Homezones go downtown

The Evolution of Shared Spaces in Switzerland

Author: Dr. Christian Thomas, Secretary of the international Federation of Pedestrians (IFP)

International Federation of Pedestrians IFP, Klosbachstrasse 48, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0) 488 40 34, Fax: +41 (0) 488 40 39
www.pedestrians-int.org
Skype: pedestrians-int

Fussverkehr Schweiz, Klosbachstrasse 48, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland
www.fussverkehr.ch

Co-author: Dr. Richard Wolff, Co-Secretary of the International Network for Urban Research and Action INURA

ABSTRACT: The promotion of pedestrian mobility contributes to a modern and sustainable urban development and vice versa. Many cities have introduced pedestrian zones and other forms of traffic-calming to counter inner-city road congestion and to improve quality and attractiveness of central shopping and business districts. However, there are many places where pedestrian zones are not possible because car traffic cannot be cut off, possibly because there is a parking facility, because through-traffic has to be allowed, or because the discussion about the exceptions would be too complicated. Therefore, starting from the traditional homezones in residential areas, the concept of pedestrian priority zones has been developed further. After allowing pedestrian priority zones in commercial zones, it has been discovered that simply slowing down the cars to 20km/h it is possible to keep traffic smooth even when there is a continuous flow of pedestrians. At the same time, urban sqares and plazas can be re-designed not for cars, but for people.

Several phases of traffic-calming and pedestrian zones can be distinguished. In Switzerland, so called *zones of encounter* (Begegnungszonen), represent the newest concept, where cars, bicycles and pedestrians share the same space, with pedestrians enjoying priority rights. This set-up may be used to create new urban spaces, so solve complicated traffic problems, and to create a public space open to traffic, and having qualities of an indoor space. The case in point, Bleicheli area in the city of St. Gallen is highlighted because it shows how artist intervention can enhance the meaning of a pedestrian priority zone and create a totally new type of public space using modern material.

KEYWORDS: Pedestrian mobility, traffic calming, homezones, shared spaces, pedestrian priority zones, art in public space, Raiffeisen.

Brief Biography:

Christian M. Thomas (*1948) PhD

Dipl. Architect (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology)

Professional experience in ecological consulting, in particular related to transport Problems,

Assistant to Prof. Paul Feyerabend (Philosophy of Science, ETH),

Research projects on ecological action and transportation,

Since 2001 scientific collaborator (including pedestrian safety) with Pedestrian Mobility Switzerland, the Swiss Pedestrian Association. Member of the Expert Council on Road Safety, Switzerland, and of the Working Party on Road Safety, UN-ECE, Geneva

2005 Secretary, International Federation of Pedestrians (IFP), Zurich, Switzerland

secretary@pedestrians-int.org

christian.thomas@fussverkehr.ch

Homezones go downtown

The Evolution of Shared Spaces in Switzerland

> **The pictures of this contribution would be more important than this text. You find them in the powerpoint-presentation, which is ready for download on the website www.pedestrians-int.org →urbanism →On Pedestrians and Urbanism.**

Author: Dr. Christian Thomas, Secretary of the international Federation of Pedestrians (IFP)

Co-author: Dr. Richard Wolff, Co-Secretary of the International Network for Urban Research and Action INURA

INTRODUCTION

This paper shows how the promotion of pedestrian mobility contributes to a modern and sustainable urban development and vice versa. The argument will be supported by illustrations of best practices, amongst them the celebrated inner city design of the so-called "city-lounge" Bleicheli, Sankt Gallen, by internationally renowned artist Pipilotti Rist together with Carlos Martinez.

Inspired by theoretical reasoning we can witness how spatial and social development in Western Europe is approaching a state of almost 'total urbanization' (Henri Lefebvre). Cities, suburbs and former rural areas are converging towards increasingly homogenous everyday experiences. Nevertheless, centrality continues to be of importance and inner cities remain 'contested spaces' (Saskia Sassen). One aspect of this conflict is the troublesome co-existence of private motor traffic, public transport, bicycles and pedestrians, which poses serious challenges to planners and users of urban infrastructure.

Many cities have introduced pedestrian zones and other forms of traffic-calming to counter inner-city road congestion and to improve quality and attractiveness of central shopping and business districts. After quite some initial resistance from shop-keepers, motorists, and others, acceptance of this traffic-calming policy has increased greatly. City dwellers are enjoying improved living conditions and businesses have often experienced higher profits.

