Mainstreaming Urban Interventionist Practices: the Case of the BMW Guggenheim Lab in Berlin

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Introduction

Through a discussion of the case of the BMW Guggenheim Lab, this paper examines how artistic intervention practices in public spaces, design activism and the spontaneous appropriation of urban spaces have entered the mainstream. The Lab project is financed by the German BMW group, one of the largest car manufacturers in the world, and realised by the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation.[1] It is meant to address issues of contemporary urban life in the form of a 'mobile laboratory travelling to cities worldwide' and, at the same time, to constitute an 'urban think tank community center and public gathering space'.[2] Since 2011, the BMW Guggenheim Lab has taken up temporary residence in New York, Berlin and Mumbai. The concluding exhibition 'Participatory City' is to be presented at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in autumn/winter 2013.[3]

In the summer of 2012, the Lab was stationed for six weeks in Berlin. The initial location for the Lab had been a site in Berlin Kreuzberg, the city's hub of political and social activism. However, the announcement of the Lab's location had met with fierce protests from residents and local activist groups, who feared that the project would reinforce gentrification tendencies in the quarter and who criticised the BMW group sponsoring. After several weeks of intense public debate, the organisers finally renounced this plan and took refuge in a less contentious site in Prenzlauer Berg. Ultimately, the actual programme turned out to be much less

controversial than the prelude and stirred comparatively little debate. It entailed lectures, debates and a range of workshops with an overall emphasis on participatory and activating formats and forms of intervention in urban spaces.

The BMW Guggenheim Lab, as high-profile cultural sponsorship, testifies in an exemplary way to the attention that is currently being paid to participatory and interventionist practices in architecture and urban design, and to the promises that these approaches hold, not only for institutionalised urban planning but also for major cultural institutions involved in culture-led regeneration strategies. At the same time, the case is highly relevant because it very clearly reveals the limits of both mainstreaming participatory urban interventionist practices, and transferring concepts and formats from one place to the other and staging them in temporary, short-term form.

To argue these points, I will first revisit the public debates surrounding the BMW Guggenheim Lab in Berlin and discuss the impact they had on the project. Secondly, drawing on several in-depth interviews with people who organised workshops and events at the BMW Guggenheim Lab in Berlin, I will examine the various notions of participation underlying these projects.[4] The focus here is on those workshops and events that worked with and in diverse urban spaces beyond the limits of the Lab's venue and intervened in public and private spaces in various ways. Thirdly, I will discuss the limits of

participation that were manifested in the case of the BMW Guggenheim Lab in Berlin.

The public debate

According to the initial plans, the BMW Guggenheim Lab was to be stationed in Berlin from May until July 2012 on a derelict site in Berlin Kreuzberg. Choosing Berlin as the second location for the Lab was a concession to the sponsoring German BMW group but also in the interest of the city of Berlin, which publicly expressed its support for the project and was instrumental in securing the site. However, the organisers and curators had not anticipated the fierce protests that their plans would arouse and were taken by surprise by the ensuing media coverage of the dispute. The arguments raised against the Lab by leftist groups and local initiatives were that the project would further facilitate the upgrading of the quarter and the displacement of working-class residents. They pointed out how in recent years a number of bottom-up cultural initiatives had had to close down or move out of their premises due to rising rents in the quarter and developer-driven investment in the renovation of existing housing stock.[5] Critics also argued that the debates about urban life which the Lab was meant to target had been in progress for years, and that citizens were not in need of new ideas but rather a local government willing to renounce its property-led, investor-friendly, urban development policies. Thus, they blamed the BMW Guggenheim Lab for instrumentalising social struggles for the sake of polishing the image of the Guggenheim Foundation and sharpening the brand profile of the BMW group. In fact, the BMW Guggenheim Lab project found itself tapping into a highly politicised debate that has culminated over the last two years. With its cheap prices, relaxed atmosphere and lively cultural scene, the city is highly attractive to creatives and tourists alike. However, rents have recently been rising dramatically (which is highly significant in a city where 85% of the population live in rented property). At the same time, the city's

planning department has been pursuing a decidedly investor-friendly policy, selling off public land to the highest bidder and privatising large parts of the social housing stock to pay off debts. Working-class and migrant residents of trendy but poor areas, such as Kreuzberg and Neukölln, where rents have risen by 40% in the past three years, have been particularly affected by these processes.

