

# Kathrin Wildner<sup>95</sup>

## Planned Gentrification or Temporary Art Zone? An Associative Tour of the Große Bergstraße with Christoph Schäfer

334

335

We're strolling through the city – “strolling” in the sense of what we'll call an associative perceptual walking tour. We – an artist and a city ethnologist – are examining the Große Bergstraße in the Altona district of Hamburg. This is a shopping strip which in the 1970s was a popular urban-planning project intended to revitalize the city centre. Its main features were broad, car-free streets, large shopping complexes and glass arcades. The new Große Bergstraße featured department stores as well as one of the city's first escalators. It was a favourite destination for shoppers from the urban peripheries.

Nowadays, like many of its counterparts, this pedestrian zone has lost its flair and prosperous commercial appeal. The new 1-euro stores, call shops and discount supermarket chains are frequented and/or run by immigrants and locals on the lower end of the social scale. City planning, politics and the media now stigmatize the former models of urban modernization, labelling them as “problem zones”.

The new Große Bergstraße is a typical example of contemporary urban development processes. It is a temporary zone, subject to the processes of controlled urban transformation. An urban space in a state of metamorphosis with conse-

quences extending beyond the street itself and giving rise to architectural, economic, social and cultural questions. It is a controversial place, one that – depending on one’s perspective – calls for property improvement, better security and clean-up, economic prosperity or prosperous creativity.

For several years now Christoph and I have been interested in the politics of urban restructuring processes and potential interventions. We have been watching the events in the new Große Bergstraße with a mixture of curiosity and scepticism. Bringing along with us a series of questions related to the characteristics and criteria of “urbanity”, we decided to take a tour of the location together. By looking at this precise physical space we are attempting to draw conclusions about social space, to retrace the idea of “the city” and to formulate further questions: How do we perceive the city? How is it changing? What role does art play in city development? What does the phrase “Right to the City” mean? What would happen if the Große Bergstraße were to be seen as a freely negotiable, experimental zone?

On our tour, we are often distracted from these questions, because the city itself looms largest in our field of vision.



17 48

336

### Pedestrian zones

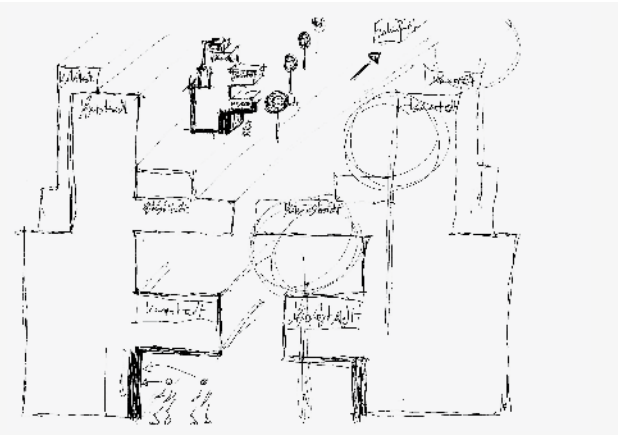
*Christoph Schäfer:* Our first view of the Große Bergstraße. Even if it doesn’t look like over there on the other side – in the flourishing new shopping strip in Ottensen – this too is clearly a shopping area. There is an extremely complex infrastructure here in which the state has invested a lot of money. Advocated by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), paid for by the state before

Reagonomics as well as alternative thinkers began using the slogan “small is beautiful”. An arrangement of streets with cars and pedestrians clearly separated by means of underpasses that nowadays seem increasingly unappealing.

