

How is it to act collectively when each one of us brings our own perspective, values, assumptions, and also our own language? How does from the many become 'one'? What compromises does one need to make on the way? These were the questions we explored during the workshop *Spaces of Collectivity*. The aim was to collectively experience and enjoy space, while noticing how different our perspectives on it are, and how being able to talk about them, is key to any collective act of visioning, making or caring for space. Maps, as final products, and map-making, as the process of making these, became the tools to visualise and thus be able to better discuss these challenges.

How is it to act collectively when each one of us brings our own perspective, values, assumptions, and also our own language? How does from the many become 'one'? And what compromises does one need to make on the way? These were the questions we explored during the three hours long workshop *Spaces of Collectivity* at the Berlin symposium *sharing/learning: methods of the collective in art, research and activism*.

### **Search for a collective through collective language**

We are architects and sociologists, members of the collective Spolka. In our projects we aim at engaging people in the collective making of cities. Through this workshop, contributing to the general questions of the symposium, we wanted to collaboratively discuss with the participants *the challenges of building shared understanding in a collective*. The way we chose to thematize this topic builds on our practical experiences as facilitators and designers in the field of participatory planning, as well as active members of our non-hierarchical collective. The workshop, and this text consequently, could be thus of interest to city-makers (which, as follows below are indeed all of us) and also anyone involved in a collective.

During the three hours we had, we wanted participants to experience and enjoy space, while noticing how different our perspectives on it are, and how being able to talk about those differences, is key to any collective act of visioning, making or caring for space. For not only designers and planners in their work, but everyone, through their daily actions, is constantly negotiating their different views on what a good place is. Do I tolerate graffiti on the shared stairwell? Am I bothered by rents rising in my neighbourhood? Do I welcome Google campus in my city? Living in physical proximity to others, we all are, willingly or not, part of smaller and larger collectives that are constituted simply by the physical space(s) we inhabit. Within these overlapping and dynamic collectives, we are constantly negotiating our different perspectives. Sometimes we have diverging views on an issue, sometimes we don't even notice an issue until someone helps us to see it. These processes often manifest themselves through big gestures, but are otherwise mostly hidden in everyday interactions. In this workshop we wanted to make them visible, paying special attention to the importance of *finding a common language*

for enabling these processes.

The workshop employed spatial mapping and map-making as its central methods. Through these we aimed to *thematize* and at the same time *visualize* the process of negotiating and eventually finding a shared perspective on a place, while developing a collective visual language to express it. Each one of us has a unique visual language shaped by our setting – just like our views on space are. In coming together, our views and languages are gradually integrated, transformed and even excluded by others. Other times, we must learn the ways and the language of an existing collective to be part of it. During this workshop, we simulated the former scenario, while at the end also briefly reflected on the latter. It was crucial for us to discuss both. For while within our professional and cultural bubbles, shared language and views promote understanding and nurture identity, these acts of strengthening collectivity can also erect boundaries, as a collective language becomes obscure to outsiders. Maps as final products and map-making as the process of making these became the tools to visualise and thus be able to better discuss these challenges.

### **Spaces, maps and collectives in the Malzfabrik**

In practical terms, the workshop was an exercise in collective mapping of the public space within the MalzFabrik – a large industrial area for culture, where District \* School without Centre, the location of the symposium has its base. In groups of six people, the task was to create maps that represented the most important aspects of Malzfabrik for their collective. We, as facilitators, also became part of these collectives, observing and gently guiding the processes from within. These temporal collectives were formed ad-hoc and gradually:

\_During an initial quick exercise, we collectively mapped the room we were in. This gave us an opportunity to discuss what various aspects made up the space: physical objects, people, light, smells, materials, sounds, associations, and how these could be visually captured on a map, either literally or through symbols. It was a chance to get to know others and their views, be inspired by them and recognise that there is no wrong way of going about the task.