On the 20 March 2012, the Guggenheim Foundation announced its withdrawal from the plans, stating that it would not take the risk of violent assaults on organisers and audience. Leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties denounced the protests, and the organisers of the Lab finally took refuge in a venue in Prenzlauer Berg – the Pfefferberg – where the Lab was held for six weeks in June and July 2012. The Pfefferberg complex is located on the premises of a nineteenth-century brewery that has been gradually renovated and transformed into a social and cultural centre over the past two decades and is now a protected monument. The complex houses a number of by now well-established cultural institutions, such as the architecture forum, Aedes, and various galleries and artists' studios. The surrounding quarter of Prenzlauer Berg has been transformed into an affluent locality over the past two decades and, in the German context, probably figures as *the* epitome of gentrification with many of its negative consequences.[6]

Sensing the city, making communities

As a result of the public debates and the pressure to justify the project, the team of curators responsible for the Berlin Lab included some discussions and panels dedicated to topics such as the sell-off of the city's property, and also sought to establish a dialogue with the protesting groups and initiatives. This plan didn't quite succeed, as these groups were obviously not too keen on playing a part in the official programme, and politicians also pulled back from participating in public discussions. Nonetheless, the

team was clear about their refusal 'to let those that cry out the loudest dominate the programme', as one of the interviewees commented. What remained unchanged was the idea of 'learning by doing' as the overall guideline for the Berlin programme, as opposed to the Lab's activities in New York with their more theoretical focus. Emphasis was placed 'on the importance of "doing and making" to activate change'.[7] This is a radical move away from an object-centred approach to architecture – which the Guggenheim Foundation represents more than any other institution, given its strategy of branding through iconic buildings – toward a process and practice-oriented approach. Besides some conventional lectures and panel discussions, the curators deliberately employed participatory, experimental and activating forms of workshops, as well as walks, performances, field trips and mobile labs, in order to extend the activities into the neighbouring streets and have the participants move through the city in various ways. Altogether, about 300 events took place during the six weeks the Lab was present. The 'making' workshops on site introduced various do-it-yourself technologies that allowed participants to create, for example, personalised mobility devices, robots that respond to the environment, environmental sensors, and health devices such as glucose meters and biosensors. Off-site events included the weekly 'Field Trips', the tours to the 'C-Zone', the 'Mobile University' workshops, and the 'ReciproCity' project (all of which will be discussed below). There was also a series of participatory walking tours in which participants took the role of 'researchers' gathering evidence about the psychological and physiological effects of public space. In all of this, the discursive production of knowledge was not only removed from traditional, cultural and educational institutions and enclosed spaces and taken out into public and private spaces, but it could be largely said that, in fact, action and material change *substituted* discourse. This kind of focus is as much practical as it is programmatic. It has been very consciously employed by the Guggenheim Lab

and the young curator responsible for the Berlin Lab, Maria Nicanor, and is surely inspired by contemporary, bottom-up, urban interventionist practices, which are characterised by two things in particular: a creative engagement with the materiality of objects and urban spaces, and a refusal to locate expertise and responsibility for this engagement solely with legitimate experts.[8] Although cultural institutions that engage in museum-community partnerships, and educational institutions that experiment with creative and performative methods are no longer new, the Lab's adoption of DIY urbanist practices went a step further. Not only were these practices used to reach out to people and bring them into the museum, they had actually been designed as the very essence of the Berlin Lab in the first place. Furthermore, the forms of participation employed in the 'making' workshops and off-site events were aimed at the dissolution of the experts vs. laymen dichotomy. These events were characterised by a blurring of boundaries and shifting roles: people were meant to be involved as active producers rather than mere consumers of the events, participating both as professionals and urbanites, producers as well as users of public spaces.

