

Making a difference – place-making and negotiating change

A study of an intentional community in Northern Germany

The community of Hitzacker/Dorf seeks to establish an other place – a model village providing an alternative to life in mainstream society. This paper aims to develop a better understanding of other places as agents of socio-ecological change. It examines the notion of place-making as central in the materialisation of transformative processes since, in the process of place-making, visions, dreams and hopes need to be renegotiated and tied to the physical reality.

Rebekka Diestelkamp, Michaela Christ

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Abstract

Socio-ecological transformation research generally regards so-called niches in which alternatives to the existing structures, institutions and norms are tested as nuclei for larger transformative processes. Intentional communities are spaces of critique in theory and practice – the critique of existing social conditions. The following paper explores alternative place-making through the empirical study of Hitzacker/Dorf, an intentional community in the Wendland area of Germany. It argues that the constant (re)negotiations about what should be different and what connections to the existing society should be sought out determine the transition phase from idea to materiality.

Keywords

intentional community, interstitial transformation, place-making

If the world has to change, there also have to be places where you already try something different.

Interview with A, June 8, 2019

Throughout history, intentional communities have been founded across the world such as monasteries, communes, ecovillages or spiritual communities. They are united in seeking to “live beyond the bounds of mainstream society by adopting a consciously devised [...] social and cultural alternative” (Metcalf 2004, pp. 9f.). Different communities differ in the nature of their intention to be different and hence their implicit or explicit critique of society¹ and their efforts of change, but they always aim to be places in which alternatives are attempted. In the creation of such communities, negotiations take place around those values and practices that should change while still seeking out connections to that, which is perceived as dominant.

The project at the heart of this paper – Hitzacker/Dorf – is such a community, which is at the moment making the transition from imagined thought to material reality. The community seeks to establish alternatives in a social as well as ecological domain. Initiated in Northern Germany in 2015, following the arrival of many refugees in the area, the project’s aim was to create a place which facilitates a different way of living together – for people who have been living in Germany for their entire lives and those who just got here. The vision of the founders was to make this possible by building a village of 300 people, providing cooperatively run, affordable ecological housing and trade as well as communal and sustainable living structures. This place was envisaged by the founders to become a model village for Europe, illustrating a different welcome culture, communal and ecological living, and a different development for the rural.

After four years of dreaming and planning, the community has recently gone into the construction phase of the project. As

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Rebekka Diestelkamp, MA | Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel | Geographical Institute | Ludewig-Meyn-Str. 14 | 24098 Kiel | Germany | rebekka.diestelkamp@gmail.com

Dr. Michaela Christ | Europa-Universität Flensburg | Norbert-Elias Center for Transformation Design & Research | Flensburg | Germany | michaela.christ@uni-flensburg.de

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¹ Although the society in which intentional communities are embedded are not homogenous, by establishing a critique the projects simultaneously establish what they perceive as mainstream.

GAIA Masters Student Paper Award

Rebekka Diestelkamp is one of the two winners of the 2021 GAIA Masters Student Paper Award.^a Her paper *Of other places: Place-making between contradiction and conformity* was selected by an international jury and is now published in GAIA after editorial board review.

The GMSPA addresses Masters students. They are encouraged to submit their results from research-based courses or Masters theses in the field of transdisciplinary environmental and sustainability science. The winner will be granted a prize of 1,500 euros as well as a free one-year subscription to GAIA. The award 2021 was endowed by Selbach Environmental Foundation and Dialogik gGmbH.^a

^a For more details see

<https://www.oekom.de/publikationen/zeitschriften/gaia/c-131>.

such, the project is in a transitioning phase from planning to physical reality: not merely imagined any more, but also not fully completed in the sense of a material infrastructure. It is precisely this intermediate state between idea and materiality that makes this phase of the project interesting. It is here that concrete practices and material forms now have to be developed and negotiated which express social and cultural alternatives. Materiality here refers not only to the infrastructure to be created newly, but also to existing land onto which this infrastructure is to be built – the land onto which narratives and interpretations of identity are simultaneously constructed.

The paper will explore the negotiation processes happening throughout this transition process from idea to materiality. What are the defining processes which shape the phase of materialisation? How do these processes happen and how do they shape the place?

Three topic areas can be found in the collected data that are of particular importance to the participants for the constitution of the community and the place. These will be depicted after a more general look at the methods used, a conceptualisation of other places and an introduction to the Hitzacker/Dorf community.

