A Space for Us
rethinking, reshaping & redesigning public space for the common good.
The story of a Prototype.

Picture by Ekaterina Feil.
I would like to thank Stephen Robbinson also known as “Steve on the bench” for challenging me to think outside the box. I would also like to thank the whole LNU design + change team, especially Zeenath Hasan for this unusual learning experience and my former classmates for their kindness and support. Dr. Michael Hohl and Sixten Sanne Göransson for external consultation. Henriette Funke, for always listening to my ideas and complaints. Steve Michaelis for helping me to understand the bare minimum of word press. Stefan Hoch for sharing his woodworking space and his tools with me. Franz Julius Pelz for the help with the set it up. Last but not least, my Family.
This design project delves into the realm of public spaces, considering sociocultural, sociopolitical, and participatory design aspects, catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic's lockdowns. Urban residents, especially those below the poverty line, endured the constraints of confined living during the pandemic. Acknowledging these effects, this experiment seeks to investigate, reimagine, and rethink urban areas and their public spaces. Focused on Berlin, Germany, and guided by an autoethnographic approach, this project serves as a conduit for discussing the diverse requirements of inhabitants.

Embracing the mission to inspire, enlighten, emancipate, and deconstruct notions of ownership within public spheres, this initiative transforms a parking lot into a dynamic piece of multifunctional furniture. By repurposing this space, the project endeavors to scrutinize, trial, and understand reactions and needs. Representing both a prototype and a design interaction, it introduces an additional dimension to the urban environment — a symbolic outdoor living space equivalent in size to a car. Designed with simplicity and user friendliness in mind, it encapsulates various roles: a place to rest, to play, to work, to exhibit, share meals, or just a simple meeting point. Emanating from a place of empathy and affection for collective needs, this project stands for the needs of many — ‘us.’

keywords

adaptive urbanism, alternative use of space, behavior mapping, co-creation, community building, design research, human centered design, open cities, participatory design, place-making, public engagement, public space, spatial awareness, social design, sociopolitical, street parking, sustainable design, transition design, urbanisation, urban environment, urban life.
introduction

This project endeavors to establish spaces that enhance the quality of life for diverse inhabitants through the creation of multifunctional, shared areas on the scale of a parking lot. My journey into this Master’s project commenced with an exploration of living spaces. I sought to unravel the essence of a living space and discern the factors distinguishing between favorable and unfavorable ones. Through personal experiences, I recognized the significance of secure housing for human well-being and the vulnerability it assumes in times of crisis. I also witnessed how housing, particularly in urban centers, is often treated as a commodity rather than a fundamental human right. Conversations with friends, acquaintances, and colleagues highlighted the mental strains faced by many during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Notably, it was evident that such crises were intrinsically linked to the concept of space. Originally, I intended to focus on personal living spaces such as apartments, rooms, and rented dwellings, encompassing one’s possessions. However, as my research unfolded, I realized that living spaces transcend mere physical enclosures. They extend into the surrounding environment – the neighborhood, street, and city. The urban backdrop inextricably connects with our individual living spaces. This realization expanded my focus to encompass public spaces, prompting contemplation of what “public” truly means. How are these spaces conceived, utilized, and perceived by individuals? What exists already? Why does it exist in its current form? Can it be enhanced or reimagined? Most importantly, who stands to benefit from these changes?

The allure of this subject was matched by a sense of apprehension. The prospect of enacting urban change, particularly within the context of Germany, where I reside, appeared frustrating. The regulatory landscape, laws, and hidden complexities posed challenges I might not have yet comprehended. Nevertheless, I was drawn to the possibility of becoming an agent of change. The outcome might differ from my aspirations, but public spaces are part of everyone’s daily life. We traverse streets, frequent establishments, utilize infrastructures, and thus, we all share an implicit engagement with these spaces. Strangely, we often accept their rules and limitations without critical thought or reflection. What would happen if we could use these spaces according to our preferences? What if we could reshape the norms that define them? These inquiries compelled me to consider the influence of societal norms on how we perceive and experience public spaces.

In the pages that follow, I embark on a journey to delve deeper into these questions, challenge existing paradigms, and explore the possibilities of transforming public spaces into something more, even just as experiment or short interaction.
Inspirations & Motivations

The inspiration for this project emerged from the profound insights of Pablo Escobar's work, "Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds." In particular, the recurring phrase "A world where many worlds fit" resonated deeply with me. In my perception, public spaces embody precisely this notion — an intersection of diverse worlds. Escobar's thesis revolves around ontological design — a philosophy rooted in existence and the inherent human quest for autonomy and self-fulfillment. This translates to the capacity to collaboratively shape our environment, co-creating the world around us. His assertion, "We design our world and our world designs us back—design designs," culminates in the redefinition of design as autonomous design.

Within this intellectual backdrop, my project evolved with the intention to fathom these multitudinous worlds and to discern what is requisite or absent within them. Central to my aim is the initiation of a dialogue with the environment, intended to stir awareness, ignite inspiration, and kindle conversations about our immediate surroundings — how we, the individuals, aspire to utilize them. My pursuit extends to underscoreing the potential for designing the manner in which we live, interact, and intertwine with both the space and one another. The ambition is to envision a more habitable world, using the canvas of a single parking lot as an illustrative example. This endeavor, therefore, aspires to evoke discourse, reimagine public spaces, and ultimately, lay the groundwork for a more cohesive and enriched communal existence.

