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New paths of participation

In 2001 Susanne Hofmann founded the „Die Baupiloten" („Construction pilots"), a practice of lateral thinkers, nevertheless, effective builders : good architecture, energy efficiency and the creative integration of the users can also be realized with a tight budget. The school renovation projects of the „Die Baupiloten" reflect the new understanding of the architect's role. «Architecture may be fun" says Susanne Hofmann. Her latest book «Architecture is Participation» describes how it works. In an interview she explains how everybody could benefit and particularly what arguments could convince the developers.



Susanne Hofmann. Picture: Rosa Merk

The role of architects and planers

With reference to the social context: the situation and the role of architects in Europe varies considerably. The range is from the «star architect», who realizes himself and claims the copyrights for his work, to the architects who do not have any real influence on the design and materialization of objects and basically degenerate to pure "design assistants" in the opinion of Alison Brooks ([1] S. 80).

What is the situation like in your context/working surroundings? How far does the architect's influence reach to set a social-political statements with their creativity?

Susanne Hofmann: I have the feeling that at the moment architecture and building culture has been pushed into the background. Good architecture is the architecture that has all technical issues under control and is able to juggle with figures. Many developers' priority is to realize a project with (technical) functionality, and which is cost efficient. This is an experience that we have quite often with housing associations. What counts is, how much a square meter costs, period. People are not interested in acting well from the social political point of view.

What is your reaction? To what extent do you want to act like this?

Susanne Hofmann: We have been asked to prepare expertise and to figure out, what might be important from the social-political point of view. School constructions are not such a big issue at the moment in Berlin. The big challenge right now are affordable apartments. In our opinion we cannot reduce the construction price any more. We have to find new solutions. For example we have to question the ratio of private and public areas. You have to react to new situations. There are many people who live alone but who nevertheless want to be part of the community. Cluster-dwelling projects in Zurich for example [Project *Kalkbreite*, author's remark] differentiated this and is an important role model for us. However, complex questions have to be answered first and Germany is not ready yet for this kind of construction. It is difficult to address people with this approach.

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The question is still: How much does a square meter cost, how much is the rent? These thoughts now refer to dwelling.

This was clearly seen in school construction. When it came to refurbishing, the most important thing was that all toilets and everything else functioned. Of course functionality is an important issue, but is has to be seen in the context of the building and the overall project. In one of our projects the KITA [Children's day care center, author's remark] Nido Piccolo (see picture 1-4), we were supposed to plan a pure façade refurbishment for 600`000 Euros. That is quite a lot of money for a building that the children are not even aware of. Especially with a day care center I thought it was important to deal with the question: Which rooms do children experience? So in this project we suggested to plan the façade refurbishment as economically as possible. Not ugly, but cost-efficient. Our plan was to expand the refurbishment into the individual rooms, bird's nest-like. Well, they were bird's nest for us. The children saw them as tree-houses that were their nests. The nests break through the façade into the rooms. A couple of days ago I visited the day care center and everybody loves the solution. We dared to think laterally and the developers accepted our ideas.



Picture 1:
Day-care-center (KITA) Nido Piccolo, Berlin.
Refurbishment and façade renovation 2009-2010.
The colorful balconies derive from the children's wish to play in a „tree nest" and to hide in trees.
Picture: „Die Baupiloten"

Who was excited? The users or the developers?

Susanne Hofmann: It was a privately owned day care center and it was mainly the users who were thrilled. However, it is not always easy to persuade the developers.

Why is that?

Susanne Hofmann: Good question. Why is that? The reason is simply because other architects do what the developers want them to do without questioning, without thinking. They do not have to make decisions. The result is architecture that is totally trivial. It fulfills a purpose and that's about it.

Don't politicians sometimes have the desire to set monuments or to perpetuate themselves with buildings?

Susanne Hofmann: I don't think so. Architecture is no prestige project at the moment. Developers simply want to get done with it and they believe that architects know how to do it anyway! Why should a school be

constructed in a different way than years ago? That's exactly the point. Many people forget or don't consider that school changes with our changing society and that children need to be educated in a different way than in former days. Many people are not aware of the fact that space is an important factor here.

Has the message not arrived in education policy yet?

Susanne Hofmann: It definitely hasn't arrived yet and people are not aware that there is an interaction between education and space. Teachers see space as a third educator, but not those who are responsible for the construction. We are often consulted when things go terribly wrong and we are expected to save the situation. One example is the renovation of the Heinrich-Nordhoff comprehensive school in Wolfsburg. We were called when they realized that the persons involved had no idea how school worked.

Picture 2: Collage space quality as starting point for the Heinrich-Nordhoff comprehensive school in Wolfsburg. Renovation 2011-2014. Picture: Die Baupiloten.

