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Why the Demand for Urban Quality Fails
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Introduction – the Black Box of Space Production

Nowadays, contemporary town and land use planning is content with moderating space development processes and tries to establish vestiges of order by creating universal boundary conditions such as minimum distances to site boundaries and the height and length of buildings or by using buzzwords such as subsequent increase of density, sustainability or infrastructure efficiency. It can be proven that these efforts are hardly going to bring about any changes to the spatial quality of these realities. In view of this obvious weakness of the planning process one might get the impression that companies are at liberty to develop their buildings and infrastructures wherever they like.

This interpretation is somewhat wide of the mark, however, and does not take into account large parts of the history of manifest local developments. This might be considered to be the result of individual decisions made on a day-by-day basis by different actors who have little awareness of the spatial effects of their actions. These “everyday cities” are therefore related to “everyday practice” (Amin and Thrift 2002, p. 7), which is the subject I want to discuss in this paper.

An in-depth investigation of “everyday practice” requires, as a first step, an empirical reconstruction of its specific social framework conditions, its actor networks and the “actor involvement time” in the urbanscape1 (the time it takes for all actors involved to conceptualise, negotiate and translate their respective interests into reality), because “the crux of urban design and planning intentions lies in the social/technical processes that unfold between the world of plans and blueprints (of designers and planners as well as companies, author’s note) and the realities within society”. (Eisinger 2004, p. 309)

Further questions about the interaction and the effect of planning in relation to the world of commercial enterprise cannot be answered until the specific local background information with respect to the production of the urban reality can be identified.

This paper aims to reconstruct these social interdependencies in the context of the history of their development, using the example of Hilti ag. I will then proceed to discuss the role, position and possibilities of planners and entrepreneurs in relation to a social context.

Research Concept and Method

The research concept of this study follows the approach of a “local urban design practice” (Eisinger 2004, p. 12) with which Eisinger succeeded in placing urban design theory and urban design practice into a social theory context. He followed the methods used in the Science and Technology Studies (sts), in particular the research approach favoured by the Actor Network Theory (ant). With this concept of local urban design practice it is possible to decipher specific local conditions which help in developing a better understanding of the social processes with respect to the development of space.

In that way, the research project focuses on a micro-level of space production and does not even begin to attempt a generalisation of findings, for example on the level of Driving Forces. The reason is that lack of detailed investigation on the level of the actors would run the risk of describing processes too superficially. In turn, this would have a blurring effect on the development of action strategies (see Menzl 2006, p. 39).

This study is based on source material taken from the minutes and planning documents from the archives of the local authority of Schaan as well as the published annual reports and company chronicles of Hilti ag, dating from 1970 onwards. In addition, interviews with relevant actors have been used to shed some further light on the facts.

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1 The term urbanscape refers to the phenomenon of the intermingling of city and landscapes.
The Rhine Valley in the Alps

Hilti AG is a globally active company with its headquarters in the Rhine Valley in the Alps. The official geographical statistics of Switzerland allocate the alpine Rhine Valley to the urbanised areas. Historically, this region is characterised by the fact that there is no real urban centre and that, in the view of its inhabitants, it is rural in character. This is founded on the dynamics of a development that has been triggered by economic growth, changes in society and increasing mobility, which, to varying degrees, can be found all over Western Europe. During the same period, the contrasts between town and country have disappeared. As a result, a new type of development pattern has established itself, which by now is the spatial reality for most people in Europe (see Eisinger and Kurath 2006). The spatial developments of the Hilti AG headquarters in Schaan have contributed significantly to this spatial reality.

Hilti AG today

Today, Hilti AG is the largest employer in the alpine Rhine Valley region and is an international market leader for measuring, drilling, demolition, anchoring and installation systems. At its headquarters in Liechtenstein the company currently employs over 1700 persons in production and administration. Every day, 660 persons from Switzerland, 663 persons from Austria, 55 persons from Germany and 388 members of staff from Liechtenstein commute to the headquarters.

These are located just outside the municipality, along the main road from Schaan to Feldkirch. The precinct can be described as a cluster that comprises various production and administrative buildings, the individual parts of which have been added successively in the course of time. By analogy to the classifications of urban landscape elements, the cluster can be allocated to the xxl structures (Bormann, et al. 2005) or super complexes (Lampugnani, et al. 2007).

