most important benefit was the proximity to the pedestrian zone Grosse Bergstrasse and the central all-round building, the Frappant: with its close to complete offering – 30 stores, six bars and restaurants, a discotheque, various leisure time facilities, five floors of governmental offices and two parking decks – it catered to nearly all local needs and offered a convenient shopping experience. As a result, this modern hybrid building was intended to be the local linchpin of everyday life and the guarantor for a well-functioning commercial center.

But soon, the district lost its attraction. On the one hand, the fascination for the modern concrete fabric with its one-stop shopping concept receded: innovative modernity and standardized comfort eliminated the desired character of a miscellaneous quarter and jarred with critical urban outgrowths such as homelessness or different types of protest. Consequently, in the late 1970s, the first shops in Grosse Bergstrasse changed hands or were temporarily vacant. On the other hand, the residential area paled: the postwar flats became too small for the average needs and the quality of the living environment declined. More and more inhabitants bothered a lack of livable urbanity. Many people, who could afford it, moved from their quarter to more interesting and attractive districts in the neighborhood. Mainly apartment owners and old or poor inhabitants, i.e. people with a low mobility, stayed in the quarter, while other normal to socially deprived people, e.g. migrants, small families, students and welfare recipients, moved in.

Today, the local unemployment is nearly twice as high as the city's average, every fifth flat is welfare housing, every third person has a background of migration, a high percentage rate of stores is used by low-budget shops, a few are abandoned. But all in all, the residential area is inhabited without big conflicts and Grosse Bergstrasse is a vivid and multifarious hub for social and commercial activities – simply on another level as intended to be. Meanwhile, investors and politicians have realized that the promises of the new urban fabric had not come true and that the shopping street doesn't conform to a high level center for West-Hamburg. Thus, the former discontinued investments, the latter make indecisively desperate efforts to upgrade the area: public workshops, business marketing, free space designs, reorganization of traffic. Finally, after the shallow measures had not come up to politicians' expectations, the

municipality declares Grosse Bergstrasse to an urban redevelopment area in order to enlarge their budget and capability of actions. Within the framework of analysis and conception, unconsidered and criticizable surveys concentrated on financial and visual aspects: they affirmed a too small purchasing power and recommended to improve the amenity values and to rebuild an ambitious shopping center as customer magnet. In conclusion, the world's biggest furnishings company, the Swedish concern Ikea, could be persuaded to replace the vacant Frappant with a new massive shopping store. But before the already arranged demolition and new construction plans were realized, the process took an unexpected turn: the building became a focal point in the Right to the City movement, a political issue – because the Frappant wasn't vacant anymore!

In April 2009, a group of creative people moved into the abandoned megastore and founded an incorporated association for art and common welfare. They named themselves after the building: "Frappant" (German for "striking"). Most of them lived in Altona, many even had already worked in Grosse Bergstrasse. They rented two upper floors of the former governmental bureau and transformed them into ateliers and offices respectively. Additionally, they arranged showrooms to present their art and meet with friends and curious people. Soon, other artist joined the Frappant society and the group grew up to 140 persons. They all were looking for affordable workspace – but apart from that, they differed in age, marital status, residence, profession, capabilities, character, political attitude et cetera. Thus, the creative community became diversified and attained publicity and impact – and with it the activities and the needed space grew bigger. Sometimes the group used illegally almost the entire building for big events with thousands of guests. Slowly but surely, more and more visitors came to participate in public debates, demonstrations, parades, parties, flea markets and kid's days, or to see paintings, sculptures, fashion, photos, movies, sound productions, music acts, furnishings and industrial designs, architecture, and to witness various performances, happenings and presentations. To sum up: the former grey and abandoned building became a colorful center for culture, a catalyst for social interactions, a connector for opinions and protests.

So, the activities ranged from entertainment to system critique. Especially the latter is reflected in the group's philosophy¹. Founded in Grosse Bergstrasse, the association was involved in the persuaded upgrading of Altona, but to the contrary, the group is not interested in mainstream consume or established culture. Rather, the Frappant members are fascinated with abandoned and forgotten lands of the economy as culture medium of their utopia: a self-determined center for cultural production and continuous critical discussion. As artists, they address the continuous separation of society and try to mediate between disparities. Thus,

¹ "Instead of the sophisticated attitude of the established art scene, we produce art with a non-elitist grossness. We spit against the walls and wash it away the next day. Our walls produce patina from the fast change of exhibits. We confront the selection of the capital market and ignorance of potential supporters with a rich and endless variety of ideas, improvisations and invitations." (Extract of the association's philosophy; www.frappant.org)

associations like the Frappant are used to close some lacks in urban planning and cultural politics, e.g. organizing information sessions about the quarter's development and helping artists with cultural infrastructure respectively. In order to manage successfully a collective art commune and to support the subculture's assertiveness, the different organizations participate with each other. The art house as a collective commune mirrors the idea of multi-faceted collaboration with interdisciplinary synergy effects. Especially, the exchange of newcomers and experienced free lancers creates an effective network and offers a primer support for founders of new businesses or freshly graduated students. Synergistically, the group invites not only neighbours to visit the exhibitions and venues but also artists without a gallery to present their art. In so doing, Frappant's work in progress is instructively presented while external input flows constantly in.