Another influential catalyst for this project emerged through direct interaction with Stephen Robbinson, colloquially known as 'Steve on the Bench'. Steve, a homeless individual who resided on a particular bench for over three years in the affluent Berlin neighborhood of Prenzlauer Berg, profoundly impacted my perspective. Through conversations and observation, I gleaned insights into the often unfriendly and exclusionary design of public spaces, particularly for those without homes. His experiences illuminated how privatization and gentrification segregate social classes, displacing longstanding residents in the name of urban renewal.

This interaction underscored that, regardless of one's familiarity with urban planning, politics, or architecture, the imperative for reimagining, reorganizing, and reforming public spaces from a people-centric vantage point is undeniable. While I couldn't directly alter Steve's circumstances, his influence evoked a heightened awareness and an array of questions, driving me to intervene on a micro level. I extend my gratitude to Steve for his inspiration; may he rest in peace.

A second impetus emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic’s onset. This crisis laid bare layers of social inequities and injustices, disproportionately affecting those with lower incomes. Government regulations, restrictions, lockdowns, and job losses drastically transformed our daily lives. The pandemic reshaped normalcy, prompting reflections on the concept of a living space. For some, the home became a constraint, a source of entrapment akin to a prison.

In this context, I recognized a critical need and an opportunity for societal transformation—a chance to reevaluate, redesign, and redefine living spaces. The pandemic underscored the importance of well-designed urban environments for maintaining mental and physical well-being.

Time spent outdoors, previously taken for granted, now emerged as a crucial tool for health. The desire to bask in the sun, interact with others, or simply escape a confined setting became pressing.

Consequently, I felt compelled to inspire and motivate a resurgence of social interactions within the city. The project aims to reclaim public spaces, reenvision their usage, and collaboratively shape environments that facilitate diverse interactions.

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**Personal Perspective & Context**

As a German citizen, I’ve chosen to delve into the subject of public space from a deeply personal standpoint. Germany has been my home, the backdrop against which I’ve painted the canvas of my experiences, and the canvas on which I’ve sketched a profound understanding of the myriad issues that define our relationship with public spaces. I refer not just to the physical presence of a place, but the emotions it stirs and the memories it etches.

This is where I experienced on a personal level different settings, encompassing a spectrum of settings, from bustling cities to quaint towns, and vibrant neighborhoods to those struggling with the weight of gentrification. My journey has traversed contrasting landscapes, from urban cores to quiet countryside, each revealing its unique tapestry of advantages and drawbacks. I acknowledge the intricate dance of usability, sentiment, and identity that each locale carries.

It’s important to emphasize that the nuances of public space extend beyond mere attractiveness or popularity. The heart of the matter lies in the interaction between people and the space they inhabit. This interaction is inherently diverse and intricate, driven by factors as varied as local culture, historical legacy, and societal norms. Additionally, the legal framework governing public spaces fluctuates across regions, presenting another layer of complexity.

A significant divergence surfaces when comparing cityscapes and towns. Cities, with their bustling energy and multicultural vibrancy, inspire a multitude of interactions within limited spaces. The dynamism of urban life fosters a propensity to
Statement by Henriette, 40 Years, Mother of 4 Children. Said that her home feels like a prison, during lockdown, 2021.

„home feels like a prison“
experiment and optimize spatial usage. In the urban realm, the commercial value of space magnifies the demand for innovative solutions that accommodate the diverse needs of its denizens. Consequently, I choose to focus this project on a metropolis like Berlin, where the interplay between human activity and spatial constraints is particularly pronounced.

Conversely, in smaller towns, the abundance of space relative to population sizes engenders a distinct relationship with public spaces. People tend to gravitate toward designated areas, those officially earmarked for communal use. These spaces become the locus of shared activity. However, even here, variations emerge, influenced by the town’s history, size, and local dynamics.

In essence, my aim is not to forge overarching generalizations but to recognize and appreciate the nuanced subtleties of public spaces across the spectrum of German settings. This project seeks to explore the complexity of these spaces, to reimagine their potential, and to inspire a holistic dialogue about co-creating vibrant, inclusive, and meaningful public realms.

According to my observations in small towns, there’s a tendency for people to be less active and engaged in public spaces and on the streets. Instead, outdoor activities often revolve around privatized areas like personal gardens, allotment plots, official parks, and playgrounds. The inclination to occupy and utilize non-designated spaces for socializing, sitting, or soaking in the sun is less common in smaller towns than in comparison to bigger cities.

Conversely, in larger cities, particularly on sunny days, you’ll frequently encounter individuals seated or standing in crowded locales, on staircases, or even in less inviting or untidy spots, all in pursuit of basking in the sunlight. From my perspective, there’s value and inspiration in mutual learning, where larger cities can glean insights from smaller ones, and vice versa. This cross-pollination can lead to big cities benefiting from the qualities of smaller ones, while smaller towns can be invigorated by the vitality of urban environments. To explore this dynamic, I deliberately tested my prototype in two divergent settings to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

**Contextual Foundations & Theoretical Frameworks**

The biggest and most profound influence on this project came from the Danish architect Jan Gehl and his inspiring concept of the human scale also known as “Cities for People” which I will explain further.

