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Lp(R)evolution: A City on the Way to the Future Las Palmas: ParkCity

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Las Palmas de Gran Canaria as an Urban Landscape Laboratory

For the first time in 2008, more people lived in cities than in the countryside. The USA expect that in 2050, more than 70% of the expected global population of 9 billion will be at home in the constantly growing megacities. Everywhere, in cities and in the countryside, anthropogenic changes are becoming visible with growing speed. Human footprints can already be found at apparently untouched places, in natural landscapes. At the same time, there is a growing need and search for untouched nature or natural spaces in the city. Nature deficit disorder is a serious matter that has to be addressed by urban and landscape planners.

In the future, a new form of landscape, an urban landscape with new ecosystems, will develop. A new landscape that adapts to the conditions prevailing in the new cities and the urban inhabitants, a landscape that newly defines and develops itself. This “new landscape” will have to take over new tasks in the urban landscapes: Spatial and functional, ecological and economic, and increasingly sociocultural tasks.

In the 2015/16 winter semester, the city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria served as an urban landscape laboratory for our class of master’s students.

Background

The Canary Islands, an archipelago located about 1300 km away from the Spanish mainland, formed as seven volcanic islands 36 million years ago. Europe’s southernmost point, only about 100 km away from the African continent, advertises with the best climate worldwide as the “Island of eternal spring”. It is a popular destination for about 3 million tourists annually.

The metropolitan region around Las Palmas, with about 680,000 inhabitants, is located in the north of the island. However, its existence is difficult to notice due to the living topography and the dry valleys (barrancos) separating the municipalities. The capital of Las Palmas, with 380,000 inhabitants, has a beautiful old town and impressive city beaches. Both are attractions for tourists and supported with big investments. Behind this sun and beach front, the city

Goals & Objectives: The transformation of Las Palmas into a ParkCity

Why it is a basic necessity to integrate landscape into cities!

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The (arrival) city of the 21st century is increasingly characterized by lacking free space for unfolding various biographies. Lacking free space for appropriation, identification, and action results in lacking relatedness that is necessary to generate quality of life among different identities. Relatedness to the city stands for home and future. Nature is a basic need of man. Tourism booms, never before did so many people travel as in this century. "Holiday landscapes" develop, untouched nature is designed and sold, but there is a basic need to develop sufficient free space and green areas also in our increasingly dense cities. Places of retreat are to be designed, quality of life is to be generated, spaces for meetings, opportunities, and ideas are to be produced for the future. One strategy is landscape. *Landscape as an urban strategy, landscape as an ecological strategy, landscape as a social and cultural strategy.*

This strategy has to include measures to interfere with the infrastructure and urban structure on various scales:

In a first step, a catalog of interventions is to be developed for the city as a holistic system. It is to be the basis of the transformation to a ParkCity. The existing infrastructure, parks, and open spaces are to be analyzed, questioned, and, if applicable, rethought.

In a second step, ideas are to be developed to integrate the „Barranco de Tamaraceite" into the urban structure. This valley is an important land form, that starts in the center of the island. The Barranco is a hidden treasure, a forgotten and ignored jewel, boarding the northern city edge at a length of more than 3 km. As the link between upper and lower town, between city and coast, it has the potential of providing the city with a new quality: a natural free space - landscape in the middle of the city.

Another step is to focus on the special places of the valley. Both the beginning and the mouth of the valley near the beach promenade of "Las Canteras" are important places that may give Las Palmas a new appearance.

The last step is to focus on the issues of soft urbanism and participation – the introduction of what we call the „social scale“. Which concrete interventions on the spatial and sociocultural levels will profit from the collaboration of planners, city, and population and, hence, will be able to tell the city's story in an entirely new way in the future.

The result is to be a strategy to establish a new relationship among the landscape, the city, and its population.



Figure 2. Sharpen the perception of nature and vegetation in urban contexts

How to reach this goal? How can a dense city that is difficult to develop due to its topography be transformed into a ParkCity? How can a city that struggles with big financial problems due to the economic crisis be transformed? Its population has hardly been sensitized for nature, the value of specific ecosystems as cultural assets, and the necessity of coexistence of landscape and city. Actually, the island with its 360 days of sunshine would easily fulfill all prerequisites for the development of a sustainable, green, future. The neighboring island of El Hierro was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2000 and is presently developing the strategy of an ecological attraction as the first completely energy-autonomous island. It is becoming a global model. Here, rethinking, awareness of a symbiosis of nature, city, and man, started 30 years ago already.

