

Commoning in the PLATZprojekt

The PLATZprojekt in Hanover is an experimental, self-organised and open space for young people to try out and develop their own ideas, but to what extent is the it a Common?



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Introduction

This essay will discuss the extent to which the PLATZProjekt in Hanover is an example of a Commons. Initially, I will describe and explain what exactly the PLATZProjekt is to lay a foundation of basic understanding. Following this, I will define 'Commons', which will give a baseline to reference the PLATZprojekt against.

I will evaluate the PLATZprojekt using three important aspects of Commoning. These aspects have been examined using public resources, such as documents from the Landhauptstadt Hannover, various organisations' websites and written academic work rather than using first hand experience at the PLATZprojekt. Firstly I will examine the project's participants and how they communicate. This is important to investigate, as Commons are based around participant equality and self-governance. Secondly, I will look into the project's finances including investment and profits, to understand the extent to which 'sharing' takes place in the PLATZprojekt. Finally, the project's relationship to the surrounding community will be examined, including its affiliation to the government.

What is the PLATZProjekt?

The PLATZprojekt is a project in Hanover which offers space for projects and ideas that would be otherwise impossible to realise within normal city conditions. PLATZProjekt is comprised of small sites which are open to be occupied and used by anyone who wants to. Most of these sites contain or consist of unused shipping containers. These plots and containers are used to implement a wide range of ideas, by a wide range of people. In order to better explain the PLATZProjekt as a whole and show it's variety of uses, I will briefly explain four different projects within it.

Das Kleider Kabinett

Das Kleider Kabinett is a library for clothes which provides a space for borrowing clothes rather than buying them. The Project aims to reduce the current problem of material waste. The 'library' offers a wide range of clothing, including unique pieces from young designers and clothes are designed and produced within Kleider Kabinett 'mini-factory'.



Image 1 - Braukiste

Braukiste

The Braukiste is a nano-brewery inside a shipping container that offers courses on beer making. The Braukiste also offers bread-making within their workshops, puts on barbecues and is rented out to previous course participants so that they can make beer unsupervised.

Du Bist Willkommen

This project aims to dissolve the isolation of refugees through a tandem program that brings them and local people together. It uses 'Welcome Godparents' to bridge boundaries, overcome cultural, lingual and religious differences . It aims to enhance the limited state support for refugees.

Übersee

The Übersee-Projekt is a new space for collaborative work and design, for unconventional and mutually fruitful-gathering away from the traditional work in two shipping containers. It aims bring different trades and people together, from architects to beekeepers, so that they can work together and learn from one another.

The concept was developed in 2013 and launched soon after by a creative group within the 2er Skateboarding e.V. (a sports and recreation venue, next door to the PLATZprojekt). The people behind the PLATZprojekt declare it as 'an experiment' without a certain goal, aim or outcome. The scheme acts as an investment for young people who not only want to discuss their city but actively shape it. (PLATZprojekt, n.d.). Removing as many barriers found in the outside world as possible make the idea realisation process "uncomplicated, unbureaucratic and easy" (PLATZprojekt, n.d.). "Das Projekt ist ein ergebnisoffenes Bottom-up Modellvorhaben". (Schmidt, 2016, p.78)



Image 2 - Übersee-Projekt

The Location

The project is located in Linden-Mitte, a western district of Hanover. This area only became part of the city in 1920 and currently holds around 12,000 residents. Its Fössestraße address is nestled within fairly bleak industrial area, surrounded by low lying warehouses and lorry car parks. Much of the surrounding area is, and has been for many years, empty, abandoned and disused. The Linden-Mitte industrial area is flanked on the North, West and East sides with residential areas. The PLATZprojekt is 3km west from the centre of the City.



Image 3 - Hanover and the PLATZprojekt

The area adjacent (see Image 5, green area) to the project was listed in the Gewerbeflächenmonitoring 2016 as part of “wiedernutzbare Gewerbebrache, die als Teil des gesamten Gewerbeflächenpotenzials mit erfasst wurden, [sie] gehören aufgrund ihrer Nutzungsrestriktionen, weil sie sich meist in privater Hand befinden, die Bebauungspläne (sofern vorhanden) häufig nicht mehr den kommunalen Planungszielen entsprechen, zu den am wenigsten markt- fähigen Flächenpotenzialen.” The area has been empty since 1996 and is currently “versiegelte Freifläche, Altlastenverdacht”. (Region Hannover Wirtschafts- und Beschäftigungsförderung, 2015, p. 25)



Image 4 - PLATZprojekt and 2er Skateboarding Verein



Image 5 - PLATZprojekt with adjacent land sites

Commons: A definition and Explanation

The word 'Commons' is defined as "Land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) but the reality of creating and understanding a 'Common' is much more complicated. I will outline a definition of 'Commons' with examples and references, and use this to examine the PLATZprojekt.

