The Bernese Proposal

The Social Space Agency (SoSA) maps and explores the Social Outer Space, expanding the possibilities of our everyday life. This Social Outer Space contains all social conventions and social practices that we have not yet created. They exist only as possibilities. Experimenting on those possibilities and making them visible to society is one of its main goals.

SoSA sees itself neither as art nor as science, but somewhere in-between. While its methods and techniques seem to be quite unconventional, SoSA approaches our social conventions and their hidden possibilities - or even potentials - in a systematical manner.

In the Bern Mission this approach was tested for the first time. Between April 29 and May 18, 2014 we conducted several experiments on and in the city. While detailed summary of each of those experiments will be published soon on our homepage, we suggest now five proposals to the city of Bern - proposals that could expand its possibilities considerably.

Despite being the capital of Switzerland, Bern is a small city, a town almost, built around a historical city centre. How can this town become an inspirational city not only to its inhabitants, but other cities worldwide? Bern has a lot of potential due to its size and many engaged, creative inhabitants. With little effort, big impacts can be achieved - an ideal testing ground for vanguard citizenship.

Currently though, this potential is being undermined by a paradox. We call this paradox the self-cleaning machine.

The self-cleaning machine is built from different parts: One is public life in Bern, which is reduced to the city center only. If you want to be heard, that's where you have to be. At the same time, there are few possibilities to be creative in the city center's public space: conspicuous behaviour is closely monitored not only by city officials, but also by the citizens themselves. This self-policing of every act, beyond the ordinary is the basis of the self-cleaning machine, maintains the Bern's city center as a museum: The functions and appearances are locked down, changes are impossible.

Next, creativity is banned to hermetic institutions, secluding it from the broader public. Experimental approaches to life are tolerated within the art context and its corresponding buildings as f.ex. the Progr, the KTB, the Schlachthaus Theater or the AUAWIRLEBEN festival. As soon as creativity leaves this sector, pouring into everyday life, each move is watched with suspicion.

This self-cleaning machine is danger to city life. It builds up an all-encompassing structure that makes the city conservative, expecting possible change from outsiders only. In our proposals, we point out ways to encourage change and creativity from within, ways to create time and space within the system: windows and fields where experimental approaches can happen, researching and developing city life.

1) Experimental Day

There is April's Fools Day, there is a car-free sunday, there is all sorts commonly acknowledged special days. Most of these days have been born rather haphazardly, without much systematic thought behind them.

We propose a new day, one based on generation of variety, offering a clear interest to the development of the city: Experimental Day. On this day, you are encouraged experiment with your environment, your working space and public spaces. This is the day to test things not only for yourself, but with all people with whom you share the city, an opportunity to try out things that you always wanted to. There is no obligation to succeed - experiments have the right fail. More importantly, this day gives you the chance to create something completely new, in an environment that supports its newness.

In sum, Experimental Day is a showcase and a catalyst of possibilities: Imagine trading jobs with a friend. Imagine a day when a shop can test out an idea they been holding back. Imagine a writer distributing short stories attached to balloons. Imagine a home as a prototype of a public space. Imagine the whole city becoming a laboratory for a day.

Establishing a new public day is a chance to give the city some character, to highlight it from other cities.
Experimental day is a clear call to collective development. It defines the city-life as an always progressing phenomenon, not a tradition that turtles itself against change.

Establishment of the Experimental Day is an experiment in city-wide communication. From communication campaigns to idea guides, it could test out the ability of Bernese to come up with a collective development.

2) Layered City

We see the city as one - it should be many. We propose the development of alternative layers of meaning to the city, adding variations to how the city appears to us, and how we approach it.

Imagine if we didn't have a single history for the places in the city. We could always create more, to select the basis of our experience. What if you could choose a history where there is an alternative old town in Bern. What would this history be like? What things would become important? How would you experience the place differently if you approached it through a different background story?

Imagine Bern, with all that it offers, as material: the different meanings we give it conceiving an infinite amount of Berns. Our experiments indicate that this is possible: with each redefinition, we're offered another city. The possibility of infinite Berns is just a matter of developing and distributing new definitions, new backgrounds for it.

The paradigm of layers would offer the ability to reconceive Bern in another way. How could you enable a project where a writer creates a new version of Bern as tours and maps to

the city. How could you make such an asset into a permanent possibility? Thinking the city's meanings in multiple layers offers an elegant and flexible way to do just that.

The systematic development of layers of meaning would put Bern on the map of new city culture. Simply put, it would offer a possibility to be creative with what Bern in a manner not offered by other cities.

