

From Planning for Rural Development to Planning for Deliberation: Reflecting the 'Mehr als Wohnen 4.0' Project

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Scales of Engagement

Participatory processes and citizen consultations seem to have become a new orthodoxy in planning. The quality of these efforts (for example the issue of tokenism)¹ and the actual influence that participants have on these processes² (for example the issue of co-production),³ however, are a source of much debate.⁴ Looking at the spheres of influence in participatory practices shows the levels of engagement allowed in or supported by these practices.⁵ It also reveals the range of actors involved and their differential rights, thus offering insights into structural moments of in- and exclusion.⁶

In this context, the question of scale is especially relevant. On the one hand, scale refers to the practicality of creating 'relevant' information on a regional scale. A lot of research stresses that the local is the preferred scale to engage both citizens and knowledge to create meaningfulness. Larger scales as the national or supranational, in contrast, tend to have a paralysing effect.⁷ The territorial or regional scale, then, offers a possibility to connect these two ends of the continuum. It offers the opportunity for participatory processes that struggle with NIMBYism to not lose sight of bigger development goals. On the other hand, scale refers to the spheres of influence that are translated into spatial realities. Identifying two rationalities of participation, the inclusive and the substantive, Natarajan points out that even though both start from the idea of 'shared interests', which legitimize and motivate the involvement in participatory formats, they have divergent interpretations of scale.⁸ Whereas the inclusive ideal starts from the construction of spheres of influence in terms of affected populace, the substantive rationale behind participation is that planning should be a site of social learning in which new understandings of certain problems can be constructed. While scale refers to a fixed dimension or geographical area in the first case, in the latter it entails the definition of a specific territory,⁹ unearthed through deliberation¹⁰ and dialogue,¹¹ that cannot be fixed in advance.

The Context

This fieldwork experience is the result of a project titled 'Mehr als Wohnen 4.0'¹² (in English: 'More Than Housing 4.0') in Styria, a province in the south-east of Austria, which has faced considerable structural changes since the decline of its steel industry. Graz, the province's capital, is Austria's second largest city after Vienna and one of the metropolitan areas with the strongest increase in inhabitants, whereas areas outside of the metropolitan dynamic are characterized by a rural exodus.¹³ One of these areas is Upper Styria, which is adapting to the loss of its long-time established steel industry and the associated structural changes since the 1960s. However, an

important part of the industry remains and has successfully redirected its efforts towards high-tech and materials science, offering qualified and well-paying jobs. The region is also strong in alpine tourism, both in summer and winter. Yet, outsiders do not recognize it as a desirable place to live but rather as a place to commute to, which not only puts a strain on municipal budgets, but also has effects on traffic and associated sustainability issues. Over the years, there have been various regional programmes to bring back growth.¹⁴

Faced with this situation, the regional development agency commissioned the Institute of Urbanism at the Graz University of Technology to develop a 'more than housing' strategy for the region: a regional design vision based on locally specific projects that combine different forms of housing and social infrastructure. The brief asked to actively include decision makers and multipliers to create a shared vision for the municipalities, to render the region visible as a good place to live, and to promote more sustainable forms of housing as an alternative to the prevailing single-family homes.

The rationale behind the commission can be read as a 'planning for growth' approach¹⁵ in the context of the shrinkage induced by deindustrialization.¹⁶ In this approach, urban design as well as measures regarding the housing industry play a major role, as they have for the last 20 years.¹⁷ Often, these measures continue existing planning strategies, such as zoning law for new construction, without reflecting the actual challenges related to the resiliency of the concerned municipalities in the face of possible future crises.¹⁸

Methods of Engagement

A multi-layered and multi-stakeholder analysis was conducted on both the regional and local scale and in combination with diverse communication formats in order to, on the one hand, understand each municipality's position within the network of cities and villages in this region and, on the other,