Firstly, I will use the definition of the Commons as a relationship rather than a resource. "Die Gemeingüter sollten ... nicht als bestimmte Gegenstände, Vermögenswerte oder gesellschaftliche Prozesse verstanden werden. Vielmehr sollten wir sie als instabile und formbare soziale Beziehung zwischen bestimmten selbstdefinierten geschäftlichen Gruppe und den Aspekten ihrer existierenden oder noch zu erschaffenden sozialen und/oder physischen Umgebung begreifen, die für ihr Leben und ihr Auskommen als essenziell angesehen werden". (Harvey, 2013).

To explain this idea, Paysan (2018) uses the example of rock climbers. Rock climbers use the rock face as a resource, but the rock face itself is not the common. Instead, the relationship between the climbing community and the rock face is the common (including, for example, the set of rules, provision of climbing routes etc). "In Tausenden von Jahren aber, wenn die Kletterer längst ausgestorben sind, werden diese Felsen dort immer noch stehen. Ein Commons sind sie dann nicht mehr, denn das Commons ist die Sozialbeziehung: der Klettersport und nicht der Fels".

This idea of Commons being a relationship is further expanded upon using E. Ostrom's eight Commons design principles (1992). This set of guidelines explain the ways in which commoners should relate to the common pool resources (for example, the PLATZprojekt site) and to each other. These guidelines relate to rules, conditions of use and related sanctions. Comparing these guidelines to the way in which the PLATZprojekt members run and use the project will further explain to what extent the project is a common.

Using this understanding that 'Commons' are, in fact, a relationship rather than a physical thing, it is possible to determine the PLATZprojekt as a common by examining the relationship between the users of the PLATZprojekt and the project itself.

Participation - Self-governance, accessibility and communication

Self Governance

“Institutionen des Gemeinschaftens [sollten] immer die Bildung jedweder Machtzentren zu verhindern suchen” (Stavrides, 2017, p.21). Using this idea, the extent to which the PLATZprojekt is self-governed (without a commanding authority) is crucial to whether it is a Common. Taking the seventh of the Commons design principles, “Minimal Recognition of Rights to Organize. The rights of participants to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities” (McGinnis M. & Ostrom E., 1992), we can further understand the importance of participants being able to self-govern in order for a Common to work.

The PLATZprojekt “versteht sich als selbstorganisierte Plattform, die Entscheidungen gemeinsam entwickelt, für einen größtmöglichen offenen Raum und Potenzialentfaltung.” (PLATZprojekt e.V., n.d.) Each participant occupies a part of the project (usually within and around disused shipping containers) and develops projects and ideas in an entirely self-run and self-organised way. These projects are entirely different from each other and usually from anything else offered in Hanover.

Furthermore, the selection process for new participants is also a way in which the PLATZprojekt is a common; these decisions are decided as a common group. “As there is no bigger entity to decide which new project will be located at PLATZprojekt, except for the existing actors, it is based on direct participation and empowerment” (endboss GmbH, n.d.). This communal decision making shows the lack of absolute power within the PLATZprojekt. In the FAQ section of the website, it is stated that from the very start of setting up a partaking project, the position on the PLATZprojekt site is a communal one: “das entscheiden wir mit dir zusammen” (PLATZprojekt, n.d.).

The absence of dictating leadership reinforces the PLATZprojekt as a common; “the organizational structure grew from a first thought „Do-ocracy“ to a dozen smaller „task forces“ of a hand full of people each, that are taking care of certain areas of the organisation, such as PR, event organisation or garbage disposal. These task forces report to everyone else at odd times.” (endboss GmbH, n.d.). This splitting up of tasks into different, smaller groups of participants is an accepted Commoning behaviour, so long as the subgroups work democratically together. Stavrides (2017) discusses this using Syntagma-Platz as an example, where the intention was: “verschiedene[n] Initiativen Raum [zu geben], um aufzublühen - solange sie demokratischen Rahmen der Besetzung akzeptieren. Mikrogemeinschaften fokussierten unterschiedliche Forderungen und einzelne Initiativen” (Stavrides, 2017, p.32)

