

## Sabine Voggenreiter: Regenerating the Urban

Interview by Katrin Bohn conducted in August 2012

For "Second Nature Urban Agriculture. Designing Productive Cities"  
by Katrin Bohn and André Viljoen

### When planning the DQE work in Köln-Ehrenfeld, why did you choose Urban Agriculture as strategic starting point?

When we started planning the DQE work in Köln-Ehrenfeld, we decided to not just set individual „creative“ topics but take a wider approach of different ways to be involved in the organization of everyday life in neighbourhoods and community driven processes.

*DQE – Design Quartier Ehrenfeld* – aims at the development of a creative urban district in Cologne. The project is the winner of the competition *Create.NRW*, offered by the North Rhine-Westphalia Department of Trade and Industry on behalf of the European Union. Our project is exploring strategic concepts for structuring the Ehrenfeld district spatially and conceptually – and will successively transform the former “working-class neighbourhood” into a creative urban space in Ehrenfeld and a centre for creatives. The awareness that cities and economies (can) grow like biological organisms, for example in a garden, forms the central motivation for our project which brings new/alternative categories into play such as: urban design, sustainability, spatial qualities, links to the location’s history, regional economies, new living and working environments, neighbourhood, ethics of economies (and of politics) and the “nature” of growth.

We assume that small-scale and sensitive urban and socially interactive planning of the “city” will help it survive on a long-term basis and (re-) generate it, and that creative micro-economies are the development engines for a European city to flourish on a sustainable basis. It is unique that a cultural scientist like me (joined by an urban practitioner) was enabled to do research by practice in realising such a project. I think this is related to the fact that urban planning is confronted with new topics that the conventional method of the master plan could no longer address. There is a new spatial interest and new spatial need, and new questions or challenges are set, like creating identity, urbanity and public urban space and altogether building a community. Our work also reflects and evaluates the production of knowledge and creative practice.

So, on the one side, we created cultural events and programs in collaboration with the urban creatives. There is a pool of approximative 600 creatives who want to be part of the process. Thus we started *Design Parcours Ehrenfeld* with about 79 venues all over Ehrenfeld and with about 60.000 visitors during one week, *Pop Design Festival (pdf)*, an event format about the topics of pop and design culture and a decentralised fashion festival with do-it-yourself happenings and catwalks.

On the other hand, we started a movement we called “Urbane Agrikultur Ehrenfeld” with a workshop and several happenings in the context of *plan10* which allowed us to multiply energies and create synergies by interlocking different arts events.

*plan* is a biennial decentralised exhibition in Cologne, which addresses the interplay of architecture, city and the arts. Not only in Germany has the analysis – as well as the interpretation and evaluation – of architecture and city, of urban and suburban spaces undergone such an enormous change in the past fifteen years. The near-artistic approaches taken by city planners and architects on the one hand, and the great interest artists and cultural theorists have in these topics on the other hand have brought about numerous (primarily temporary) projects with a playful, symbolic and metaphoric – but also very precise, pragmatic or even sociopolitical – orientation. As diverse as the respective positions and intentions may be, all share a common interest in bringing about a change in perception: in seeing situations and places, spaces and areas within the architectonic/urban structural context in a different way and in drawing productive conclusions. And the “best way” to create sensibility and

awareness in this regard is still the artistic approach – with the corresponding strategies and methods.

For *Urbane Agrikultur Ehrenfeld* this meant that the *plan10* events were followed by a workshop program *Ehrenfelder Frühling* in 2011 while we opened our first “urban garden” in Ehrenfeld in the very neighbourhood of DQE head quarter and on a post-industrial brownfield site: the *Obsthain Grüner Weg*.

**The DQE project aims to establish a 'creative' quarter in Ehrenfeld. How do you think Urban Agriculture helps to this aim?**

The centre for urban agriculture initiative in Ehrenfeld is the *Obsthain Grüner Weg*, a fruit orchard realised as a co-operation project between DQE and the local housing company *GAG Immobilien AG*<sup>1</sup>. This mobile community garden with its 30 apple and pear trees, consisting of old varieties for the most part, opened in May 2011. Since then, it has developed into a location for leisure activities, learning and production in which gardening enthusiasts from Ehrenfeld raise a very broad variety of edibles, plant varieties of fruit and vegetables that have grown rare and receive instruction in herbology and even beekeeping. The project is now home to some 130 different useful plants. The plot of ground on which the garden is located belongs to GAG and is construction land for the *Grüner Weg Wohngebiet*, a residential estate now under construction, where in future the open spaces will be planted with these very trees. As building progresses, the vegetation of the fruit orchard that currently is contained in mobile plant containers will thus migrate, little by little, to its final location. So it will ultimately become a community garden for the new residents living here: overall, an extraordinary project in new housing construction in which the first thing to develop, before all else, is a garden.

