

The Schinkel Street Market as a Multifunctional Place in Osnabrück (Germany): Nostalgia and Political Performance in the Pandemic

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Introduction

In this article, I analyse the street market in the Osnabrück city quarter of Schinkel as a multifunctional place and an important component in the physical as well as the imaginary construction of both the immediate surroundings and the environment on a global level.¹ Schinkel is located in the east of the city and is known as being very diverse. It is home to 14,412 inhabitants, including Poles, Portuguese, Italians, Turks, Bulgarians, and people from various countries of the former USSR as well as Germans.²

Many authors in urban anthropology focus on main squares, strategically crucial segments such as the cultural and tourist sectors, or hypervisible settlement structures such as poor and rich ghettos in the city (see, e.g., Caldeira and Holston 2005; Dines 2002; Dürr, E. 2000). I instead foreground what is from the city's perspective a small-scale, relatively unimportant and invisible street market in a neighbourhood that is subject to discrimination as a poor district (see Aivazishvili-Gehne 2023). I look for concrete, multifarious strategies of actors who (re)envision the place, the district or city, or sometimes even society and the global community. And last but not least, instead of describing and analysing the traditional functions of the market as a place of commercial exchange, I perceive the market as a place of temporal transgression that leads us to the city's and society's visions of the past and the future.³

I will demonstrate that in addition to coming to the market for the primary function of buying food, people come for socializing and happy get-togethers, the lack of which has been particularly acutely felt in these pandemic times (Melkumyan, 2017; Melkumyan, Fehlings, Karrar, & Rudaz, 2021). But the street market in Schinkel, like the markets described by Alfred Gell (1999) in his classic study on markets in India, also changes its function in the course of the week and thus has a temporal aspect as well (1999: 107). While the district market takes place here once a week, on other days the square serves as a car park or as a practice area for obtaining a driver's license. And finally, I argue and try to show that Schinkel's street market functions as

¹ The city is located in Lower Saxony and has about 165,000 inhabitants.

² Population register of the city of Osnabrück as of 31.09.2020.

³ When I say "transgressive," I mean "going beyond borders." However, I do not use the term with as broad a meaning as Michel Foucault does (Foucault 1977: 35). Rather than exploring the philosophical or social connotations of the term – what is allowed and what is not, what is excluded and what is sheltered, what is black and what is white etc. (ibid.) – I am concerned with places of transgression as places where people imaginarily leave the physical boundaries of the place, with or without the help of technology (mobile phone, internet). For more on places of transgression in Osnabrück, see Aivazishvili-Gehne (2023).

an effective stage for the representation of various political and social interests and even for visions of the future(s).⁴

In the following I briefly introduce my methodological approach. Then I describe and analyse the location, the street market in Schinkel, from different perspectives. For some it is a space of memory and imagination. Using Harvey's (1993) approach, that "places like space and time are social constructs and have to be read and understood as such" (1993: 25), I address two processes: first, how communities and places are represented and imagined in the market; second, how they actually are constituted through material and social practices (1993: 16; see also Lefebvre 1996). Thinking along those lines, I show in the first part of the paper how different actors from Schinkel try to reconstruct their living environment, the neighbourhood, based on the history of the street market as a place. Here I focus on processes of economic and social transformation on the community level.⁵ Subsequently, I present some ethnographic vignettes and argue that not only the past but also the future of the neighbourhood, of the city and of society on a global level are imagined in (through) such places as Schinkel's weekly market. Among other things, I discuss the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic that have influenced the mapping of residents' future visions for the city and society.⁶ In addition, I report here on a political leaflet found at the market during the local political elections in Germany, a good illustration of how large global entanglements become visible in a relatively invisible local place, in my opinion, and one that took on a special political dimension in February 2022. I recognize Schinkel's weekly street market as a "local and multiple" place of the type discussed by Margaret C. Rodman, who argues that "[f]or each inhabitant, place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people and places. The links in these chains of experienced places are forged of culture and history" (Rodman 1992: 208). Therefore, it is important to understand how people become aware of and use events in the distant past as horizons that can inform present action (1992: 209).