Encouraged by the apparent benefits of pedestrian-friendly urban environments planners and users of urban spaces have further developed their methods of creating livable and lively spaces. Several phases of traffic-calming and pedestrian zones can be distinguished. Special attention will be given to the latest concept of different types of pedestrian priority zones (in Switzerland called ‚*Begegnungszonen*' which means zones of encounter), where cars, bicycles and pedestrians who share the same space, with pedestrians enjoying priority rights.

PEDESTRIAN ZONES AND TRAFFIC CALMING – 5 PHASES

The political and historic context: The evolution of pedestrian zones

The Swiss model of pedestrian priority zones (also called shared spaces) was inspired by the Dutch 'woonerf' (literally the front yard or front garden of the house) concept. In this concept,

streets are treated like extended gardens or backyards. Cars do clearly not have priority but their drivers shall submit themselves to a 'common law' of equal speed for all street users. In such zones, Pedestrian priority is applied to the entire surface of the public space, and this is possible not just in side-streets in residential areas, but in the most lively spaces of towns and cites. This concept must be seen in the context of the development of pedestrian transport policy in Europe and Switzerland, in particular.

As long as the speed of all vehicles is slow enough, it is easy for pedestrians to get along with cars, buses, and trams. This concept allows for a new design of urban space, which is not oriented along the lines of motion of vehicles, but is based on spatial concepts of urban planners, or even artists. This is usually rather puzzling to motorists, which makes them automatically slow down, which in turn is the basis of the pedestrian safety in these places. The Swiss Pedestrian Association has started the website www.begegnungszonen.ch (zones of encounter, i.e. home-zones), where you can find a great variety of information in German on this type of shared spaces. For the sake of clarity we present this development in a five-phase model.

First generation of shared Spaces: conventional street in residential area with pedestrian priority (Woonwef - Wohnstrasse – Homezone).

With simple measures a side street in a residential area is turned into a playground where cars have access at a very low speed.

Figure 1 First Generation

Second generation:

A street becomes a continuous surface from wall to wall, even in commercial areas.

In many shopping areas of Swiss towns, cars are permitted, but the pedestrians have priority on the entire surface. Parking is permitted on marked lots only.

Figure 2 Second Generation

Third generation:

An new urban space for all road users is created.

In Biel-Bienne a square has been re-invented as a large urban space to be a meeting place as well as a traffic zone where pedestrians and vehicles can mingle at low speed. 12'000 cars, 1'000 busses and many pedestrians a day get along fine every day.

Figure 3 Third Generation

Fourth generation:

The pedestrian priority zone set-up is used to solve complex traffic problems.

In Geneva, the square in front of the railway station is used by trams, buses, and cars coming out of a large garage. There is a complete mix of all road users, but the pedestrians have priority, and all movements are slow.

Figure 4 Fourth Generation

The conclusion of the experiences and of the presentation is that possibilities to make slow road users get along have just begun to be explored. For the pedestrians it is a great advantage to be able to walk freely in all directions he or she likes, and this may compensate for the disadvantage of having to share the pedestrians' space with vehicles.

This is the age where some people would like to take their car even into their living room. So, making a living room out of a street space with cars and motorcycles is a logical consequence. With this rather astonishing approach a new chapter in the development of urban space is beginning.

Fifth and newest generation:

The public space becomes a living room ("city lounge" in the city of St. Gallen)

Here, small streets in the central city have been covered with red rubber. Furniture out of the same material has been placed in the streets, traffic signals are placed like toy-objects, and the illumination comes from light bubbles. Cars are allowed, but driving feels like intruding into an intimate space.

Figure 5 Fifth Generation

The main goals of pedestrianization, towards Mellow Mobility ('Mobilité Douce')

If we look at pedestrianization through the eyes of a traffic engineer we have to consider that in most city regions have built efficient new mass transit infrastructure like railway lines, metro or rapid transit bus lines have been constructed. Therefore many more commuters, shoppers and visitors than ever flock into the central urban areas. This bulk of people cannot circulate any more on the old sidewalks from the stagecoach age. Therefore, new spaces for the increased number of visitors are not just an amenity, but a necessity for the functioning of the urban life. Old photographs of city centers show how few pedestrians were crossing large public spaces, which are now full of cars, trams and pedestrians.