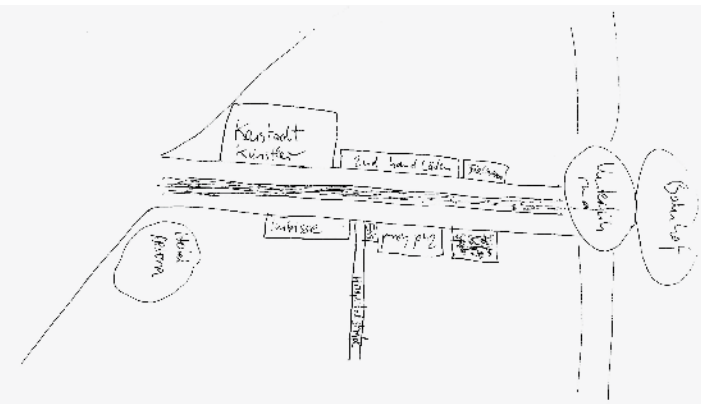
*Kathrin Wildner:* Right. When the Große Bergstraße was rebuilt in the 1970s, the prevailing idea was that of a city based on a strict separation of functions: living – working – shopping; and one based on different speeds: pedestrian – cyclist – car – underground.

*Christoph Schäfer:* The culmination of this, as criticized by the Situationists, was the reduction of the city to shopping, sleeping, working and transport in between (see Ohrt 2008<sup>95</sup>). The city’s inhabitants were reduced to a function.

*Kathrin Wildner:* The term “pedestrian zone” clearly defines the individuals, and always refers to a shopping area.

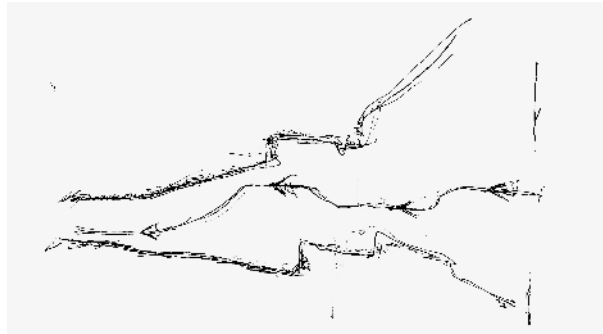


17 48



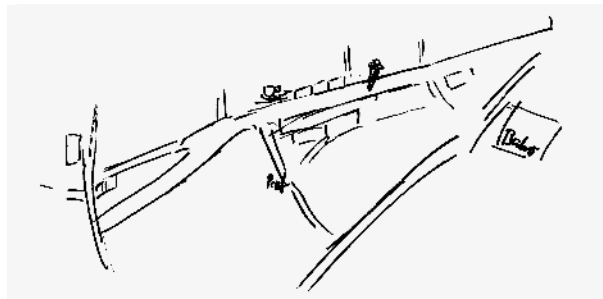
17 48

*Christoph Schäfer:* In reality a kind of canal or channel was built. You feel like you're being channelled. All this now has a historical feeling to it, because this kind of urban development is completely over. Two years ago a bus lane was built right through the pedestrian zone in the lower section of the Große Bergstraße. This is a different logic – accessibility, revitalization and such things. A different vision of the city.



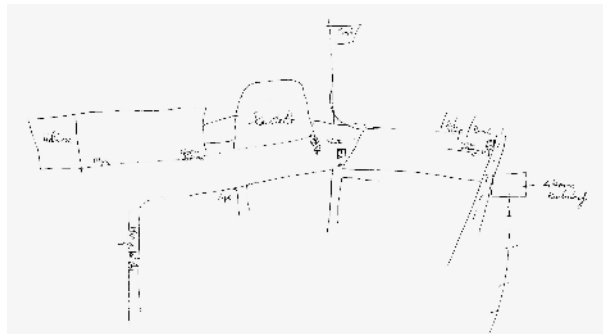
17 48

340



17 48

341



17 48

342

## Let's talk about the city

*Christoph Schäfer:* The poster right here in the middle of the intersection – “We're looking for Germany's funniest street: Kackhauserstrasse (‘Shit House Street’), Tunseldaallee” – is an advertisement for a new season of the TV show *Schillerstraße*. To me this advertising campaign is as if the TV-Station wants to inscribe itself back into the reality of urban life. A stupid joke is used to try and put down roots again in the urban space, in this case by relating to the names of streets. Probably the loss of reality in TV is now seen as a problem by the program makers. For me this is a kind of parallel to that event at Kampnagel. “Parcitypate” was the kind of event, where a neoliberal university in Switzerland and a formerly alternative theatre start to be interested in the city. They begin to go into the city to create a dynamic between urban space and theatrical space, which had become too disconnected from one another. Once this was different: Kampnagel was first a factory, then it was squatted. As a space with a political potential it had strong ties with the city. This connection was lost, and now the directors are trying to find a way back, to establish contact again with the city, to hark back to the city. Similar to this advertisement for the [Sat 1 Show](#).