Fig 1.  
Workshop *Spaces of Collectivity* with Spolka  
Photo: Fritz Schlütter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen der Künste"

\_We then all ventured out and each of us explored the space individually. Through our own perspective, everyone tried to pay attention to the aspects that made up the space, while noticing which of these were important to them personally. Some sat for a long time in one place, while others tried to cover every inch of the area. We all enjoyed the luxury of time to just be in the space and notice its details. Our perceptions were captured on prepared base maps of the area.



Fig. 2.  
Workshop *Spaces of Collectivity* with Spolka. Individual mapping  
Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen  
der Künste"

(Coming back from the 'field', we chatted during a coffee break. In this time everyone was asked to find a partner for the next step in the process.)

\_Forming collectives of two, we took turns sharing our findings / perspectives of the space. Our individual maps were central in this activity. If anything was missing, the map was extended; if something was unclear, the map was redrawn. The partners were learning about each other's perspectives, as well as about each other's (visual) language.

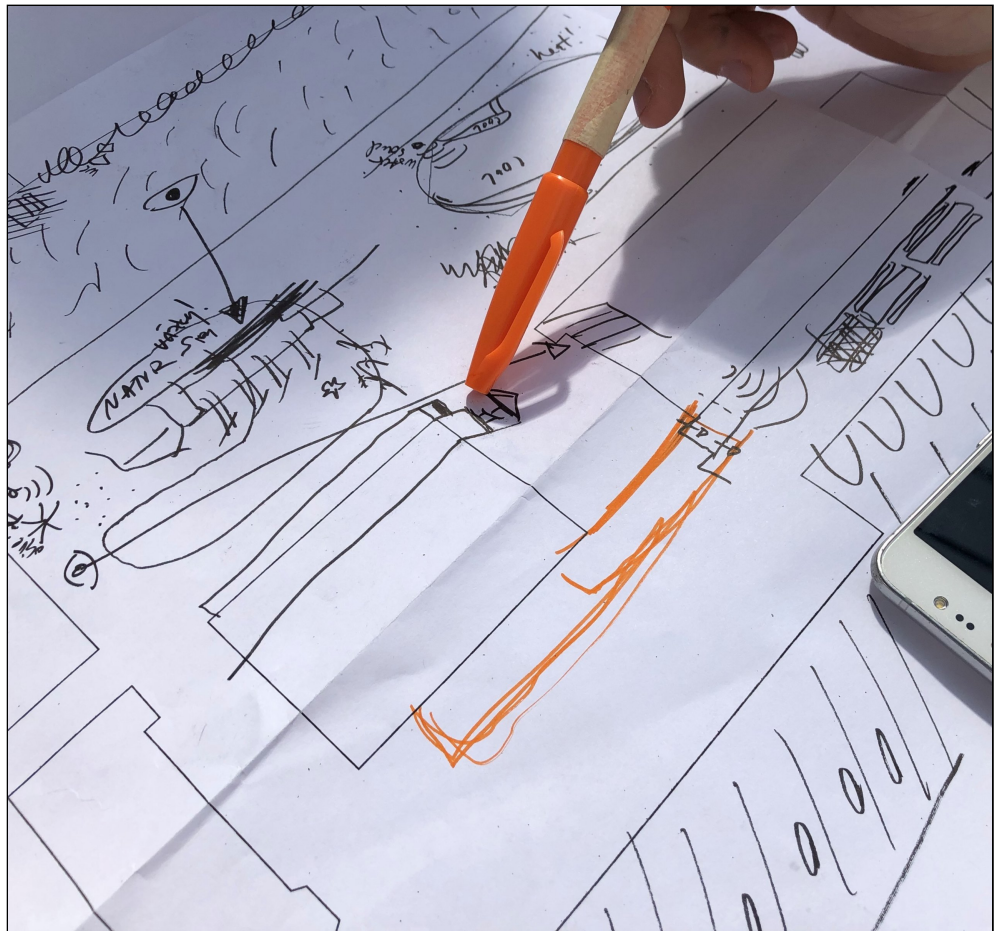


Fig. 3.