What to do? An intervention catalog for Las Palmas is needed, on various scales, in various sectors, for various institutions, various groups of the population, and for the parties involved. Which role do landscape architects and landscape planners play in the execution of such a far-reaching task?

Let me answer this question by quoting the Association of German Landscape Architects. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of this association, it published a brochure with the following sentence: "Landscape architects – at the interfaces of urban planners, civil engineers, botanists, sociologists, and philosophers – are the balm on the sealed wounds of the stressed urban soul."

This quote describes the complex role of the landscape architect. He does not only have expert competence, but also becomes the coordinator and mediator in interdisciplinary teams.

Starting the Process/the project: Getting Involved in the Topic!

3 weeks of research! Investigation of the history of the Canary Islands, of historic urban development, current projects, and development tendencies. To deal with the issue of “a city on the way into the future”, we left the islands and studied future-oriented and non-material concepts, programs, and master plans, such as Almere IJland/ Floriade/ Oosterworld, Sangdo or Masdar City.

4 days of excursion - 65 km of walking tours - 5 days of workshop

During an excursion to our Urban Laboratory the information gathered is reviewed and the workshop is organized to answer questions and to have them answered by local experts. Various walks to a number of districts, urban structures, and atmospheres sensitize us for the potentials and problems of the city, make us experts of the location - friends of the city. Detailed spatial, cultural, sociological, political, and ecological knowledge is required to develop credible strategies. An emotional relationship to the city and its population is important to develop a vision, with enthusiasm and pleasure.

What Do We Propose? Let me present and discuss the results and techniques applied by using two student projects as an example.

Provocation! We spread out a radical, provocative, and remediless green virus that infects, awakes the city and citizens. A virus that infects politics, economists, inhabitants, streets, parks, houses, and public mentalities.

“A green virus from the mountains, spreading through barrancos into every city corner for the city to recover. Its fruits are the flowers in front of your window.”

Sensitization! We sensitize the public with small “green” interventions at certain places, we build local centers and connect them by nature to form a “green network” between the Barranco de Tamaraceite and the coast. Nature becomes the protagonist and signage that changes the thinking and behavior of its neighbors in the long term.

The “virus” strategy provokes, it injects nature into the city.

Via the barrancos, the green virus spreads from the interior of the island into the city and forms an increasingly refined “green” network. A network of nature, landscape, and ecological mobility as well as of gradually changing mentality.

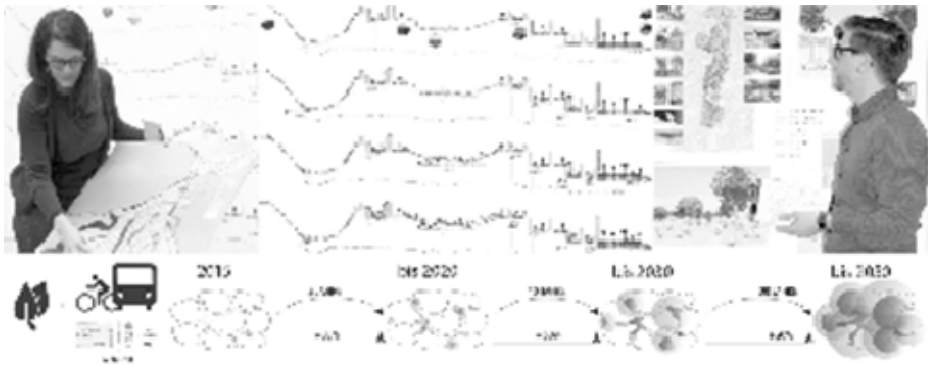


Figure 3. „Virus“ (Isabel Garcia Espino - Tim Walschburger)

At first, the actor “city” offers alternatives to the present transport system. The private car is replaced by sustainable transport means. The network of bicycle paths is extended. Stations are established for lending electronic bicycles, electric buses are used with integrated compartments for taking along bicycles. The bus network covers long-distances and short-distances.