Methodological Approach: Doing Ethnography during the Pandemic

Specific places have their own history and memories (Berg and Sigona 2015: 6; see also Duijzings 2018: 6). Besides the need to contextualize perceptions of and attachments to the place, it is important to observe the everydayness of the place. In the social sciences, places are often associated with terms such as "everyday" and "lived" (Lefebvre 1991; Dürren 2000; Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2018; Hengartner 2005). And in order to understand and grasp everyday practices on

⁴ For more on how social anthropological literature views localities as stages for certain phenomena, see also Haller (1994).

⁵ "Community" in this context includes a sense of belonging, implying identification as a "Schinkelan" as well as a feeling of commonality with fellow city dwellers.

⁶ I have adopted the term "mapping futures" from Bird et al. (1993). In this book, titled *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, various authors from different disciplines describe the cultural politics of space, analyse its representations and changes in time, and try to map the future in order to show possible ways of "thinking futures" (ibid.: xiv).

the local level, it is necessary to study the activities and actions of individuals and groups (formal or informal actors in the district, social/professional groups, etc.) on multiple levels and in different situations. How does the street market affect people's day-to-day lives? How do people reshape the market through their actions? How do they individually and collectively make engagements? Inter alia, I argue that this space is used for imagining a model city of the future as artists and district residents reinvent Schinkel after "their heart's desire" (Harvey 2012: 24).

In addition to the classic method of participant observation, this paper draws on situation analyses, field diary records and thematic as well as biographical interviews.⁷ The pandemic certainly shaped and moulded my research. One useful tool I found for my fieldwork was to intensively undertake the ordinary activity of walking as an ethnographic strategy (cf. Moretti 2017: 93; see also Duijzings and Novaković 2016: 177 and Nguyen 2016). Following Moretti's (1917) suggestion, I walked around in the neighbourhood regularly and learned thereby to see, imagine, and understand public spaces from the particular perspectives and social positions of those I journeyed with.⁸ I followed what different inhabitants imagined and remembered, what they missed or desired (ibid.).⁹ In addition, I found the methodological approach of describing and analysing the field with the help of "tales," as in Van Maanen (2011), a very helpful tool. Van Maanen distinguishes among realistic, confessional and impressionistic tales produced by the researcher. "Realist tales [...] provide a rather direct, matter-of-fact portrait of a studied culture, unclouded by much concern for how the fieldworker produced such a portrait [...] confessional tales focus far more on the fieldworker than on the culture studied. Impressionist tales of the field [...] are personalized accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork cast in dramatic form; they therefore carry elements of both realist and confessional writing" (Van Maanen 2011: 7). My tales are also a combination of realistic and impressionistic tales. Sometimes I made small talk with vendors, and sometimes I just tried to listen to the conversations. Much like Rhoda H. Halperin and her research team, I came to the conclusion that "many aspects of the marketplaces could be observed in silence. These observations provided extremely important data – data every bit as valuable as that generated from interviews. We learned a great deal simply by watching, listening, and counting" (Halperin 1990: 31).

In the following section, I will describe and analyse the marketplace in Schinkel from different angles, both from the perspective of different people and by comparing the stories about its past to today.

⁷ Twenty-eight interviews were conducted in three languages: German, Russian and Georgian. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in the respective languages.

⁸ But sometimes I was also on my own and perceived the surroundings through my senses.

⁹ But it was not always possible to meet people in person. Sometimes the interviews took place after working hours, and maintaining social distance was simply impossible. I was fully vaccinated and also did rapid tests twice a week. There were no Covid incidents during my stay within circles where I moved regularly. The vaccination proved to be extremely effective in my case. And I considered myself lucky to have done it before my field stay.