Workshop *Spaces of Collectivity* with Spolka. Map in process

Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen der Künste"

\_The challenge of the final map-making step was to bring the findings into a yet larger collective of six and negotiate while making one map of the space: what should be on it - what do we find collectively important, *and* how should it be drawn - what is a language we can all understand? And most importantly: are we deciding all together? Are the voices of all being heard? Perhaps given the time pressure, in some groups, few more dominant persons took on the lead. In others, the process was more open.

\_Each of the four groups produced a unique map that they then presented to the others. The questions asked reflected the extent to which the collective managed to create a visual language understandable not only to those in it, but also to those outside of it. Having a title and a legend of each map (structure given by us, borrowed from codified maps) made the collective language more accessible.



Fig. 4.  
Workshop Spaces of Collectivity with Spolka. Presenting maps  
Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen der Künste"

\_In the closing round, we collectively reflected on the process through which the small temporary collectives were created.

#### **Forming collectives, opening collectives**

Despite taking an active part in the collective making of the maps, it is now, more than one year later, difficult even for us to understand them. Some symbols bring images of space, but others are empty signifiers. This is probably how the maps must have looked back then to those, who didn't take part in the workshop. The temporal collectives found their language as they formed (it) through collaboration. But once formed, it seems rather difficult for outsiders to join. We unfortunately didn't have enough time during the workshop for a collective reflection on this specific aspect of collectives, even though this was the one we were most keen to discuss. For while as facilitators and designers we have many methods of bringing people together, we often struggle to keep the collectives open, once formed.

This balancing between identity and openness is a recurring topic especially in our collective Spolka as such. The collective is based on old friendships, thanks to which we share much history, and being a woman is the obvious commonality among us - things that make it rather easy for us to find a common language, but for many create a hurdle to join. What is wrong with closed collectives, you might ask. In practice, often nothing. In principle though, they mirror fortresses, like those built by us in the EU: protecting our comfort and losing sight of other perspectives than those we have already created mutual understanding for. To conclude, we thus leave you with a question, possible answers to which seem to lie only in training our sensibilities to each other: How to nurture a space of collectivity, while keeping it open for others?



Fig. 5.  
Workshop Spaces of Collectivity with Spolka. Putting individual maps  
into collective maps  
Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen  
der Künste"