The Mobile University of Berlin (MUB) organised by Karsten Michael Drohsel, Stefan Höffken and Tobias Meier, all members of the bloggers network 'urbanophil', was one of the key projects of the Lab, exemplifying its conceptual approach as 'a small lab within the Lab' (KMD). The MUB consists of a basic set of infrastructure mounted on a cargo-bicycle that is brought to the location of each workshop and collectively assembled by participants. Emphasis is placed on collaborative action and a playful and creative engagement with the materiality of urban spaces, which gives participants the opportunity to explore the diverse perceptions that exist about a particular place and the different claims and suggestions that can be made to improve it. In testing how these diverse perceptions and claims can be made to co-exist, a planning process is

simulated on a very basic level that reflects the difficulties of planners to 'find solutions for places they don't really know, for people who live in those places and use those spaces' (KMD). This experience is meant to offer participation that precedes formal planning processes 'to enable people to understand what happens in participation' (KMD). Importantly, the organisers see themselves as catalysts in initiating a process and suggesting a topic, but not as experts, consultants or service providers. A key feature of their participatory experimentation with urban space is the emphasis on physical intervention and bodily movement. For instance, in a workshop that problematised the residual space under the Jannowitzer Bridge, colourful tapes were used to either mark things that seemed important or to suggest changes. In experiments like these, the emotions, experiences and knowledge of participants, who have no professional background in planning or design disciplines, are explicitly seen as resources that need to be made fruitful for formalised planning processes; residents are seen as those 'who, in the end, tell us [planners], how a place functions' (KMD). The ReciproCity project by Andrea Respondek and Kyra Porada, an interdisciplinary planner-designer team, was conceived in a similar way. Participants were invited to explore the neighbourhood of the Pfefferberg individually, noting down their thoughts and observations and leaving notes for other people who, in turn, could react to these notes and comment on them. Here, the constant switching between immersion into the urban space, and conscious reflection through formulating and noting down observations, is meant to be instrumental in allowing non-professionals to generate knowledge about urban spaces and to pose questions that remain unasked when using and moving through the built environment on a daily basis.

The Lab's other two projects, which were explicitly aimed at a participatory exploration of public and private spaces at the (physical and social)

peripheries of the city, were both organised and conceived by artists rather than planners. 'Field Trips', organised by young American art student William Schwartz, took participants on cycling tours to diverse and mostly peripheral places in each of Berlin's boroughs, with stops at private homes. The seven tours were loosely organised around generic topics such as 'Homes', 'Jobs' or 'Food' and described in the programme as 'a platform for collective exploration and knowledge-sharing that physically engages the city'.[9] At the heart of the project stood the idea of everyone being an 'expert of some kind' and having something to share with others. The crucial part in preparing the tours was to virtually knock on private doors and ask people whether they would be willing to invite a group of strangers into their home and give short lectures on topics that they were knowledgeable about. Of those who agreed, none was professionally concerned with urban issues and many had never given a talk before. For William Schwartz, the lasting value of these tours mostly lies in the intimate encounters generated between strangers, 'the immediate experience of being in these places' and 'a widened view of the city and urban life' (WS).

The project 'C-Zone' by German artist Maurice de Martin had a similar approach. It gave 'peripheral spaces and their residents for a short while a platform and a voice' (MdM) by organising two bus tours to the working-class districts of Lichtenberg, Marzahn-Hellersdorf and Treptow-Köppenick on the eastern outskirts of the city.[10] 'Local experts' (*Kiez-Experten*) were invited to join the group while visiting, for instance, derelict industrial premises, a Vietnamese residents' community centre, or the defunct theatre of the German community of re-settlers from Russia. The sites, itineraries and protagonists of each tour were carefully selected so as to produce constellations in which these real life places and people would, for a few moments, appear 'in a different light' and 'in a different context' (MdM). Maurice de Martin stresses how locals were

