

Instruments for sustainable urban development in Eastern Germany – the example of the “Wächterhäuser” (warden houses) in Leipzig

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1 ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of the GDR, Leipzig, a middle-sized city in Saxony, is characterised by a dualistic process: on the one hand the reconstruction of around 80 per cent of its old dwelling houses. On the other hand the loss of more than 100 000 inhabitants since 1989. Although the number of inhabitants has increased since 2001, Leipzig still had around 38 000 empty dwellings in 2008¹. Economic and demographic forecasts predict that it would need several decades to reconstruct and use all these empty buildings.

Especially the handling of around 2 500 buildings of the Gründerzeit is an urgent issue for the city. These dwelling houses are often located at central main roads and therefore important for the urban structure. But due to their unattractive location they often remain empty which leads to a constant decay. This has negative consequences for the image and infrastructure of the surrounding neighbourhood and city quarters (Heck and Will 2007 p. 24-25).

One self-governed instrument which was developed against this urban deterioration is the concept of the so called „Wächterhäuser“(warden houses). The principle of this instrument is the preservation of houses through usage.

On the one hand, the “wardens” receive a house for little money, which they can shape following their needs and ideas. On the other hand they only have to pay the running costs and are responsible for keeping the house in good condition and for removing damages. Especially social, cultural, and commercial users, who exercise a certain appeal on the quarter, are potential wardens².

The paper asks which type of users can be found, whether this instrument for urban development is a sustainable self-governance strategy for a city like Leipzig. And it asks whether this concept is also fruitful for other contexts.

2 INTRODUCING THE CONTEXT

2.1 Demographic- and Urban Development in Leipzig since 1989

Since the collapse of the GDR, Leipzig is characterised by a deep demographic transformation. The following table gives an overview of the demographic development of Leipzig since 1989 until 2008, in relation to the live birthrate and the number of people moving in and out of Leipzig.

	1989	1994	1999	2004	2006	2008 ³
Inhabitants	530 010	481 121	489 532	498 491	506 578	515 469
Live birthrate	5 961	2 531	3 582	4 274	4 410	5 096
People moving in	11 390	13 097	21 015	23 306	23 969	25 640
People moving out	27 191	19 102	20 700	21 463	19 030	20 419

Source: Land Statistical Office, Department for Statistics and Elections Leipzig

After a harsh decrease of inhabitants, due to unemployment, suburbanisation, and decreasing birth rates, the number of inhabitants has increased since 2001 and has reached around 515 469 by the end of 2008 (Stadt-Leipzig 2009d p. 3). At the level of urban development, Leipzig faces the problem of a high vacancy rate – in 2008 Leipzig had around 38 000 empty dwellings⁴. Especially the handling of around 2 500 buildings of the Gründerzeit is an urgent issue for the city. These dwelling houses are often located at central main roads and are important for the urban structure. Due to their unattractive location they often remain empty which

¹ LVZ article: „Weniger Wohnungen stehen leer“, 18.02.2010, p. 17.

² See http://www.haushalten.org/de/waechterhaeuser_modell.asp, last visited: 11.12.2009.

³ In 2009 the number of inhabitants for the city of Leipzig reached 519 300, LVZ article: „Leipzig wächst gegen den Trend“, 17.03.2010, p. 21.

⁴ LVZ article: „Weniger Wohnungen stehen leer“, 18.02.2010, p. 17.

leads to a constant decay. One of the main problems the city faces is the fact that most of these empty Gründerzeit buildings are private property and the city does not have the financial resources to buy all these houses (Heck and Will 2007 p. 27).

Generally speaking Leipzig is marked by two developments:

First, the urban landscape of Leipzig is characterised by parallel shrinking, especially in western and eastern quarters, and growth, especially in the south of Leipzig (Heck 2005 p. 8-9). Especially the shrinking process has implications for almost every field of the city, concerning urban structure, functioning neighbourhoods, or social and cultural offers. The city has identified the problem and adapted several instruments for the revitalisation of empty areas and dwellings. One example are programs like URBAN II or EFRE with different funding focus. The aim of these programs is the development of disadvantaged city quarters through different instruments like urban rebuilding or interim usage (Heck 2005 p. 10).

Second, the predictions for the urban development of Leipzig are marked by a demographic obsolescence of its inhabitants.

Therefore it is necessary to develop further innovative ideas in order to cope with the problems that result from this ongoing demographic and urban transformation process (Heck and Will 2007 p. 24-26).

2.2 Self-governance strategy: HausHalten e.V.

An example for such an innovative idea is the private association HausHalten e.V. Since October 2004 HausHalten e.V. is concerned with the activation of empty (Gründerzeit) dwellings in Leipzig. The association functions as mediator between the owners, the potential wardens (users) of the houses, and the City administration. The latter has a promoting role in this project - the Department for Urban Regeneration provides the start-up financing (HafenCity 2008 p. 44).

