CONCRETE MICRO UTOPIANISM IN ARCHITECTURE
– PRACTICES OF INFILTRATION OR SEDATION?

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<u>Introduction</u> A great variety of architectural projects for temporary use have emerged especially in the public and semi-public spaces of capital cities in the global North, arisen mainly and increasingly in the context of Berlin after the Fall of the Wall. In the subsequent decades the re-united and re-established capital was in search of its nascent ideal self, with probably as many different scenarios as inhabitants. It was a time of uncertainty, also for the future of many urban sites, in leftover spaces partly until today. In the past years in media coverage much has been said and written about so-called *alternative urban practices* and/or *critical spatial agency*, the ephemeral character of the projects leaves its traces in various publications, mostly project collections geared towards the younger generation of architects, designers and the likes.[1] With regard to current events, this is not anymore a niche discussion among specialists, but has become a talking point in the general public, most notably being taken seriously on a political level.[2] My motivation to take a closer look at these projects, can be subsumed under the research question: Does or can a popularization and/or formalization of alternative urban practices in the long run contribute to a necessary *re-politicisation* of *urban thinking?* – as a former working title of my current PhD research suggested.

The projects in focus could be subsumed under the following description: Although oversimplified, they share a certain aesthetic semblance, often they come in the guise of experimental spatial installations, composed of simple materials, staging temporary interventions; some appear like urban playgrounds, some are of more solidity. Participatory strategies usually play a crucial role in the design process, even more for the final, albeit sometimes variable physical appearance, or if you will, visual identity. Mostly if not in use, the banal, or simple structure of the construction becomes apparent. In the majority of cases, the initiators of the projects are critical, mostly transdisciplinary working architects; in Berlin lately making strategic contact with

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1   E.g.: Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till (2011), *Spatial Agency – Other Ways of Doing Architecture,* or Peter Bishop and Leslie Williams (2012), *The Temporary City*, or Lukas Feireiss (ed.) (2012), *Going Public – Public Architecture, Urbanism and Interventions,* and many more. Remarkable is the "new social" imagery, for each of the project documentations puts people and processes first. Also the research on alternative urbanism is not anymore in its infancy: A plethora of academic papers revolve around questions on the social impact of "bottom-up" architectures, whose authors are mostly from the field of urban studies: Sociologists, social anthropologists, political scientists, and urban planners, considerably less researchers with an architecture background.

2   "MakeCity Berlin – a festival for architecture and urban alternatives", various locations Berlin in June 2015.

politicians, such as the city's present senate building director Regula Lüscher.[3] It is also her, who asks in the preface of the relatively new book *Make_shift City – Renegotiating the Urban Commons* (2014): "How do art, architecture, and civil planning negotiate in the current discourse on the future of urban space? Can they attain a productive interrelationship, or is this discourse marked by opposition and rivalry? That is the key question currently being asked in Berlin, as a city of temporary interventions."[4] There appears to be a crucial difference to my own research interests: Lüscher poses an either-or question concerning the relation of alternative urban practices and institutionalized politics: Unity in 'productive interrelationship' or separation through 'opposition and rivalry'? Following that, a decision is pending, between a policy of usurpation or roll back – a political attitude fraught with problems.

In the following, I will particularly focus on two themes, which were dominant in the related discussions from the beginning: The status quo of public space and the impetus of utopian thinking in architectural and urban production. Coinciding with the end of the Cold War, and thus the collapse of the Soviet Union, the death of utopia and the decline of public space have been declared. The disbelief in utopia can obviously be ascribed to the fall of real socialism, of which more later; whereas the disbelief in the future of public spaces is somewhat more complex to grasp.

Public space: Myth, decline and subversion With the proclamation of the decline of public space – closely related to the decline of the welfare state in the Thatcher–Reagan era, and to be taken as representative for worries about the gradual decline of democracy – discussions about its ideal constitution became subject of a larger discourse. The rampant privatisation and economisation tendency of planning and building processes is a major indicator of the accelerated increase of neoliberal politics. Being under the reign of a globalized economy is the common destiny, architecture, urban space, and many other spheres of life share. Today, neoliberal market mechanisms dictate the majority of private, and evermore public planning policies, where the favoured goal is plain profit maximization. In the course of the years, the

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3   E.g.: Raumlabor Berlin, Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, Andrés Jacque's Office for Political Innovation, Urban Catalyst, Exyzt, etc.
4   The book was preceded by a conference held at the TU Berlin in 2012: "Make_shift: the expanded field of critical spatial practice".

activities of architects increasingly remained for niche projects and representational purposes, with isolated effects, and no major socio-political impact.