Methods

The paper is based on the ethnographic field study conducted in the summer of 2019.² The methodology throughout the stay was based mostly on the people-centred approach developed by human geographers *specifically* to approach the phenomenon of place (Rodaway 2014, pp. 334–343). It shares some similarities with the theory of social practices in that it also focuses on the everyday and the lifeworld of people, and knowledge is generated from human experience (Reckwitz 2002, p. 244).

In order to develop a deeper understanding of place-making processes, it was important to stay on site for one month, living in and with the community, partaking in all community activities (such as plenary sessions, various planning groups, and of course building the houses), thus developing a sense of place.

In total, 12 narrative interviews were conducted with 14 people,³ who were selected by theoretical sampling (Flick 2010, p. 118). All interviewees were active and central members of the project, except for one local citizen of Hitzacker.

The interviews and fieldnotes were transcribed and then coded using grounded theory: open, selective and axial (Glaser and Strauss 2006). An inductive as well as deductive approach was used for the evaluation of the data by keeping in mind some theoretical terms (see below) next to the coding. The resulting analysis considers the place-making processes in Hitzacker/Dorf in a permanent negotiation between contradiction to and convergence with a perceived dominant culture.

Other places

Looking at places that already try out alternatives has been an active topic in transformation research. The notion that a greater social transformation is only possible through experimental spaces serving as a breeding ground for change is reflected in the interest of transdisciplinary research in real-world laboratories, referring to spaces that are somehow delimited from their environment and constitute themselves in a new way (Wagner and Grunwald 2015, p. 27). Spaces that are created in the niches of society – also referred to as interstitial spaces – are considered to show that alternative social, cultural and economic ways of life are possible. Wright (2010) contests alternative spaces are essential in order to experiment with and experience new practices. Von Redecker (2020) similarly assumes that different interstitial practices in connection are what drives social change, whereas Geels (2002) adopts a multi-level perspective and asks under which conditions alternative practices can transition from the niches into the mainstream.

Well into the 20th century the social sciences and humanities were largely space-less disciplines. In the 1980s, however, they underwent what is generally referred to as the *spatial turn* (Bachmann-Medick 2018, Warf 2010). Since then the fundamental importance of understanding all human activity in its spatial dimension has received more attention in many disciplines (Döring and Thielmann 2008). There is no practice or meaning without place.

Examining places that are perceived to be different is nothing new, however. It was Foucault who coined the term *heterotopia* – literally meaning *other place*. As opposed to utopias (Greek: no place), these are places “that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia” (Foucault 1986, p. 24). Re-

² The extensive research was conducted as part of the author's Masters thesis, supervised by Holger Jahnke and Michaela Christ, both at the European University Flensburg, Germany.

³ All interviews were held in German and later translated into English by the author. All interviewees' names and personal data have been changed; letters replace interviewees' names in this paper.

search on intentional communities connects to this understanding, since these projects can be seen as agents of heterotopic place-making per se. They are “deliberately founded to provide an alternative to life in mainstream society” (Meijering 2006, p. 11). Meijering (2006, p. 21) classifies intentional communities as heterotopias, as this “underscores their capacity to challenge mainstream norms and values”. Intentional communities are often considered in light of their utopian nature (Metcalf 2012, Sargison 2007). Whereas existing research focusses on either established or failed projects, this contribution is interested in the so far largely unstudied intermediate state of materialisation. This transition shall be considered for the case of Hitzacker/Dorf, examining the necessary negotiations in establishing its intentional, interstitial nature.

Places in human geography are conceptualised as always incorporating materiality (physical appearance), socio-cultural structures (activities), and meaning (Relph 2008, p. 48). None of the three components can exist or be understood without the other two. The perceived materiality is immediately charged with meaning, which only thus makes socio-cultural structures possible. The meaning given to a place might be personal, but it is also socially shared and can thus be contested (Cresswell 2009, pp. 169 f.). Socio-cultural structures and ascribed meaning in their turn shape the emerging materiality.

Creating difference implies an active process. It is active not necessarily in the sense of intentional (although that can also be the case) but in the sense of a social process. Other *places*, going back to Relph (2008), are constructed in all three dimensions – not only a different social practice, but also a different materiality and – arguably most important of all – giving the practice and the materiality a different meaning. This paper shines a light on the aspect of difference under these dimensions. It considers the spatial dimensions of a niche project, an interstitial space, in its moment of becoming, of transforming from thought into materiality.