The majority of our modern, big cities look similar. The buildings are tall and massive, with large glass facades. The streets are wide and huge, and for me, this feels distant, separative, and cold. Amid all this modernness and technologies there still is the human being; us, with our lives, struggles, and unique social needs, that does not necessarily fit with the cliche of modernity. In our search for opportunities, education, better career chances, or just more money and a better life, we move to the cities. But the way the cities are built is not necessarily for us and our needs, but as I could observe rather cars and streets. Cities seem not to invite us, humans, as living social beings - but to regulate us.

They do not create interaction, inclusion, or intimacy but rather the opposite. To understand that, it is helpful to acknowledge that cities are shaped by much bigger forces than human individuals. They are mostly influenced by the economy and their interest, like money and privatisation. One example is hostile architecture or hostile design, which intends to keep humans and animals away from certain areas or buildings. The goal is to actively stop people and animals from the feeling of too comfortable and spreading out in certain areas like city centers. This might be one of the reasons for missing human interactions, community and inclusion. It leaves the impression that one of the consequences is the feeling of disconnection, separation, discomfort and inequality.

Jan Gehl spent a lot of time trying to figure out: What could be a scale for measuring happiness for people in connection to the cities? In research for over 40 years, he tried to find out what a good urban habitat for humans could look like. Understanding the nature of human beings, their needs and desires is the missing link, in his opinion. If we look back at how we as humans historically used to live, we can see an enormous change. We lived in tribes, extended households and large families, in whole family villages. It used to be the best option for our survival chances, but it also created community and a feeling of connection. It is easy to see that we are social beings and always have been. So it seems to me that it is a quite modern phenomenon to live alone, or in tiny households, small families, or small clusters like flat-sharing communities.

Historically, a formative time for the development of our modern cities was the rebuilding time after World War II (in Europe), as well as the time of the economic boom around the 1960s in western countries. Urbanisation, as a big and ongoing movement relocated people on a larger scale from the countryside to the cities: the outcome was an enormous housing shortage. Not only did housing solutions become necessary, but also bigger and better streets for evermore cars were desperately needed. The modernist killed city life says Jan Gehl in the documentary "The Human Scale". A lot of older city characteristics went missing in this period, such as small and safe neighborhoods, meeting and resting points, small shops and short ways for shopping. In his opinion, this is an indication of changing us as people when meeting - and living points change.*

As mentioned above, the car plays a big role in this change, since the 1940s, city planning was structured around traffic flow, speed and efficiency of cars. The consumption of cars and real estate is still the main generator of economic growth worldwide. So to maintain a high growth rate it was and still is in some places necessary to build sufficient roads and highways so that the economy can keep on growing. City planners found out very quickly that if you build more roads for cars, you will soon have more traffic.

"Equally, the development of road infrastructure transformed and created cities; divided communities; enabled an enormously large and economically powerful goods transport industry; and led to traffic congestion that has dramatically reduced the operability of city life and, by degree, affected public health. Perhaps the most dramatic measure of the volume of road traffic and growth of road networks worldwide is the number of people killed by traffic accidents(…)*

In conclusion, traffic makes the human environment more dangerous and toxic. By separating car areas from human

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5 km/h

60 km/h

Münzstraße in Berlin Mitte. Picture by Ekaterina Feil
areas, for example through parked cars or different roads, fewer injuries to people are the outcome. You can see this already happening all over the world; in New York City, for example, the injuries from car-related accidents went down by 63%, when pedestrian and car roads were separated, which is in my opinion a great result.

Cars not only create a more dangerous environment for humans, but they also create poorer health outcomes, by driving more and moving less, obesity rises. By creating big distances, social isolation was the outcome and financial hardships emerged. Not only by separating social classes but also by creating a need for a product that not everyone can afford and through gentrification and moving the population below the poverty line further from the city centers. Moving through cities quickly is still a very important issue that needs re-thinking, redesign and restructuring, especially in times of climate change, however, this issue is beyond the scope of this text.

I would prefer to work with the relatively newly created set of data and focus on the human scale in this work. Through my travels over the years, I observed something magical about old city centers. I saw that more public life is happening in old cities and car-free areas. So, I created the narrative that it is like this because people feel connected to historical places and that the weather must influence it, since I was traveling mostly through Southern Europe or South America. But as I got to know the human scale, I understood that the main argument is about speed. Yes, the weather is a nice influence, but in old cities, you move at another pace; you move with the human speed, an average of 5km/h.

If you move at 5 km/h you can experience the world around you differently. The experience becomes sensual. You can see better, the colors, the details, and you can interact with the environment or the people. You can just pause where your attention leads you. Furthermore, you can smell and you can hear your environment differently. In a modern city, the pace is 50 or 60 km/h, the scale for cars. With 60 km/h are bigger streets, a bigger turning radius, bigger signs, brighter and louder traffic lights, and a lot of space for parking is inevitable. It is faster, louder and a very different experience compared to the human scale of 5 km/h. The way cities are built has an impact on our lifestyle as human beings.

In my opinion, the question is not only about who should be prioritised. Vehicles or people? the economy or happy and healthy humans. It is about how to integrate all of the needs. Cars and good streets are still needed, for example for rescue operations or online delivery services. But comfortable and safe spaces for humans are equally important.

