

Corporate urban furniture, public space, and money. A sketch for an artistic research project

[<http://stadtinnenarchitektur.de/?p=1561>]

Introduction

The basic idea of the project is a Marx-inspired analysis of the economic logic of corporate urban furniture with a focus on exploring its spatial patterns. It's not about a rigid application of the Marxian technical apparatus, but, as a start, about embracing his critical perspective on economic patterns. The first step in Marx' critique of political economy was a sorrow historical analysis of how economic surplus is generated: in order to be able to critique economic inequality one has first to understand the regime of capital accumulation that produces the inequality. The first volume of his *Das Kapital*¹ is a minute analysis of contemporary modes of the generation of economic surplus with a particular focus on Great Britain and the so-called Manchester-capitalism, as well as of then current theories of economic surplus such as e.g. Riccardo's and Smith'. Only after this empirico-historical analysis Marx sets out for his own theoretical description of capitalist accumulation and economic surplus in the subsequent volumes of the *Capital*, posthumously published (and edited) by Friedrich Engels.

The never-ending transformation of capitalism

One of the distinguishing features of capitalism is its seemingly inexhaustible capacity to adapt to historical change. As a phenomenon with many faces, capitalism must be described as a concatenation of historically transforming accumulation regimes, all with their specific form of exploiting labor, but all serving the one, single objective of capitalism: the concentration of capital. Seen from a historical perspective, these iterations of capitalism are characterized (and named) after the dominant form of capital, i.e. after the most profitable form of capital. In the last decades, to name just of a few of the latest iterations of capitalism, there has been a discussion of finance-capitalism, disaster-capitalism², network-capitalism and surveillance-capitalism³. So the first decisive questions we have to deal with is: today, and with respect to corporate urban furniture, what economic regime or form of capitalism are we dealing with? Under which capitalist paradigm does corporate urban furniture extract surplus from public space? What does the switch from traditional, land- and plot-based capital markets of Fordism to the postfordist markets of the immaterial economies of attention⁴ mean for public urban space?

¹ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Der Produktionsprozess des Kapital* (Köln: Parkland, 2005).

² Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Penguin Books (London [u.a.]: Penguin, 2008).

³ see Shoshana Zuboff, „Google as a Fortune Teller The Secrets of Surveillance Capitalism“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5. März 2016, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/the-digital-debate/shoshana-zuboff-secrets-of-surveillance-capitalism-14103616-p2.html?printPagedArticle=true>.

⁴ For this, and for an indepth analysis of the development of the advertising business in Berlin, see Sabine Knierbein, *Die Produktion zentraler öffentlicher Räume in der Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie: ästhetische, ökonomische und mediale Restrukturierungen durch gestaltwirksame Koalitionen in Berlin seit 1980*, 1.

Corporate street furniture as extrastatecraft

When looking at the phenomenon of corporate urban furniture, Keller Easterling's concept of extrastatecraft⁵ is useful to outline its role in contemporary design of public space. In her 2014 book she deals with the building of infrastructure spaces, and how private actors are dominating this sector resulting in the privatization of the design of public space (or the deconstruction of it). Technical standards and economic best practice-models, often codified in national and international norms and standards, determine the design and re-design of local public spaces. Corporate street furniture serves infrastructural functions, and thus must – beyond being part of a symbolic economy – be regarded as an active agency involved in designing public space. It provides functions such as public toilets and bus shelter in exchange for the possibility to economically exploit parts of the urban space by colonizing the individual perception with strategically placed and integrated advertising media. So the second question of the project is: What are the spatial patterns of corporate urban street furniture? Is there a particular distribution of furniture in Berlin that can be represented in some sort of a loss-and-gain-map?

Research objective

The idea is to try to break down the financial figures of one player in the corporate urban furniture market in Berlin to the concrete single instances of its street furniture product system. What revenue does one specific token of street furniture generate? With respect to the market consolidation in the corporate street furniture business, the Wall AG lends itself as object of research. Berlin, where the corporation runs its corporate headquarter, is its single biggest market and regarded as a sort of experimental laboratory for new furniture and new business strategies. It has recently been acquired by the oldest player and global leader in the business, JCDecaux.