The Schinkel Weekly Market and Its Tales

Almost every Wednesday, I spent time at the street market in Schinkel to better understand Schinkel as a “lived” place (Lefebvre 1996).¹⁰ There were nine stalls selling fruit, vegetables, fish and meat, cakes and pastries. One stall was for appetizers (*antipasti*). It smelled wonderful when one walked by. Separately, there was a local beekeeper selling honey, wax products and cosmetics. One saleswoman told me during my regular observation tour that the weekly market was held every Wednesday from 7am to 1pm. It was not particularly crowded. However, I could feel that this small local market was important and popular for certain groups of people. Mostly older people or families with small children came. In terms of ethnic diversity, a rather homogeneous picture was represented. The majority were long-established Schinkelans.¹¹ I think migrants are more likely to buy from regional grocery shops than from this local, regional market. The reason may be that the local market is expensive, and because migrants often buy in bulk, it would be uneconomical.

Besides my observations, which did not always go unremarked,¹² I listened to the stories about this locality told by different residents whom I met either directly at the street market or on other occasions and then asked to walk with me in the neighbourhood. Sometimes it was the residents who wanted to show me their neighbourhood on their own initiative. One of them was Manfred, an 84-year-old man whom I met during my research in Schinkel at the civic organization Bürgerverein Osnabrück-Schinkel von 1912 e.V.¹³ He is an active member of this organization. When I told him about my project, he kindly offered to show me around the district. He drove me by car to different places in the district and told me stories about the origin, development and decay of various localities. I heard from Manfred that he often goes out with his friends to the weekly market to have a cup of coffee and exchange ideas. I asked whether I could join him there, and he was happy to make an appointment with me. We met at the entrance of the market on 22 July 2021. He took me directly to the coffee stand, where two elderly ladies and an elderly gentleman met me with curiosity and courtesy. They asked me about my work and then told me about their memories of Schinkel and the market.

Astrid (in her 70s) and Manfred (in his 80s) told me that it used to be quite different 30 years ago. There were lots of flowers. The Schinkelans used to meet here to drink coffee and gossip. Astrid doesn't come to the market so often anymore. The market is smaller and is no longer as lively and interesting as it used to be. The friends she used to go there with are no longer alive, either. But the market still takes place every Wednesday, and those who go there also shop.

¹⁰ I was there pretty regularly (except when there was very heavy rain) for one to two hours at a time.

¹¹ In line with Yildiz's and Berner's suggestion (2011), I take a critical view of Schinkelans' disinclination to move (*Sesshaftigkeit*) and perceive this phenomenon more as a myth (ibid.: 249).

¹² On 04.08.2021, for example, I noted in my diary that passers-by stared at me in amazement and with stern faces as I walked up and down and repeatedly wrote something in my notebook or took photos with my mobile phone (only with permission, of course). The surprise of passers-by was probably due to the assumption that I was a journalist or, even worse, an inspector from the public order office, because I was always standing around taking notes.

¹³ All names have been changed for anonymity.

There is supposed to be an “upgrading and strengthening of trade structures,” as my interlocutors explained to me.

A week later I again met Manfred and his friends at the same coffee stand (where the visitors had mostly bought bratwurst, a type of German sausage usually made of pork and spices), and we talked about the past and present of this place. The friends introduced themselves to me as “old Schinkelans”. One woman has lived here for 70 years, the other for 55 years, and Manfred for 25 years, he says. There used to be sloping gardens here, and instead of apartment blocks surrounding the market, there were workers’ housing estates. Farmers used to sell their produce at the market. Today, the vendors are more often wholesalers. Everyone decides it was better in the old days, when many more visitors came and more people gathered here. Today it is rather boring and sad, Manfred’s friends said.

These statements remind me very much of Sophie Watson’s (2006) analysis of the Princess Street Market in London, where visitors and residents imagined that the past was happier and the marketplace used to be more vibrant and socially harmonious. Susanne Fehlings (2022), who describes the Yabaolu Market in Beijing, made the same observation, there. I think that in Schinkel, as in Watson’s and Fehling’s case, there is nostalgia at work, a kind of “exaggerating” (cf. Mitchell 1998: 2) or “whitewashing” of the past and a production of memory that reflects only some people’s lives (Watson 2006: 46).