*Kathrin Wildner:* It was called “Parcitypate”. Similar to this sign with “funny” street names like Tunseldaallee, they're trying to get people's attention with the play on words. The idea of the event at Kampnagel seemed to be to create discussion about the city from different perspectives – city planning, cultural studies, theatre, art. It wasn't really about doing something active, rather to dialogue about the city was put on stage.

*Christoph Schäfer:* If you take “Parcitypate” as a symptom and not as a platform intended to solve a problem – it becomes clear that it is real urban space with all its names, places and histories that is of interest. Suddenly, it seems as if the urban everyday is seen as the realm where the production of the city is taking place.

*Kathrin Wildner:* It's really about everyday urban reality and urban histories. Yet it's also very much about the creation of the city on a local level. This in turn points to an extended definition of space. Space not as a container, but in the Lefebvrian sense as a complex societal whole – physical, social and discursive (cf. Lefebvre 1991<sup>95</sup>). Or space as defined by Martina Löw (2001)<sup>95</sup> – a continual process of arrangements and placements. Space as everyday experience, as both the catalyst and product of social events. And yet – and this seems important to me, especially as in this context the call for art is getting louder – it is also very explicitly about physical, material creation or the potential for artistic interventions in public space. The question however then must be about the meaning of art and its role in the city.

## Ways of looking at the city

*Christoph Schäfer:* The role of art and artist can be very different. For instance here, the Altona railway station, which has been re-built recently. In the 1970s the old, completely intact steel construction from the early industrial period was demolished. I was told that no one protested against this – only the Swiss artist Bernhard Luginbühl. Today the mainstream has adopted his view and a building like that would probably not be demolished. This way of thinking has prevailed. Artists have had an impact on the way people view such things – that is what art can contribute to city planning in this case.

*Kathrin Wildner:* The railway station was nevertheless torn down. In what ways has his way of thinking prevailed? Isn't it true instead that that epoch or period also had specific ideas about the city and implemented these ideas materially? In the case of the Große Bergstraße – pedestrian-zone architecture with brick and concrete, which corresponded to the image of society at the time and was intended to allow all participants in city transport to move unimpeded and with equal rights. There was no room here for the cathedral-like, imposing steel construction of the railway station. The artistic perspective is then to be understood as a critique of this kind of replacement of one ideal by another. And this would become relevant 30 years later.

*Christoph Schäfer:* When I look at Luginbühl's sculpture – he worked a lot with metal and industrial scrap materials. He removed materials from their original context and transformed them into aesthetic objects. This "aestheticization-by-means-of-isolation-from-an-everyday-context" is a method that has a long tradition, but that also represents an aestheticizing moment in relation to the materials of a by-gone age. In Luginbühl's sculptures and in his love for the old railway station concourse what might be called a "nostalgization" plays a role. And I would certainly say that this view of the industrial era has prevailed. Maybe, though, Luginbühl also meant something else entirely, something related to workers' movements and the social history that clings to such places and could have been preserved. In this sense his views have not prevailed.

## "Tendential drop of profit rate, we give up!"

*Kathrin Wildner:* We are still standing at one end of the Große Bergstraße, the railway station is behind us and we're looking down the street. The wind is whistling sharply. A few years ago there was a row of pavilions here with small shops, and these play a major role in your film "Revolution Non Stop". What interested you about this location?



