

Places for Togetherness

Two recently designed city squares in Germany demonstrate in an exemplary manner how public spaces, which offer a range of uses through well-conceived design, can help to ensure sustainable urban development on both an ecological and social level.

The moments in life in which one can pause to reflect on life itself are often few and far between. With seemingly every minute accounted for by something more pressing, opportunities for deep reflection rarely present themselves. The chance to ponder on the meaning and/or absurdity of life is sometimes simply not present, nor can it be dictated by others. However, the desire, or rather the drive for this type of awareness of being can be triggered at any time. Aromas, visual images and dynamic environments stimulate us and present opportunities to raise our awareness of ourselves and our surroundings. In these moments, the imagination and our senses can transport us. Whether it is only for a moment or for much longer, everyday reality is left behind, leaving only true awareness of our existence in the meshing of time and place. The older we get, the more important these moments become. They bring a peaceful calmness caused by setting one's self within the flow of the river of life, originating from the small spring and journeying towards the ocean. When we are aware of this broader context and our place within it, we become better social beings who are truly participatory members of the greater society.

What place does such an article have in this publication? The answer is quite simple. This holistic view of life, with its basis in the connections between all things, needs opportunities to flourish and above all adequate venues that can act as forums for contemplation and human connection. In many cities, we search in vain for places to reconnect. Every square in a city is unique and it is quite impossible to list what a good square needs in the sense of what is mentioned above. But one thing is clear: it needs people. And if we want to reconnect to life, to community, consciously or not, the square needs very young and very old people and all ages in-between.

Mixing several generations in an urban area can be a complex planning task. At first glance, it seems difficult to achieve because the needs of various age groups in open spaces appear so diverse from one another. How many young people like to sit on a bench and watch flowers grow? Which retired person wants to prove his mobility in a half-pipe? Those who wish to bring generations together must create activity areas and peaceful areas which are able to coexist or even complement one another. At best, they offer something for all age groups.

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This has been the goal of Atelier Dreiseitl in Überlingen on Lake Constance for the last thirty years. Realizing this goal requires much more than doing the daily tasks of a landscape architect, it requires the need for an intensive process in which the planners and residents are co-operatively involved from the start. To develop open spaces which can serve as an interactive stage for residents and visitors requires awareness of larger social dynamics beyond mere aesthetics.

One of the company's philosophies centres on the use of the element water. Originally utilized by the company as a creative and mood-altering element, water proved to also serve as a social bonding element. It has become a basic factor in sustainable urban planning; even more so because of its environmentally friendly component. As a socio-culturally bonding element and at the same time environmentally-relevant medium, water is integral in the focus of planning at Atelier Dreiseitl.

Two recent projects in medium-sized German cities illustrate this well. These two case studies celebrate how design concepts can connect people of various age groups in an urban community. Both projects use water as a driving force for the design concept. Implementing water into urban open spaces offers an abundance of possibilities that can influence and create different atmospheres in urban settings. There are many ways to present the character of water in our urban environments. It adds beauty and value for people in daily life and brings unique experiences to a sometimes uneventful routine. Many different effects and moods can be achieved with the creative and familiar properties of water.

For example, water as a still surface expresses endless beauty. Motionless as a small pond or vast sea, people are often filled with a sense of peace and calm

even in the busiest city. The tranquillity of water is conveyed to anyone who cares to stop. Whereas the rhythmic movements of a water surface stimulate an invigorating shift in mood as well. Rhythmic gravity flow in rivers and canals cause surface undulations or swells, and sunlight maximizes water reflection, transforming the brilliance of light into a show of sparkles over its surface. Sometimes the physical presence of water may be sensed by sound or smell alone, not just visually.

The joy of effectively working with water is brought about by a knowledge and understanding of the medium. The extraordinary results which occur are the reward for study and diligence. In order to grasp all of the different characters of water and its spiritual benefits, the designer must first respect the element of water as a dynamic contributor to the open space.

The Heiner-Metzger-Square and the Linnenbauer-Square

In both projects, the collaboration began before the planning. The company Atelier Dreiseitl always actively invites public participation in such projects. In these cases, this was achieved through the establishment of student-workshops which created a venue for ideas and suggestions to the further planning. "Meeting point for several generations" and "Place of enthusiasm" were quickly adopted as the themes for the planning of the squares in the city-centre.