Introduction to Hitzacker/Dorf

Hitzacker/Dorf is a development within the small town of Hitzacker (about 5,000 inhabitants) located in the Wendland area of Germany – synonymous for the administrative district of Lüchow-Dannenberg. The Wendland is an area which in itself can be read as a heterotopia in many ways, as its present identity was shaped by the decades of protests against nuclear energy and particularly against the dumping of nuclear waste.

The project idea arose in 2015 among some members of the initiative *Zuflucht Wendland* who had the wish to facilitate intercultural, intergenerational and ecological communal living.⁴ In 2016 a cooperative and an association were founded to provide the legal frame and by now the cooperative has approximately

190 members. In the same year the cooperative acquired the land for the first building phase – called the village road. By 2017 the community had developed an organising structure with various working groups, a weekly plenary session and a monthly meeting for basic issues. The first model house was built in 2018 and by 2019 the project has entered the active building phase.

To become part of the project, there is a formal process starting with a first hands-on participation on one of the regular so-called building days, followed by a mentoring process where interested people are joined with long-standing members. Parts of the resources needed are generated through a personal contribution on the building site. Those who are physically not able to contribute here are asked to involve themselves in other ways, for example by cooking for those who are building. After the getting-to-know phase, which also includes participating in a set number of meetings, plenaries and workshops, an application for membership has to be made which is decided on by the cooperative. With the payment of the membership fee of minimum 500 Euro the admission process is completed.

The cooperative structure also enables the financing of the project, with membership shares, private investors and a loan from the GLS Gemeinschaftsbank. The project intends to create a socially diverse context in which financially and socially less able members can participate fully, for example through a solidarity fund. To date, Hitzacker/Dorf is, however, still largely characterised by a majority of white middle-class academics.

At the time of the research, five out of the 14 planned houses along the village road (the first building phase) were under construction, with building permissions having been obtained for the entire construction phase. The acquisition of the land for the second building phase was still in process (figure 1, p. 32). This part of the village shall ultimately house around 100 people in dwellings designed to accommodate families and co-living arrangements. There will also be one house for communal activities and shared infrastructure, as well as one seminar house for workshops and educational programmes, which will also be rented out to outsiders.

In the summer of 2019, only one family was living permanently on site, another apartment served as an IT office and a third as the community space. From the original idea of the three founders the project has taken its own course, drawing mostly elderly people and some younger families with their own ideas and visions. From a number of refugees involved in the initial stages only one family had remained with Hitzacker/Dorf by 2019.

The community of Hitzacker/Dorf has the objective to create a new infrastructure (in terms of buildings, work, mobility) as well as a holistic social design (with aspects ranging from social justice, migration, socio-ecological transformation, resource, and land use to democracy, communal living, and an alternative development of rural space). The wish to create difference was one of the most striking aspects in all interviews. In all narratives, personal as well as communal, there is a clear demarcation from what is depicted as mainstream society, particularly in the ecological and social domains. The evoked society from which the

⁴ The project information is based on <https://hitzacker-dorf.de/index.html>.

interviewees distance themselves is one where capitalism permeates all areas of life: the social as well as work life, economic activity, and the perception and treatment of the environment.

The values and norms of society experienced as dominant are not shared, and the own life is constituted as diverging from this society. B (interview, June 8, 2019) for instance states: “Money never was important to me. Or *career* or something like that.” “Our society,” C (interview, July 4, 2019) criticises the perceived mainstream, “is a service society. We don’t have our own resources, we have to steal them somewhere else, we have to continually create needs.” This criticism of social values motivates the members of the community in their search for alternatives encompassing an ecological as well as a cultural dimension. In every way, Hitzacker/Dorf embodies for its members the possibility of creating something different to this society: “It is just not sustainable with the agriculture, with the agroindustry – what is offered here as cultural mainstream, marksmen’s festivals, harvest festivals and so on, that’s all nice and well, but it is not our culture, we have a different approach” (interview with C, July 4, 2019). The different approach is understood broadly, more as an open-ended question than a clear answer. Difference here seems to be more important than defining own goals. In C’s (interview, July 4, 2019) account questions are therefore more predominant than answers: “It’s about a different economy, [...] how do we do a culture of sharing? How do we get out of this spiral of growth? [...] How do we live with refugees, enable different working hours, build and live ecologically – and healthy?”

From the material on Hitzacker/Dorf we have identified three main topics, which appear to be of particular importance to the constitution of the place. The first is the naming of the project, which symbolically expresses an essential identity. The second are the meanings attributed to the land onto which this identity

will materialise, and the third are the way decisions are taken in the project – a process which lays the foundation for future practices.