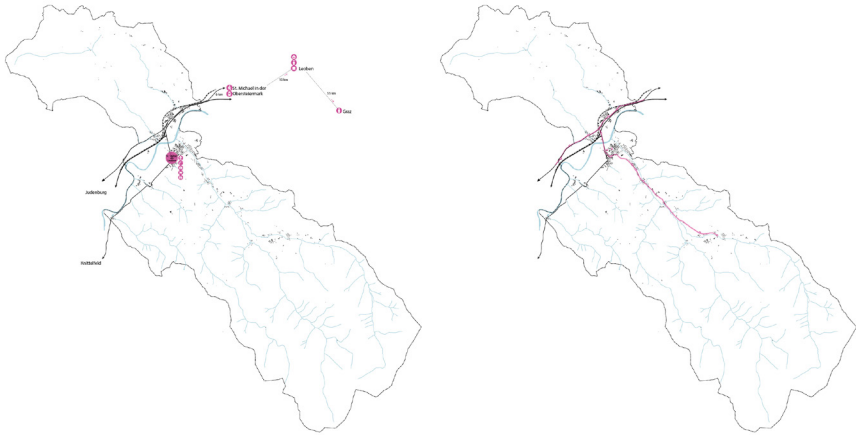


Fig. 1. Graphic analysis of public transport coverage and availability of social infrastructure in St. Stefan ob Leoben. ©Institute of Urbanism at TU Graz, Austria.

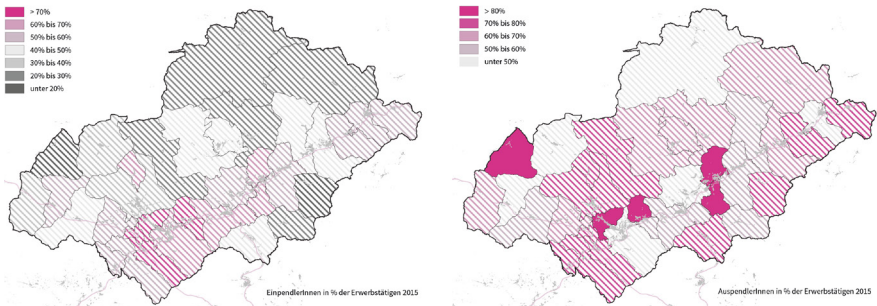


Fig. 2. Graphic analysis of inward and outward commuting in eastern Upper Styria. ©Institute of Urbanism at TU Graz, Austria.

to share the feedback and outcomes of this effort with stakeholders in the region. The first phase of the project was to develop a regional vision based on a comprehensive view, which was then translated in five municipalities into more detailed strategies and – through cooperation with local architects – preliminary designs for one specific building that should act as a catalyst or ‘lighthouse project’, to exemplify a new way of dealing with housing issues in the region.¹⁹ The main target groups were municipal politicians and administrators, as well as real estate experts and housing cooperatives – the multipliers that can implement or promote the gained insights and ideas. In a second phase, the focus was on one municipality and the development of a transition plan together with students, incorporating the knowledge gained during the first phase to link research and teaching and to involve the inhabitants as stakeholders.

Fieldwork Experience

The initial statistical and spatial analyses that covered issues of mobility and accessibility, demography and density, land prices and building dynamics, and economy and tourism, at the regional scale in relation to the topographical conditions, gave the impression of extremely uneven preconditions for economic performance and mobility. The central cities are well connected by motorways and national rail services, while the more mountainous regions are served by highly infrequent bus connections and bad road infrastructure. There is also a high percentage of inward and outward commuters. This is a sign that the availability of local jobs is low, but also a proxy for the intense economic interweaving in the region and with the Graz and Vienna metropolitan areas.²⁰

The (online) questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with mayors and the municipal staff helped to gain a deeper understanding of how these numbers play out in the experience of everyday life in the region. The interviews were also a means to detect locally relevant narratives that could influence and trigger ideas for the regional design vision. The question-

naires focused on the presence of (social) infrastructure related to education and childcare, public transport, gastronomy, medical care, digitization and shopping, as well as clubs and associations and the relevance respondents ascribe to these factors. This was done to get an impression of how the factual presence of infrastructure influenced the perception of the quality of life.

Judging from an overview of all 17 respondents, there were few discrepancies between the two layers of questions. Respondents ascribed most relevance to those infrastructures that were actually present in their municipality, except for public transport, digitization and gastronomy, which they found lacking. The overall impression was one of satisfaction with their living environment, with only a few issues that could be improved, but these were perceived to be largely beyond local influence (for example, public transport or digitization), because they either fall under national or provincial responsibilities or because they are the effect of global dynamics of economic development. This was a first moment to pause and reflect. Recalling Stumvol and Zech's plea for a 'mindful and attentive' way of thinking and talking about the countryside, of having a look without reading the statistics beforehand, the misalignment of ideas about the regions that had formed based on statistical and spatial analyses and the actual satisfaction reported became apparent.²¹

To get a more nuanced impression, this step was followed by semi-structured interviews with again either mayors or leading administrative staff of the municipal building authorities, enquiring into the specific qualities present in the municipality, how these had developed in the past, and what the respondents' vision for the future was. Housing, quality of life, population development and upcoming municipal building projects were touched upon in the further course of the conversation.