When parts of Copenhagen became pedestrianised with the help of Jan Gehl, he found a simple predictability of public life: if you create more space for people, you will have more public life. One aspect of it is that human beings like to feel welcome and invited. The space needs to be open, welcoming, safe, comfortable, including and inviting for simple human activities. The exact opposite of restricted or fenced, user-unfriendly through cold metal, or sitting opportunities that are so far from each other that it's impossible to talk. If public space is regulated by many prohibitions, coldness and limitations, life seems to be dull, and the environment feels privatised and excluded.

signs, scooters, bicycles, trash bins, construction equipment, buggies, dogs, kids, restaurant tables, and more...

driving cars, parking cars, & bicycles
Urbanisation is a very relevant topic in the aspect of climate emergency. In 2020 were approximately 4.36 billion people living in cities worldwide according to www.ourworldindata.org.¹ This is already over 55% of the population of the world. According to the UN, these numbers are expected to rise to 9.8 billion people by the year 2050. In 30 years it will be expected to double the urban capacity worldwide. It is estimated, that this numbers will rise to 11.2 billion people and 80% of the people will live in cities by the end of this century.¹¹ Urbanisation and sustainability are, from my point of view, highly interconnected and therefore a significant component for a more sustainable future.

The “Right to the city” is an idea and a slogan that was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre, a famous Parisian analyst, theorist and sociologist in 1968. He emphasises the effects that capitalism had on the city and the emergence that the city belongs to its citizens. Basically, it shall empower people to reclaim the city as a co-creation space. The right to the city is still up to date as an active political and social citizen movement that has been applied in several places all over the world. The slogan has been used and refined by several thinkers, to mention one of them, David Harvey, a social geographer and his Social Justice and the City publication from 1973.¹²

These movements are about people who have found it impossible to live comfortably in their cities and out of this contradiction created the emergency to fight for their home, their right to shape the city, for their social and political interests.

One example is a group of citizens from Montreal, Canada, where the people stood up for their right to the city for 11 years. After demonstrating, squatting, holding public information sessions, occupying the office of the developers, and getting arrested, the court decided that the citizens of Montreal have the perfect right to fight for their city and the right to decide what will happen to a neighborhood. Now, the participants own the land in common, there is no private ownership, no speculation, and it is not possible to buy and resell this property again. As such, these citizens have sent an example to people all over the world, of what people’s power can do, a major accomplishment that was created by the democratic actions of citizens and their participation in the urban planning of their environment. At the end of his Ted Talk about the right to the city, Dimitri Roussopoulos, a Social Ecologist says “We as human beings, we as citizens must take back our cities, away from the 1% back to the 99% - All power to the people.”¹³

Another theoretical and methodological framework that influenced my work is the thesis on the open city by Richard Sennett. He is known as a sociologist, theorist and historian of urban life. His main themes are the isolation or disorientation of modern individuals and the superficiality and instability of interpersonal relationships. His work let me understand that the city is not just streets, bricks and concrete, but also the representation of the inhabitants. It has a soul, vibrancy, vitality, a feeling, and is a place where the community should thrive under its conditions.

An open city is a social system that represents freedom and disorder. An open or good city for humans should be clean and safe. It should have efficient public transportation and
other services. It needs a dynamic economy and should be culturally stimulating for its citizens. It should be a just city and do its best to heal social divisions of race, class and ethnicity.14

Sadly, these are not the cities we live in, but they can become the cities of the future. The contrast of the closed system is the opposite of that: it is a rather “socialist” concept of regulation by limitation, order, bureaucracy and many many rules. This is a way of suppressing social activity, disabling local innovations and growth. It disables life and its development that happens effortlessly and involuntarily by just letting it happen. In this context, I would like to invite and include everyone, especially the population below the poverty line, in my project and create places that can improve the standard of living outside in public.


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Cultivating Self-Sustaining Public Ecosystems: Insights from Bottle Collectors in Berlin

During pleasant weather, parks and playgrounds come alive as people of diverse ages and backgrounds gather, coexisting harmoniously. To me, this appears as a gentle, self-organized ecosystem that thrives independently. I’d like to illustrate this concept through the example of “bottle collectors” (Flaschensammler).

Bottle collectors encompass individuals from varying backgrounds, often hailing from low-income circumstances. Many are elderly individuals who supplement their pensions by collecting empty bottles for deposit returns. The deposit value ranges from 0.08 to 0.25 cents per bottle.

They function efficiently, employing structured approaches and sometimes forming groups to maximize profits. Their roles involve collecting, safeguarding, and returning items to supermarkets. Remarkably courteous, they approach and inquire whether a bottle is empty before requesting it.

The efforts of these bottle collectors prevent the city from facing a significant street waste issue on sunny days,
particularly in and around public parks. These spaces are occupied by individuals who frequently consume bottled beverages. It's common to find public trash bins overflowing with refuse, often accompanied by empty bottles.

This organic system developed spontaneously, devoid of the need for regulations or governmental interventions. It naturally evolved, based on mutual understanding. It signifies a pact between those seeking leisure, who can forego the deposit refund in exchange for convenience, and the collectors, who earn through the deposit. This balanced exchange embodies an intricately designed system of reciprocity. Hence, allowing people the space to self-organize is vital. Such an organization occurs naturally when conditions are fair and conducive for all parties. The diverse needs of individuals don't always necessitate direct governance or control. Some systems autonomously emerge without causing harm.

Self-designed systems like these are inherently more sustainable, from my point of view. We can draw inspiration from the autopoiesis concept by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, wherein self-organizing and self-replicating systems emerge from the interrelations within a whole, much like the dynamics of living organisms."