History of development

The history of Hilti AG starts in 1941 with the merger of Gebrüder Martin and Eugen Hilti to form Maschinenbau Hilti o. H. G. By the early 1950s, the company, which at that time was still located in the centre of the village of Schaan, had developed into an enterprise with about 300 employees. In order to create more space, the company decided to extend their location in the centre. According to Michael Hilti, son of Martin Hilti, today a member of the supervisory board of Hilti AG, the company entered into negotiations with its neighbour on this subject. Since the neighbour’s demands were excessive, the Hilti brothers had to confront the municipal council regarding the problem of space. As a consequence, the municipal council offered Hilti a piece of land outside the village, in an area called “Im Forst”. There were several reasons for this offer. Michael Hilti mentions the intention of many local administrations at that time to move industrial and commercial premises outside the boundaries of towns or villages. He sees another reason in the quality of the soil in that area. The terrain “Im Forst” is situated at the base of a mountain slope and features good building ground whilst the land at the base of the valley was considered to be structurally poor.

Encouraged by the new spatial opportunities, Maschinenbau Hilti made an application covering 36 ares (3600 m2) of land. The idea was that 18 ares were to be made available for immediate development and a further 18 ares would be reserved for later development by way of an option to purchase. The purchase price offered to the municipality was about CHF 14 /m2. The municipal council did not accept this offer but only offered 11 ares at a price of CHF 14/m2. If the company needed more land at a later date, it would then have to pay CHF 18/m2. The negotiations lasted for three months and were concluded in June 1954. The first building application for a new factory on the land “Im Forst” was approved as early as 18 July 1954. After completing the factory building, the company was able to relocate in the same year (see Wenaweser and Wanger 1995).

Global strategy and local effects

In the course of time, the market position of Maschinenbau Hilti grew stronger. In parallel, the company began to specialise in fastener technology. In the period from 1954 to 1961, Hilti established market organisations abroad, thus implementing a global distribution strategy. In 1960, Maschinenbau Hilti became Hilti Aktiengesellschaft (company limited by shares). Four years later, Hilti AG purchased buildings at a second location in Schaan, the so-called “Werk 2”, where it established a research centre.

In the further course of the company’s history, financial and human resources considerations led to a move to locations and markets outside Liechtenstein. Firstly,
the human resources in the alpine Rhine Valley region were too limited for a rapid expansion, and secondly shifting production facilities into the respective markets meant reduced transport distances and hence a saving in costs. As it had done with its “Werk 2” development, Hilti AG purchased existing premises in the countries abroad, thus profiting from existing actor networks. Alternatively, new locations were developed, for example in the USA.

The global development of the company, in combination with the decision to maintain the headquarters in Schaan, also had an effect on the local situation in Schaan. Whilst during the first phase in Schaan the emphasis was on the development of production facilities, from 1970 onwards the administration was built up as a priority. However, the prerequisite for this development was an adequate supply of land being made available in successive stages. In consequence, the 1960s and 1970s saw Hilti AG involved in negotiations with the municipality and private persons about land.

Negotiations for office buildings
In 1973, plans were being drawn up for the first larger office building. As the height of the planned building did not comply with the maximum height allowed by the building legislation, a special application had to be made to the respective authorities, which was subject to approval by the municipal council and the state government. In this context, the planning authority imposed a condition. As a condition of the special approval, a row of trees was to be planted on the site, along the stretch of road leading from Schaan to Feldkirch, in order to integrate the site better into the landscape. As it happened, the office building was put up but the condition was not met. In 1975, a training centre was built in the form of a pavilion, which was then extended three years later. In 1980, a new office building was erected for the information centre, with about 2500 m² of office floor space and 3000 m² of industrial floor space. This project was also subject to a special approval since it exceeded the limitations imposed by the building legislation by 11 metres. In connection with this special approval, the condition for landscaping improvements from the year 1973 was repeated. However, again the condition of the 1980 approval was not met. In 1984, an extension to the administration building was approved. Again, this had to be negotiated as part of a special approval because of the building’s excessive height. The same applied to the extension of the office building “Nord” in 1989. This time, the only exceptions granted were regarding the length and width of the building. The height restriction of 20 metres was not lifted. Again, the condition imposed in 1973 regarding the landscaping provision and structuring was repeated. Since on this occasion the planning authority requested the submission of a landscaping plan prior to the approval, such a plan was produced by an external consultant and submitted by the required deadline. This meant that building approval was granted. As it turned out, the office building was constructed but again the landscaping plan was not implemented.