17 48

17 48

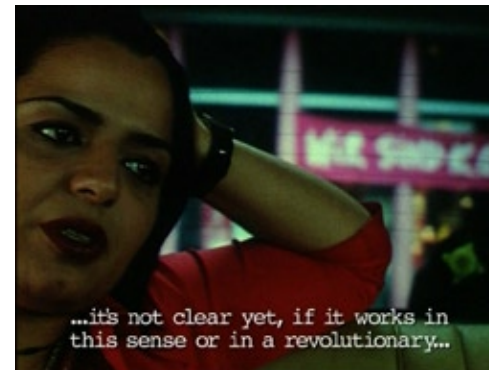
344



17 48

17 48

345



17 48

346



*Christoph Schäfer:* That was in spring 2000. Back then many of the pavilions were already empty, there were no tenants. It was a kind of paradise – a 99-cent paradise. There were a lot of small junk shops and, further down the street, a Karstadt department store with an Aldi supermarket in the basement – a hybrid form that was tailored to the local population. What I liked was that it was a shopping area for people who didn't have money. And this was in the middle of the New Economic Boom. Yet the Große Bergstraße was on its way out. There was a lot of activity here, but it was somehow unclear what was happening. That's what interested me about the location. In the film I was looking for more such locations from an earlier period: a shopping arcade from the 1970s, an old non-stop cinema, the Karstadt's upper story car park – all places behind which stood a very specific kind of “urban promise”. The premise of the film was that, when these locations fail, the urban promises of the eras in which they were made or the utopian society that they represented become visible again.

### The city looks at itself?

*Christoph Schäfer:* What I find architecturally beautiful about the Bergstrasse is, for example, this 1960s corner house. You have the feeling that there's a café or restaurant up there with a terrace. To me this is one of the greatest achievements of the European City which such locations made possible – places where the city can look at itself. This location, which is now a billiard salon called Le Queue, is also one of these places.

*Kathrin Wildner:* Not all too long ago it was an Afghan restaurant. Yet there were thick blinds over the windows that prevented the city from seeing customers and prevented customers from seeing the city.

*Christoph Schäfer:* But something else was going on there. An Afghan restaurant like this comes from a different urban tradition, where under certain circumstances being on display behind a panoramic window might not be so great.

*Kathrin Wildner:* A different idea of publicness and being in public spaces, where eating belongs to the realm of more intimate activities, activities which people prefer not to do in public. But you just spoke of the European City, which refers precisely to a very specific idea of middle-class publicness, in the sense of the “piazza” or the “agora”. Though exclusion mechanisms and questions as to who the public is or who has the right to the city were never looked at in special detail in this quite idealistic view of the European city.

*Christoph Schäfer:* This location, the Große Bergstraße, was an exception – or rather it consisted of a series of exceptions. Precisely in these pavilions, where



17 48

347

there were arcades, passages, shelters. It was planned as a kind of organised bazaar. The location had something social-democratically subdued about it, and then there were the vestiges of something else ...

*Kathrin Wildner:* ... something labyrinthine? There were niches that were like hideouts or that had the potential to be hideouts. Locations that aren't visible at first sight and cannot be controlled.

*Christoph Schäfer:* Exactly. And demolition began at the very moment when the urban promise hidden in these places began to be realized – when a real bazaar began to take shape – a completely unromantic, untouristic bazaar, with customers and merchants from all over the world (some even from the “Orient”). One of the last small shops here was called “Prinz von Eschnapur”. The proprietor was a tailor from Iran who sold these glamorous silk men's shirts that had a disco flair. Those were the kinds of stores here – somewhat trashy but describing a completely different world.

### Art as trigger?

*Kathrin Wildner:* And what is it like now? It's totally generic, empty. And there's something shady about it. There are also the specific circumstances surrounding the former Karstadt building, a huge concrete block from the 1970s that has been empty for quite a few years. There's talk about whether it should be torn down and replaced because it's supposedly an architectural monstrosity, or not torn down but sold. But who wants it? And what is to be done with it in the meantime? Temporary use by artists.

*Christoph Schäfer:* Do we want to get into the details? This looks like “off art”. Artistic graffiti, street art.

*Kathrin Wildner:* What do you mean by that? You don’t make it sound very attractive, as if something strategic were being done with specific goals.