An important precondition for the realisation of the warden house concept was the implementation of a regulation in 1999 that allows the temporary public use of empty private properties. Hereby the building law remains legal and HausHalten e.V. receives the usage right for five years. After this period the property owners shall negotiate directly with the wardens about the further usage of their houses (Heck and Will 2007 p. 29).

The strategy of HausHalten e.V. can be put in a simple phrase: preservation through usage. The association searches for suitable wardens who are willing to preserve a house even under difficult conditions (Heck 2005 p. 47). But the association is not only seeking for a simple preservation; it wants to reach a cultural, unconventional, and innovative usage of the houses because it wants to increase the local, national, and international attention, attract new investors and by that revitalise city quarters. The stabilisation of structural disadvantaged city quarters shall be realised through usage (Heck 2005 p. 41-47).

The advantages of the warden house project are amongst others the compatibility with the financial problems of the city and the attractiveness for the owners and wardens of the houses. The owners are responsible to provide functioning electronic and water connections and the restorage of the buildings for usage. Here, public fundings are available. The wardens receive information from HausHalten e.V. and the tools they need for the restoration of the houses. Additionally the wardens pay a membershipfee which is used for the activation of other empty houses. And they sign a contract with the association about their engagement in the restorage and usage of the house. These contracts present a commitment of the wardens and secure the alienability of the concept into other contexts (HafenCity 2008 p. 44-45).

HausHalten e.V. pursues different goals with its warden house project: It wants to safe cultural monuments (Gründerzeit houses), advise the owners of the houses, find users who are willing to keep the houses in condition, revitalise city quarters through social and cultural offers, retrieve from the contracts between the owners and the wardens, so that both sides can contract directly, promote employment through integration of unemployed in the process of restoration of the houses, and spread their concept in other municipalities with similar problems like Leipzig (Heck, Pantzer et al. 2006 p. 36).

Although HausHalten e.V. is successful - until now they take care of about thirteen warden houses in Leipzig and they have more wardens than houses - the project cannot be continued abundantly due to the difficult financial situation of the municipality and the strict obligations for the signing of the contracts. That is why

self-governance strategies like this have to be strengthened and promoted in this field (Heck and Will 2007 p. 34).

3 THE WARDENS

HausHalten e.V. is looking for wardens that will exert positive effects on the quarter of the warden houses. Therefore especially social and cultural agents are potential wardens, because with their projects and initiatives they help to revitalise disadvantaged quarters and integrate the citizens of the quarters (Heck, Pantzer et al. 2006 p. 36). The usage of the houses for living is not intended because then HausHalten e.V. would turn into a competitor on the housing market of Leipzig.

At the moment Leipzig has thirteen warden houses; the (potential) wardens are diverse, among them are artists, entrepreneurs (start-ups), and associations with a social focus (Friemel 2009 p. 98-99). In 2009 HausHalten e.V. had 700 potential wardens. Due to this huge interest, the potential wardens have to present a concept for the usage of a house⁵.

Below, three examples of warden houses and their wardens are presented:

⁵ <http://www.haushalten.org/>, last visited: 4th February 2010.

Warden house	Wardens	Profile
Lützner Str. 30 (western quarter)	- project- and audiogallery “A and V”	- a platform for exhibitions; the program is organised by graduates of the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig and University Hildesheim; they show photographs, videos, drawings, and sculptures
	- two studios for artists	- studio Kathrin von Ow - studio Windisch/Schimkat/Weber
	- copy- and printing service	- first start-up in a warden house
	- warden community	- provides the wardens with information and tools for the restoration
	- cultural platform “Purpur”	- cultural platform and open stage for different theatre events
Kuhnturmstr. 4 (western quarter): first released warden house – the wardens have signed directly a contract with the owner)	- KUHTURM	- room for exhibitions with focus on media art
	- studios for students of the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig	
	- studio Winterhagen/Schinkel/Kowalski	- three students of the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig founded this studio
	- social association	- self-initiative from migrants from eastern Europe, they offer language courses and cultural events
Eisenbahnstr. 109 (eastern quarter)	- Leipzig office of network operator MAXX on Air	
	- DSP – democracy and social work	- association provides people with food, books, clothes, and household stuff, legal advices; people can use the library, participate in cultural events and advanced training courses
	- gallery for digital culture e.V.	- gallery for digital gallery and installations; platform for exhibitions, events from the digital world (blog-lounges, spam-slams), and workshops
	- warden community	- participates in/organises events in the quarter

Source: http://www.haushalten.org/de/realisierte_objekte.asp (last visited: 21th February 2009)

The warden houses are not only seeking for start-ups or entrepreneurs from cultural, creative, or social fields. In the process of the restoration of the warden houses, HausHalten e.V. also integrates long-term unemployed who are living in the quarters in order to intensify the identification with their quarter and give

them the possibility to be active participants in the process of revitalising their neighbourhood (HafenCity 2008 p. 45).