Meaning: naming Hitzacker/Dorf

Taking Tuan’s (1975, p. 153) assumption that naming is a central aspect to ascribing meaning to a place as a starting point, the name Hitzacker/Dorf can be seen to be pregnant with meaning in this regard:

Above all, it can be seen to express the wish to be part of the surroundings. The community specifically chose the name Hitzacker to express an affiliation with the town they are located in and they feel part of. At the same time, the second part, “Dorf” (village), explicitly establishes difference – it is not a part of Hitzacker town, but Hitzacker *village*, which is built here. When asked about the name, this tension was present in many answers. A (interview, July 19, 2019), for example, mentions that she doesn’t think the name is bad, “even though we are of course actually a district of Hitzacker. And consciously so, even if that is sometimes difficult to communicate.” At another point she clearly stresses that she doesn’t see the project as a “closed village” but that they “try to get in touch with the neighbourhood, who are invited to participate in the topping out ceremonies, and the offers for the community are also offers for the neighbourhood” (interview with A, June 8, 2019). Village for her does not stand for a closed entity but is rather meant to symbolise community – a community which, however, comes into the difficulty of defining itself as separate from another entity, that of Hitzacker town. In order to bridge this separation, the unity of both is continually reinforced through words: “We are part of the town. It would be a disaster if we were this segregated” (A, from the notes of the research diary, July 2, 2019).

Despite the emphasised connection with the town, naming the project seemed to have created a rift between Hitzacker and Hitzacker/Dorf. This was acknowledged by members of the community – who referred to it only grudgingly: “It was a working title. That’s now becoming a problem. In actual fact we’re creating a district of Hitzacker” (interview with C, July 4, 2019). The discomfort with the name was also reflected in the interview with D (July 2, 2019), who sees himself as a



FIGURE 1: Latest planning of Hitzacker/Dorf, both building phases.
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<https://www.gutzeit-architekt.de>

fan turned sceptic. He originally liked the project but then started seeing things more critically because of the chosen name – “but then it was called Hitzacker *Dorf*. And that was the end of it for me.” For him “the village thing has nothing to do with Hitzacker” (interview with D, July 2, 2019). Through the name, the project all of a sudden becomes something distant and strange to him. D (interview, July 2, 2019) sees himself as a local and thus representing the entire local population, who seemingly have a shared understanding of what village means: “A village is a village, a village has its own village life.” To D the project has already fallen into the extreme pole of contradiction through the naming. To him this name symbolises ultimate difference, no potential of connection.

The community chose to call the project “village” not in reference to the material circumstances as a geographically separate settlement. Within the community “village” expresses what they aim to create: solidarity and autonomy. The term points towards an idealised and romanticised idea of rural life. The village becomes a metaphor for a life in which social relations are close, a life characterised by neighbourhood assistance, autonomy and commitment. Village is imagined as a place without alienation, anonymity and social divides – all of which aspects of modern life which the members reject.⁵ The name expresses what the community wishes to be, and what not.

“We want to be a real village,” says E (from the notes of the research diary, July 2, 2019), implying that a *real* village does not just happen by itself but needs to be created. To her, as well as to C (interview, July 4, 2019), village is “the epitome for a cluster which is largely autonomous. Which therefore in itself provides the possibility of a safe context.” The strive for autonomy can here be understood as enabling difference by protecting the community from the norms and regulations of the surrounding society.

There is also an awareness of romanticising the idea of village life when the darker sides of village life are mentioned: “In actual fact village life is brutal. If you don’t integrate, if you don’t want to be a part, if you don’t join the marksmen’s club or the fire brigade or something, you’re *out*!” (interview with C, July 4, 2019). However, the positive associations with the notion “village” seem to have outweighed the negative ones and the prevalent narrative is one which again establishes difference: “We want to imagine village completely *new* – and for our times, meaning for the 21st century, that means solidary neighbourhood. Relating to each other, but still living in freedom. That will be our piece of art” (interview with A, July 1, 2019). What village means and stands for is thus continually re-negotiated in Hitzacker/Dorf. “Village” to the members of the community is something to be practiced, experienced and indeed contested.