*Christoph Schäfer:* It has a strange aftertaste. It’s not at all like someone came from the suburbs to leave some bombs and tags behind. It has an artistic pretension to it. Five years ago there was nothing like that here. But since then – in the last three or four years to be exact – all these projects have been proposed and pushed and promoted by different state or private institutions. There are still pieces and references left over from one of the countless events and exhibitions. The place is oversaturated with art. But nothing stays and it’s uninspiring. One wants to be silent in shame vis a vis all this artistic hustle and bustle.



*Kathrin Wildner:* Yes, it’s a strange feeling, as if someone wanted the vestiges to be left behind as a strategic sign: something was here once. But the whole thing only lasted two years and now the last spaces or studios are being more or less voluntarily cleared out.

*Christoph Schäfer:* The artists are just stopgaps. Nothing sustainable has been planned. It was never intended to establish something seriously artistic here. Because, if something were really to happen, people would have to stay for five or ten years, maybe even fifteen or twenty.

*Kathrin Wildner:* No, everything here is short-term and communicates the idea of a turbo-gentrification that in the end hasn’t worked. First for a couple of years there were rooms for different kinds of artists. Then there were a few larger exhibitions. Then students of the HafenCityUniversity started to draw attention to the question of city planning on a more professional level. It wasn’t a matter of specific everyday use anymore, of the daily production of space; rather the city was made a focal point by way of arguments and proposals about the city and its representation. A very specific kind of production of urban space. Again, similar to the Parcitypate event at Kampnagel<sup>95</sup>, a kind of dramatization of discussions about the city.

349

### What can art do?

*Kathrin Wildner:* But what role does art play in these processes? Is it about art?

*Christoph Schäfer:* It doesn’t seem to be about art. If it was about art there would be some kind of challenge involved. If there was a chance for invention in the creation of urban design, if something new would be created... In Stuttgart in the mid-1990s something like this was done in a pedestrian zone from the 1970s that was like the Große Bergstraße. There was a cool bar in an old pedestrian zone pavilion, and the city’s best disco was in a building that used to be a bank. It was all disguised as an art project. It was special and glamorous, an aggressive transformation, as if the bank had been occupied, people dancing where once money went over the counter.

But here in the Große Bergstraße you never get the impression that this is about appropriating a failed structure. It was like people were invited but weren’t supposed to be too crazy. Not one of the exhibitions ever managed to overcome the stale vibe that such locations have. The Hafenklang music club came closest. But that was only temporary. It was only here while its real location on Fischmarkt was being renovated, as they were able to make provisional use of the old department store. That completely changed the atmosphere, especially at night when there were concerts and other events. If they had stayed it might have been the starting point for something. Something might have really happened. But in reality nothing here was ever intended to be more than temporary. The status quo was never challenged.

*Kathrin Wildner:* So what role might art be able to play in this abbreviated version of strategic, economically controlled urban development processes?

*Christoph Schäfer:* That is a question that doesn’t just have to do with art, but also involves this issue of the “Right to the City” (see Lefebvre 1996<sup>95</sup>).

350

How much life is allowed to be there as a precondition for a development?

How can something establish itself when everything is so controlled?

I didn't find the situation here in 2000 with the pavilions all that bad. One of the political concepts of the movie "Revolution Non Stop" was that nothing repels long-term investment from a neighbourhood more effectively than 99-cent stores. They appeal to the kind of customers that investors definitely don't want. Even political demonstrations or squats are more attractive, as they tend to appeal to a more interesting clientele with a lot of creativity. Students or political movements can at some point be integrated in a different way. They translate something into a language that people involved in economics and politics can understand. But people that don't have money – they want them out of central locations, there's no room for them here anymore. Then it really is about the "Right to the City" – the right to spend time in the city centre, maybe have a job there, even if it's a low-wage job. It's about being able to spend time in the city, to meet people, to interact – as far as I'm concerned in the form of a black market too –, above all to be able to participate in the city.  
*Kathrin Wildner:* To experience the city ...