Accessibility

“Jeder, der sich engagieren möchte ist herzlich eingeladen mitzuwirken!” (PLATZprojekt, n.d.); theoretically, anyone is able to join the PLATZprojekt. This is an important aspect when considering it as a Common because “enclosure through literal or symbolic barriers of a community’s common space may signal the death of the space-commoning (and communing through space)” (Stavrides, 2016, p.4). This accessibility plays a positive and important role within the community of the PLATZprojekt. There are almost no prerequisites for participants, which is explicitly said within the ‘Mitmachen’ section of the PLATZprojekt’s website “Einzig und allein die Intention und Offenheit für Entwicklung, Prozess und Veränderung sollte von Anfang an bei allen Beteiligten Voraussetzung sein” (PLATZprojekt e.V., n.d.). This is particularly notable with the PLATZgarten, which has a high participant turn-over but an equally high participation demand

(Schmidt, 2016). If the PLATZprojekt closed its doors to new members, not only would it cease to work but it would become an exclusive club rather than a common good.

However, “for a resource to be a common good, by definition it must permit open access for all - yet some form of boundary is often indispensable if a commons is to be cultivated collectively” (Pelger D. et al, 2017, p. 9). In alignment with this idea, the PLATZprojekt does limit the participants due to spacial restrictions. “Da unser Gelände räumlich begrenzt ist, müssen wir immer darauf achten solange wie möglich Flächen für neue Projekte freizuhalten und daher dicht zusammenrücken”. (PLATZprojekt e.V., n.d.). Crucially, this allows the common resource (the site on which the project is based) to remain protected and sustainably usable for the community. Another form of boundary to newcomers are three participatory restrictions: no direct competition with existing city projects (it only supports organisations that have been held back by rental prices and bureaucracy), no highly political project (left or right) and no housing (due to site restrictions). Although these restrictions are a little more abstract, they still protect the common resource. For example, if the project became highly political it would cease to receive the governmental funding that it relies on. Alternatively, if the containers started to be used as housing, the land owner would no longer legally be able to allow the continuation of the project.

Comparison and Communication

Stavrides (2017) discusses the importance of institutions of communities ‘promoting comparison’ and the necessity of ‘translation’ to convey and explain these differences. “Institutionen, [die] an den Praktiken des Gemeinschaftens Beteiligten dabei helfen, ihre Praktiken füreinander zu übersetzen” (Stavrides, 2017, p.20). The PLATZprojekt does indeed promote comparison by providing a space in which many different people, projects and ideas can manifest within the same site.

Furthermore, the participants promote comparison amongst themselves. For example, both platzWERK and the Übersee project encourage completely different professionals to work together, whilst the Artist Residenz container brings artists together from all over the world. The Open Space container provides people “die Möglichkeit [zu bekommen], den eigenen Geschmack oder die eigene Ästhetik einem Publikum zu präsentieren und andere Menschen daran teilhaben zu lassen - natürlich ohne, dass menschenfeindliche Inhalte jeglicher Art ein Forum bekommen.” (PLATZprojekt e.V., n.d.) Furthermore, Du Bist Willkommen provides a space specifically orientated towards understanding and translating differences between Hanovians and refugees.



Image 6 - Du Bist Willkommen logo

Finances within the PLATZprojekt - Funding and Profits

Stavrides (2016) argues that the rules and practices of capitalist organisations oppose those of institutions of sharing. He also states that it is important to prevent the capitalist enclosure of the commons, including the obstruction of Commoning practices that tend towards an openness of sharing. (Stavrides, 2016, p.3). For these reasons, it is important to understand the money involved with the PLATZprojekt; the finances explain the majority of the extent to which the PLATZ community is rejecting capitalistic behaviours and instead promoting sharing and equality.

Funding

Initially, the PLATZprojekt was financially supported by the BBSR (Bundesministerium für Experimentellen Wohnungs- und Städtebau) within the research field “Jugend.Stadt.Labor”. The project was provided €120,000 to cover a 3 year (2013 - 2016) period. “Das PLATZprojekt ist offiziell somit ein Forschungsvorhaben im Bereich “Experimentelle Stadtentwicklung”, die Fördergelder müssen in Infrastruktur investiert werden.” (Landeshauptstadt Hannover, 2015, p.4). Accordingly, this sum of money was used to set up the energy supply, common room (indoor and



Image 7 - Jugend.Stadt.Labor

outdoor), bathrooms and to pay for contact and tax consulting. Initially, the money was also used to purchase the first few containers, which were handed out to original participants. “Das Ziel [war,] nach Ablauf der Förderung finanziell autark zu sein” (Landeshauptstadt Hannover, 2015, p.4) and once the infrastructure was developed, the maintenance costs were planned to be covered by allocating individual projects within the PLATZprojekt. (Landeshauptstadt Hannover, 2015).