In France, the concept of mobilité douce (mellow mobility) is gaining ground. This refers to an overall transport policy that respects all users, all modes of transport, the environment as well as social components such as safety, public and open access, etc. Perhaps one can conclude that a pedestrian-friendly transport policy is a cornerstone of a mellow mobility.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE "CITY LOUNGE", SANKT GALLEN

The problem – the setting

Bleicheli is a newly built development of some old buildings (among them a Synagogue) and four new office building of the banking corporation "Raiffeisen", not far from the main station and the central business district of the city of St. Gallen. It was an unorganised area of backstreets and no-go backyard in a downtown area, like so many others in the world. This area, where the public space is owned partly by one fast growing bank and partly by the city had no life, no character, no identity. Hardly anyone ever visited it on purpose.

One of the causes of this problem was that the banking district had been built without a master plan. Where once there had been a small-scale part of town, over the years, one new bank building was built after the other as headquarters for the Swiss Raiffeisenbank. The individual buildings were carefully planned, but what resulted between the buildings was a barren space devoid of any life, a fragmented left-over of urban un-planning; a dead, under-used urban wasteland. The space was a conglomerate of leftovers without any coherence. The place was without appeal even though all the buildings were carefully designed. For both the city and the bank, this was an undesirable situation. What was there to do?

The bank – as private land owner – and the city - as owner of the streets and sidewalks - got together and came up with a public private partnership for a joint venture to 'upgrade' the space.

Problems make partners: The City of Sankt Gallen

St. Gallen is the center of eastern Switzerland with an urban agglomeration of around 150'000 inhabitants. This makes it Switzerland's seventh largest city. It is situated between Zurich and the Lake of Constance, not far from the German and Austrian borders. St. Gallen is one of the country's oldest city with a picturesque medieval core. Its cathedral and the world-famous library are a UNESCO world heritage site. Both in spirit and in politics St. Gallen is considered as a conservative minded place.

The city's readiness to upgrade the Bleicheli area in partnership with the bank was facilitated by the fact that two of the targeted streets were destined for renovation anyway.

Problems make partners: The Raiffeisen Bank

The other partner of this joint venture is the Raiffeisen Bank. It was founded in 1862 as a credit-loan cooperative by Wilhelm Raiffeisen, the mayor of a German town, with the aim of eliminating usury. Its Swiss branch is now Switzerland's third largest bank, right after UBS and Credit Suisse, with a market share of about 20%. In contrast to most of its competitors Raiffeisen Bank is not a shareholder company but still a cooperative with 1.3 million members, almost 3 million customers and 1200 banks in Switzerland alone. Worldwide, the Raiffeisen system is present in more than 100 countries with over 350 million members. Its business philosophy is based on high ethical standards. The bank focuses on local economy and holds the goals of sustainability high. This rapidly expanding bank is particularly strong in the fields of mortgages and small business loans. Typically, its headquarters are not in the traditional banking centers Zurich or Geneva, but in the smaller city of St. Gallen.

How to make a courageous decision happen.

Everybody in Switzerland was surprised that the conservative city of St. Gallen has realized the most radically modern and yet intimate urban space of our time. It all began very normal: The city has organized a design competition together with the bank. A jury was nominated with 18 members, among them the experts of the city, people from the bank, other stakeholders and external experts. 6 competitors were invited to participate. Right at the beginning, the jury decided to consider closely the 5 "normal" projects which were of a high quality, but the "city lounge" was considered not realizable. When the discussion had narrowed down the choice to two projects, and the jury had difficulty to decide which one should win, an external expert proposed that everyone would say which project of all the six he or she personally would like best without respect to costs, technical problems or views of others. All members of the jury said that they would like best the city-lounge project, "but….". At this point this expert said that the jury is asked to tell the public

what the jury likes and what would be best. The city has the engineers to solve the problems and the bank has the money to pay for the solution. – And that's the way it happened.

Prize winner Pipilotti Rist and Carlos Martinez

This way the competition was won by internationally renowned concept and video artist Pipilotti Rist, together with the architect Carlos Martinez, Widnau, Switzerland. Other collaborators were Konstantin Lauber, Roland Schneider, and Vogt and Partner for the light design. Pipilotti Rist, born in Eastern Switzerland in 1962, is a celebrated video artist as well as a popular musician with her band Reines Prochaines. She won the Premio 2000 prize at the Venice Biennale 1997, worked as art director for the Swiss National Exhibition 2002, and taught at the University of California in Los Angeles. Today she is recognized as one of Switzerland's most popular and best selling artist, ranked 22nd on Artfacts.Net list of the world's top living 100 artists.