As a consequence of the continuing expansion over the years car parking became a problem. The number of parking spaces between the production buildings and the office building Nord increased to 500. This was later extended to about 780 spaces to the south of the site. Apart from that, only minor changes and modifications of the existing structures were carried out in the 1990s. It was not until 2004 that the next larger project was carried out. The existing training centre was replaced by a new one, which today is primarily used as a venue for receptions and exhibits.

Adaptation and extension of local buildings.
The successive nature of the growth of the precinct made on-site processes and communications increasingly complicated. In response to this problem, the planning department of Hilti AG did some in-depth studies for the site. In this context, the car parking and the spatial distribution and networking were examined and re-organised. At the same time, the planning for an extension of the facility below the road to Feldkirch was started. In accordance with company strategy, about 500 workplaces for highly qualified personnel in research and administration were to be created in the short term, in premises with a net usable floor area of 18,000 m². To this end, entries for an architectural competition were invited from 14 internationally active offices, and recently a Swiss architects’ practice was selected as the winner.

To enable this extension to go ahead in principle, the first thing Hilti AG had to do was to develop a space design strategy in cooperation with the structure planning officer, the local planning administration, the state government and the municipal council. The relevant conditions were negotiated and the design concept was discussed during this round. In the next step, the change of use plan has to be approved by the public, i.e. the social resonance has to be established. Since Hilti AG is the largest employer in the municipality and a stable economic factor for Liechtenstein, the company assumes that the project has the support of the general public.
Learning from “Local Urban Design Practice” and “Everyday Cities”

The actor involvement time in the urbanscape.

The reconstruction of the historic urban reality at Schaan provides a clear pointer. Various actors and actants are involved in the process of the creation of spatial structures. For example, there was the neighbour who, at the beginning, did not yield to the needs of Hilti and made sure that the company could not continue its development in the village centre. Then there were the municipal councillors who with their decisions regarding the offer of the “Im Forst” land and tenacious negotiations had an influence on the spatial development. At the same time, this gave rise to the first allegiance between the company and the representatives of the municipality. The decisions and needs of the already existing actor networks surrounding the Hilti brothers became manifest in design schemes for production and industrial buildings. With the execution of these design schemes a further translation of drawings into the built environment took place and hence a re-translation of the design world into urban reality.

With the facility extended to provide new workplaces, it was possible to start new product lines and hence diversify the market offering in order to reduce risk exposure. For its long-term survival, the continuously developing actor network had to find new employees as well as negotiate the best possible fiscal and economic conditions for its facility at Schaan. Hilti’s global strategy has led to extensions outside Liechtenstein, which in turn has generated the need for expansion of the facility at Schaan. However, even though the need for these actions arose from global requirements, they had to be negotiated with local actors, such as the state government, the municipal council, the planning authority and the general public of Schaan, for example when special approvals were sought.

These facts add a modifying dimension to the effect of globalisation processes on urban reality. What can be clearly seen is that individual actors can only improve the chances of realising their interests and objectives if they are prepared to forge alliances with others. The formation of these actor networks serves to negotiate intentions and objectives, to create win-win situations. These are then transferred into the world of planners and designers whose output is then back-translated to manifest the urban reality. As can be seen from the example above, the development objectives have to be renegotiated every day in order to ensure that the chance of their realisation can survive in the long term together with the desired business development.

In addition, the example shows that the sum total of the negotiating processes of all players involved leads to the successive formation of the urbanscape. The total time taken up by this process can be called the “actor involvement time” in the urbanscape (see Eisinger and Kurath, 2007). It follows that the actor involvement time in the urbanscape begins long before the first physically recognisable spatial transformations and stretches way beyond these.

The position of planners/designers and entrepreneurs as players in a societal negotiation process.

If we consider urban reality as the result of societal negotiation processes, we can state from the above accounts that these negotiation processes involve several actors with equal standing. For the planners/designers this means that, just like the other actors, they are part of societal negotiation processes and cannot determine these from an outside position.

Undoubtedly, other factors, such as legislation, capital and power also have an influence on the result of such negotiations. But again and again we can see that some actors can also take an opposing stance in the negotiations. Therefore it is possible that so-called power structures can shift in negotiation processes on the grounds of mutual dependencies. For example, it is quite conceivable that a small group of residents would block the re-zoning application for the next development phases of the Hilti sites if they succeed in forging appropriate alliances, which in turn would put the apparent oversize of this internationally active company and its growth plans into perspective.