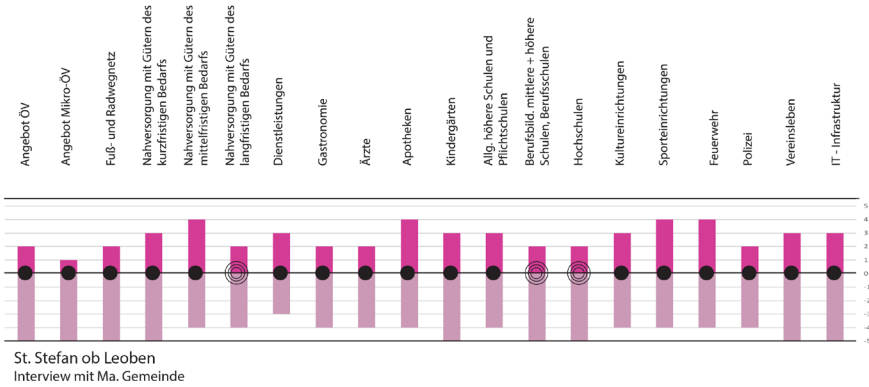
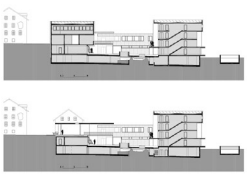


Fig. 3. Graphic analysis of questionnaire responses in St. Stefan ob Leoben.
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DORFKERNER-NEUERUNG IN FLIEß



Im Zentrum der Gemeinde Fließ in der Nähe von Landeck und Fiss-Ladis, haben sich über die Jahre mehrere Leerstände entwickelt. Um das Zentrum aufzuwerten und zu beleben, hat die Gemeinde strategisch wichtige Gebäude und Leerflächen im Ortszentrum erworben. Dort entstanden drei Gebäude, die mit den Funktionen Wohnen, Arbeiten und Einkaufen dem Zentrum die Attraktivität zurückgeben. Die unterschiedliche Baukörper mit einem verbindenden Dachelement fassen einen Platz, auf den alle öffentlichen und halböffentlichen Zonen der drei Bauteile wie der Gemeindehalle, das Jugendzentrum, Geschäfte oder der Gemeinschaftsraum des betreuten Wohnens orientiert und durch den diese ohne zusätzliche innere Stiegenhäuser direkt erschlossen werden. Die Wohnkörper beherbergen 14 Wohnungen mit einer Fläche zwischen 45 und 50m² und kompakten und trotzdem offenen Grundrissen. Zudem gibt es einen Gemeinschaftsraum. In den beiden anderen Baukörpern befinden sich das Gemeindeamt sowie ein Nahversorger und ein Jugendzentrum gemeinsam mit weiteren Gemeindefastrukturen wie eine Arztpraxis und Dienstleistungen. Eine Bushaltestelle ist ebenfalls integriert.



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Fig. 4. Sample from the collection of good practice examples.
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Predominantly, the 28 interviewees started with statements pointing out the high quality of life in the municipalities. The longer the conversations lasted, the more the picture became differentiated, with two formative narratives becoming apparent: the narrative of rurality was a main source of identification and pride, used to explain the high quality of life in the municipalities with reference to a beautifully intact nature, intact social relations and intact family life – all in opposition to Austria's big cities of Vienna and Graz. This idea of rural quality was upheld even when introducing the second narrative: one of economic decline. This was used to describe not only the current job situation or past demographic changes, but also the past neglect of housing and municipal development issues, since these were partly taken care of or dominated by the steel companies.²² In the end, it was then used to point towards the effort it costs to maintain the quality of life and a development perspective for the inhabitants. Behind both of these topics hovered the narrative of the periphery and peripheralization, expressed in accounts of a lacking accessibility and of a compulsory and individual automobility, of a lack of possibilities and infrastructure for personal and professional development (especially beyond the still prevalent, traditional gender roles).