In 2015, the PLATZprojekt received 25,000 of governmental funding following recommendations from the Innovationsfonds Kunst und Kultur Förderungen (Landeshauptstadt Hannover, 2016). The Innovationsfonds Kunst und Kultur awarded their funding based on three main principles: the first is “Junge Hunde - First Steps”, the projects should be aimed at young artists and creative minds. The second is “Get Together”, which encourages interdisciplinary projects that advocate cooperation between participants and creative industries whilst developing the art/culture landscape of Hanover. The final principle is “Long Life”, which aims to elevate innovative and explorative projects in the field of further education and training.

Since the funding has expired, the project has been able to support itself and is financed primarily through rental income and donations. It does receive temporary support from the city of Hanover; for example, the city has agreed to support the search for sponsors and buy the land if the lease is terminated by the owners (who have thus far let the PLATZprojekt use it for free, on a 6 month contract basis). Support for the project is also supplied by endboss projects, which is a ‘projectforge’ based in Hanover, represented by Robin Hönig (one of the PLATZprojekt founders). Finally, support is provided by german based agency Urban Catalyst. Urban catalyst are responsible for the Jugend.Stadt.Labor research, financed by the government.

Looking more specifically at the participants, many of the projects have funded themselves through crowdfunding, including the Massage Box (raised €3,072 to date) and NähPLATZ projects (raised €771 to date). Although the project does try to help with financial advice, the funding for each project has to be proposed during the process of applying for a PLATZ.

The financial beneficiaries that have contributed to the project have refrained from being actively involved and dictating the way the project works, which does reject the normal capitalist structure. Although the project relied initially on outside sources of money, it has always used it for the common good of the participants. Despite this influx of external funding not being traditionally part of a Common, it doesn't appear to affect or alter the democracy within the PLATZprojekt.

Profits

The PLATZprojekt is a non-profit organisation. Although as a whole it doesn't make a profit, individual projects' profits can be retained by those participants. "Wir wollen hier alle Geld verdienen. Aber wir wollen nicht in den festgefahrenen Strukturen der Vergangenheit leben." (Schrammer S., 2017). However, the condition of this money retention is that the project is not in direct competition with what already exists in the city. The idea is not a "Gewebepark [zu] werden, daher müssen wir darauf achten, dass die Flächen nicht aus privaten Interesse ausgenutzt werden." (Platzprojekt e.V., n.d.).

In many cases, the money made by the projects is recycled back into their continued development. Using the PLATZgarten as an example, where "Jungpflanzenverkauf, Saatgutbörsen und ein Cocktailstand bei Festen und Veranstaltungen bringen Spenden für Erde, Pflanzen und Baumaterialien" (PLATZgarten, n.d.). In many cases, the money made is used for the good of all participants rather than as a profit for specific parties.

The PLATZprojekt works as a common by preventing a particular institution or individual from taking the profits and therefore the power. The participants pay the agreed €60 rent per month and otherwise don't have to financially answer to the project organisers. This supports Commoning as each project participant benefits from the effort they input. However, the monetary profits do not appear to be shared among the different projects and involved parties which contradicts the idea of Common sharing. Instead, the different participants do help each other where possible, for example the acquisition of containers, financial advice or general DIY. As the PLATZprojekt is aimed at helping businesses get off the ground, perhaps these gestures are more of a representation of the 'common' than purely sharing finances would be.



Image 8 - Bee-keeping in the PLATZgarten

Cooperation with the Community

“Das PLATZprojekt ist zu einem aktiven Teil der Stadtkultur geworden” (Moers, 2015).