sceptical about the BMW Guggenheim Lab and in fear of being exploited or exoticised. If he had not worked in the Marzahn district as a music teacher for five years, he is sure that he would not have gained the trust and cooperation of the locals. At the same time, he was also aware that only through the Lab had he been able to gain the interest of participants from the 'gentrified context' of Berlin-Mitte. Nevertheless, he took care to put together a diverse audience from different professional and social backgrounds when accepting registrations for the tours. Indeed, all the interviewees agreed that the audiences were relatively diverse, and according to Lutz Henke, the Lab programme manager, the accompanying survey conducted by the organisers during the six weeks of the Lab suggested similar things. Participants came in part from the neighbouring quarter, but also from other districts. Paradoxically, the media coverage had aroused the interest of a broader public, motivating people to visit the Lab who would not usually engage in political debates about architecture and urban planning issues: they simply wanted 'to see what all the fuss is about' (LH). In addition, part of the audience was made up of tourists, some of whom had come to Berlin specifically for the Lab. Nevertheless, there were people participating in some of the events who had no knowledge of the overall concept and preceding debates. This was the case, for example, with the participants of 'Field Trips': some of the people who came along for the tours were ones the organisers had spoken to while preparing the project.

Clearly, the BMW Guggenheim Lab in Berlin, with its participatory technology, design-centred experiments and various forms of off-site 'field-work', offered plenty of attractions and experiences. Drawing on observations made during the Lab, Karsten Michael Drohsel sees the value of these activities for the participants as helping them to solve individual problems and have them understand 'that with their own hands, a bit of instructions,

a bit of community and a bit of material, which is not so expensive, one is able to do something himself' (KMD). Interviews with the planners and performers who organised the trips and tours in the neighbourhood and in Berlin's boroughs also revealed how the value of these experiences largely lay in the shared experience: 'that in a particular place a group of people meets and relates to each other who would normally never meet' (MdM). On the individual level, the Lab was surely an experience that participants will remember, and one which, in some cases, might also prompt action.[11] Such a concept within the context of the BMW Guggenheim Lab holds subversive qualities, as William Schwartz does not fail to notice when reflecting on one of his fieldtrips: 'If we think about how much time, money and energy the Lab, and myself included, invested just so that seven people could share a moment of total intimacy... this is pretty interesting' (WS). Yet, when envisioning participation that goes beyond inclusion to promote empowerment and to confront the inequalities, displacements and enclosures that characterise neoliberal urbanism, the limits of a temporary, albeit high-profile type of intervention like the Berlin BMW Guggenheim Lab become clearly visible.

The limits to participation
The BMW Guggenheim Lab is, without doubt, a high-profile type of cultural sponsorship. It is meant to both sharpen the brand profile of BMW in terms of innovation and to reach out to new markets. Interviewees and curators claim they did not encounter any interference by BMW in the programming. Still, this is clearly no bottom-up type of initiative characterised by self-organisation and improvisation: projects were commissioned for the Lab and did not originate from work done by participants of the Lab.

Participation was therefore limited: firstly, due to the short-term, temporary nature of the Lab, most projects and ideas were ready-made, either

imported from elsewhere (such as the walks by urban experimentalist Charles Montgomery), or pre-existing in Berlin. Only a small number of the projects were developed specifically for the Lab, which was due – rather surprisingly – to the fact that despite BMW's sponsorship, the budget was not sufficient to finance the development of a greater number of projects from scratch. Nonetheless, many of the projects developed for the Lab would not have been realised without it, either because of a lack of funding (as in the case of the Mobile University) or a lack of publicity (as with the 'C-Zone' tours).

Secondly, the Lab's venue in affluent Prenzlauer Berg certainly did not encourage the inclusion of working-class and migrant communities from Kreuzberg or Neukölln, for example, or from the districts on the eastern outskirts of the city with their mass housing. The interviewees agreed that holding the Lab at the site in Kreuzberg would have helped to bring in these groups, which, after all, the Lab was targeting with its hands-on approach and focus on empowerment-technologies. Still, it is doubtful whether people who do not have the skills and competencies to adapt to the shifting roles of being 'producers', 'explorers' or 'researchers' would be likely to take part in these experiments. The tours described above, which brought participants into contact with peripheries of all sorts, were successful, but limited in terms of the number of people who could participate. Also, the fact that the Lab's working language was English meant that participation was severely limited. Most Lab events were held in English with translation available. Tours and fieldtrips were conducted in either English or German, but the Lab's extensive use of website and social media was restricted to English.[12] The choice of language suggests that the prime target audience for the Lab were the young and creative local elites, tourists and global citizens, rather than the excluded and marginalised.