The utilization concept for the interior renovation was developed in cooperation with students, parents, teachers and the developer. With the help of posters the qualities of space were developed and the divisions were defined in the course of a negotiation game.
The collage "a peaceful lawn " created by the student Rebecca Schrader got to the heart of it "a lawn should serve well-being and exchange with others. It should be a relax zone (between the lessons) and it should be a place to linger, […]. The high grass makes you feel safe."



People try to pull the rip cord afterwards?

Susanne Hofmann: They do, but it's a shame that they don't think it through beforehand. It would be so much easier and at the end of the day more cost efficient.

But doesn't it also mean additional effort for the developers?

Susanne Hofmann: Not really. We do not want to be the «uncomfortable» architect. We want to make things as easy as possible for the developer. So actually we are rather «comfortable». We do our «home»-work as architects. That means, a building must function, energy indexes and budget frames must be complied with. That's our job. But we do not want to produce low-cost space. We also want to show the developers the potential that an object offers. We fight for it. It costs time, but architecture is not fun, if you do the same over and over again. What's important for me is that it remains exciting.

In your projects you are sometimes confronted with the criticism of layman as users such as in your strategy of the Baupiloten "R6 evaluate designs" ([2]S. 111). You allow to get involved in discussions with so-called laymen who have a different understanding for architecture.

Susanne Hofmann: We do, but these discussions have been prepared in a way that it's discussable by laymen. You cannot communicate simply by the means of plans because laymen cannot deal with plans. It's about principle topics that we introduce: the inside-outside ratio, flexibility or atmospheric worlds of imagination. The question we ask is: Is it this world or a different one? As an architect you must be aware of your role as an expert for the creation and design of space. That is our task which we must not give up. But the users can tell you whether they want something comfortable, something warm or rather something cool. Then we know that we should maybe choose a different material or color. Users might rather want more transparency. These are things that can easily be realized within the frame of the architectural concept. You have to be careful not to give up your own expertise because then the planers will end up as the faceless agents of the 70s.

That means you take the responsibility for the creation of space and before that you take in the atmosphere and the moods of the users in order to transfer that into architecture.

Susanne Hofmann: Exactly. We take on the ideas of the users. We organize all kinds of workshops, depending on the group. That is also described in the book "***Architecture is Participation***". It provides the basic elements that are then put together in a way that fits the group, just like this 90-minute poster-workshop that helps the people to describe the spaces that they want. Via this poster workshop as a communication medium the architect learns about the users' wishes.

Energy efficiency or user requirements?

The main motive for a refurbishment today is to improve energy efficiency. Unfortunately there is no budget left to adapt the school to changed user requirements. Are there any arguments that might convince the school owners to invest less into energy efficiency and façade and more into pedagogic requirements and user expectations?

Susanne Hofmann: For me it's definitely not an "either-or", but a "both-and". I believe that both is possible. I have to renovate the façade anyway, so I can also include energy efficiency. The developer's requirements – i.e. budget and energy efficiency - must be fulfilled. That is our task. But when I know, what the user wants and what expectations he has regarding his space I can easily integrate these. There are various options to design a façade. I don't design a façade in its own. Before the Baupiloten design a façade they approach the user in order to get a feeling of his needs. This happens via workshops and is a relatively fast procedure. With this additional information we try to develop the architecture, including the energy standards. We do think laterally, but we try to make people feel as comfortable as possible.

Participation as a new planning culture

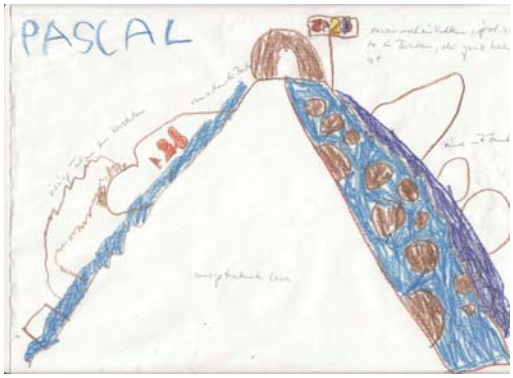
The main railway station in Stuttgart shows how important participation is today. What were the trigger moments for the development of the Baupiloten-method?

Susanne Hofmann: The trigger was the first project, the Erika-Mann elementary school in Berlin. It was important to the headmistress that the children were given a voice. We thought about how to accomplish that. It was a multi-cultural school with 25 different nations. We encouraged the children to draw pictures of their home-countries. That didn't work, as they all lived in Berlin and regarded Berlin as their hometown. They drew the usual pictures: soccer field, their rooms... It didn't really help us. So we developed the idea to bring the material ourselves and let the children put together posters. One of the tasks was the design of a hallway. We didn't ask how we could make the hallways nicer, but the task was to show us the pathway to future in a poster. That worked out fine. The children created real pieces of art. They created great titles and told us the stories that went with the posters. We finally got a feeling for what was important to them and realized how well they could communicate sensuously. We took up their ideas and finally developed the word of the silver dragon.