There is a significant body of work on nostalgia about places (and inter alia city places) in the anthropological literature (Herzfeld 2016; Mitchell 1998; Boym 2001; Cassin 2016; Shaw and Chase 1989 etc.), and to put this topic strongly in the foreground is beyond the scope of my paper. However, I would like to go into a little more detail on the question of the “nostalgic construction of community” (cf. Mitchell 1998) in Schinkel. As I mentioned before, Schinkel is a very diverse neighbourhood. The history of Schinkel as a district begins in 1914, when several farms with centuries of tradition were incorporated into the city of Osnabrück (Brundiek 1990).¹⁴ Schinkel is a neighbourhood very much characterised by industry.¹⁵ Large companies and factories such as Karmann, Klöckner and Kabel Metal recruited numerous guest workers from Portugal, Italy and Turkey, predominantly starting in the 1970s. Workers’ settlements emerged. “There were big companies here, factories looking for workers. Karmann’s delegation was even in Portugal and advertised there. Klöckner was here, the steel factory, where Hasepark is today. They made the best steel in the whole of Europe. The workers lived right in the vicinity. Each company brought many workers.”¹⁶ In the mid-1990s, the local newspaper spoke of Schinkel as a lively district characterized by a rich retail trade with an “extensive range of goods.” These “long-established family businesses” (*alteingesessene Familienunternehmen*) selling shoes,

¹⁴ The following passages on Schinkel’s historical development are partly taken from my other publication on Schinkel, “Tales of the ‘Good Neighborhood’: Post-Soviet Immigrants in a German City” (2023).

¹⁵ Bürgerverein Osnabrück-Schinkel von 1912 e.V., 1990, *Schinkeler Geschichte(n) Schinkel Historie(s)*.

¹⁶ From informal conversation on 14.07.2021 with Ronald, another member of the Bürgerverein Schinkel von 1912 e.V., whom I met in his own flat, where he showed me old pictures from the district and talked to me about sad developments regarding deindustrialisation in Schinkel. (For more on this topic, see Aivazishvili-Gehne (2023)).

wallpaper, men's fashion and technology no longer exist today.¹⁷ The deindustrialisation that began in the late 1990s dealt a heavy blow to the district.

The traces of dismantled industry and altered factories in the neighbourhood testify all too clearly to the processes of decay. These traces can reveal to us some fragments of the inhabitants' socio-economic life. Where there used to be job opportunities, there have been since the mid- to late 1990s emptiness and desolation. People either become unemployed in Schinkel or have to take jobs elsewhere. For this reason, Schinkel has been known as a socially disadvantaged district since the mid- to late 1990s. Many interviewees, migrants as well as "old inhabitants" (*Alteingesessene*), report that workers from different backgrounds lived together in the locality. It was a social life full of conflicts and emotions. The work and the goals united people. Many interviewees also repeatedly addressed the image of the neighbourhood as a "problem neighbourhood," but not all agreed with this perception.¹⁸

It is likely that market visitors become nostalgic simply because there used to be a better life in Schinkel for residents, "when there was more cohesion," as my nostalgic interlocutors remember it, and more attractive economic conditions than today. The nostalgic construction of Schinkel's past with more joy, flowers and togetherness points rather to the process of "structural nostalgia" (Herzfeld 2016: 140) and emphasizes the inhabitants' relative powerlessness in the present, with a dismantled, destroyed and emptying environment, compared to the "true state" of living in those good old days. And although Herzfeld's work deals with structural nostalgia on a much longer historical scale, Greeks "remembering/reconstructing" and relating to the Ottoman past, his analysis is also applicable to my argument. Like Herzfeld's, my interlocutors also idealize and generalize the harmonious, unclouded past, when Schinkel was economically strong and the neighbourhood had not developed a bad reputation. Manfred's suggestion that men worked, sweated and cursed together is a good illustration of the fact that even in his memories, society was full of human emotions and conflicts and that it was a hard-working life. My interlocutors' sentiments and laments are more a product of the "static quality" (Herzfeld 2016: 140) of the labelling process. People remember one particular "big" event (whether good or bad, and in this case, a rather good one) and overlook the whole series of small but important transformations that followed in the neighbourhood.