Interpreting the decline of public space as representative for a gradual decline of democracy in general, is based on the assumption that democratic standards and fundamental rights, like free speech, political participation, freedom of movement, etc. are bound to the public sphere as an 'inclusive arena being able to accommodate and foster diversity.'[5]

A quite interesting possibility of interpretation opens up, when looking at the classic comedy *The Assembly Women* or *Women in Parliament* (Gr. *ekklēsiázousai*, 391 BC) by Aristophanes,[6] who criticizes among other things, for what the Greek Polis has ever since been idealized: The public space as genuine sphere of political action.[7] Evidently, then the members of parliament were male-only, whereas women ruled the private realm, i. e. the social sphere (Gr. *oikos*). Discontented with their political representatives and with no say in the public, a group of Athenian women united in their conviction to change the prevailing predicament into an egalitarian society. Dressed up matching their male counterparts, they entered the parliament, presented their political agenda and eventually got in power with a majority of votes, all in line with democratic standards. Rather than emphasizing the revolutionary action of the women's assembly and with that the gender awareness of Aristophanes' narrative, albeit resonating in the subtext, I propose to bring the cunning trick of disguise into focus, a strategy taking full effect subversively that possibly turns the prevailing mal-functional order upside-down.

Here, I suggest drawing an analogy between alternative urban practices and the appearance of the women in disguise in the male-only parliament, desirable as *practices of infiltration*. But, unlike Aristophanes' happy ending, it stays uncertain whether a subversion can successively be put into effect, meaning to become operative on a *truly*

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5   As the organizers of this panel put it on the conference website RC 21–2015, description session B2: http://www.rc21.org/en/conferences/urbino2015/public-space-in-the-ideal-city-ambiguous-imaginaries/ – last accessed July 2015.

6   Reinhold Martin, author of *Utopia's Ghost* (2010), referred to the piece in his talk at the symposium *How is Architecture Political?* at the Architectural Association, London, Dec 2014.

7   In 20th C political theory, most famously by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958).

political level, since the claim that the public sphere is pure space of political action cannot anymore be maintained.[8]

Still, with the projects in focus their initiators express – intended or not – a declaration of intent against a pervasive commodification of the urban space. David Graeber, social anthropologist, occupy-co-initiator and author of *The Democracy Project* (2013), would speak here about 'small-a anarchists [who] are the real locus of historical dynamism right now.'[9] In contrast, critical voices see *urban alternatives* being instrumentalized by neoliberal municipal politics, e.g. through city marketing slogans, such as Berlin 'the creative city'. In this light, alternative approaches towards a new urbanism, which held a lot of promise in the past two decades, are in danger of converging with the very nature of capitalist production.

Dialectics in utopian thought The increasing interest back in utopian concepts nowadays, grows proportionally with the perceived decline of public space. Despair with reality triggers the search for an ideal nature of public space as common ground for an egalitarian society. The vacillation between hope and despair creates tangible fantasies of unattainable goals. The instantaneous appearance of its inherent dialectics is quite symptomatic, when dealing with the concept of utopian thinking. Two sides of the same coin appear instantly: In *The Politics of Utopia* (1982) Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor write that 'long debates […] take place between those who use "utopian" to mean "unrealizable because hopelessly idealistic" and those for whom it connotes an ideal society, a real alternative.' They go on, stating that 'the essentially contested nature of the concept of utopia and the chequered history of utopian thought can be traced back to the paradox at the heart of the pun which [Thomas] More coined: is the good place (eu-topia) by definition *no* place (ou-topia)? Differently put, is utopia

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8   The dualism public-private has to be deconstructed, in order to come to terms with a contemporary perspective on the state of affairs. Georg Glasze gives a fruitful insight in his essay "Privatisation of public spaces" (2001), when he sheds light on the assumption, that urban spaces, owned by public authorities, do not automatically guarantee democratic standards, and vice versa, that privately owned urban spaces are not automatically characterized by anti-democratic actions. The lines get blurred, even more when taking the digital realm in consideration as common ground for genuine political action, e.g. considering free WiFi in popular coffee shops and CCTV cameras monitoring many public spaces.
9   David Graeber (2002), "The New Anarchists," *New Left Review* 13, http:// newleftreview.org/A2368 – last accessed July 2015.