In consequence, some of the association, especially urban planners and architects, developed a reuse concept alternatively to the governmental strategy. The group wanted to preserve the original Frappant building in order to create a public space – open to different attitudes and people. They envisioned a collective meeting center for culture and social interactions, ideas and experiments, which does not primarily follow market requirements. By using the different types of rooms, the Frappant was to be designed as a multifunctional building for culture, entertainment, recreation, social facilities, shopping, work and living. A five-steps-strategy to finance the concept was based on an independent reviewer's valuation. Moreover, public funding was indispensable for the initial realization, but planned to be minimized during the consolidation process. Finally, the association should manage the building's maintenance completely on its own, for instance, by subletting attractive area to particular shopkeepers and communal services. On the one hand, the reused building was to be a remembrance of Altona's past and a symbol for a resourceful recyclability of reputed useless urban forms. On the other hand, the Frappant proved the potentiality of an open city model, where tolerance, solidarity, intellectual reflection and social interactions are lived.

But it should not be. After various proceedings with the government and the public, the owner claimed a selling price higher than the actual valuation price, which Ikea was even willing to pay. From that date on, the artist group was under the notice to leave. During the time of the threatening eviction, a remarkable political debate and public awareness arose with national notation. On the daily agenda were governmental hearings, newspaper articles and comments of famous supporters. In the context of the protest movement, the Frappant became a focal point for the socio-cultural controversial debates in Hamburg. Locals and a bulk of the city's publicity divided into supporters and opponents. Finally, the courtship of politicians and investors succeeded with a criticizable referendum: Altona's inhabitants voted for both Ikea and their own standardization of private homes and public environment. In that case, the famous quote of Hermann Muthesius about the betterment of design production and theory, "from sofa cushions to urban design", gets ironically a total different meaning. The Frappant group was offered an alternative building, former barracks in 19th century architecture, in a

calm residential area of Altona. Being offside of dynamic developments and public spotlight, there the artists rather practice culture than do politics in order to influence the future of their quarter. But there, in Grosse Bergstrasse, the Frappant lacks as a projection screen for different desires and a figurehead for diverse protests. Most likely, the productive compressed diversity of their previous location, a beneficial situation for many local people, will disappear and persist only or rather hopefully in the artist's house.

There are many theorists, e.g. Georg Simmel, Henry Lefebvre, Jane Jacobs or Kees Christiaanse to name but a few, who refer to the compressed diversity as an immanent feature of urbanity. According to these authors, difference is the culture of urbanism, the stimulator for social progress and the motor for urban modification – and a city always changes: constantly its inhabitants, goods, qualities and with them their relative constellation move or vary. A city is a dialectic system in which difference reveals local characteristics, conflicts and capabilities. If one tries to level all disparities or resist the omnipresent urban modification, he acts anti-progressively – and will probably fail. But that does not mean letting *laissez-faire* or liberalism regulate everything! Only if we understand and tolerate coexistence of differences, if we cultivate diversity and stimulate positive developments, i.e. use it for the common welfare, we can admit to the heterogeneity of the society and produce innovations in a fair and sustainable way.

Even though the association had to leave the Frappant building and could not avoid the gentrification process in Altona, the artists' activities were an important contribution to the urban development: the group of creative people in that special building was a difference to the quarter for itself; the Frappant was an inspiringly and instructively relative object to its environment. The group picked social modification and cultural depletion out as a central theme for the urban agenda. Its activities catalyzed a uniquely enriching process and boosted necessary political debates. Besides, the association's experiences prove that moments of cultural coexistence can be perceived much more consciously and used productively. For example, it might be possible to stabilize the certain labile moment in the pre-gentrification phase in order to strengthen the quarter's creativity and innovation potential.

As a result, the entire city could cushion critical exchanges of inhabitants, enrich its cultural landscape and attract qualified employees by stimulating the right objects and achieving an advantageous balance. Hence, Hamburg could ensure a positive urban development without negating its many-sided character – if the city tolerated its differing townsfolk.

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