In Neu-Ulm, active play was made possible through climbing walls and table soccer areas, as well as an open chess area. Benches are spread throughout the square. From here, one can observe what is going on from a comfortable distance. What young person doesn't want to prove to those watching how he can rush over the place with his BMX-bike? Which older person doesn't enjoy remembering his own experiences and antics of years ago



through observing and teaching others? The element water seems to bring all the players together. The water runs down a large stainless steel mesh. It creates an impressive image and furthermore a lovely music of its own which blocks two high density roads. The curtains stand in a flat water basin. On summer days people happily wade through it, irrespective of their ages.

Town planning concepts should reflect and create identity and be useable. This is what one can observe in manifold ways on a beautiful summer day: children and teens playing and enjoying the central water installation. The water level isn't dangerous or difficult for anyone, but it draws people and creates an emotional experience for everybody, including the happy realisation that the impact of the innumerable water drops can deflect the traffic noise pollution. Midst the water curtain and basin stands a sculpture. In the evening, the glittering movements from the water have a hypnotic effect. The installation demonstrates how art can serve society in open spaces while also counteracting urban deficits.

The design concept of the Linnenbauer-Square in Herford is based on the same principles. Even though the elements of the square have, to some extent, different shapes, materials and colours, the square has got the signature style of the Überlingen-based company. This signature approach includes taking into account all the members of the community. People who are given the opportunity to participate in the planning of the square naturally have a higher esteem for it in the future and will take care for it. The square is anchored in the community. This is how Atelier Dreiseitl's philosophy expands the term of sustainability from a purely ecological aspect to a social aspect.

In the newly designed square, a wooden boat lies at anchor, protruding over the edge of the basin out onto the slatted



The Linnenbauer-Square in Herford (region of North-Rhine-Westphalia, northern Germany)

sand-coloured area. Reflecting its urban setting, the basin doesn't have a natural shape but rather an urban shape. The object is essentially a sculpture, but it enhances sensual perception by using the element water. Here as well, the ankle-deep water invites people to walk through, to step in and note how their legs alter the flow of the water. Human beings leave traces by simple acts and who knows what courses may be altered simply by touching something. The movement of water in Linnenbauer-Square in Herford is not as overt and dramatic as that in Heiner-Metzger Square in Neu-Ulm. However, the gentle slope of rippled water which all are welcome to touch enhances tranquillity and contemplation midst the busy city. At best, it can create in one the sensation that something has gone into motion through his touch, that he has a part in something larger.

Both the Linnenbauer-Square and the Heiner-Metzger-Square offer room for active movement and for quiet activity. Planting islands in the shape of boats are bordered by seating accommodations, further away there is a climbing wall. Hardly anything on these squares is ready-made; the basic design elements have been produced individually. To reflect and create identity, to ideally utilise space; these are the effects that Atelier Dreiseitl wants to achieve while designing city squares.

An older resident of Herford remembers the time before the square there was redesigned. Even though there were always many people in the Herford pedestrian area, people crossed the square quickly or ignored it, he recalls. It was an irrelevant area; a hardly useable place made of flagging and plantings. Yet it is not true that people don't want to meet outside, that they prefer to watch TV alone. This is what has been proven in the new Linnenbauer-Square. Old and young, foreign and German people now all convene there. The older Herford resident now comes back as



The Heiner-Metzger-Square in Neu-Ulm (region of Baden-Württemberg southern Germany)

well because of the number of people there. They give him the sensation of not being alone and of being part of an active community. The target has been achieved.

Samenvatting

Er bestaat een behoefte aan momenten waarin men reflecteert op het leven. Aroma's, visuele verbeelding en dynamische omgevingen stimuleren onze zintuigen en nemen ons weg van het alledaagse leven. Deze holistische benadering vraagt om plekken dat als klankbord fungeert van de menselijke gedachten en dat sociale contacten stimuleert. De filosofie van het bureau Atelier Dreiseitl richt zich op het gebruik van het element water als sociaal bindend en stemmingbeïnvloedend element. Aan de hand van twee projecten wordt geïllustreerd hoe water werkt als een sociaal-cultureel bindend element.