necessarily unrealizable because of its ideal nature? According to the answer given, utopianism signifies either the birth or death of political optimism.'[10]

Although a critical historical analysis could assist us in understanding the longing for utopian thinking in the current situation,[11] I suggest another, assumingly more effective approach to the study of utopias, inspired by Richard Kilminster's essay *The debate about Utopias from a sociological perspective* (1982). That means not to emphasize or interpret the given historical contexts through asking why and how utopias sprung up or looked like at a certain time, but rather asking for the general problem of the function of utopias in societies. So does Kilminster, when he refers to Norbert Elias for whom 'utopias are „directional fantasy-images of possible futures", indispensable as a means of orientation in human societies. The image shows either what kind of solutions to social problems or type of society its authors desire should come about (wish images) or what solutions or futures they fear (fear images); […]. […] By looking at the function of utopias in society as an object of sociological inquiry, Elias hopes to free the concept of utopia from either of its derogatory or laudatory associations, as well as from its associations with political groups.'[12]

A radical break in the history of utopian thinking was sparked by the post-modern demand for a radically pluralistic thought, when the notion of utopia saw itself confronted with the problem of legitimization, especially with the accusation of totalitarianism since WW II. The widespread opinion that post-modernism set the seal on utopian thinking can be opposed by the development of a new variation of (literary)

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10   Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor (1982). *The Politics of Utopia*, p. 15.

11   From its very beginnings in antiquity, utopian thinking has always been closely related to the search of an ideal state (political condition): Whereas Plato's *Politeia*, Morus' *Utopia*, and the enlightenment's social contract philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke mainly meant their ideas in a didactic sense, 'the French Revolution suggested to some [extent] that the course of history *could* be diverted, and utopia (of a sort) *could* be implemented – in other words, that abstract ideals could be incarnated in society by deliberate human action. This discovery helps to account for the increased optimism and activism of nineteenth-century [social] utopias' (Goodwin and Taylor (1982), *The Politics of Utopia*, p. 15). Utopian socialists, such as Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen also highly influenced Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels thought. At this point very tempting, but it would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in what sense they were utopians themselves.

Although originally a literary genre, some utopias have extensively been described spatially, especially in the 19th and 20th C. The spatial organisation became the formal expression of its internal logics, e.g.: Fourier's Phalanstère, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux' partially realized Salines Royales in Arc-et-Senans (later: part of his utopian vision Chaux), or in the beginning of the 20th C, Tony Garnier, who tried to devise humane living conditions in his so-called Cité Industrielle.

12   Richard Kilminster (1982). *The Debate About Utopias*, p. 9–10.

utopia[13] – as manifested in Michel Foucault's writing *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias* (1967), where the plurality postulate appears in six different formal, yet abstract principles: Such as (3) 'The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' or (4) '[…] those linked […] to time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival. These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [chroniques]'. And the last principle (6) is that 'either [heterotopias'] role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space […]. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation […].[14]

Taking the notion of heterotopia as a place of mirroring, and thus freeing the concept of utopia from the dualism "good place – no place", is historically a great step towards a new level of reflection, towards a contemporary approach of worldly multi-perspectives.

With the aim to emphasize the inherent and thought-provoking dialectics of utopian concepts, and to suggest a starting point for further development (within my future PhD research), it follows a list of authors, each of which with a distinct view on the notion of utopia – dualistic / contradictory / complementary:

- Ideal or phantasma (Morus)
- Chaos vs. order (Hobbes)
- Abstract vs. concrete (Bloch)
- Subversion and ordering (Ricoeur)
- Wish or fear image (Elias)
- Reality and mirror (Foucault)
- Resistance or repression (from a psychoanalytical viewpoint)

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13 Cf. Judith Leiß (2010), *Inszenierungen des Widerstreits – die Heterotopie als postmodernistisches Subgenre der Utopie*.
14 Michel Foucault (1984 [French 1967]), 'Des espaces autre' ('Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias'), *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* (5): 46–49. This has been paralleled by a paradigm shift in planning theory and practice in the 1960–80s: Gaining importance of user participation in the structuralist approach of architecture, and later negotiated as Communicative Turn.