Thirdly, the transfer of concepts and best practices from elsewhere did not turn out as expected. The curators had not been aware of the political debates they were tapping into and were taken aback by the 'German hypercritical attitude' they encountered (MdM). Press commentators agreed that the idea of activating inhabitants who had already been engaged for two decades in debates over the transformation of the Pfefferberg complex and the adjacent Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood was somehow misplaced, as was the concept of holding workshops that featured hands-on experiments in a city that already lives off its creative milieu and its cultural producers.[13] In a recent statement, curator Maria Nicanor acknowledged that the Lab might have learned more from Berlin than Berlin did from the Lab.[14]

However, we need to accept that grassroots initiatives that intervene in the built environment and appropriate urban spaces for common uses are not necessarily inclusive, empowering or egalitarian, as Hillary Silver, Alan Scott and Yuri Kazepov have pointed out.[15] These kinds of semi-failures have also been observed in neighbourhood programmes in Berlin, such as the citizens' budgets, which were part of the *Soziale Stadt* programme, yet the extent of bottom-up involvement varied considerably, and less educated and migrant citizens were hardly involved.[16] Or again, the community gardens project in low-income areas, which despite ambitions for social inclusion are led by middle-class residents living in those districts.[17] Moreover, as Margit Mayer points out when reflecting on, amongst others, the case of Berlin: creative city politics tend to 'hijack movement practices for purposes of urban restructuring and enclosure'.[18] In contexts of state withdrawal and austerity urbanism, the principles of self-management, entrepreneurialism and flexibility have long become normalised and 'usurped as essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programmes'.[19]

Conscious of the danger that design-activism and informal interventions in derelict or disregarded urban spaces spearhead more conventional forms of rent-seeking urban development, Fran Tonkiss, in a recent paper in *City*, offers suggestions about the political impact of what she terms 'interstitial urbanism'.[20] In her view, these participatory, informal, improvised and temporary urban interventions and occupations challenge the 'orthodoxies' of urban development: 'the temporalities given by urban investment cycles, conventional built lifespans and messianic end-users'.[21] By 'exploiting powers of delay and embedding habitudes of use' these spaces and practices 'are characterized less by "temporary" use than by persistent and regular use'.[22] Tonkiss concludes that urban interventions as critical practice 'might better be understood not as utopian but *anti*-utopian projects, given their commitments to making actual places in the void spaces of grand designs, and their readiness to live with urban imperfection'.[23] The BMW Guggenheim Lab very consciously made use of this appeal of the 'anti-utopian' by relying on the aesthetics of the temporary in the architectural design of the Lab's venue and its short-term concept, as well as in the practical, hands-on approach, the focus on empowerment-technologies, and the use of activating formats and forms of intervention in urban spaces. Faced with the dilemma that in participation there is always the 'need to overcome biased deliberations in which some voices count more than others',[24] deliberation was meant to be evaded altogether.

However, the issues of inequality, gentrification and displacement came up very clearly in the public debate that preceded the BMW Guggenheim Lab. Paradoxically, it was particularly the Lab's concept of a temporary, though highly visible, occupancy of a leftover space in the city's hub of urban activism that triggered these debates. Critics feared that despite the idea of a 'minimally invasive' intervention, the site and the quarter would be left changed and prepared for a further influx of capital. The organisers of the BMW Guggenheim Lab were neither prepared nor willing to really engage in these political issues. Neither were they able to create practices and spaces that would last beyond the timespan of the event. The Lab generated encounters and individual experiences that were unexpected and rewarding. However, informal urban interventions that acquire durability and have a political impact only come into being through 'situated social action',[25] which needs a site and time to unfold, neither of which was provided. Instead, the Lab gathered an impressive array of ideas on how to improve urban life in various ways. This show of socially engaged experiments and interventions in urban space is documented in a glossary of '100 Urban Trends' for each of the three cities. It is available from the Lab's website and will be the basis for the concluding exhibition in New York. In terms of solving any of Berlin's real problems, the debates and experiments held at the BMW Guggenheim Lab were too general, too exclusive and too short-lived to be of lasting relevance.