Parallel system-based non-understanding

Demands from architects and planners for a spatial awareness, levelled at companies, for example, are obviously not going to be met without restrictions. These different actors focus on their different interests. Conversely, the same applies when we consider the outlook for companies. Companies cannot assume that planners fully understand (and share) their objectives of unlimited commercial growth and hence spatial expansion, because their objectives are in part opposed and they have developed diverging benchmarks for values. In this context we can borrow the term “parallel system-based non-understanding” used by Niklas Luhmann in his
Social Theory (Luhmann 1997) (see Eisinger and Schneider 2003, p. 392). In the course of a progressing differentiation of parts of society, these parts have developed their own language codes. Possible code words in politics could be power/no power, in commerce figures/no figures, in ethics good/bad. When these diverging parts of society have to deal with one another, there is the constant threat of misunderstandings which cannot be resolved via a mutual understanding. There is only limited scope for bringing about such an understanding. However, a pragmatic approach can provide an answer: as we have seen, in this difficult situation the actors involved look for solutions by creating win-win situations in the sense of structural ties. The creation of such a situation makes it possible for each actor to maintain his respective focus. A relevant example is nature conservation. Where developers are prepared to finance the creation of biotopes, it is possible that opposition to the development of large sites can be neutralised. This meets the interests of nature conservation agencies, even though the later effects of this solution may be contentious. In this respect, such compromises may often, and of necessity, be “unholy alliances” of opposing interests.

The role of planners and company representatives in negotiation processes

The example of the special approvals for the Hilti AG’s office buildings shows that it is possible to create win-win situations. In this example, exceptions regarding the height of the proposed office buildings were conditional upon certain landscaping measures being undertaken for the company site. This makes the remit of the different roles clear. While the company was pushing for a spatial expansion of the facility in order to create more workplaces, the development control authority tried to enhance the spatial quality of the development. Both parties have fulfilled their respective roles. However, the fact that the condition imposed by the planners was not implemented may have to do with a lack of following-up on the part of the planning authority to enforce the conditions. The roles must therefore be exercised with proactive motivation by the respective parties.

Failure as a Question of Timing and Activity

Using these findings we can now find an answer to the question why the companies with their buildings and developments had a much stronger effect on the development outcome than the planners with their objective of spatial quality. We have to direct our attention to the timing of the beginning of the negotiation process.

From documents in the archives it is apparent that Hilti AG always opted for a proactive approach in its negotiation strategy. When the company began to plan the expansion of its facility it forged contacts with potential alliance partners in politics and society at the earliest possible opportunity. According to Michael Hilti, the company still pursues this strategy today.

With the planning administration it is the other way round. As an institution based on legislation, it relies on its statutory instruments and legal remit. This tends to lead to a passive approach to planning. As a consequence, the planning authority did not become involved in the negotiation process until this could not be delayed any longer. This is in line with economic principles in actor networks. Actors will not be integrated into a network as long as they are not needed, as any increase of such networks will always be associated with extra costs. For example, we can see this mechanism at work when approvals have to be obtained. By the time that the planning authority finally became involved in the actor network, the commercial, societal and political conditions had already been negotiated and actually crystallised in the form of building applications. As these did not consider and hence did not include any aspects of space quality, there was hardly any room left to accommodate any modifications.

In consequence the “back-translation” or implementation of the proposed development created a built reality with less than satisfactory spatial qualities. We can conclude that planning today enters the process too late, and is too passive in its approach.

Conclusion: Planning Authorities need Proactive Approach in Negotiations for Spatial Quality

From the point of view of architects, landscape architects and urban designers the success of urban design will be judged by the degree to which it incorporates the intended spatial quality in the built reality. For this to come about it is necessary for planners to be prepared to adopt a proactive approach and form long-term alliances in order support their intentions.
Here the following should be taken into account:

Planners need to develop their own objectives and visions at an early stage and present these in clearly communicated spatial concepts.

Strategies and room for negotiation have to be developed in parallel with these concepts.

Space concepts and associated specific local qualities need to be addressed and proactively negotiated as early as possible in the negotiation process.

There must be a mechanism for ensuring that the result of negotiations is properly implemented (translating planning documents back into the built reality). This leads to the conclusion not only that the planning process should be integrated as early as possible, but that it should actively attend to the negotiation processes for as long as possible.

An investigation of the built reality shows that neither out-of-control globalisation processes nor the respective companies can be held responsible for the lack of spatial quality. The responsibility lies with those actors who have developed an awareness of and sensitivity to spatial quality and related questions and who demand such a spatial quality. Therefore the design and planning disciplines should become active and adapt their professional knowledge and strategies to the societal conditions of the urbanscape.

Bibliography:


