Beyond Best Practice
Re-valuing mindsets and re-imagining research models in urban transformation

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Abstract
Mobilizing the potentials of design-based research (thinking-through-making, reflection-in-action), "Beyond Best Practice" takes aim at accepted value-systems and conventional working methods, to advance more integrative urban design and planning practice. At base, ours is a methodological inquiry with pragmatic intent. Within the context of urban transformation processes, we want to understand and shape *how collaborative thinking happens*. We are interested in how people *make ideas* and *how ideas re-make urban landscapes.*

In applied research terms, we might describe our project thus: "Beyond Best Practice" outlines and tests an iterative, transdisciplinary and integrative knowledge creation process useful to planners and designers doing sustainable urban development projects. This process matters because sustainable urban transformation poses what Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber call a "wicked problem" (1973); and to sustainably transform todays' complex urbanscapes, first identified by Francois Ascher (1995) and Thomas Sieverts (1997), requires moving beyond modernist-inflected, sectorial planning models, as these neither deliver integrated results nor address qualitative concerns.

In procedural terms, our project delineates a testing ground for new modes of knowledge creation. It takes up the practical question of how globally recognized "best practice models" get applied in always local urban harbour transformation settings. Our work interjects a site-specific, qualitative worldview into the predominantly quantitative mindset of sustainable urban development actors. We undertake experiments in and on process, and of "real" planning projects, using the communicative tool of critical conversation in a collaborative think-tank.

In critical thinking terms, we harbor diverse motives with respect to accepted research practices within the academy, and beyond: To expose overlooked value systems and methodological frameworks. To sketch out a new conceptual horizon for 21st century planning activities. To challenge the hegemony of "scientistic" perspectives in discourse associated with "sustainable" planning theory and practice. To test the risk-threshold of institutionalized research practice by interrogating value-systems and metrics that sanction "disciplined" knowledge-creation activities. To explore where inquiries that "don't fit in"

to normative research categories or established academic fields might belong. To replace stale "real world vs. academy"/ "theory vs. praxis" debates with forward looking dialogue.

With this project we therefore propose an alternative research model based not on collection, analysis, discussion and conclusions of already acknowledged matters-of-fact, but on the observation, labelling, discussion and elaborating on matters-of-concern (Latour 2008) arising from the communicative activities of our networking actions. To formulate the not-yet-discussed, to outline the not-yet-outlined, to pre-figure what is going to be processed within the research work, to invite and support dialogue-in-becoming, between different mindsets, we envision the process as a "goldwashing", fostering an ability to detect and contextualize new grains of value; ideas, innovations, visions and techniques being formulated in conversations and collaborations. We embrace iterative work modes with learning loops, gradually bringing in all aspects and interests, widening vocabulary, sharpening concepts and clarifying thinking. Such research work would contribute to optimising place-based knowledge creation processes (to meet local site-specific goals) and to formulating general sustainable urban development goals in a new ways (to make legible the process and its conversational components).

Keywords: urban transformation, best practice, design thinking, critical conversation

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