One of the eight design principles of Commons is: “Congruence between Appropriation and Provision Rules and Congruence Between Provision Rules and Local Conditions. Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, materials, and/or money.” (McGinnis M. & Ostrom E., 1992) It is an important aspect of ‘Commoning’ to not only benefit the common and commoners themselves, but also the wider community. This is an area in which the PLATZproject excels; “das PLATZprojekt hat sich gut in der Stadt verankert und erlebt einen Zustrom an unterschiedlichen Akteuren aus der Stadtgesellschaft, die in einen regen Austausch mit dem PLATZprojekt treten.” (Mein Hannover 2030, 2015)

With Commoning, “external resources and actors can play an extremely important role, interacting with internal and local ones, in creating civic arenas or forums, social and political spaces for deliberation.” (McCay, 2002). The PLATZprojekt works and cooperates with the local, city-wide and national community. This relationship allows the project and the community to grow and learn from each other. “Die Stadt kann durch ein Projekt wie das PLATZprojekt und seinen Strukturen entsprechend lernen, wie im Sinne einer dezernatsübergreifenden und flach hierarchischen Verwaltungsarbeit solchen Projekten gegenüber zu verfahren ist.” (Mein Hannover 2030, 2015) This is evident in the research role the PLATZprojekt plays in the governmental scheme of Jugend.Stadt.Labor, but some more specific examples of this cooperation and affiliation are also worth mentioning.



Image 9 - Participant discussion within Jugend.Stadt.Labor

In 2017, the PLATZproject was involved in MADE BY: SELF as a workshop location provider. MADE BY: SELF is a governmental scheme within the field of cultural youth education that teaches over 70 young people and young adults aged 16+ creative and organisational skills using workshops.

The PLATZprojekt is in cooperation with the WALK program as a 'Lernort'. WALK was initiated in 2008 as a project for vocational qualification for disadvantaged young people, in order to help these people take meaningful career steps in environmentally relevant occupational fields. (Landeshauptstadt Hannover, 2015).

The PLATZprojekt's cooperation with the wider community is seen within many of the participating projects. One example is the PLATZgarten, which is an urban garden community that extends throughout the PLATZprojekt and works in cooperation with Stadtbienen e.V., a bee-keeping group based in Berlin. The garden was originally founded under a different name before the existence of the PLATZprojekt, showing the willingness of the PLATZ participants to work with others from the very beginning. The Artist Residency container is another example of communal collaboration as it brings people from Hanover and from its twinned french city Rouen together through a series of exchange programs to exchange ideas and approaches.

Finally, as the project aims to avoid direct competition with the local community, it ensures that the participants do not compete directly with the local businesses. They are careful to only benefit and not hinder the surrounding area, Hanover and Germany as a whole. This position follows the Commons design Principles (McGinnis M. & Ostrom E., 1992) and promotes the PLATZprojekt not only as a Common for the partakers but for the community in general.

Conclusion

“Space communing is not, therefore, simply the sharing of space, considered as a resource or an asset, but a set of practices and inventive imaginaries which explore the emancipating potentialities of sharing” (Stavrides, 2016, p.7). The practices of the participants and the relationship that they have to their communal resources, each other and the wider community show the PLATZprojekt to be a Common. “Common space is produced through collective inventiveness, which is either triggered by every day urgent needs or is unleashed in the effervescence of collective experiments” (Stavrides, 2016, p.6), which is almost exactly what has been happening within the PLATZprojekt since 2014.

If Commons are defined by the relationship between their Commoners and their resources, the fact that the PLATZprojekt is self-governing and open to new-comers (within resource-protecting restrictions) makes it a Common. Participant comparison and communication are also important features of the project, which fits the definition of Institutions of the Common explained by Stavrides (2016). Additionally, the PLATZprojekt and its participants apply the aforementioned Commons design principles (McGinnis & Ostrom, 1992), (perhaps inadvertently).

Regarding the funding and profits of the PLATZprojekt, the participants are helped and encouraged by the government and community but retain very few restrictions from these bodies. The input of funds from the government had the potential to restrict the PLATZprojekt's role as a Common, but they do not alter or constrict it because the project is funded as research. The profits for individual projects are not 'shared', which makes the PLATZprojekt less 'Common' and more self-promoting. However, this relatively low level of money making is necessary for the Commoners to survive.

Finally, when examining the PLATZprojekt's connections to the community, it is further conveyed as a Common. The Commoners are mindful about the needs of the local community, whilst playing an active role in its promotion. It stands as an open and beneficial common good, not only for the participants but for Hanover and Germany as a whole.

The PLATZprojekt is an “open-access resource space and a self-organised commoner community that acquires from a portion of this space the raw materials necessary for survival”. (Pelger et al, 2017, p. 8) The participants come to use the site to make a living in a way that is otherwise impossible. Using the PLATZprojekt gives them and their ideas a unique opportunity to survive. “[Gemeinschaften] bezeichnet Zustände, Situationen und Beziehungen anstelle von Dingen” (Stavrides, 2017, p.16) and the sum of conditions, situations and relationships within the PLATZprojekt make it is Common.

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