Visions of the Future in Times of Pandemic

My observations and entries in my diary show that the street market is still today quite a welcome change from everyday life for the residents. Especially after the outbreak of the pandemic and several lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, the residents very much appreciated the opportunity to meet one another outside for a chat. I regularly saw small groups of people who came together for coffee, cake or bratwurst. But starting in August 2021, the marketplace took on another dimension than just being a place for shopping and socialization. The closer the autumn elections got (a

¹⁷ See Wochenendjournal Osnabrück, *Schinkel Verlagsbeilage*, 15 Juni 1996, 8.

¹⁸ I write about this in more detail elsewhere. See Aivazishvili-Gehne (2023).

federal election on 26.09.2021), the more exciting the weekly market became. Every week I saw new advertising stalls announcing party programs, sometimes even with music to attract visitors. As an effective stage for political plans and actions, the place was thereby transformed from a space of memories to a space for visions of the future. Some of these visions were ordinary in nature: typical political rhetoric from the party programme etc. Others were a true product of the pandemic times. In this section, I present one of these visions of the future, shaped by the pandemic *Zeitgeist*, in the form of an ethnographic vignette.

On 10 September I arrived at the market at 10 am and stayed for about an hour and a half. Visitors were relatively numerous today. I counted up to 60 people. In one corner, I saw a small round table with two musicians and two other persons. They were promoting a party that was not known to me. I spoke with these activists, a woman and a man, who turned out to be party members. Both of them were in their 50s. The party, Basis Demokratie [Democracy basis], was founded in 2020, and its members are euphemistically described as *Querdenker* (“out-of-the-box” thinkers); in fact, they oppose rules about Covid (and other) vaccination and often deny the existence of the pandemic. These people doubt state regulations regarding the pandemic.

The woman had more balanced views, but the man was quite aggressive in my opinion. The woman said, “Of course we see that the virus exists, but as artists we worry about the democratic order in our country. We used to have a good life here. You did what you wanted and hoped that the state would take care of the rest. However, since the beginning of the pandemic, everything is in disarray. Sometimes the regulations are so contradictory and absurd that one no longer knows what is going on. Why are we being restricted?” We also talked about my research project, and the woman said, “There are also Russian Germans with us [in our party]. These people warn us. They say, ‘Watch out!’ They know what life is like in a dictatorship and warn us. We want to create an alternative for these people too. They are AFD [Alternative for Germany] voters, not all of them, of course, but some.”¹⁹

The man I perceived as a real demagogue. He quoted some statistics from the internet and enumerated conspiracy theories about a new world order.²⁰ He spoke hastily and aggressively. “Take off that mask, it is of no use anyway,” he said to me while standing opposite me without a mask. “I think it is alienating that people are wearing masks in this marketplace,” he said. I answered calmly but firmly, “But I still keep my mask on.” He

¹⁹ AFD is a right-wing populist and far-right political party in Germany. It was founded in 2013 as an EU-sceptical and right-wing liberal party.

²⁰ So far, I have heard the following conspiracy theories from vaccination opponents in Germany: 1) The vaccine causes infertility. 2) Certain microchips are inserted in the body and make the recipient manipulable. 3) A new world order will be created, and democracy will disappear. Some opponents of vaccination even compare their situation with the fate of Jews under Nazi Germany. Vaccine opponents were also restricted for the time being, and there was aggressive pushback against them.

smiled ironically, saying, “As you like,” and then he started on his conspiracy theories across continents, citing statistics from some US sources according to which 1.5 million people have died in Europe despite Covid-19 vaccination to his knowledge. [...] According to him, there is no written proof that SARS 2 exists. The vaccines are harmful to the cells, and where and when aftereffects occur is a question.