Pictures are essential elements of communication for the Baupiloten. How do you understand your pictures?

Susanne Hofmann: Baupiloten approach a draft with pictures as «atmospheric worlds of imagination». They can be of very strong conceptual nature and not photo realistic 1:1 images which would too much determine specific renovation measures. What is more important is to create a certain atmosphere which can be so flexible that it allows the application of different materials.





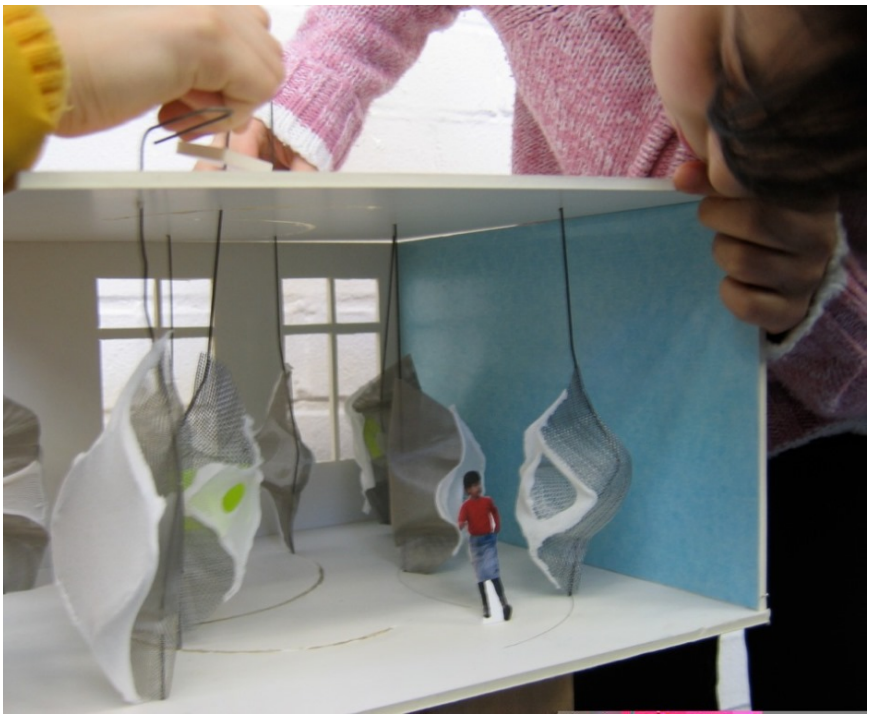
Pictures 3 - 4: Kindergarden Lichtenbergweg, Leipzig. New building 2009-2012. In the frame of a project week the children worked with the elements earth, water, fire, air and weather. The selection inspired the children the draw volcanoes and their advantages («huge rocks for hiding»). The pictures came with stories that they developed with their imagination. Pictures: Die Baupiloten.

Regarding the atmosphere it can be a cool material or a non-cool material. The more the drafts developed, the more defined the architectural picture became. But at the beginning it actually just existed in conception and atmosphere.

Do the users recognize themselves in the design drafts?

Susanne Hofmann: They do not design. The posters and all the work enables them to express themselves. That is the most important thing. They communicate via the atmosphere. Atmosphere is the communication medium.

Or we make games to find out what they really want. We also work with activities and atmospheric concepts that they can mix together and explain their wishes and needs. It is not about design but they bring in their user knowledge and their expertise. In case of the school it's the teachers who bring in the relevant pedagogic concept.



Picture 5:
In the first construction phase the spacious interior halls of the school that is classified as a historical monument were redesigned as learning and recreation areas. They offer new differentiated space for learning in small groups. Between 2006-2008 in a second construction phase additional leisure and recreation rooms were created for the day-care area. The children's posters were spacially investigated and transferred into a conceptual model: the "shield spring model". After intensive brainstorming with the children a protected capsule was developed from which they could look out. Picture : Die Baupiloten

Long-term flexibility and usage openness are always postulated – as a contribution to sustainable construction. Where does the integration of individual user requirements and overarching forward planning end? Who decides, what "optimized" on a long term basis means?

Susanne Hofmann: That is a big challenge. On the one hand there is «customer-tailored» and on the other hand we have «generic architecture». There is no simple formula for this. I do neither want «customer-tailored» nor «generic architecture», but I try to understand both the users' needs and the requirements of the developer. If for example they want high flexibility, I would try to figure out how utilizations could be modified. In case of specific utilizations we have to do away others in the future. However, it has to be clearly pointed out.