Materiality: the land

At the time of purchase, the land where the village road was to be built was a fallow agricultural field without pre-existing buildings or even trees. The perceptions, descriptions and interpretations of this land by the people of Hitzacker/Dorf were diverse but there is a clear narrative of freedom implicated by this uncluttered space. It bore the promise of malleability according to hopes and dreams: “[...] and then I thought, in this place the dream can become reality, it is something where so many things are still possible” (interview with A, June 8, 2019). When asked to describe their thoughts and feelings on first seeing the particular field where Hitzacker/Dorf would materialise, the interviewees mentioned the amount of space and the freedom this space implicated. Projecting new visions onto an already existing place can even be understood to share similarities with a colonial approach. Beetz (2008, p. 12) contests that the dominant discourse on “empty” space, particularly also linked to the rural, often leads to a justification of “development” work in rural areas. In this way the rural serves as a supposedly empty canvas on which the realisation of any given project is not only possible but even welcome.

Materialising their dreams brought about some conflict, not just within the community, but also in contact with the neighbours. Particularly in the beginning a dispute between Hitzacker/Dorf and the neighbouring carbide company around emission requirements caused an initial rift between locals and newcomers. Although the land appeared empty, it was not so for the neighbouring factory, who saw it as part of their needed environment for emissions.

Reading the land through which the ideas were to materialise, some interviewees stress the possibilities of difference from current social and economic ways, whereas others focus on their own emotional connection with this place. The critique of social circumstances, an unsustainable economy and agricultural production also becomes apparent by the view of the members onto the land they take possession of. F (interview, July 18, 2019) says: “To start with, everything here was expanse and field. By now some nooks have emerged because of the dug-out material, which is lying around everywhere, and which is starting to green. But in the beginning, this was actually abused land.” To him the remnants of society’s failures are inscribed into the materiality of the place. The land as it existed before the project started is simply referred to as a field by the interviewees, but at the same time this field is filled with negative attributes whereas the land use since the beginning of the project is seen very positively.

What the interviewees see is not just any field. The description of this plot follows along the lines of their experience of social injustices instead. G (interview, July 10, 2019), for example, characterises the land as infertile and expresses her gratification for exactly this circumstance: “I am glad we’re building on a place that is not particularly fertile. That reassures me somehow.” The unprofitable soil is seen to give a sense of sufficiency to the place, to the project and to the people.

⁵ Ideas on the – in part heavily romanticised – revival and (re)construction of village and rurality have also found their way into recent sociological and geographical literature. See, for example, Neu und Barlösius (2018), Woods (2011), Neu (2016).

Contemplating the land thus problematises dominant paradigms of growth and consumerism. Despite all criticism of the way the land and resources have been treated, the stories simultaneously express a relationship with the place by finding in the landscape a sense of home and connection. H (interview, July 14, 2019) mentions that the Elbe (the river close by) is her favourite river and when she came to Hitzacker “I thought everything fits. It’s like coming home.” J (interview, July 17, 2019) talks about similar feelings: “I like the land here a lot. I feel like beginning from just outside Hitzacker all the way down to Dannenberg there is this landscape where I felt at home straight away. It was this strange sense of arriving. Being at home.” The landscape is thus filled by the interviewees with a meaning of safety, home, familiarity. These are all attributes which seek to establish a relationship.

Practice: making decisions

A practice which fundamentally structures any intentional community and along which difference is explicitly established in Hitzacker/Dorf concerns the decision-making processes. After the original attempt to make all decisions together, the growing number of members called for a more systematic approach, which ultimately led to establishing a sociocratic decision-making model. This means the tasks are dealt with in working groups and advisory boards, who can make decisions for their field of action in a self-determined manner. All working groups are interconnected through topic-specific delegate conferences. In these, cross-thematic consultations are held. Questions of principle are discussed and decided in the monthly plenary or the general assembly.

Sociocracy as an organisational tool is supposed to counter the “problems of power and dominance,” as F (interview, July 18, 2019) describes it; sociocracy is seen as a method to enable participation and contribution of all, even those traditionally excluded. The members of the community wish to take decisions that respect all voices. Nobody should feel excluded; hierarchies and power accumulation should be avoided. The community is proud of this equality-based self-organisation. At the same time doubts and frustrations permeate the everyday experience: “In actual fact it’s not that easy to implement and shape things here” (interview with K, July 9, 2019). And indeed, the very things sociocracy is meant to oppose seem to continue being problematic. K (interview, July 9, 2019) explains that he generally doesn’t feel like the communication is very advanced, rather “it is like in all groups, there are people who like to talk a lot and digress, and there are people who are quieter.” This dynamic interlinks with a gender disparity – a topic which some members addressed already in the early stages of the project: “We temporarily had a women’s group because it was so male dominated [...] in the first phase” (interview with A, July 19, 2019). It becomes apparent here that even the procedure of decision-making is not final, but has to be re-negotiated again and again in its details.