The project: An invitation

The aim - in the words of the winners of the competition – was that the Bleicheli area should become an 'urban lounge', something like an extended living room, a master piece of design with the aura of an urban icon. In fact, the designers wanted to turn around the concepts of inside versus outside. They wanted to negate the idea of a street, and launch the idea of an outside living room.

"The key motive is to repulse the cars. When you step from indoor to outdoor (out of your house) in Venice, there are no cars. The little streets and the spaces in between are lively / full of life / vibrant. The difference between inside and outside, between private and public is therefore much smaller" (Pipilotti Rist, quoted in Pfaff: 6).

We all know that many people have a very intimate and affectionate relationship with their car. This fact should be used to make the cars (which could not be excluded from the use of the area) become something like a movable piece of furniture or like a toy in a living room.

To achieve this, a red carpet, made of Tartan, a high quality rubber surfacing (as used in sports grounds) should cover the entire project area; streets, squares, fountains, cars, benches etc. similar to snow fallen from the sky. The new space was opened in November 2005. All in all it cost 3.9 mio. Swiss francs or AUS$ (2.5 mio. Euros), of which only slightly more than half for the urban lounge, the rest for street repair measures.

The whole area is organized as a lounge and is clearly divided into various compartments representing various spatial themes. In the section of Gartenstrasse the artistic design starts with an entrée, followed by a cloak-room, a corridor, and a reception area. What then follows is a café, a relax lounge, a sculpture park, a business lounge and a street lounge. Other parts include a meeting zone, bicycle stands and zones of transition.

The artist, Pipilotti Rist, wants to conjure up the image of people's private spaces extending into public space. She therefore tries to animate people to lie down on the benches. To achieve this, some of the benches, seats, couches and other 'furniture' are designed with round edges, others with sharp edges, covered with the red rubber rug provoking users to assume various postures and resting positions (Pfaff 2006: 6).

The red rubber rug covers all the furniture, even curb stones, gutters, manhole covers, and parts of the tree plantings. Everything is coated like icing on a cake (Pfaff 2006: 8). Street signs seem to be placed randomly, even though they have to be compatible with traffic laws. Huge street lights are suspended and give the illusion of floating bubble-shaped clouds. They measure 3 meters in

diameter and create various lighting situations in changing colors, thus creating a surreal and artificial atmosphere.

The outcome, the results

This concept of a city lounge with amorphous edges creates an aesthetic sense of relaxation. It makes visitors want to stay there a while, to spend some time, to rest and hang around, like in a public living room. The setting wants to evoke a friendly and surprising atmosphere with occasional ironic undertones (Buff 2005: 7f). One critic explains the emotional effect of this spatial arrangement as the product of some sort of irritation or distortion of the senses, achieved solely through the red color of the environment, which leads to an estrangement from reality. It is an 'other place' in the sense of Foucault's heterotopia, ... thus giving rise to new freedoms for thought and action" (Pfaff 2005: 10). It is interesting to see how the old streets develop into newly designed zones of mixed use. And how these spaces amalgamate with the artificial red rug of the outdoor (Buff 2005: 9).

Some details of the realized project

The choice of an appropriate coating material was difficult. It had to be fire-proof, and resistant to both graffiti and chewing gum. Cleaning requires a special machine for regular cleaning with high pressure. Possibly, without the support from a bank no public builder would choose such an experimental solution, because of the fear of high maintenance costs. The layout and the design of the zone invites visitors and passes-by to make free use of the 'urban lounge'. One of the central aims of the project is to offer a tolerant, liberal environment with only loose regulations. Despite these efforts, at night, the city lounge is still very empty – and it becomes a pure sculpture under a special light. To animate this, there are plans to animate Bleicheli area with open-air movie screenings and concerts.

A QUICK SWOT-ANALYSIS OF THE CITY-LOUNGE

The SWOT-Analysis shall help us understand the strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O) and threats (T) of the Bleicheli project.

Strengths

The city-lounge by Rist and Martinez shows some impressive strengths. In a first and very general analysis it clearly supports the ambitions and endeavors. Its physical form and the spectacular appearance are a perfect vehicle for the promotion of traffic calming to the extent where the car clearly becomes the invader of a pedestrian area (or the guest in it). It draws public attention from professionals and lay-people alike, both locally and internationally. The relatively modest costs prove that physically attractive improvements do not have to be excessively expensive. Maintenance costs seem to be reasonable.

This type of inner city upgrading may be an example of taking (re-)possession of public space. By re-vitalizing the formerly bleak outdoors, public space gains attractiveness. Within only one year, the site has become a popular meeting place, at least at lunchtime. It may thus contribute to solving problems of safety and neglect. Therefore, this may be new a step towards the *reconquista* of public space.