In projects of this nature, an important factor, in addition to the actual sources of agricultural experience and knowledge, are the social networks that develop within the respective neighbourhood and beyond – the food growing garden as a space in which to relax, an educational entity, and a meeting place for groups of all ages. Co-operation contacts with other community gardens are also important in this regard. These meant for us, amongst others, a workshop held in March 2012 with the initiators of the *Prinzessinnengärten* in Berlin<sup>2</sup>: working from the successful concept as practised in Berlin, scenarios were drawn up for the planning and development of such community gardens based on a location analysis. This provided models or check lists for the three projects in Cologne: *NeuLand*, *Pflanzstelle* and *Obsthain Grüner Weg*<sup>3</sup>. After two years, our project presented itself in detail to all interested individuals during *plan12*: with the video documentation *Urbane Agrikultur und Produktive Stadtlandschaften in Köln-Ehrenfeld [Urban Agriculture and Productive Urban Landscapes in Köln-Ehrenfeld]* by Sybille Petrausch, a digital slide show, a presentation in the *Obsthain Grüner Weg* publication series, a garden meeting held on 22 and 24 September 2012, an exhibition with design studies on productive urban landscapes in Köln-Ehrenfeld by students of the *Technical University Berlin*, and a lecture on this topic by their professor Katrin Bohn during the major autumn festival day on 23 September, where guests could also taste the first honey from the fruit orchard on Grüner Weg.

The urban agriculture movement is alive and growing in Köln-Ehrenfeld too...

**I have just seen a short film on the DQE website about the project *Urbane Agrikultur in Köln-Ehrenfeld*. In the film it is stated that '*participation necessitates reception*'. This seems very close to one of our *CPUL City Actions*, the one we call '*Visualising Consequences*'. Could you please expand on such strategies from the DQE point of view?**

If we wish to be able to change and further develop our cities with the requisite imagination and creativity, new forms of observation must arise from time to time. In this sense, Katrin Bohn of Bohn&Viljoen Architects has been working with the notion of

the 'productive urban landscape' for years. She attempts to elevate urban gardening and the practice of agriculture to an urban-structural dimension, and to establish these as an overall design approach with sweeping positive effects for urban life. A practical manifestation of theoretical reflections such as these is also the communal fruit orchard *Obsthain Grüner Weg*, described above. The idea for this project was the result of the workshop entitled *Ehrenfeld, was isst du? [Ehrenfeld, what are you eating?]*, which Bohn organised together with landscape architect Dirk Melzer during *plan10*. In another workshop in 2011, a concept was developed with committed residents of the neighbourhood that provides for a green layout of Ehrenfeld, accompanied by smaller and larger areas for agricultural use. An initial building block in the direction of planning and implementation is the *Karte der guten Gelegenheiten [Good Opportunities Map]* in which, along with fallow areas, "green paths" are also featured linking Ehrenfeld with the adjoining districts of the city. The discontinued rail freight routes of the former industrial location thereby offers the potential for creating a 'Low Line Linear Park' for pedestrians and cyclists. This could be supplemented with environmental-education offerings such as a community food centre. So far, we reached more than 700 people who took part in the actions and happenings like *Ehrenfeld, was isst Du?* or in the gardening workshops and open garden events.

As mentioned earlier, all which has been designed and implemented to date for *Obsthain Grüner Weg* could be seen on display during *plan12*, but, most importantly, another workshop was held with Katrin Bohn in which the next steps were jointly planned and launched: the realisation of three orchard "offshoots" in Ehrenfeld, and hence the decentralised extension of areas of self-sufficiency. Part of the work will consist of an analysis of the specific features of each individual area and in the preparation of a 'mini-transferability study'. The method used - 'spatial, geographical and organisational mapping' - will be developed further as the conceptual and planning work for the 'Low Line Linear Park' continues. The results of the workshop were shown as "work in progress" throughout the entire *plan12* week and publicly presented and discussed during an event with residents and expert critics.

