What Kind of City Do We Want to Live In?

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In an age of climate change, species extinction and resource scarcity, long-established spatial and traffic concepts are proving to be outdated and obsolete. So, why not try out the alternatives available to us, here and now? That’s the idea behind street experiments. An interdisciplinary team at TUM’s Chair of Urban Structure and Transport Planning is researching whether and to what extent this concept can be deployed in urban design and development.
Munich. April 2022. Walking through the city’s Schlachthof district, the sleek brick façade of the new Volkstheater instantly catches the eye. Situated directly opposite, Zenettiplatz offers another urban design highlight – though its significance might not be apparent upon first glance. The square is surrounded with plywood structures painted turquoise, inviting passers-by to sit and linger for a while. Large planters provide a base for an entire grove of trees, fringed with spring flowers and culinary herbs. There is a bulletin board peppered with notices advertising second-hand furniture and free training sessions at the nearby gym. A man flicks through the freely accessible book alcove, searching for new arrivals, his two exuberant sons having already snatched a comic book. “My neighbor’s elderly mother loves coming here to chat to other local residents,” says a woman who has left her electric car to charge at the mobility station over the road. She also confesses that she is grateful for the recently redeveloped “Piazza Zenetti”.

Four years ago, this was nothing more than a parking lot for private vehicles. Its transformation into a place for people to meet, dedicated to local residents, started in the summer of 2018 by order of the City of Munich. The square was completely transformed as part of a research project called city2share, which involved local residents and was supported by a landscape architect. The parking spaces in the northern section made way for a place designed to allow people to relax and meet others, while the parking area in the southern section was converted into a mobility station with car and e-bike sharing services. The grand opening was attended by the mayor of Munich as well as representatives of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, the municipally owned transport company Münchner Verkehrsgesellschaft, and the project’s industry partner, BMW. The whole project was originally conceived as an experiment and only scheduled to last six weeks. During this initial period, however, something clicked. A citizen’s initiative formed and organized a series of street parties in the subsequent two summers along with activities focused on the new “piazza”, which ultimately led to the change being made permanent.

**Pandemic emboldens citizens with desire for change**

The “Piazza Zenetti” is a prime example of successful transformation of the public realm. It is also far from an isolated case, from Milan to New York, Barcelona to Bo-
gotta, urban residents are turning to ciclovías, “play streets” or “summer streets” to enable their vision of a better world to run free. Although no two projects are alike, they are all connected by a shared longing for change. People sense that things cannot continue as they have been to date. Climate change, environmental pollution, species extinction, resource scarcity and, of course, the coronavirus pandemic have all forced us to rethink our way of life, including our mobility behavior. But what alternatives exist that are both reasonable and practically feasible? Numerous street experiments are underway around the world with the aim of finding out. From an academic perspective, street experiments are “deliberate, time-limited changes in street use, regulation and/or form with the aim of researching systemic changes in urban mobility”. The project at Munich’s Zenettiplatz is just one example.

“The coronavirus pandemic was a veritable booster for these initiatives,” highlights Gebhard Wulfhorst, who leads the Chair of Urban Structure and Transport Planning at TUM. “It suddenly sparked a great willingness in society to challenge and question many things, to give new...
Acceptance, communication and citizen participation
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Ana Rivas

things a try, and even to buy into very strict restrictions at many levels for temporary periods. The pandemic has also had an extraordinarily positive impact on the willingness and courage to pursue change." For many years, people have been resigned to the fact that streets – particularly in urban areas – are dominated by motor vehicles, whether parked or driving. “But we have been forced to reflect and realize that streets are not primarily made for cars but for people! Streets are part of the public realm where we meet others and chat with neighbors, sit in cafés and go about our daily business. Once you understand that, it can be better incorporated and implemented in planning processes,” emphasizes Wulfhorst’s doctoral student, Ana Rivas.

Public space is a hotly contested resource
In the course of her dissertation, architectural researcher Rivas gathered data on around 150 street experiments in 38 countries, analyzing six projects in Amsterdam and Munich as case studies based on her own catalog of criteria. Rivas wanted to find out the conditions under which time-limited initiatives lead to lasting change at different levels, including individuals’ mobility behavior, urban planning, building design and engagement with different interest groups.

So, what did she find? “There are three criteria that determine the success of a street experiment, namely acceptance, communication and citizen participation. This means that those who are directly affected should be involved as closely as possible in the concept and execution of a project to gain their commitment to the cause. At the same time, the entire process must be coordinated with all stakeholders on an ongoing basis and also communicated to the outside world. Finally, it is very important to have local authorities on board.”

Urban transformation is not an easy task, as public space is a valuable resource and – due to its limited nature, especially in major cities – is hotly contested. “The challenge here is to find a balance between the interests of different groups: people who drive and those who cycle, others who get about on foot, deliver goods, visit local bars or want spaces to play in,” explains Gebhard Wulfhorst. “There are plenty of potential technical solutions, from new drive systems in electromobility to autonomous driving to sharing and shuttle models with bicycles, scooters, buses and taxis. Yet, all these concepts can only achieve success if their products and services can be integrated into the public realm – otherwise, bicycles will end up lying around on footpaths and that will annoy
everyone. Innovations need to be integrated as a common, sociocultural construct, which means developing, exploring, considering and trialing them together.”

Street experiments, as shown by Ana Rivas’ research, can make an important contribution to this process. “This idea of bringing different stakeholders together, which we have developed with our partners in Amsterdam and Milan, is something we now want to pursue more intensively in Munich,” explains Wulfhorst. Established in the fall of 2021, the Munich Cluster for the Future of Mobility in Metropolitan Regions (or MCube for short) provides a framework for this research and is part of a new funding program established by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The vision behind MCube is to establish Munich’s position as a pioneer of sustainable and transformative mobility innovations. One of the cluster’s lighthouse projects aims to create low-traffic neighborhoods through the use of multi-modal transportation options. “In that project, working together with the Chair for Urban Design, the City of Munich and private partners, we want to combine alternative mobility systems with new design concepts for the public realm. It is exactly these ideas that we know from successful street experiments and now wish to put into practice.”

Monika Offenberger

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European partners

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