I hope that this project will follow a similar trajectory. Enabling it to create and sustain itself by providing space and opportunities for interaction, co-creation, and intersection. This collaborative dance mirrors a symbiotic bond grounded in mutual advantage.

As mentioned before, living, especially around big and popular cities like Berlin, Stockholm or Copenhagen, became a profitable and exclusive product for wealthier demographics. My work seeks to connect people and find solutions for everyone in the context of public spaces. But how? Free spaces are impossible to spot. Even a parking lot is rarely empty, but numerous are present, but nearly always occupied by parked cars. I figured out that Berliners own fewer cars than other big cities in Germany. About 1.2 million vehicles are registered in Berlin by a population of nearly 3.7 million inhabitants. On average, 1000 inhabitants own 390 cars. I am by far not the only one wondering if that space could be used for other purposes. What if there would be fewer cars in the inner city? This is quite a drastic and speculative approach, but we can still imagine how much space that would create. How many tiny houses could be new homes? How would the vibe of the city change? What would arise? Surely interesting to speculate, but for my project, I would rather create and test.

One of the associations is Berlin Autofrei which can be translated to “Berlin Car-free”. Berlin Autofrei has been actively fighting for a ban on private car use in central Berlin for over 15 years now and would like to create the largest car-free urban area in the world. Their biggest arguments are sustainability, human health, safety, equality and a better quality of life through a combination of, safer streets, fewer accidents, better air quality, more exercise, more space for social interactions, and the same conditions for everyone.

The development in car-free areas is already measurable, not only are there more streets for cyclists, but since November 2018 a total of 15 parklets and plenty of bicycle parking spaces have been set up in Bergmannstraße in Berlin Kreuzberg. A Parklet is a sidewalk extension on the street using one or several parking lots and expanding the pedestrian areas with a combination of benches, bicycle racks, and flower boxes and serving as hang-out places in the popular city part of Kreuzberg. Some of them have been removed again because of noise disturbance, which shows that it is very complicated to create an active change within a city. It is still quite impressive how the whole street has been upgraded.

For quite a while, I was observing the cars which were parked on my street. I tried to remember how often they were moved and which of them were just left there, static, not used, not moved. I could see that some of those cars were parked in the same spot for the whole week, or longer, and some of them only moved rarely, used for weekend activities to get out of the Parklet Bergmannstraße. Picture by Ekaterina Feil
city, into nature. I realised how useless it is to occupy a space that others might desperately need. How unfair it is, to just block a spot with an estate on wheels. So I decided to work with this place, a parking lot by visualizing my thought process and opening up a conversation or local interaction.

Parking is quite an issue in every big city and if you ask a car driver, they would wish for more. If you ask a pedestrian, they would wish for less. A parking lot has a size of approximately 250 cm by 500 cm, which is 10 square metres. This is the size of a small room. For some people, it is their whole living space and costs around 500 € in a shared flat in Berlin in 2021.

Compared to that, parking in the same city costs nearly nothing if you apply for a residential parking pass, around 20 € per year. As a resident, you are allowed only to park in the parking the zone around your living space, but you need to pay per hour if you need to park outside your parking zone. The hours where you need to pay for parking are from 9 am to 12 pm. The cost depends on the area from 1 € to 3 € per hour. The time from midnight till 9 am parking is free. If you don’t pay, it is very common to get a ticket for a 15 € parking fine instead.

Working with the concept of a parking lot is nothing new; many other artists and designers have worked with or in parking lots. One example is the street artist Banksy’s Swing Girl from 2010. But I choose it consciously anyway, as for me, it has the space of one parking lot, and has great symbolic potential and character to place something else in this space and break up the common view of parked cars. It has the power to disrupt the norm and to criticise, to situate the idea of a little bit of extra living space outside on the streets and into public, to expand the idea of an outside living room or the ordinary public bench, in contrast to parked cars, by using only one parking lot and transforming it into a multifunctional furniture set.

I imagined a space that can be used for free, and which can improve the standard of living for some inhabitants, but at the same time that has the power to start a conversation and social interaction. In contrast to the already existing parklet, my work should be more flexible and fluid, the opposite of static. What I had in mind was everything in one parking lot.

Something to sit and eat, play (table) games, have inspiring talks and much more. I imagined that, for example, it could be used as a selling or exhibition stand. Or a neighbourhood flea market or a kids’ lemonade stand. It could be a workplace in the sun for some hours. A place where a local band could have a rehearsal. A space to inform about neighbourhood activities or political engagements. A place to hold a workshop, a place to get in touch with other people. A place to start a new hobby or get inspired by someone else’s. A place to simply start interactions and conversations. Or a place that can be seen as the extra balcony that is missing. For example, for a sunny breakfast or picnic, to sunbathe or to watch the stars and the moon during the night. To have a romantic dinner under the open sky. It can be so many things; a creative space, a stage for street musicians or a local comedian show, a DJ-booth, or a pop-up bar. The Idea was lovely, but I was pretty sure, that it would be impossible to materialize it in Germany.

As my collaborator for the project, I chose the contemporary artist Sixten Sanne, from Sweden. His work focuses on topics around the city, public spaces and the lack of incidental sociality in the flow of the city. Sixten is a very close friend of mine and has experience making public installations even in Berlin.

While I was stuck with legal matters for my project, I remembered a project Sixten made years ago, which seemed to be similar to mine. So I got in contact with him and told him about my idea of an outside living room to get some advice. He worked with the concept of a parking lot before and transformed it into the concept of a parking lot before and transformed it into a house.