Weaknesses

In contrast to the optimistic view, one could take a rather skeptic stance. Is it true that new space been created? A critic is the Swiss architect Hansjörg Gadient. He argues that Rist and Martinez are wrong if they think that thousands of square meters of red rubber can create a lively inner city (Gadient 2006: 10). This artificial space lacks natural green, he continues. The few Ginkgo trees look to him like a bit of parsley on a tomato sauce. He argues that a 'lounge' is really a waiting room, a hotel lobby or a living room, i.e. a private room, where movement has come to a standstill. By contrast, the concept of a city is one of public life and activity. What, then, is an urban lounge? Is it not a contradiction in terms? Gadient goes on to denounce the Bleicheli project as an actual loss of public space. What appears to be public is in fact private outdoor space and its design, its use and control is actually taken away from public control (Gadient 2006: 10). Regardless of this critique one may question if it is desirable to reverse the concept of inside and outside, a switch which you may observe in shopping malls where the inside is furnished with fountains, trees, benches, and waste-bins like in an outdoor space.

For the exception of one restaurant there are no ground floor amenities for customers, nothing to invite the outsider to come here except for a Swatch-shop. An apparent weaknesses of the project is the fact that most of the ground level use of the adjacent buildings is not open to the public. There are hardly any shops, only one restaurant, no night clubs or bars. Therefore the space is rather empty at night.

Opportunities

The example of St. Gallen shows that even in a rather conservative town, it is possible to find unconventional solutions as far as the transformation of streets into livable space goes. The design of public space does not need to use the conventional repertoire of pavement and street furniture, it may be oriented towards the type of objects which are usually chosen in a private surrounding. This type of design elements make a visitor who comes in by car become a stranger, it thus makes him automatically drive very slow, and thus no more dangerous for the pedestrians, who may live in such spaces like in an indoor room (lounge). The more we succeed to make humans feel to live freely, the more we make drivers feel awkward and out of place, which leads to drive more cautiously. This way we may arrive at solutions which ignore the original concept of carriageways and sidewalks, and give the entire space back to the pedestrians. Solutions which include the use of automobiles are easier to realize wherever the access for deliveries, construction or parking garages has to be allowed. Therefore they may be applied in a greater variety of situations than pedestrian zones.

Threats

One of the threats of any outstanding solution is an insufficient maintenance which could make a special place an especially ugly place. Another threat of making public space look private is that it could be turned over to private use, be used for people who pay an entrance fee, only.

Taking this point a bit further one could look at the red surface as a the red carpet rolled out in front of the bank. This stance seems to be confirmed by the naming of the square 'Raiffeisenplatz' (Raiffeisen square). So is it not public but corporate space that has been created? The city owning the greater part of the surface will have to make sure that the space remains public even in the future.

CONCLUSION

A strong and coherent policy for the promotion of pedestrian mobility can have a powerful impact on the structure and the living conditions in urban areas. By promoting and demanding conditions that are pedestrian-friendly we thus promote a socially, environmentally and economically more sustainable development. The self-confident everyday pedestrian can thus become a spearhead of urban innovation, for the benefit of the entire urban population. As far as public space is concerned, we welcome a fresh look at public space, but we want to make sure it stays public.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buff, Theo (2005): Bleicheli-Quartier wird städtebauliche Ikone, in: Stadtspiegel no. 109, 2005, p.7–9.

Gadient, Hansjörg (2006): "Andere Meinungen – Fehler im Stadtgeflecht", In: tec21, no. 19, 2006, p.10.

Pfaff, Lilian (2006): "Kulisse", In: tec21, no. 19, 2006, p.4-10.

Zulauf, Tim (2005): "Gegen die grösste Videoinstallation der Welt – Ein Interview mit Pipilotti Rist". Forschungsprojekt Kunst Öffentlichkeit Zürich, Materialien. Institut für Kunst und Medien, Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich. www.stadtkunst.ch/0/5/22/82/ (accessed 8.6.2006)

More pictures on homezones of different types in Switzerland see:
www.begegnungszonen.ch
where you find a data bank with many facts, figures and illustrations, and
www.stadtlounge.ch where you find more background-information on the city-lounge project.

CREDITS

Fotos and Support: Thomas Schweizer and Urs Rybi (Fussverkehr Schweiz), Richard Wolff (INURA), Andreas Wirz, Archipel, Zürich;.

Translation of quotes by R. Wolff.