After too long an hour of ideology for me, I said goodbye to the man with the excuse that I was at the market to observe and record what was happening. “Have fun shopping, then,” he said, and I walked away from him. (From my diary, 10.09.2021, Osnabrück)

As we see from my ethnographic notes, in addition to the primary function of being a place for buying food and socialising, the street market changes its spatio-temporal meaning now and again. As I also mentioned in the introduction, on certain days the marketplace is used for other activities than shopping. In this concrete case, however, it is transformed into a place for the promotion of specific ideas and the construction of visions for the future. The vision presented here is thoroughly characterised by the pandemic. Today, there would most likely be a different image and perception of what is happening in the city or the country. My interlocutors displayed fear and mistrust regarding the social welfare state and its actions. What could hopefully be relied upon before was doubted and not entirely accepted at that time.

In concluding this section, I would like to add my general observation that I did not observe any special activities by this group during my stay. People stopped, listened to the music played, and moved on. The man was also unsuccessful in his campaign against mandatory masks. The visitors, including me, followed the rules and wore masks. At the same time, I could not register any dissenting voices. There were no attempts to ban them from the street market or to protest loudly against them. The offered leaflets were taken with smiling thanks.²¹ In the following section I would like to point to other kinds of visions of the future that are also being created and promoted in the market environment.

²¹ At this point I would like to add as a comment my reflexive thoughts on the activists’ explicit reference to “Russian Germans” in their anti-vaccination ranks. With my vignette, I certainly do not want to reproduce an opinion that is already widespread in Germany, that this group of migrants have shown themselves to have a particularly negative social impact. Neither do I want to portray a migrant neighbourhood like Schinkel as a hotspot and dangerous place in this respect (as having a high percentage of opponents of vaccination), as the media not seldom do. Highlighting that it is a migrant neighbourhood that endangers society through its problematic lifestyle would be simply wrong. A blatant example of the demonisation of such a neighbourhood would be an internet post from 5 May 2021, “‘I decide for myself what I get injected with’: Concerns about vaccination scepticism in socially deprived areas” [„Ich entscheide selbst, was ich mir spritzen lasse“: Die Sorge um die Impfskepsis in sozialen Brennpunkten], referring in this case to a district in Berlin. See <https://m.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/ich-entscheide-selbst-was-ich-mir-spritzen-lasse-die-sorge-um-die-impfskepsis-in-sozialen-brennpunkten/27136770.html>, last accessed on 03.01.2022.

Visions of and Questions about a Peaceful Future

It was not only thoughts of the pandemic that clouded the vision of some citizens in the marketplace in September 2021. Among other things, I also saw a red stall at the market during the election season. Two men were campaigning for the German Communist Party. The party's programme and various flyers were placed on the small round table. A message in the form of a postcard-sized flyer immediately caught my eye. On it were maps of Europe with the caption "NATO EXPANSION" (in all capitals in the original), showing the members of the alliance in 1990 and 2009, along with a question written in red: "Does Russia want war?" Two tanks were drawn under the maps, a huge blue one with "USA" written on it and a much smaller red one representing Russia. This drawing and the chart next to it were intended to show the ratio of military expenditure between the United States and Russia. The reverse of the card was no less interesting, as it reproduced a famous Soviet poem by Yevgeni Yevtushenko, "Do you think the Russians want war?"



Meinst du, die Russen wollen Krieg?

Jewgeni Jewtuschenko 1961, +2017

Meinst du, die Russen wollen Krieg?
Befrag die Stille, die da schwieg
im weiten Feld, im Pappelhain.
Befrag die Birken an dem Rain.
Dort, wo er liegt in seinem Grab,
den russischen Soldaten frag!
Sein Sohn dir drauf Antwort gibt:
Meinst du, die Russen wollen Krieg?

Der Kampf hat uns nicht schwach ge-
sehn,
doch nie mehr möge es geschehn,
dass Menschenblut, so rot und heiß,
der bitt'ren Erde werd' zum Preis.
Frag Mütter, die seit damals grau,
befrag doch bitte meine Frau.
Die Antwort in der Frage liegt:
Meinst du, die Russen wollen Krieg?

Nicht nur fürs eig'ne Vaterland
fiel der Soldat im Weltenbrand.
Nein, dass auf Erden jedermann
in Ruhe schlafen gehen kann.
Holt euch bei jenem Kämpfer Rat,
der siegend an die Elbe trat,
was tief in unsren Herzen blieb:
Meinst du, die Russen wollen Krieg?