Sixten explored with his project, what would happen if you change public space and repurpose it. He told me, that one of the biggest achievements was that the house became a meeting point in the city. It was recognised and well-known. The work was taken down by local authorities in 2018 and replaced with two park benches and a tree.
Sixten gave me the advice to make my project as simple as possible and not worry about the material or appearance. He helped me understand that installations in public spaces are always experiments and therefore they don’t have to be perfectly designed. They might end up repurposed and used in different ways than intended. I should rather think about social functions instead of visual forms.

According to the broken windows theory, which says that if something is a little bit broken it states a visible sign of anti-social behaviour and might invite other people to break it more. So keeping the design simple might even have even more benefits.

The list of setbacks began to grow bigger and bigger during this project. One of them was that I needed to move during the project, away from Berlin, the city where I intended to place it. Another problem was that I had been working on a community project during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the next lockdown was just proposed by the government. However, the biggest problem I faced was gathering proper information on legal matters and permission in public spaces.

Here I was, with a utopian idea for the people, limited by locality issues, legal matters, a pandemic, authorities, rules and order. Trying to create a collaborative project for the city, while being separated from my classmates, without a woodworking space or tools.

I was not eager to let the idea go and was way too deep into research about public spaces and community building. I tried to reach out to the bureaucratic apparatus for public spaces but I could not find any real person who would be responsible for my matters or had the power to help me out somehow. I had been writing emails and trying to find telephone numbers or reach a person to talk to directly.

What if I could find a way to sneak around all the restrictions, regulations, rules, laws and bureaucratic phases that had brought me nowhere so far? The only feasible options left were to find some kind of loophole, do it without any permission and hope for the best.

I kept on thinking and the solution I found was the most obvious one. The most significant thing about a car is that it has wheels and can move. So if I work with wheels and can move it around, it would become a loophole and from my point of view has the eligibility to be in a parking lot.

Luckily, I remembered a project from one of my favourite architects from Germany, Van Bo Le-Mentzel. He is the inventor of the “one Square Metre House” and the “TinyU”, a university that builds tiny houses, and was part of the Bauhaus Campus Berlin. I remembered seeing these tiny houses placed on officially registered car trailers. This gave me and my idea confirmation. I would not have an officially registered car trailer, but I would have something pretty close to that.

The next step in the design process was to figure out how it should look. What kind of furniture would be necessary? And what kind of material would be needed? I wanted to create a real-size prototype. Which can be tested by real people, with real needs and their own opinions.
WHAT IF ...
Exploring Implementation Challenges

I made a quick survey and asked about 40 people from different backgrounds and different places in Germany. The only criterion was that these were people who lived in an apartment. The subject group I interviewed were in the age of 5 to 70 years old and the main question was what they would like to do outside. What do they need space for? The outcome was not much of a surprise. Answers like more places to rest and sit. Sitting possibilities can be moved and arranged so people can find their formations to talk or play with each other. More places in the sun. Places to have lunch. Tables to play games or to draw. More Parks, more green areas, more dog areas. Comfortable sitting opportunities. It made me happy to see that I was on the right path with my observations and research, and the people I interviewed were confirming it.

As I mentioned before, for my idea it needed to be a multifunctional furniture set, because it was very important to me to test as many opportunities as possible. In my imagination, there was the need to offer a place to lie down, so at least one side needed to be big enough that a person could lie down there. A table was essential, and it needed to have enough sitting opportunities so that people could play, dine or drink around it. I mentioned a bar-like situation, so it needed to have some kind of bar table or something like a shelf to lean on or to place a drink. It would need some kind of place to hang or stand things on, to exhibit. It ought to be simple to understand and user-friendly. Furthermore, it should be inviting. It needs to be on wheels, and it should somehow visualise the dimension of the parking lot.

I made some sketches and decided to make it very simple, as Sixten advised me to. Through a friend, I found a woodworking studio and some to help me to construct. My basic woodworking skills needed help with statics and stability of the construction. The object should be strong enough that people could sit in it, but light enough to be moved. This project is more about researching, testing and experiencing, so I decided to work with squared timber from spruce for constructing the framework. For the shelves and the sitting opportunities, I would work with glued wood boards from spruce.

To connect the different parts I used a threaded rod and nuts, and big metal washers for aesthetic reasons. The multifunctionality issue was solved through basic metal hinges, to make the furniture collapsible and create the possibility to interact with the object. To make use of it the way it is needed to perform user-friendliness, in order
to make people play around with it. The woodworking space was available for only one week to me and I had to be very efficient and fast. I received some advice, but most of the work needed to be done by myself in a week.

As mentioned above, the final object or prototype needed to have some sort of wheels. This was especially important because I did not want to get into any trouble with the authorities. This tiny little loophole was necessary to keep on going. If I can move it around, it has the authentication to stand in a parking lot if the fees are paid. Also, I could move it somewhere else if a situation comes up, such that someone feels offended or disturbed by it. So to be able to push or pull the construction, I used four heavy-duty transport castors with safety breaks.

It was very important to me to show the three-dimensionality of the parking lot and it could be created through height so that it would be possible to stand and walk in it. Since the object needed to be transported and reinstalled again, it needed to fit into my car. So the measurements for the individual parts needed to be a maximum of 2,50 m to fit inside the car. I wanted the object to be moveable and therefore it was necessary to think about the turning radius to make sure that it would be possible to move it into a parking lot, even when it's tight and between cars.