Notes

1. 'What is the Lab?', BMW Guggenheim Lab, <http://www.bmwguggenheimlab.org/what-is-the-lab> [accessed 01 August 2013].
2. Ibid.
3. Initially, the Lab was meant to take temporary residence in altogether nine cities around the world over a span of five years. In early 2013 these plans were dropped without explanation and the concluding exhibition was scheduled for the end of 2013.
4. Five in-depth interviews with people involved in the program were conducted. The interviewees were Lutz Henke, a cultural scientist and artist who served as the local programme manager of the Berlin BMW Guggenheim Lab, Karsten Michael Drohsel, planner and member of 'urbanophil' (a German blog on urban issues), Maurice de Martin, a Berlin-based artist, William Schwartz, an American artist currently living in Hamburg, and Andrea Respondek, a Berlin-based

planner. I wish to express my gratitude to the inter-viewees for sharing their experiences and knowledge with me so generously.

5. <http://bmwlabverhindern.blogsport.de/> [accessed 01 August 2013].

6. Andrej Holm, *Die Restrukturierung des Raumes. Machtverhältnisse in der Stadterneuerung der 90er Jahre in Ostberlin* (Bielefeld, Transcript, 2006).

7. 'Berlin Lab', BMW Guggenheim Lab, <http://www.bmwguggenheimlab.org/where-is-the-lab/berlin-lab> [accessed 01 August 2013].

8. For example, *Insurgent Public Space. Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities,* ed. by Jeffrey Hou (London: Routledge, 2010); Robert Klanten and Matthias Huebner, *Urban Interventions: Personal Projects in Public Spaces* (Berlin: Gestalten Verlag, 2010).

9. 'Field Trips: Homes', BMW Guggenheim Lab, <http://www.bmwguggenhe-imlab.org/where-is-the-lab/berlin-lab/berlin-lab-events/event/field-trips-f?instance_id=770> [accessed 01 August 2013].

10. These districts are usually perceived as being on the outmost periphery of the city, and therefore (mostly falsely) considered by the middle- and upper-class residents of Berlin Mitte to belong to the C-Zone, the most distant fare zone for public transportation services.

11. Maurice de Martin reported how some participants of 'C-Zone' had returned to the Vietnamese community centre later on.

12. It is important to note that 'Field Trips' by William Schwartz was held exclusively in German.

13. For example, 'Guggenheim Lab brachte viel Lärm um Nichts', *Berliner Morgenpost* 29 July 2012; N. Bernau, 'Guggenheim Lab: Es war den Streit nicht wert', *Berliner Zeitung* 27 July 2012; C. Meixner, 'Das Guggenheim Lab und die Strategie der Umarmung. Eine Bilanz', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 26 July 2012.

14. 'The BMW Guggenheim Lab. An urban experiment that nearly failed', *TheEconomist*, 8 August 2012.

15. Hillary Silver, Alan Scott and Yuri Kazepov, 'Participation in Urban Contention and Deliberation', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34, 3 (2010), pp. 453-77.

16. Ibid., p. 469.

17. Marit Rosol, 'Public Participation in Post-Fordist Urban Green Space Governance: The Case of Community Gardens in Berlin', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34, 3 (2010), pp. 548-63.

18. Margit Mayer, 'First World Urban Activism', *City* 17, 1 (2013), p. 12.

19. Ibid.

20. Fran Tonkiss, 'Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City', *City* 17, 3 (2013), pp. 312-24.

21. Ibid., p. 323.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., p. 321.

24. Hillary Silver, Alan Scott and Yuri Kazepov, 'Participation in Urban Contention and Deliberation', p. 472.

25. Fran Tonkiss, 'Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City', p. 322.

26. Ibid.

Biography

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