Es weiß, wer schmiedet und wer webt,
es weiß, wer ackert und wer sät -
ein jedes Volk die Wahrheit sieht:

Meinst du, die Russen woll'n,
meinst du, die Russen woll'n,
meinst du, die Russen wollen Krieg?

www.linksforum-paderborn.de

Picture 1 and 2: Political leaflet from the market, September 2021, photos by N. Aivazishvili-Gehne

I, as a Georgian citizen, was at the moment somewhat frustrated and remembered my sadness at how little is known about what has happened in Russia's non-EU neighbourhood since the breakup of the USSR. (Examples include the Russian wars in the North and South Caucasus, Chechnya and Georgia in the 1990s and again in Georgia in August 2008, to name a few.) I recognise that my thoughts were influenced by emotionality, but I still find it important to reflexively process my feelings at the time as a researcher in the process of fieldwork. I took this card home at the time as a bizarre find in the field, but I would not have dreamed in my worst nightmare that this issue would be so brutally revived again in February 2022. In my opinion, this example is an excellent illustration of the multifunctionality of the marketplace and of the fact that we, the researchers, can find and follow global political and social processes even in what seem at first glance to be invisible localities.

Sketching the Future of the Neighbourhood

The visions presented in the following pages introduce us to the urban activism that residents and a certain professional group are using to transform the neighbourhood according to “their hearts’ desires” (Harvey 2013: 24). Directly opposite the market entrance, an art installation opened in the summer of 2021. The project was conceived as a signpost. The author and artist Isa Thalstein developed a future-oriented idea for the city and society with a group of young people. I learned about this project from flyers that could be seen in many shop windows in Schinkel. I emailed a team member, and on 16 July 2021, I met Didier, a young student in his mid-20s, right at the installation.

From him I learned that this project has a certain history. At another location in Osnabrück, an art installation had taken the form of a long wall on which was the following sentence: “What world do you dream of?” Passers-by were meant to write their answers on the wall with chalk. From time to time, the team members went there and collected the citizens’ dreams, wishes and visions of the future. After each such inspection, the team gathered, sorted the wishes and expectations into categories, and turned them into a needs analysis for city development. This also paved the way for the current project in Schinkel. A year and a half later, the installation in Schinkel opened. The team consists of four people, and according to Didier, his contribution is entirely volunteer. An opening ceremony was held, and the project was even announced in the local newspaper *Mein Schinkel*, which described the installation as follows:

Ten metal steles about the size of a person are distributed among the trees in Ebertallee [directly opposite the market entrance]. On them, in different languages, are words like ‘peace’, ‘solidarity’ and ‘climate protection’. At each end of the green space are two triangular wooden prisms that serve as writing boards. Written on them is, “Where do we want to go? Where do we start?” Passers-by can add their own thoughts there. “We are looking for places that show what a sustainable, shared future, one with solidarity, can look like,” says Isa Thalstein, who is organising the participatory art project with the group of

artists ZUKUNFTSKUNSTOSNA [Future art Osna(brück); in all capitals in the original]. (*Mein Schinkel: Die Zeitung für den Stadtteil*, 3/2021: 16)²²

When I asked Didier about the purpose of the project, he answered that the aim was to raise societal ecological awareness. The debate on climate change fuels fear nowadays. People increasingly see their future in dark colours. The artistic team wanted to change that. When I asked why they chose Schinkel as a suitable location for this, he gave the following reasons: “Schinkel has had a bad reputation. It has been negatively ‘exoticized’ as a migrant neighbourhood,” and the artists want it to be seen as a place with potential, not just deficits. “Journalists, for example, often demonise the neighbourhood,” he said. “We want to change the image. The future in Schinkel is meant to encourage, to inspire desire. It is a very diverse district. And also the wishes or indications of what we actually see here and what one would like to see here are manifold.” Didier comes twice a week to check on the installation and the entries. I also made a note of some of the wishes that day. One person would like to have a dance hall. People asked when they would finally be able to eat and play music together. More flowers would be desirable. A neighbourhood festival, more meeting places, a café, etc.

