

How to transform a non-place into a totem

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Today we know, that the actual dominant development model is leading us to a societal collapse. We know the necessity of sustainability as well as proven solutions for social and ecological problems. The central questions are: Why doesn't our society change, although we know it should and could change? What does a transition of our society into sustainability hinder or promote?

Such questions cannot be answered by new technologies, strategies of efficiency or old economic models. Instead, they need an examination of the social and cultural factors of societal development. In this development also feeling and emotions play a very important role. According to the iceberg-model of psychology, the behaviour of people depends for 80 percent on (subconscious) emotions and only for 20 percent on (conscious) rational arguments. Art can often deal with emotions much better than science.

The Ruhr Basin is an ideal laboratory for experimenting, developing and studying the possibilities of transitions into sustainability. This region is a product of the industrial revolution and was for a Century the epitome of coal mining and heavy industry. Many people came from very different countries to work in the factories of Duisburg, Essen or Dortmund. Today only ruins remind us of that time of economic growth.

The crisis started 50 years ago. The high unemployment forced many people to move away. Some districts of cities like Duisburg lost more than 50 percent of their population.

Especially people with a good qualification and income left the region. In the remaining population, the share of people with migration background is very high. This region might recognize much earlier than others, that an unlimited economic growth is only a myth. This situation made the question of a “Strukturwandel”, of a transition from an industrial-based to a post-industrial economy, to a priority for the regional and local governments of the last 30 years. They invested resources in an extension of the service-sector. While parts of the Ruhr Basin were newly retransformed into nature, several industrial ruins were transformed into theme parks: Today they are stations of the European Route of Industrial Heritage.

But a good chance to dematerialize the regional economy has been the vision to base it on culture, i.e. on scientific research, academic education, creative and artistic work as well as on cultural diversity. Especially this effort convinced the European Commission to elect this region to the European Capital of Culture 2010.

The motto of Ruhr.2010 is its programme: Change through Culture – Culture through Change! This ideal framework gives artists the possibility to develop and experiment creative strategies of transition in the cities. Two of these artists are Milica Reinhart and Marjan Verkerk. The Croatian and the Dutch artist met the first time in the international art-project exhibition “Visible Visions”, that belonged to the program of the UN-Conference Rio+10 in 2002 in Johannesburg. They began one year later to work as artist combo at the idea of an art-project in the south of the Ruhr Basin. They concentrated their attention on a road bridge, that runs through the medium-sized town of Hagen, where Milica Reinhart lives and works. This bridge “does not cross water, but channels traffic – 40,000 cars per day, also a lot of pedestrian use it as an underpass, not a very pleasant experience – through a grey neighborhood beset by problems, where people from 82 nationalities live in close proximity.”[1]

This description is typical for many areas in the Ruhr Basin, that are disadvantaged and still bearing the marks of the collapse of the heavy industry. The road bridge is a non-place, which existence is cognitively repressed, that hasn’t got any identity, and where nobody would stay voluntarily, unless to attract attention to it. This bridge is also a symbol for the contradictions within the industrial development model, that designed the cities in a rational and centralized way, following the myth of a totalitarian auto-mobility at the expense of social communication and quality of life in public spaces.

The aims of Milica Reinhart and Marjan Verkerk’s creative intervention were:

- a) To transform the road bridge “from a soulless feature into a multicoloured beacon” [1]; from an “Unort” (non-place), symbol of social exclusion in a decadent industrial society, to a “totem”, symbol of integration in a heterogeneous neighbourhood. A minimal material input should lead to a maximal immaterial output.
- b) To catalyze a process, that makes the inhabitants of the area around the bridge from object to subject, from consumer to producer, from audience to author of the cultural production and of the urban transition.

The design of the road bridge should be based on “human resources’ that were abundantly available in the area: the inhabitants, and their memories” [1]. Reinhart and Verkerk began to interview women and girls, who lived within one square-kilometre radius of the bridge. “Why did we interview only women? We tried to ask men about personal memories, but they usually came up with the colours of the shirts of their local soccer team. We also found that women are often the storytellers, and conduits to the next generation. Mothers strongly seemed to influence the way their children integrated with an alien society” [1].

On one hand, it was not easy to get the level of trust that is needed for the intimacy of an interview on personal memories: Artists are often seen as outsiders in a workers’ milieu (but not only there). On the other hand, the inhabitants of this area were positively impressed to meet somebody, who came to listen, curious for the life-experience of migrants in the periphery of a city.

One year was needed to collect 42 stories of women from originally different nationalities. “In a women-only context, many interviews became very emotional affairs. Hidden feelings came to the surface – homesickness, distress at lost dreams, traumatic memories. Some women led very difficult lives, and experienced real hardship. 81-year old Margarethe from Germany ran before the Russians in World War II, 26-year old Thuy fled her country, Vietnam, in the war. Many interviewees said this was the first time they had shared their feelings with outsiders” [1].

“Emotionally, some of them have never really left their country of origin”, says Marjan Verkerk. An African woman told once to her: “Ghana is always in my head. I am here, but I am still always there”. Another woman from South America remembered the rainforest in her country of origin, when she looked at the trees in the outlying area of Hagen. During the interviews, the women picked the exact colours that they connected with their memories from a very detailed chart, selecting between 10 and 20 colours each. “Using the selected hues, the artists created an individual artwork relating to the women, their countries, and their stories. These colours compositions, in a specific order, make up the overall design for the bridge. The women were also invited to write the word for ‘bridge’ in their own language: puente, köprü, ponte, brücke, etc. These words appear in white neon letters in front of the finished design so that it lights up at night”[1].

Reinhart and Verkerk began to paint the bridge in 2008, five years after the project-start. They immortalized the stories of people in an art-work, although these people neither are heroes or belong to an elite.

Colours are an ideal code for expressing feelings and emotions and so for promoting empathy. Empathy is a universal language, that promotes social communication in spite of differences between cultures, social classes, milieus, generations or biographies. Of course the bridge is an ideal symbol for such a connecting communication.

42 paintings about just as many stories of women, that spans 450 meters on the side of the bridge, give visibility to an heterogeneous community and to a “globality”, that were overseen before.

Migrants are “ambassadors” of a globality, that is seldom shown by the media and experienced by tourists, but exists for example in the inner life of the people, who are our neighbours.

Reinhart and Verkerk named their project “die Sehnsucht nach Ebene 2”. Sehnsucht means longing, nostalgia, and homesickness. “Ebene 2” is the official name of the bridge. An examination of the process of the project makes clear, why its results aren’t of course and expectable. The two artists started their project without a financing. In the first years they worked for this project without getting any, and sometimes little money for it. Often such a transition would not start, if the financing (i.e. the given societal order) would be made to its precondition: the real necessary precondition is the ideal motivation we need for leaving that social order, that is also based on the power of money.

The genesis of “die Sehnsucht nach Ebene 2” was accompanied by a political debate in Germany, between those who opposed the project believing it to be a waste of money and those who supported the communication and debate it had started among people [1]. On the one hand these conflicts threatened the continuation of the project; on the other hand they promoted the public and media attention for the project: “A stream of articles, interviews and readers’ letters appeared in the local papers” [1]. This process made the bridge to something more than an art piece.

Every social system is a complex system, whose transition cannot be completely steered. Reinhart and Verkerk preferred the risk of a participatory process to a reduction of complexity through a top-down design. For them the real author of “die Sehnsucht nach Ebene 2” was the very heterogeneous community of Hagen, that found through the project a new common identity on the Level 2.

[1] Project-website: <http://www.sehnsuchtnachebene2.de>, by Moze Jacobs