4 OPEN QUESTIONS

The warden house project of HausHalten e.V. presents a self-governed strategy from below and deals with the revitalisation of disadvantaged quarters in Leipzig. The private association took over responsibility for an existing urban and social problem. The city of Leipzig depends on self-governed initiatives mainly due to financial problems. At the same time the City administration promotes the project when it comes to the start-up finance.

Still, two questions remain: Is the instrument of the warden houses a sustainable self-governance strategy for a city like Leipzig or is it a convenient way for the City administration to shuffle off responsibility? And is this concept transferable into other municipalities?

4.1 Warden houses – sustainable self-governance strategy?

Like already mentioned above, the municipality Leipzig cannot restore all empty Gründerzeit buildings due to financial shortages. Therefore HausHalten e.V. plays a decisive role for the revitalisation of these buildings and the surrounding quarters. In order to realise their plan the association benefits from several structural decisions: in 1999 a regulation was implemented that allows the temporary public usage of unused private properties. Hereby the building law remains legal (Heck and Will 2007 p. 29). Furthermore the wardens sign a contract with the association about their engagement in the restorage of the house. These contracts present a commitment of the wardens and secure the alienability of the concept into other contexts (HafenCity 2008 p. 44-45). And owners can rely on public funds in order to fulfil their duty to supply water and electronic connections and a basic restoration.

Karsten Gerken from the Leipzig Department for Urban Regeneration describes the warden house project as a realistic economic solution for social and urban decay and derotation. The increased attractiveness of city quarters by restored Gründerzeit building might, in the long term, attract new investors and bring capital to the city⁶.

The warden house idea is under further development: future plans include a program for owner-occupiers. Here, interested individuals form a building owners group and restore together Gründerzeit buildings and use them jointly⁷.

All these facts show that the association has developed a sustainable strategy in order to cope with present and future problems of urban spaces, in relation to specific developments like the demographic shrinkage, vacancy, and municipalities with less money for social and urban issues. HausHalten e.V. integrates different issues into its project: it is not only concerned with a simple restoration of empty and decayed buildings, with its concept HausHalten e.V. also tries to overcome social and cultural deficits – it integrates long-term unemployed and neighbours of the warden houses, offers graduates and other entrepreneurs cheap space and development opportunities and gives mainly social associations the chance to improve the coexistence of people living in disadvantaged quarters with high unemployment, and vacancy.

Especially when municipalities and states retreat more from social, cultural, and urban issues, like it is happening in the recent years, self-governed strategies will become even more important. The active participation of private associations and groups is an important instrument to overcome social and cultural divides – the warden house project is a good example for this concern.

4.2 Transferability into other cities?

Several examples show that the idea of the warden houses from Leipzig has become a role model for other cities with similar demographic and urban problems. Warden houses have opened in other Eastern German cities like Görlitz, Dresden, Halle, and Chemnitz; now also Western German municipalities like Bremerhaven and Wuppertal are interested in this idea.

⁶ http://www.haushalten.org/de/haushalten_pressearchiv.asp#2007, last visited: 3rd February 2010

⁷ <http://mephisto976.uni-leipzig.de/sendungen/direkt/beitrag/artikel/waechterhaeuser-ruine-oder-raum-fuer-ideen.html>, last visited: 3rd February 2010.

In order to advise other cities, HausHalten e.V. is funded by the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building, and Urban Development. The association advises other municipalities how to find new users for historical buildings in order to preserve these buildings.

5 CONCLUSION

In the middle of 2006, HausHalten e.V. made up a first balance of its project: it revealed that the basic restoration of the Gründerzeit buildings keeps them on a level for further preservation; the warden houses present new knots for identification of the people living in these quarters; networks are builded through the revitalisation of former stores in the warden houses by artistic projects and associations; by that, new residents move to these quarters (Heck, Pantzer et al. 2006 p. 37).

The financial shortages of the municipalities bring self-governed strategies like the warden house project into the focus of the City administration. HausHalten e.V. works closely together with the municipality in order to realise sustainable urban development in disadvantaged city quarters. Additionally the association is funded by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research in the frame of the project “Citizens initiate sustainability“. HausHalten e.V. is also engaged in cooperations with different educational providers in order to promote local employment (Heck, Pantzer et al. 2006 p. 37).

The association hopes that the further development of the warden house idea might lead to more engagement of citizens in their city and their active participation in the shaping of a city image. That would be an alternative to expensive sanitation or, even worse, demolition.

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