*Christoph Schäfer:* ... and that is going to be destroyed. Now they're trying half-heartedly again to bring the city back to life with art, but it's different. The exciting resource that was once here doesn't interest anyone. Urban planning doesn't take that into account. It either doesn't recognise the urban potential that's already in the city or it wants to control this potential so much that nothing's allowed to happen. You could ask yourself why art has disappeared here so quickly and with so little resistance. How did they manage to pull that off so smoothly?

### **Inventing the city**

*Christoph Schäfer:* Even if there were a few different approaches to city planning here, the question was never asked: How do we want to live? Only when this question is posed is it really about developing an urban utopia and not just a way of dodging the question. It will be interesting to see what happens. Maybe this location will become interesting for us again in a couple of years, because you get the impression they will continue trying new things. Maybe things will develop quite differently. Completely different things might become possible. Who knows ... And somehow the Karstadt building is screaming for a situationist squat. I mean – inventing a different kind of city for a different kind of life. This would be the place for it. There are strange spaces – new

ideas could come about. One could invent new kinds of public spaces. Yes, this could be a different kind of building, not just the same old forms – one could develop an experimental city. It's a giant block! Now that would be a project!  
*Kathrin Wildner:* Then it's about trying to assert oneself, actively selecting a location and not waiting for an invitation – taking a location over for six weeks, not in anticipation of failure but rising to the challenge that the building presents and working with it – inventing the city.

### **Notes on the visual material**

*There are three levels of visual material to the guided tour of the Große Bergstraße: photos of the street taken in April 2009; a series of mental maps from a workshop on the Große Bergstraße held in 2006; and finally a sequence of video stills from "Revolution Non Stop" by Christoph Schäfer (filmed in 2000 on the Große Bergstraße and other outlying districts of the city), the main focus of which is city restructuring.*

Series of mental maps on the Große Bergstraße, workshop held by the group Offene Kartierung (Open Mapping) with Kathrin Wildner:  
*Mental maps are maps in which memory, orientation, major features as well as the individual and collective occupation of locations used daily are combined. Mental maps don't reflect "reality", rather they are imprecise and distorted in different ways. On some maps experienced and utilised spaces or knowledge about them are shown. Other maps tend to be symbolic interpretations of fictive landscapes or clichéd images – sketches of our mental images of locations seen but never experienced. Creating these mental (or cognitive) maps is a method in urban ethnography used to examine the perception and aptness of urban spaces. Urban space influences people and their interactions, and people influence urban space by their use and adaptation of it. Urban space is nevertheless always an aesthetic, imagined and ideological expression of a group as well.*

*In May 2006 I was invited to a workshop organised by the "Offene Kartierung" group (<http://offene-kartierung.de>), in order to explain mental mapping techniques. The Offene Kartierung group experiments with different methods of cartography as a manner of understanding the city by way of the creation of open maps using self-defined parameters. The mental maps shown here were created during the workshop when I asked the participants to sketch the Große Bergstraße.*

Sequence of stills from the film “Revolution Non Stop” (Christoph Schäfer, 2000, 16mm, 19’):

*Utopia is the subject of “Revolution Non Stop”. Christoph Schäfer has inserted this film into a particular context: “Revolution Non Stop” begins and ends in the Metropolis Cinema in Hamburg. Since the setting and the screening room are the same – and the spectator can have a drink in the bar ‘outside’ the film or bump into the film’s Meaning Making Taxi driver’s Jaguar in Mönckebergstraße – the division between fiction and reality is further blurred. All the ‘participants’ in the film are artists from ‘semi-dominant’ local networks for film, music, politics and art in Hamburg and Berlin. Schäfer tends to interweave fact and fiction, a phenomenon that Benjamin saw during his time in the disappearance of the shopping arcade, but that nowadays – in the era of large shopping centres, Big Brother and on-line virtual speculation – is central for/affects all of us. “Revolution Non Stop” was produced for the Außendienst (‘Foreign Service’) exhibition in Hamburg (2000–2001), which generally focused on the issue of art in public spaces, and, more specifically, on the interventionist aspects of contemporary art strategies (cf. Ulrich Schötker on <http://www.saloon-la-realidad.com/christophschaeferprojekte/RevolutionNonStop>).*

*Translated by Chris Michalski*