The final measurements of the object turned out to be 186 cm wide, 250 cm long and 216 cm high. On the longest side, it is equipped with a shelf that is 200 cm by 20 cm and a bench in the size of 200 cm by 30 cm. On the opposite side, it is equipped with a bigger bench for reclining, which has the size of 200 cm by 40 cm, as well as ropes for the possibility to exhibit or hang things. The table is 110 cm long, 40 cm wide and 91 cm high.

The furniture parts of the object are foldable through hinges, and a simple but functional system of a hole and some rope can tie down the remaining loose parts. I left the wood untreated but sanded it, so it would have a presentable look and texture, and so that it would feel nice and no one could hurt themselves by touching raw wood and getting splinters.
Construction close-up. All Pictures by Ekaterina Feil.
Luckily, it was possible to build the object in one week, in a woodworking studio of a friend in Dessau-Rosslau. I intended to drive to Berlin, around 130 km away, install the work there and activate the participatory design process. Here, I could actively engage with people and have one-to-one conversations. I could see their reactions, interview people and maybe even record the interactions if they would give their consent to that. I could document the story of the object, the experiences and opinions and write about the outcome.

But through the several delays, there was not enough time for that anymore. So I had to change my plans and decided to install it where I built it. It would allow me to test it in a smaller context, in a town and not a city. It could be interesting to compare the reactions later on and it might be nice to bring some unusual interactions to a small town. I was sure, that it would have been easier to gather information for documentation in Berlin due to livelier streets and more people. In the end, this setback became a good occasion, although a challenge, to push the possibility of interactions in a smaller urban area, with its more fixed modes of relations.

Taking the object down again into its pieces after it was built inside the woodworking studio took me about 2 hours. Putting it back together took me about 4 hours. To be honest, I did not expect it to be so time-intensive, but luckily I got some help from a friend to set it up. For future iterations, I would redesign it so that this process is faster and easier.

I chose the popular and normally lively area around the original Bauhaus building. There was no strict lockdown at that time in May 2021, but the infection rates were still high and even though the weather was nice and friendly again, people were still acting cautiously and responsibly. The streets were still comparatively quiet and empty and we acted responsibly by wearing a mask throughout the whole process.

The buses with tourists were missing and the pedestrians, which are usually a mix of inhabitants, design students, and tourists, were minimalized. But it was still possible to gather information, opinions and reactions.
Pictures by Ekaterina Feil.
public engagement

Insights from Field Testing

After overcoming various challenges and adapting my plans, the prototype was finally installed in a parking lot in Dessau-Rosslau. Despite the unforeseen changes, the engagement with the prototype provided valuable insights and information that aligned with my project's goals.

Passersby, intrigued by the unconventional presence of the prototype, approached it with curiosity. Their questions and interactions added depth to my understanding of the project's impact and potential. The most common questions posed by individuals were:

"What is that?"
"Why is it in a parking lot?"
"Why is it on wheels?"
"What is it for?"

These inquiries highlighted the need for clear communication about the purpose and intention behind the installation. The questions I posed to the public aimed to gauge their perceptions and reactions:

"Do you think it is needed?"
"Would you use it?"
"What do you like about it the most?"

The responses I received provided valuable insights into how people perceived the prototype and its potential benefits. It was encouraging to find that the prototype resonated in urban settings. This indicated that the concept was adaptable and relevant across different urban contexts.

While I had initially envisioned the project's impact primarily within the bustling city of Berlin, the positive responses in a smaller town confirmed the universality of the concept. The prototype's presence sparked conversations and interactions that might not have occurred otherwise.

The experience also highlighted two significant lessons:

Development of New Public Space Norms: Engaging with the prototype underscored the need for new guidelines and norms for the use of public spaces. The prototype prompted questions about its presence and purpose, revealing that the established norms for public spaces do not necessarily accommodate unconventional interventions. This realization emphasized the importance of creating a space for experimentation and reimagining urban environments.

Time as a Catalyst for Change: The engagement process demonstrated that change in public space usage takes time. While the prototype's presence elicited curiosity and positive responses, it also revealed the need for a gradual shift in mindset. The questions posed by individuals indicated a curiosity about the project's purpose and highlighted the potential for a transformation in how people perceive and utilize urban spaces.

In conclusion, the engagement phase provided valuable insights that will guide my project's further development. The prototype's impact exceeded geographical boundaries, sparking conversations and interactions that contributed to the project's evolution. The questions raised by both the public and myself offered a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in reimagining public spaces. The lessons learned will serve as a foundation for refining the project's goals.
Reflecting on Feedback and Shaping the Future

The feedback received provided valuable insights that influenced the direction of the project. The multifunctional furniture set sparked positive reactions and shed light on various aspects of public space usage.

Positive Reception of the Table: The most prominent element of the prototype that resonated with people was the table. The concept of having an outdoor table for various activities such as dining, working, and playing card games was widely appreciated. This response highlighted the importance of creating functional and versatile public spaces that cater to people's diverse needs.

Surprising Willingness to Sacrifice Parking Space: The unexpected willingness of car owners to sacrifice parking spaces for communal outdoor spaces underscored a growing awareness of the potential for positive change. The realization that parking lots occupy significant portions of urban areas prompted introspection and a desire for more meaningful uses of space.