At the moment, the city of Berlin is planning to reduce the existing recompensation contracts with Wall AG, as the city aims to decrease its dependency of third parties regarding the design of public space. Wall AG is answering to these economic challenges with notorious neoliberal talking points, aiming at evoking the aura of win-win of public private partnerships and at the same time picturing the scenario where the city has to provide for the functions needed in public space by itself as a scenario of decline. The definition of new functional needs with regard to the public space and its digitalization becomes a valuable goal for urban furniture corporations in general: by inventing new needs, they expand their capital, because in order to be able to offer recompensation for placing ads in public urban space, there must be functional needs regarded as necessary for public space yet not satisfied.

Research method

Put in a nutshell, the aim of the research is to think about a way – theoretically and artistically – to attach appropriate 'price-tags' on the masses of corporate street furniture

Aufl. (Wiesbaden: VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss., 2010), 397.

⁵ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London/New York: Verso, 2014).

colonizing urban space. The project proposes to research and map the financial revenue of the Wall AG onto their system of urban furniture in order to make visible, or tangible, their way of commodifying public urban space.

The products of Wall AG are seen as a system of furniture-objects – as opposed to as single objects – in order to find a way to map their financial numbers in a differentiated manner: what are the elements and features of the urban furniture systems that Wall AG wants to put out in the city because they generate money, and what are the ones that it has to put out there as contractual recompensation for the right to commodify parts of the public urban space? What, from Wall AG's point of view, is their bull-furniture, and what is their bear-furniture? Or seen from a more Everyday-life perspective: How many fancy dog stations do we get in exchange for giving a share of our attention to a mega advertising screen televising it's message into public space, and do we want dog stations?

Research program

For it's objective the project has two main tasks to address: (1) a plausible mapping of the corporation's income and expenses onto their system of urban furniture, preferably type-wise and instance-wise. The main work in the mapping of Wall AG's balance sheets onto of their furniture system is the research into (a) the business numbers and the price structure of ads placed via the corporation's urban furniture system. Given the state of the source materials to be considered, a disclaimer is in order. Where hard numbers cannot be obtained – which is to be suspected given the secretive nature of business relations – the project can work with assumptions as it's focus is on the system, not on the correctness of it's quantitative evaluation. There is material available on the general development of the advertising market in German cities such as the Frequenzatlas⁶, which provides a quantitative survey of the average flow of passers-by of street sections, grouped after the means of transportation used. From documents such as these we will have to reverse-engineer plausible numbers for Wall AG where exact business numbers cannot be obtained. The second research target is (b) a mapping of the single instances of the furniture in the public space of Berlin. For the project, we will identify a representative part of the city and map the Wall AG furniture in the area, in the selected Kiez. For the mapping, we'll develop an open-source based workflow with common tools such as openstreetmap and generic CAD resp. other appropriate geometric modeling software.

The second task is to (2) to develop a spatial understanding of the impact of urban furniture – seen still from the system's perspective – on public space. The work here consists in determining a way to describe the impact of corporate urban furniture on public space. One approach offering itself in case of visual ads is to interpret the visibility of an ad carried by a Wall AG furniture as an indicator of it's penetration of the urban space. On the type layer, these areas of visibility can be described as features of particular furniture types. When combined with the map of the locations of the furniture in the selected Kiez, a first approximation of which particular spaces in Berlin are the target of Wall AG should emerge, and a map of which functions it provides where for recompensation. The aim here

⁶ <http://www.plakatunion.de/de/mediaberatung/mediaforschung/frequenzatlas.html>, accessed 17-02-01.

is to develop a spatially qualified representation of the selected Kiez, a representation that bears the possibility to become operational by way of artistic interventions in the Kiez.

Artistic research

Now, if we succeed in researching and preparing an informed model of the economic footprints of Wall AG's street furniture in Berlin, and also of the logic of their spatial distribution in public space, what do we do with it? The goal here is to come up with a way to project back the findings of the project into urban space. As the single instances of Wall AG's furniture system are the material interfaces where the economic pattern of corporate urban furniture interferes with the urban audience – us –, a strategy shall be developed to hack or re-frame concrete urban furniture in the explored Kiez. What if an ad-screen would live-display its financial loss/gain and its position in the overall financial mechanics of Wall AG? And what sort of a display could that be, or, to come back to the metaphor in the introduction: how could a price-tag look like that can be attached to such an elusive object as the commodification of urban space? The project will close with a collective sketch session in which we try to condensate the research findings of the project into a proposal for an artistic intervention on the level of a concrete piece of urban furniture of Wall AG's system.