*'Participation necessitates reception'.*

I guess successful reception also shows in the way ideas are being taken forward, expand, grow beyond our project. Now that *DQE* is drawing to a close, what will stay or continue?: The idea of the "offshoots" is being taken forward, amongst its sites is a triangle of open space studied in the last workshop and a seemingly rural brownfield site identified and mapped during an earlier workshop. The beekeepers' group at the *Obsthain* community garden has been contracted to run environmental education projects over the next months esp. with local children. The gardening group at the community garden is being portrayed in a small local TV-series. The fruit trees will be planted into their final locations in the housing development during next year. Together with the housing company *GAG*, we are now planning their '*Mietergärten*', housing-related residents' gardens starting with the set up of a gardeners' association. Along the road *Grüner Weg*, the first section of the *Low Line Park* will go into its 2-year trial phase starting 2013 and being supported by the City of Cologne, the local council of Ehrenfeld, the housing company *GAG* and the environmental charity *Klimakreis Köln...*

**Your work mostly involves the artistic professions and art practice in a purposefully wide sense. How or where do you see the role of artists in the creation, perception and dissemination of urban agriculture ideas?**

There is a close relation between creativity and green productivity in the city or in a neighbourhood: both processes are highly productive and both are community processes. Creative work awakes the approach to the productive work of food growing, as it means contemplation, togetherness, sharing knowledge and experiences, all of which are open source processes in creative communities and gardening communities. It also awakes the impetus of directly designing the own sphere of life and of planning processes in the city. Both envisage a responsible and democratic, bottom-up development within a community or the different communities of a quarter at the

(small) scale of a city neighbourhood: the interaction of different communities - creatives, immigrants, older residents - considering the endogenous urban progression of an entire neighbourhood in relation to the importance of a "good life" for everyone.

Within the urban agriculture strand of the *DQE* project, common actions are driven by common experiences. Its do-it-yourself productions are lead by the ideas of a new economy, alternative working structures, models of a new work and life ethic developed by informal learning in an informal community set-up.

'*Die Wahrheit ist immer konkret*' [*The truth is always precise*]<sup>4</sup>.

Although we are also part of the theoretical or abstract discussion about creative cities on the one hand and of social and political implementations of Urban Agriculture on the other, *DQE* are very much focussed on the special, real situation where we can work on experience and the development of images and models on the spot, simultaneously or dialectally. Envisioning is a necessity when deciding whether to start acting in reality and to be part of an acting community. To share a "vision" means first to work on common images. So, our experience is that common images are more convincing than logical talking. It is not only that we reach the creative communities in this way, but also, and even more so, the broad public and even the municipality - and we meet the '*Alltagskreativität*', the '*everyday creativity*' of the neighbourhood people.

### **Is there a future for Urban Agriculture? How do you imagine such a future for Köln-Ehrenfeld?**

The aim of the first *DQE* workshop *Ehrenfeld, was isst Du?* now is a fact: the greens of the social housing project *Grüner Weg* by housing company *GAG* will be an urban garden with apple trees, herbs and vegetables especially for the people living there, but also for the neighbourhood. The latest workshop *A scale of 1:3* showed ways of how to spread food producing community gardens within the neighbourhood of Ehrenfeld. There is now a strong movement of urban gardeners in the quarter. Last but not least, we developed the community driven project '*Low Line Linear Park*' with productive green along the former industrial rails.

And the future?:

The site *Grüner Weg Wohngebiet* is now seen as the starting point of an old railway track, which we would like to convert into a linear productive park towards subsistence of the community, into a demonstration project for the whole neighbourhood, and into part of the program to transform Ehrenfeld into a productive urban landscape. Both sites could share a community food centre which would aid networking and outreach and provide room for workshops for stakeholder capacity building. The development of foot and cycle paths on the *Low Line* would offer the inhabitants of Ehrenfeld a green and safe way, without much car contact, to the Cologne green belt (500m distance) and the *Stadtwald*, a 200 ha big park in the bordering quarter of Braunsfeld. Biomass, produced through the care of the green, and organic kitchen waste, could be used to produce energy for the housing development at *Grüner Weg*. A greenery and climate-action-plan for Ehrenfeld will be created, taking in consideration experiences of other pilot projects and reflection of the implementation processes. This plan will be established with community involvement and realized on already achieved *DQE* workshop results...

I hope that we implemented the future of Urban Agriculture in the heads of the inhabitants...

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1 *GAG Immobilien AG* is a Cologne-based housing association aiming to provide good and affordable accommodation especially to citizens on a lower budget. Germany has many similar housing companies.

2 for project details see: Nomadisch Grün gGmbH (2009) *Prinzessinnengärten*, Online: <<http://prinzessinnengarten.net>> (accessed 14.7.2012).

3 for project details see: Kölner NeuLand e.V. (2011) *Ein mobiler Gemeinschaftsgarten für Köln*, Online: <<http://www.neuland-koeln.de>> (accessed 30.9.2012).

und: Pflanzstelle: grenzenlos gärten e.V. (2011) *Soziokulturelle und urbane Landwirtschaft in Köln-Kalk*, Online: <<http://pflanzstelle.blogspot.eu>> (accessed 30.9.2012).

4 see: Lenin, W. I. (1905) in: *Zwei Taktiken der Sozialdemokratie in der demokratischen Revolution*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1961.