And while the respondents presented a varied picture of their municipal environments and referred to diverse local contexts in contrast to an overall statistical representation, the idea of the periphery itself was left unquestioned, and it seemed to be accepted that because of static, geographical parameters such as topography and the distance to either Graz or Vienna, they lived on the periphery, accepting both the good and the bad of this situation. This was expressed most clearly in the understanding that – despite planning efforts – an equivalence in living conditions in urban and rural areas may be far from being achieved, but this is balanced by other qualities.²³ Especially the quality of the surrounding nature or the quality of social contacts are seen as compensation. The village is perceived as a resilient living space in the face of global transformations such as climate change, while the single-family home with a private garden remains a representation of social and financial stability.²⁴

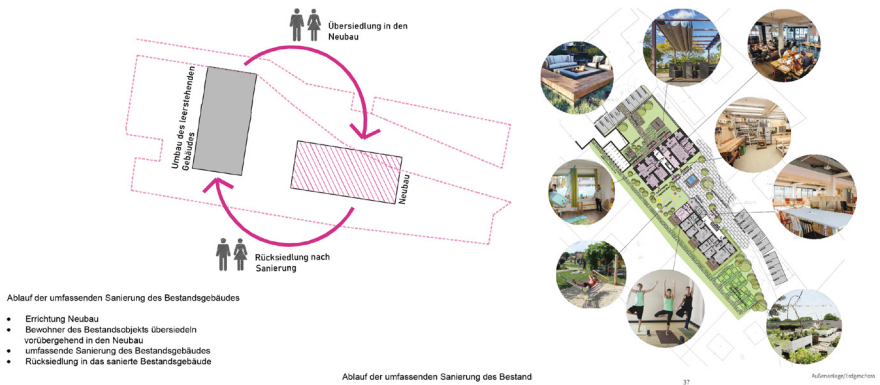


Fig. 5. Illustrations showing the preliminary design for the transformation and extension of existing housing in the centre of St. Stefan ob Leoben. ©röthl architektur zt gmbh.



Fig. 6. Impressions from the opening of the traveling exhibition in Trofaiach, 3 February 2020. ©Institute of Urbanism at TU Graz, Austria.

In these stories and explanations, a long-standing dichotomous conception of the city and the countryside was present – one could even call it an anti-urbanism that is part of the narratives and the basis for the qualities ascribed to the surroundings.²⁵ Only a few of the interviewees conceived their municipalities as being integrated into a network of specific locales in relation to one another and to the metropolitan areas of Vienna and Graz, and they had aligned their development goals with that position.

This was a second moment to pause and reflect. A dichotomous understanding of city and countryside negates the complex social, political, material, infrastructural and ecological links and interdependencies between cities and rural spaces,²⁶ which makes it impossible to comprehend the urbanization process that is actively supported by non-urban spaces.²⁷ The local, as presented in the accounts, however, was missing these links and could be understood as a manifestation of a 'local turn' and its associated challenges,²⁸ neglecting the (also global) interconnectedness of city and country, of nature and culture.²⁹

In this situation, more attention was given to communicative formats such as roundtables, presentations and media coverage to engage more stakeholders, to gather more views and to start a discussion on the relevance of our findings. These findings were then shared in workshops with local real estate developers, housing cooperatives, politicians and experts of rural development. Additionally, a collection of good practice examples was used to contextualize the local experiences in the housing market.

In a next step, five municipalities were given the opportunity to receive a more detailed development strategy and a preliminary design for one lighthouse project by local architects. The aim was to strengthen collective services and alternatives to motorized private transport,³⁰ a consistent inner development and the conversion of existing buildings in central locations, as well as to activate the ground floor zone, both for housing and for

new forms of work.³¹ Depending on the position of the municipality in the network of relations between territories, the uses of the ground floor zones would develop significance on a local level, such as a shop for goods of daily use, or on a territorial level, such as a medical centre.³²

To communicate these concepts, a travelling exhibition brought together parts of the analysis and collected the good practice examples. The graphical means of working proved to be an accessible way of representing the analysis and, together with the work of the architects, it provided a good setting for discussion with local stakeholders.³³ While there was a general appreciation of the fact that the project dealt with rural areas, the focus on inner development and building renovations as well as mobility issues was controversially discussed with inhabitants, for whom it was the first time that they could engage with the project.