How do you handle the conflict developers' requests versus teachers' requirements versus students' wishes?

Susanne Hofmann: I haven't had the experience that teachers have contrary positions than the school. We cooperate with all parties involved and at a high school in Hamburg we developed a new game for example: What are individual rooms and what is open space? What might a future-oriented learning environment look like?

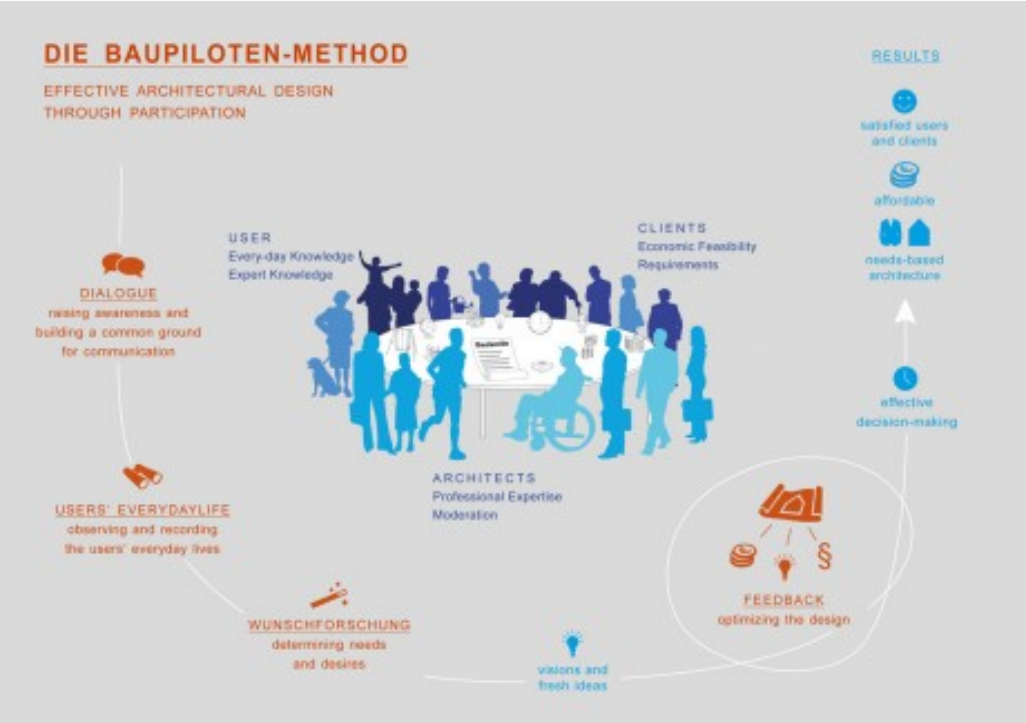
We intentionally involve a mixed audience and they negotiate with each other. This is how we make the decisions. I usually step back here and let the users discuss it among each other: How much retreat is helpful, how much isn't? This is a totally helpful instrument to reach decisions that do not derive from one group only but is actually a consensus among many.

Jeremy Till called it "the best possible". "We are not in a perfect world" - but in "the best possible" one and "the best possible" is still pretty awesome. It results from common negotiations and as it turns out, their ideas are often not so far away from each other.

What is your message?

Susanne Hofmann: If you create space together you will be surprised how many seemingly controversial ideas turn out to correspond, though. Most times you simply don't see these common grounds. If you discuss and develop future architecture together, developers and users will realize at the end of the day, how much more satisfied they are with the result.

Thank you for the interview!



Picture 6: The Baupiloten-method
The user's knowledge about the usage and experience of space is the fundamental recognition in the architectural draft procedure of the architect.
The planning method of the Baupiloten includes the participation and cooperation of the users and other stakeholders in drafting and planning of architecture.
In order to enter into a dialogue a communication level is created mainly by and via the determination of the desired atmosphere.

Source: www.baupiloten.com/baupiloten-methode/

Pictures:

Due to copyright issues all architectural images can only be found on the website www.baupiloten.com/projekte and in the book "PARTICIPATION IS ARCHITECTURE" [2].

Further information:

Film „PARTIZIPATION MACHT ARCHITEKTUR": www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdueUeuJrnA

Website „Die Baupiloten": www.baupiloten.com/

References:

[1] Kullack, Tanja. Architektur. Eine weibliche Profession. Jovis Verlag, Berlin 2011

[2] Hofmann, Susanne. PARTICIPATION IS ARCHITECTURE. Jovis Verlag, Berlin 2014.

Interview :

Sonja Geier, November 2015