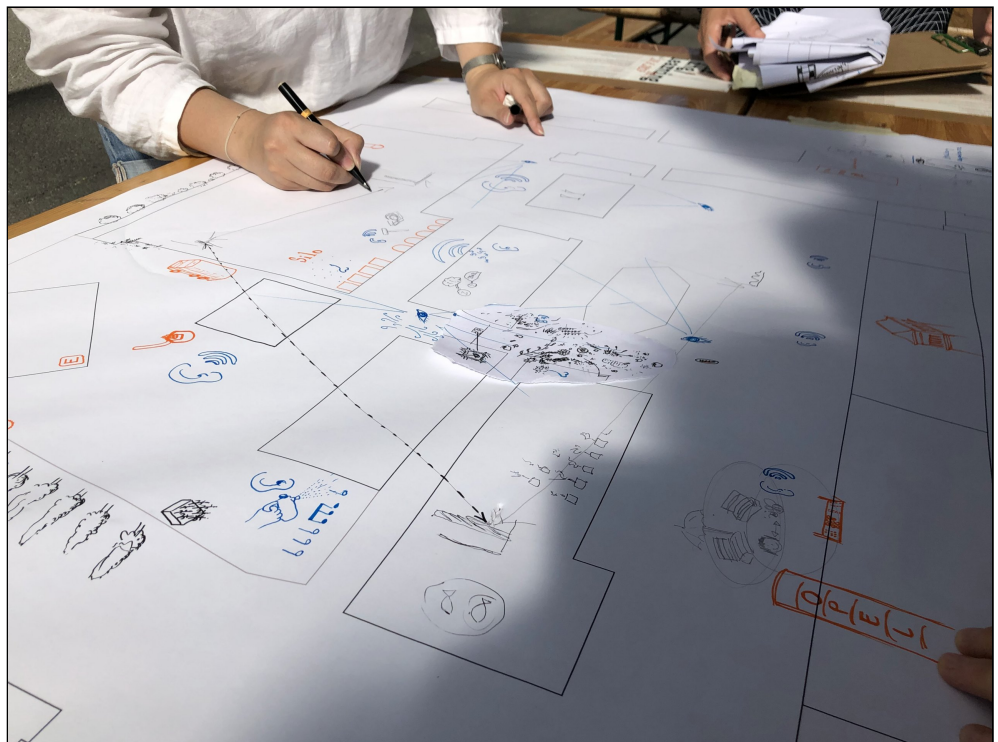


Fig. 6.  
Workshop Spaces of Collectivity with Spolka. Designing a collective  
map  
Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen  
der Künste"



Fig. 7.  
Workshop *Spaces of Collectivity* with Spolka. Designing a collective map  
Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg "Das Wissen der Künste"



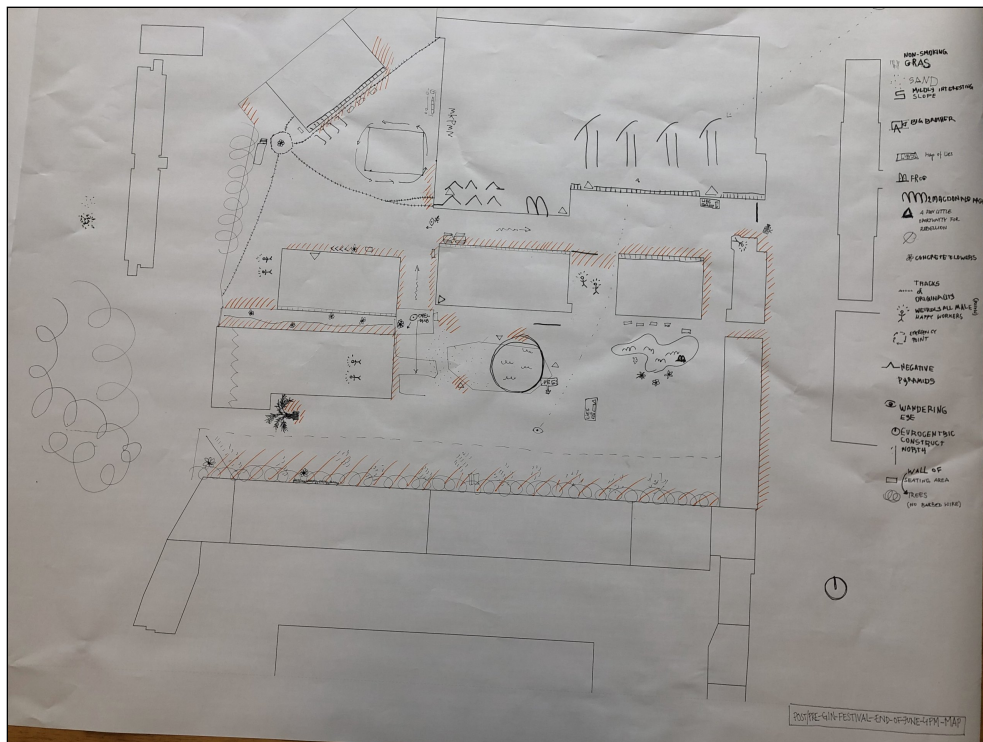


Fig. 8.  
 Workshop Spaces of Collectivity with Spolka. Map in process  
 Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg “Das Wissen der Künste”



Fig. 9.  
 Workshop Spaces of Collectivity with Spolka. Resulting map detail  
 Photo: Fritz Schlüter. Courtesy: DFG-Graduiertenkolleg “Das Wissen der Künste”