This was a third moment to pause and think. The critical evaluation of the project outcomes can be considered as an almost 'logical' response to a process in which inhabitants were only involved at the end. Beyond this, it also points to the share of problems that need supralocal solutions and cannot be solved within the limits of one municipality alone. Nonetheless, the (short-term) political dynamics as well as the current planning culture, which is established along the lines of the Austrian federal organizational structure,³⁴ continue to work within established administrative borders.³⁵

Discussion

The activities in clubs and associations, the social ties and support within the family and the neighbourhood, and the continuation of longstanding traditions proved to be central to people's quality of life. In that context, the peripheral position of the municipalities was presented ambiguously. On the one hand, it was the basis for the difficulties within the municipalities and, on the other, it was the reason for their fundamental qualities. As such, interpersonal relations and local organization form part of a narrative that

places people's municipality at the centre of their considerations, suggesting controllability, while the larger context seems beyond their influence.

What at a first glance may seem to evade the challenges of a globalized economy and its local effects could actually form a new nature of the local, if an idea of territory could be established that both recognizes global interconnections as well as local ties and emotional connections.³⁶ Such an approach ascribes fluid borders and very different levels of scale to (individual) human territories – from global connections to local initiatives – that extend beyond established administrative and national borders. But how to understand and manifest these ideas in a municipal reality that is confronted with challenges in regional and intermunicipal collaboration, in an environment that limits innovation because of a lack of an institutional framework's conditions or rules (both formal and informal, so laws as much as customs and traditions), let alone in a global context?³⁷

Pierre Veltz provides an important contribution to understanding the challenges of rural development. He claims that a discontinuous archipelago of poles and networks is a better representation of today's economic and cultural geography than traditional maps of nations (or of provinces and regions in this case), in order to represent associated and disassociated areas based on the nature of relations between them. This comes with the recognition that current planning laws and guidelines, focused on clearly delimited geographical entities (such as the municipality or the district), fail to address the fundamental issue, which Veltz describes in the following way:

It is as important to respond to this anxiety as it is to promote equality in terms of services, income and access to facilities. What our cities and territories need, first of all, is to re-invent co-operative forms that allow everyone to become actors of their lives, of the future, and of a shared future. This is not a matter of money or green space or public facilities or of planning in the ordinary sense of the term. It is a fundamentally political and cultural affair.³⁸

Conclusion

In the course of the project, the question of scales of engagement or influence kept appearing again and again. Generally, a cleavage became apparent between local problems or needs and their roots, which were often linked to spheres outside the given institutional context. A central issue was that of different levels of engagement with the project results and the willingness to implement them. This had several reasons. The programme was established by the so-called 'Regionalmanagement', a body of the provincial government to stimulate growth and economic development because they saw a need for it, not because the municipalities had asked for it. The format proved to resist the creation of co-ownership, for which a larger and broader deliberation would have helped, but that was far beyond the scope of the commission. The strong analytical focus of the project and the graphic means of representation, however, were able to engage interest. The view of the outsider on the region proved to be a great input for those municipalities in which a discourse and motivation already existed. It became apparent that the real value of the project did not lie in the quality of the strategy per se, but in the role the proposal could play as a discursive input for ongoing debates about municipal development. Through reflective moments during the project, a shift away from the initial brief occurred. With it, participatory prescriptions also shifted from an inclusive ideal to a substantive rationale, supporting the need for deliberation and dialogue.

While it seems to be an accepted fact – both in research and everyday experience – that the provision of services in the general interest in peripheral, rural areas can only be guaranteed along minimal standards, it remains vital to question – through broad discursive processes – what these minimal standards mean for each locality. This also implies engaging with questions of how collective or cooperative action and effort can support or create them. Going beyond 'planning in the ordinary sense',³⁹ it must then be about strengthening people's capabilities to be able to contribute to this collective or cooperative action,⁴⁰ 'to become actors in their own lives', as Veltz says.⁴¹