Alternative urbanism – practices of infiltration? Following Foucault's fourth heterotopian principle, temporal projects have their own, quite powerful modes of operation. The relativism of temporality also became a key element in the current alternative urban planning discourse.[15] Fran Tonkiss, sociologist at the London School of Economics, writes in one of her recent texts *Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city* that five years is not much for the city life, but in the lives of children, it can make up a whole universe or in the lives of transients, it can give distinction to a certain phase of life.[16] The 'banality of the good', as Tonkiss put it at another occasion,[17] becomes especially irresistible in projects like R-Urban: Practices and Networks of Urban Resilience in Colombes in the greater Paris area by Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, or the Prinzessinnengarten project in Berlin by Nomadisch Grün – two rather well known and successful projects of the past years.[18] From the beginning, in both cases the timeframe was limited, although not yet clearly defined. Within the group of participants, discussions on the duration of the projects had polarising effects: The opponents criticise the establishment of temporary projects as critical factor in the process of gentrification, and beyond, are worried about their future credibility as proponents of temporary urbanism. Proponents of the preservation take it as step in the right direction towards a new democratic urban culture. Either way, the prolongation of the life cycle of temporary projects is a hot political topic.

Another example is the project COSMO by Andrés Jaque/Office for Political Innovation, on display at the Young Architects Program 2015 of MoMA PS1 in NYC.[19] In many ways, the project is in line with alternative urban practices, ephemeral in its material composition, and for temporary use only (10 weeks). What distinguishes COSMO is in the first place its site, the institutionalized space of MoMA, then its strong formal gesture, and its quite elaborate technical performance, as a water-purifier. With that it critically comments on the global water scarcity (on the city scale), and thus gains political momentum, since climate change is the weak spot of capitalism, as Naomi Klein recently pointed out in her latest book *This Changes Everything:*

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15   Cf. Urban Catalyst (2013), *The Power of Temporary Use*.
16   Cf. Fran Tonkiss (2013), "Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City", *City journal* 17 (3): 312-324, based on a talk at the Berlin conference "Make_Shift", mentioned earlier here.
17   International workshop „Designed to Improve? Buildings, interventions and the makings of the 'social' in interdisciplinary urban practices", University of Hamburg, May 2014.
18   http://r-urban.net/ and http://prinzessinnengarten.net/ – last accessed July 2015.
19   http://momaps1.org/yap/view/19 – last accessed July 2015.

Capitalism vs. The Climate (2014). The project aroused much attention, and thus could be interpreted as popularized and/or formalized alternative project with an impact on the re-politicization of urban thinking.

Returning to Arendt's idealist approach towards the Greek polis, a framework of action has to be identified before it is even possible to take action. Thus determining a border or demarcation corresponds to setting the legal sphere and is thus a pre-political action – an indispensable condition for the political life of the citizens. In a metaphorical sense, certain architectural structures can be identified as such frameworks coming prior to political action, ultimately to create space and freedom for thinking. The initiators of such critical spatial practices could then be interpreted as civil agents, conquerors who enter unknown territory and reclaim land for the emancipated, self-organising citizen to join in and engage as proactive member of the critical mass in a critical revision of successes and problems.

Conclusio Architecture itself – in the context of critical spatial agency – is, is at, or takes place at the intersection of aesthetics (physical appearance) and the political (to take the short route: public space) in the contemporary city. Currently, in the discourse around the politics of the city, other subject areas are leading the discussions. A consequence is that the aesthetic dimension is often neglected, considered being something surplus. I believe, if the understanding of architecture does not reach beyond the object (the self-contained piece vs. an open frame or infill structure), architecture's relevance for society's good is at stake. Rethinking (the power of) architectural structures should figure equally high on the list of priorities.

As the title of my paper put up for discussion *Practices of Infiltration or Sedation?*, I suggest a rereading of these alternative urban practices clearly as *practices of infiltration*. When identifying these strategies with a return to the human dimension, to flesh and stone – in contrast to impalpable (global) market operations, also the answer of my research question (Can a formalization of alternative urban practices contribute in the long run to a necessary *re-politicisation* of *urban thinking?*) becomes clear: No!

I will conclude with posing possible leading questions for further research: What does it mean for today's society, if public space can only be negotiated in utopian terms? Is

there a political potential of the arts in general (not: Political art)? Can projects/objects have a distinct political impact through their modes of operation? Is it possible/necessary to think of demarcation lines: Architecture interpreted as pre-political framework, and if so, how? If it is not about a sharply limited space where "politics" takes place, but about the political dimension of collective action, how does that look like for the realm of architecture and public space? Can a shift of the political to cultural practices be prolific? And finally, who is the public, what do *they* need, and where and how should it take place?

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