Barriers to Object Mobility: The prototype's mobility feature did not resonate as expected due to ingrained societal norms. People's hesitance to move the object revealed the deeply rooted respect for what is perceived as private property in public spaces. This insight highlighted the need for a shift in perspective and a recalibration of societal norms to accommodate more flexible uses of urban elements.

Visualizing Three-Dimensional Space: The prototype's height served as a powerful tool for visualizing space, creating a dynamic contrast to the usual horizontal layout of public spaces. The experience of standing and walking through the object gave individuals a tangible sense of dimension and space, prompting new perspectives on urban environments.

"Every Person's Right" for the City: The journey of this project culminated in the idea of establishing "every person's right" for the city. Inspired by concepts like "everyman's right" that grant access to nature, the project envisions a set of principles that guide respectful and shared use of urban spaces. These principles encompass the idea of creating inclusive, inviting, and open spaces that encourage responsible behavior, sharing, and mutual respect.

The Path Forward: The feedback and insights gained from engaging the public shaped a new vision for the project's future. The journey revealed the complexities of reshaping public space perceptions and highlighted the need for incremental change. It underlined the importance of fostering civil disobedience in the face of rigid urban systems that hinder open interactions.

As the project continues, it will draw inspiration from these insights to advocate for the development of "every person's right" in urban contexts. This approach will involve collaborating with communities, local authorities, and stakeholders to reshape the narrative surrounding public spaces. By addressing barriers, fostering understanding, and promoting the values of sharing and co-creation, the project
aims to catalyze positive transformations in the way cities are perceived and utilized.

Urban rules could be the following:

1. Do not disturb others. Do not be noisy or play music too loud after 10 pm.
2. Do not break anything on purpose.
3. Leave the place the way you would like to find it and take your trash to the trash bin.
4. Do not occupy for too long and stay only for some hours.
5. Share the place and invite others.

Ultimately, the project represents a journey of discovery, engagement, and transformation, where the multifunctional furniture set acted as a catalyst for meaningful conversations and reflections on the shared spaces that define our urban lives.

One direct way to address all of these issues is to limit or remove cars and replace them with alternative solutions. In my project, constructing a mobile, multi-functional outdoor "room" proved to be a valuable experiment in exploring the potential transformation of this space. Through my design research, direct interactions, and conversations with people, I observed a lack of awareness and fundamental understanding that leads to the mere acceptance of design circumstances in public areas. The concept of having the right to the city and actively reshaping public spaces is poor.

There's a significant need to educate and rejuvenate the public imagination from the dominance of modernist city designs and car-centric infrastructure. I hope that this participatory and transitional design experiment can contribute to driving this shift forward, and I anticipate that the project's outcomes will inspire more open concepts of urban spaces. It could be intriguing for authorities to realize that people tend to act more responsibly and conscientiously with objects than often assumed.

My vision for the future encompasses greener and pedestrian-friendly cities, characterized by enhanced biodiversity, safer streets, and cleaner air. Fortunately, this aligns with the objectives of initiatives like the New European Bauhaus, which also aims to promote environmentally friendly and people-centric cities across Europe. This initiative is a testament that change is already in motion. In various cities,
including Berlin, there’s a growing trend towards reduced traffic areas and streets dedicated solely to pedestrians and cyclists.

Understanding the purpose of this project might be challenging; it ultimately falls between a guerrilla-style short-term installation and a gray area – not illegal, yet without official permits or long-term objectives. It serves as a three-dimensional tool to initiate conversations, a stepping stone for further endeavors, and a simple experiment. This unconventional object bears a symbolic character – a visualization of space and an invitation to contemplate and formulate individual opinions.

Reflecting on the project, I would approach many aspects differently. The prototype was crucial for visualization but lacked sustainability. Installing it was arduous, and regrettably, it broke after multiple re-installations. Filming and recording people in public spaces also posed challenges; engagement was hindered, and securing permissions proved difficult. People were more candid when the camera wasn’t present, enabling me to gather more insights through conversations and note-taking than through filmed interviews.

The most noteworthy lessons emerged from the dialogues I fostered:

* Nine out of ten individuals appreciated the concept of comfortable seating alongside the table. Introducing more outdoor tables in urban areas for dining, working, and socializing would be a valuable addition.

* Seven out of ten participants admired the flexibility and adaptability of the furniture to their needs. Integrating such versatility into public spaces, even though it seems utopian, could offer more possibilities and enhance people’s freedom in utilizing these spaces.

* Five out of ten respondents expressed negative surprise regarding the substantial space occupied by cars. While heightened awareness was achieved, it remains a gradual process, as five out of ten respondents still held a strong attachment to their car’s parking space.

In my view, my project represents a modest contribution to driving this paradigm shift in a specific location where residents could experience and envision alternatives to the norm. It prompts contemplation about the use of public spaces, which often remain overlooked or taken for granted. In my perspective, kindness towards people, plants, and other species is simple and inexpensive. Essential to this notion is having space, the freedom to utilize it, and time. Co-creation is a continuous and natural process that requires time to flourish.

Despite the existence of artistic interventions in parking spaces by designers, the challenge of reclaiming cities for the people persists. I conclude my thesis with the words of Buckminster Fuller, underscoring the unique knowledge I’ve accumulated within the realm of sustainability, social interactions, and design for change: “The opposite of design is chaos.”* Perhaps more chaos is what’s needed in the context of this work.

Thank you.
references


image references:


Parking house by Sixten Sanne. Picture provided by Sixten Sanne.