To manage the elevation differences in the city, elevators are proposed. Shared spaces support the co-existence and equivalence of all traffic participants. This change will generate freely disposable areas, such as parking lots and driving lanes, which can be converted into green and free spaces. Reduction of sealed ground, more shady trees, and an increased absorption of CO₂ result in a better urban climate and a higher residence quality. The quality of life is increased for all citizens. Perception of nature increases, as existing natural spaces are accessible and upgraded and new free spaces are created.

Rethinking takes place in the perception and use of nature and the environment.

An exemplary city cross section shows the development phases and interventions, visualizes the spreading of the virus and the change of city over the four phases proposed. Various places, road cross sections, and living quarters as well as the existing barrancos and park areas develop to a utopia of a green and sustainable city. The citizen is activated in a changing environment, own initiative is generated and promoted. Free and fallow land is released for use. The city is given back to its citizens, the process of rethinking and using the city and the environment is started. From the flowers in front of the window to large urban parks – responsibility generates awareness. After infecting Las Palmas with the virus, recovery starts.

The “Barranco to Sea” strategy sensitizes.

Sensitization is defined as the process- or impulse-driven change of state of sensitivity that describes the emotional, cognitive, and motivational state of a human being for a certain topic, which is acquired by an impulse or process. Therefor existing objects are made visible and can be experienced by minimum interventions. These small interventions are aimed at sharpening the perception of the population in a subtle way and generating new behavior patterns and habits.

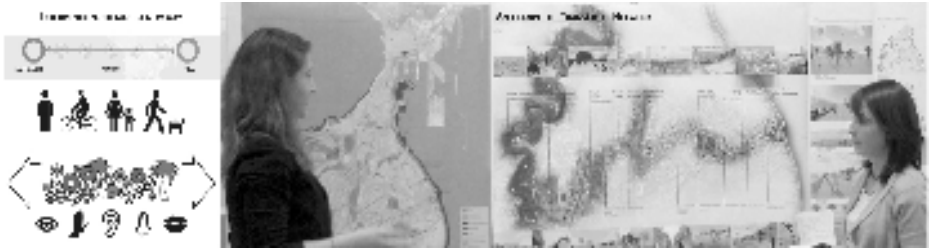


Figure 4. „Barranco to Sea/e“ (Thérèse Christ - Noemi Müller)

The superordinate strategy on the city scale first connects the two distinct forms of nature, the Barranco and the sea, along three transverse axes, newly defined ways in the city to open up its potential for the population. Connection of parks and squares as attractors is defined. In between, green connection paths of high quality are formed. They connect the different residential quarters with each other and with the nature and water landscapes and give the city of Las Palmas a new quality. Gradually, an alternative network, the Park City of active and interactive citizens, develops.

Interventions that get the citizens involved. The topographic step that divides Las Palmas into two levels is integrated into the project and gives nature the possibility to become signage. Viewpoints establish relations to the green veins of the city. The way becomes visible from various perspectives. The city redefines itself via the newly generated system of green paths.

Discussion/Conclusion

Does Las Palmas need a radical treatment like a virus to mutate, to transform, to get infected, to get transformed into a Park City? Or is the population of Las Palmas so committed, so creative, so aware to see, perceive, install, design, and feed a fine network of small sensitive interventions in the long term?

Implementation is of crucial importance to both strategies. Which techniques are required to start the process, from integration of big landscapes into the

city to the idea of “flowers in front of the windows”? The project and the vision have to be defined. A strategy has to be developed. Groups involved have to be convinced and the population has to be integrated both into the participative process as well as into the organization of implementation. In all these areas, it is required to have a “virus” in the form of enthusiasm and emotion for the topic of “nature in the city”. Nature is a basic need of man. In modern industrial society in particular, the lack or disregard of these factors causes diseases and depression. Apart from the fact that the human brain reaches its maximum capacity at 15 – 17°C in the forest, the color green stands for nature, naturalness and joy of life, for rest, peace, protection and self-respect. Needs of stressed urban souls.

There is free space in the city, may it be in the form of large-scale parks, squares in quarters, gardens, or fallow land, conversion areas, temporarily unused areas, urban voids, free corners, grass strips, balconies, and roofs. Our cities are not ill, they do not have to be healed! The existing potential only has to be detected and visualized. Perception of the existence of nature in the city has to be enhanced. Chances have to be used to develop undefined places and to design and use them. Cities are in a permanent develop process and space for “green” densification is available.