3) Enhanced Communication

In urban public space, almost only official and commercial communication channels are tolerated. While such communications channels are necessary, this monotheism of communication creates a poverty of informatics of the city, where the citizens are reduced to mere recipients of limited range of messages. The result is passive resistance of information and informational apathy.

We propose a program for enhanced city communication. Its goal: Empowering citizens to create and use public communication channels.

In a society that conceives public space as a system of participative communication, alternative street signs and non-commercial posters, personal memorials and sign languages could take their roles in the city, opening up possibilities towards multiple perceptions and usages of the city.

Bern should take the lead on the development of new communication channels to increase the exchange of ideas in the city. As an example, in a new culture of urban communication, people could use a system of "You can talk to me"-Buttons, that make it easier to get in contact with each other. Encouraging such initiatives would be highly beneficial against the compartmentalized communication culture of Bern.

Redefining the communication in public space could also enhance communication between citizens and the government. Bern lacks non-formal ways of exchange between the population and the political authorities. We propose the creation of public voicewalls that can be used by the citizens for feedback to the authorities.
In the same perspective, we propose an easy-to-use system for 'requests for change' that can be used by any citizen in order to give constructive inputs to authorities and administration.

The non-commercial usage of leaflets, posters and notes in public space is currently made impossible by the restrictive policy of cleanliness. We propose more tolerance towards the use of public space for individual communication, for example through a creation of officially approved billboard space for non-commercial usage.

4) Prototype places

Take a walk in Bern. There are many different places to discover. You can walk into a shop, a restaurant, a cinema, a bar or a friend's house. You have a variety of choices of where to go to. But this variety is limited. In fact, the list of different functions offered by the city is extremely traditional, and similar to any other city in the world. While bar is different from another, it's still a bar - and so is the restaurant.

In short, the city is formed from a limited palette of functional formats. There's no systematic development of this palette. In its functions, the city is a surprisingly stagnant entity, repeating itself with uncritical servience to tradition.

Against this stagnancy, imagine places and zones where people try out new formats. Imagine a place where you could order a conversation, with a certain topic, or an exchange place for ideas. Imagine rooms and spaces people could occupy for a certain time to try out new formats. Imagine experimental spaces for spending time, with changing themes, and the possibility to affect those themes.

To counter the problems created by the stagnant functions, we propose Prototype Places: Places that are open for new uses, for experiments on how we meet, how we interact. Places that introduce new possibilities for our everyday life.

If Bern would systematically zone places for experiments of new city functions, it would attract new culture makers into the city. It would also offer Bern the attention as a city that that is doing something unique.

Curating the selection of places would create publicity for the city itself. It would also enable dialogue about the desires of the citizens, painting pictures of what people want out of the city.

Such places would gain extra attention: people would come to visit them simply for the interest of their uniqueness.

The different proposals for such places would offer visions of possible cities: How would the city look if the experimentally developed format would become more numerous in it.

5) Laboratoric City

We see the citizens of Bern working on a multitude of projects that add variations to the city life. On the other hand, we see the city administration concerned with standardisation of its approaches, and economisation of its initiatives. Working with such a limited range of approaches cuts out initiatives that could make a difference precisely because they don't follow the standard practices. These days, successful companies have to place around 10% of their budget to experimentation, research and development of new forms, without assurances of them working at all. Cities, the concrete forms of our shared culture, should do better.

Diversification of models of approval, support and function are a rational way to enhance city's uniqueness. Bern needs methods that recognize alternative approaches, offering them a breeding ground, even a catalyst for further difference.

Therefore, we propose a City Laboratory. Its task is to develop and support projects exactly because they are different from the existing standards. Such a laboratory would form a testing "area" for new developments in the city in all its forms, from citizens to governance. City laboratory would create a systematic support for the development of the city life itself, offering Bern a rational pathway to become a special, noteworthy city. City Laboratory would organize initiatives such as the above mentioned Experimental Day, Enhanced Communication and Prototype places. The laboratory would also train city officials on alternative approaches, either developed by it, or found elsewhere.

These are the five proposals of the Social Space Agency to Bern. Not all of those would need to be realized at once, nor would they need to be executed exactly as described in order to turn the city into a more colourful and unique place. But at the same time they only provide a glimpse of how many different cities we could imagine and live in. Bern definitely has the potential, and it would be a shame not to use it.

Exploring social outer space is not easy, and even more difficult if done alone. That is why the Social Space Agency exists: encouraging, inspiring and helping each other. Therefore, SoSA offers its help to the city if Bern is willing to expand the possibilities of its everyday life.

SoSA – The Social Space Agency

www.socialspaceagency.org

socialspaceagency@gmail.com

Contacts in Bern:

Miko Hucko, 079 720 72 25

Micha Küchler, 076 377 93 83