- 1 Sherry Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35/4 (1969), 216-224.
- 2 Katherine Melcher, 'Equity, Empowerment, or Participation: Prioritizing Goals in Community Design', *Landscape Journal* 32/2 (2013), 167-182.
- 3 Patsy Healey, 'Collaborative Planning in Perspective', *Planning Theory* 2 (2003), 101-123.
- 4 Bent Flyvbjerg, 'Bringing Power to Planning Research: One Researcher's Praxis Story', *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 21/4 (2002), 353-366.
- 5 Sherry Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35/4 (1969), 216-224.
- 6 Fran Tonkiss, *Cities by Design: The Social Life of Urban Form* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
- 7 Pierre Veltz, 'Beyond Inequality: Three Perspectives on Territorial Justice', *GAM* 15 (2019), 12-25; Lucy Natarajan, 'Perspectives on Scale in Participatory Spatial Planning', *Built Environment* 45/2 (2019), 230-247.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Bruno Latour, *Das Terrestrische Manifest*, translated by Bernd Schwibs (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018).
- 10 John Forester, *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 11 Judith E. Innes and David E. Booher, 'Reframing Public Participation: Strategies for the 21st century', *Planning Theory & Practice* 5/4 (2004), 419-436.
- 12 The project was a joint effort by a team at the Institute of Urbanism at the Graz University of Technology. This reflection, however, is a personal undertaking.
- 13 Michael Höller, 'Neue Prognosen: Landflucht nimmt auch in Zukunft kein Ende', *Kronen Zeitung*, 31 May 2022.
- 14 Nussmüller Architekten, 'Redesign Eisenerz', <https://www.nussmueller.at/project/redesign-eisenerz/>, accessed 24 October 2022.
- 15 Branislav Antonić and Aleksandra Djukić, 'Environmentally-Friendly Planning for Urban Shrinkage', *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (2020), 410 012084.
- 16 Stefanie Döringer et al., 'A Meta-Analysis of Shrinking Cities in Europe and Japan: Towards an Integrative Research Agenda', *European Planning Studies* 28/9 (2020), 1693-1712.
- 17 Andreas Gravert, *Die Entstehung der Themen Stadtschrumpfung und Klimawandel in der Raumforschung* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022).
- 18 Ayda Eraydin and Gülden Özatağan, 'Pathways to a Resilient Future: A Review of Policy Agendas and Governance Practices in Shrinking Cities', *Cities* 115 (2021), 103226.
- 19 Eva Schwab et al., *Wohnen 4.0* (Graz: TU Graz Institute of Urbanism, 2020).
- 20 Rudolf Giffinger and Hans Kramar, 'Kleinstädte als Wachstumsmotoren Ländlich-Peripherer Regionen: Das Beispiel Waldviertel', *disP - The Planning Review* 48/2 (2012), 63-76.

- 21 Isabel Stumvol and Sibylla Zech, 'A Case for a New Image of the Countryside', *GAM* 15 (2019), 34-43.
- 22 'Böhler, from the cradle to the grave', was one of the phrases mentioned to indicate that when the industry was still going strong, it provided 'everything' for its workers and left a vacuum when it declined.
- 23 Pierre Veltz, op. cit. (note 7).
- 24 Stumvoll and Zech, 'A Case for a New Image of the Countryside', op. cit. (note 21).
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Pierre Veltz, op. cit. (note 7).
- 27 Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).
- 28 Neil Brenner and Nikos Katsikis, 'Operational Landscapes: Hinterlands of the Capitalocene', *Architectural Design* 90 (2020), 22-31.
- 29 Pierre Veltz, op. cit. (note 7).
- 30 Eva Schwab, 'Sustainability and Justice in the Territorial Project', in: Aglaée Degros et al. (eds.), *Basics of Urbanism: 12 Begriffe der Territorialen Transformation / 12 Notions of Territorial Transformation* (Zurich: Park Books, 2021), 208-221.
- 31 Aglaée Degros and Eva Schwab, 'Relational Mobility: Alternative Mobility as Key to Quality of Life', *GAM* 15 (2019), 110-119.
- 32 Daniel Behar, 'Fracture Territorial: Le Frisson que Rasure', in: Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias (eds.), *Nouvelle Relégations Territoriales* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 2017), 17-27.
- 33 The first two exhibitions took place just before the pandemic, while all further stops of the travelling exhibition and the accompanying press work and discursive formats were victims of the lockdowns. This came right at the moment when the engagement with one particular municipality in the second phase had to be reframed. But this 'challenge of real conditions' is not the focus of this article.
- 34 Markus Bogensberger, 'Instruments of Urban Planning Illustrated with Styrian Examples', in: Degros et al., op. cit. (note 30), 140-151.
- 35 In the municipalities, the mayors (without necessarily having the appropriate training) are the highest building authorities and their responsibility ends at the municipal border. The provincial and national level are underrepresented. Regional and territorial network solutions are only applied hesitantly, also because appropriate instruments are largely missing.
- 36 Latour, op. cit (note 9).
- 37 Giffinger and Kramar, op. cit. (note 20).
- 38 Pierre Veltz, op. cit. (note 7).
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Amartya Sen, *Die Idee der Gerechtigkeit*, translated by Christa Krüger (Munich: Beck, 2009).
- 41 Pierre Veltz, op. cit. (note 7).