What Didier told me is well in line with the anthropologically proven thesis that ethnically heterogeneous groups can also appropriate a neighbourhood as a space for identity and action and thus create group identity (Haller 1994: 11). Examples include neighbourhood groups, clubs, shops and citizens’ initiatives. Schinkel is a truly interesting place to discuss belonging within the framework of “reputational geographies” (Parker and Karner 2010: 1452).²³ According to the authors, people create social imaginaries through the construction, reproduction and contestation of symbolic and material boundaries drawn around places. These boundaries themselves are indicators of social status, define places of memory, and serve as repositories of feelings that can have profound socio-economic and emotional consequences (2010). Residents define an area as “good” or “bad,” “safe” or “volatile,” “no-go” or “peaceful” through such social perceptions (ibid.; Van Eijk, G. 2012; see also Harvey 1993: 22). Put another way, it is a question of symbolic and material boundaries “drawn around places as indicators of social status, sites of memories and repositories of affect that can have profound socio-economic, as well as emotional consequences for local residents” (Parker and Karner 2010: 1452).

My research materials show that residents, whether settled for a very long time or recently arrived, denied the dominant imagery of the neighbourhood with its bad reputation for higher crime rates and violence. Actually, I found that all of my interlocutors who lived outside Schinkel and had little to do with the neighbourhood believed in this bad image. For those who lived there, Schinkel represented a perfectly acceptable and thoroughly positive place to live and socialize (see Aivazishvili-Gehne 2023). One of the activists’ primary goals is to update Schinkel’s damaged image. Through the installation and the blackboards on which to write answers to the

²² My translation from German.

²³ In a similar vein, Loïc Wacquant talks about “territorial stigmatization” (2007).

questions, they highlight more positive perspectives on the space and create a more fruitful vision for the future, together with the residents.



Picture 3: The weekly Schinkel street market, August 2021, photo by N. Aivazishvili-Gehne



Picture 4: An art installation opposite the market entrance, August 2021, Photo by N. Aivazishvili-Gehne

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have analysed a marketplace as a multifunctional space and an important component in the physical as well as imaginary construction of the environment in an urban context. Using different ethnographic observations, I showed spatio-temporal changes in the marketplace and demonstrated how the market's history is affected and shaped by people's day-to-day lives in the given environment. Presenting residents' stories and memories of the marketplace in the past allowed me to illustrate how and why nostalgia shapes individuals' experiences and makes the past of whole communities seem more harmonious and happier. The nostalgic construction of Schinkel's past points rather to the process of "structural nostalgia" and the "static quality" of remembered events in the neighbourhood (cf. Herzfeld 2016: 140). In addition to its significance as a place of memories, the street market also turned out to be a place of transgression for specific visions of the future. Here too we saw the multifaceted trajectories of how residents perceive their own city, state or even the world.

I analysed the changes brought about by the concrete pandemic *Zeitgeist* that the marketplace revealed. Exchanges with my interlocutors pointed to the finding that pandemic visions are filled with as well as shaped through societal dissension. Germany as a social welfare state is doubted and not entirely accepted. Some interlocutors lament the end of the times when it was possible not to worry and simply to trust the state without questioning it.

The example of the political leaflet found at the market transcends state and national boundaries and points to the intertwining of local interpretations with global processes. It shows that even a small local street market can be a highly exciting place for observing transnational and translocal activities. It is a place where borders and boundaries become fluid and where one can experience diverse flows of goods, ideas and ideals from elsewhere (Appadurai 1990).

Finally, I demonstrated that the street market and its immediate surroundings are used as space for articulating a kind of creative urban activism in which artists and district residents, trying to improve the "reputational geographies" (Parker and Karner 2010: 1452) of the neighbourhood, reinvent Schinkel more after "their heart's desire" (Harvey 2012: 24). My interlocutors do not accept the popular characterizations of Schinkel as a "dangerous," "bad" neighbourhood without criticism. Activists as well as residents see versatile potentials and possibilities in the neighbourhood and try to use them productively.

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