Most struggles manifest themselves following the same disparities a greater society also faces. Despite being open for everyone in principle, resources, particularly knowledge (education) and time, continue to play a central role in who is able to participate in the working groups. J (interview, July 17, 2019) describes the dynamics in the construction group – which fundamentally shapes the materiality of the project – as follows: “We had a construction group, who took care of everything, and then I realised that I can’t *participate*, I’m struggling technically but also time-wise.” Discussions in the construction group during the research were led by the three people with most technical knowledge, and to save time and costs other members occasionally refrain from getting too involved. From the perspective of the participants, external constraints frequently prevent a more extensive debate about decisions.

The struggle with participatory decision-making finds its extreme form in the confrontation with vastly differing needs and ideas. Long discussions without physical facts were portrayed as the root of the problem of keeping refugees involved: “In the beginning there was no house here, only visions and plans and how it could be, that was a complete mental overload” (interview with L, June 26, 2019). On a very basic level, participation requires material security and mental perspective and a shared culture of negotiation. L (interview, June 26, 2019), too, is convinced that “once the houses are *built*, *then* it will be easier to find refugees. Then they will be able to see what it is, how life *is*.” At the same time, this approach robs them of their active involvement in materialising ideas; it means fixing the dreams *for* them.

Particularly from the negotiations around the materiality, the design of the houses, the gardens or the community spaces for example, two very differing needs can be discerned: that of breaking with old traditions and lifestyles; and that of seeking familiarity, home and convergence, which of course comes to fruit in completely new dimensions when considering the stories of displacement and disconnection on the side of the refugees. The interviewees are aware of the discrepancies between dreams and reality and that the sociocratic structure does not automatically solve the issue. It is part of the experimental nature of the project that the process of decision-making has to be constantly adapted and revised to make room for the different needs.

Conclusion

Striving to create other places and attempting to live alternative futures in the society as it is creates, as Pickerill and Chatterton (2016, pp. 736f.) describe it, incomplete terrains, “where people live by their beliefs and face contradictions from living between worlds – the actually existing and the hoped for.” The contradictions of this interstitial life in Hitzacker/Dorf appear to arise in the earliest stages of the transition process from idea to materiality. Whereas in thought everything is possible, the material reality requires decisions and therefore negotiation processes about critique of the existing and aspiration of difference. The conver-

sations in this study have highlighted three key elements: namely the meaning given to the place through its naming, the understanding of the materiality of the land, and the practice of socio-critical decision-making. The place in its materiality, practice and meaning is produced through the negotiation processes that balance on the line between establishing alternatives while at the same time seeking out identification with the surrounding society as well. These processes are central in the creation of a self-identity for the project and in the occupancy of the place.

The study of Hitzacker/Dorf shows that these negotiations are not only a central challenge but also the basic mode in which interstitial transformation happens. The study also shows just how conflictual and demanding these processes are.

Through the discussion around what should be changed and which connections should be nourished, an objective of transformation itself ultimately becomes subject to contestation. The society from which a delamination happens is thus questioned and (re)constituted.

This phase of materialisation – the phase of bringing visions into a physical shape – is of particular importance. During the time of “mere ideas” the empty space can be filled with visions, dreams, and hopes, as well as critique of the previous influence of society. In the process of building these ideas need to be renegotiated and tied to the existing and the newly created materiality. Once the building phase is completed, the newly shaped materiality itself will take a leading role in establishing what life is like in this community. It is the time of transition from thought to physical reality which requires that the balance and mutual influence of materiality, meaning, and practice must be negotiated between all those involved.

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Rebekka Diestelkamp

Studies of general and comparative literature, English and religious studies (BA) at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, and transformation studies at the European University Flensburg, Germany (2020: MA). Since October 2021 research assistant at the Geographical Institute, Kiel University, Germany. Research interests: humanistic geography, place-making and socio-ecological transformation.



Michaela Christ

Studies of sociology, political sciences and pedagogy. Research assistant at the Norbert Elias Center of Transformation Design & Research of the European University Flensburg, Germany, since 2013 head of the historical transformation research field. Research interests: sustainable urban development, sufficiency research, historical transformation, changing societal relations to nature, sociology of violence.