

tal

Jochen Boberg_ Utopia of the humane city

Das Tal

Wie willst du dich mir offenbaren,
Wie ungewohnt, geliebtes Tal?
Nur in den frühesten Jugendjahren
Erschienst du so mir manchenmal.
Die Sonne schon hinabgegangen,
Doch aus den Bächen klarer Schein!
Kein Lüftchen spielt mir um die Wan
Doch sanftes Rauschen in dem Hain
Es duftet wieder alte Liebe,
... der alte Lust;

en



Kurt Schwitters, Merzbau, Hanover, 1933

**How do you want to present yourself to me,
so unexpectedly, my beloved valley?**

Only in my early youth

I often saw you like today.

The sun has already descended,

Yet there's a glitter off the stream;

No breath of wind caresses my cheek,

Yet there's a soft rustle in the green.

From: Ludwig Uhland, The Valley

Prolog

"Something is utopian, as a devaluation in the mouths of businessmen (and politicians) who feel particularly wise, this sweeping devaluation is homebaked or phrase anyway, garnished with fear of the future in general."

This provocation by the philosopher Ernst Bloch, the author of the "The Principle of Hope", calls for the daring leap into a better future.

In contrast, there is utopia as an inner emigration in times of hatred and war. Kurt Schwitters wrote in 1933 as a comment on the "Merzbau": "That's when we noticed how small we were. "I'm scared," said Helma. "But you really don't need to be," I replied. "I'll build a house in our imagination and we'll move in." That was the utopian refuge, the Merzbau.



The times are restless, they scare many, but we still have the opportunity (and the task) to shape our world with a real utopia in such a way that we do not have to flee into our own, isolated “Merzbau” so that is worth living in the world we have built – for everyone.

From non-place to living space

When you enter the street with the simple name **Tal** from Marienplatz through arches under towers, you are not touched by poetry.

On the right the lively Viktualienmarkt, on the left the Platzl with the Hofbräuhaus, in the back the Marienplatz, which is busy at times, and in front of you, hardly to be seen, the Isartor, actually historically significant, the only one preserved from times past, there is a piece of street, inhospitable, parked full early, actually useless and ugly: no place to linger, no place to rest, to talk.

And the gate, the Isartor itself, is a barrier, entered only during city tours, no longer leading anywhere, surrounded by traffic.

Here, in the historic center, this Metropolis With A Heart has an open wound, especially since the surroundings have lost a lot of their appeal in recent decades. Theatinerstraße and Weinstraße have lost cafes, small shops, cinemas and now also a traditional pub, behind the New Town Hall lie boring makeshift arrangements since ages. Marienplatz is also no longer surrounded by anything worth living; Kaufingerstraße to Karlsplatz follows the same trend. The term “pedestrian zone” is of little use here, and as long as commercial and residential rents continue to rise, nothing will change. But at least, traffic-calmed in many places and with the crossing of the U-Bahn and S-Bahn at Marien-

platz in connection with the 1972 Olympics, part of the old town was made more accessible.

The **Tal** remained untouched and that is precisely why there is a great opportunity here to dare an effective experiment with a look at the history in the center of the old town: not to advance from the car-friendly city to some bike-friendly or otherwise city, but to a human one.



Paul Citroen, Metropolis, collage, 1923

But first back to history. The stark opposite of such a city was shown by the photo exhibition by Olof Eliasson in Berlin's Martin Gropius Bau from 2010 entitled "Innen Stadt Außen" ("Inside City Outside"). Depressing images of large, bare places, inhospitable streets, rows of houses outside and futuristic-looking interiors, deserted. Such a panorama of inhospitableness could be found almost everywhere today: in the deserted former industrial centers, the

residential machines of the big cities, the empty inner cities.

In contrast to this, the euphoria of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, represented in the cathedrals of the industrial age, the train stations, the factories and reflected in the images of art, for example already with Menzel, then with the painters of the "Brücke", milder with the "Blauer Reiter" – the myth of the metropolises as places of progress.



from: Ólafur Elíasson, Innen Stadt Außen, 2010, p. 46/47





Rudolf Schlichter, Hausvogteiplatz, watercolour, 1926

This dream (the roaring twenties), which was also partly ecstatic after the First World War, was then thoroughly shattered by the crimes of the Nazis, the mass murders, the destruction of large parts of Europe and – probably rightly so and most of all – the destruction of the German cities and regions.

Munich was also badly hit. The statistics say 90 percent of the old town center and another 50 percent of the surrounding area were in ruins, a real catastrophe and yet – at least

in western Germany – the possibility of a new beginning under democratic conditions and with the Marshall Plan. The reconstruction began and soon the economic miracle began too. The constitution, the party programs, the revival of “free democracy” gave rise to hope that a society would now emerge that saw people in the center, socially and justly. Much of this has come true, but there have been other developments: from the social to the free and finally to the market economy with all its consequences.

After two slumps, the financial crisis in 2008 and now a devastating pandemic, we feel these consequences first-hand, are terrified of the emerging conspiracy theories and extreme ideologies and know that we have to fundamentally change something, not just in our heads, but in our own environment. It’s not about cosmetic repairs, but about a fundamental change, about the experiment of a utopia.





Israels Plads, Copenhagen, 1950s.

**It's not about cosmetic repairs,
but about a fundamental change,
about the experiment of a utopia.**

Such an experiment is being considered in many cities across Europe, and it was implemented in Copenhagen. "Our urban living room – Learning from Copenhagen" is the name of an exhibition that is currently touring through Germany and is documented in a publication (Arvinus + Orfeus Verlag 2016). An example: "Five million people sojourn on Israels Plads every year: The square was designed as an urban living room that celebrates diversity and the art of living. Here people are free to talk to each other, play games or simply relax." That is what the catalog says, and the photo is proof.

We know how much the designed environment, how much architecture and urban space affect us.



Israels Plads, Copenhagen, 2015

A small example: in Nuremberg there is the Sebald Church, the nave Romanesque with heavy walls, the choir high Gothic, with columns from the floor to the spire. If you observe visitors, you can see them in the Romanesque part of the church, stooping slightly, but in the choir they stand upright and are "drawn into the sky", a sublime feeling. You can experience the same thing in everyday architecture, in school buildings, government offices, department stores and, of course, when furnishing our streets.

I experienced Munich from 1962 to 1974 as a "secret capital city" and a Metropolis With A Heart. There were still breaks in the cityscape, Schwabing was Schwabing, with its bars the "Seerose", the "Nacht-eule", the "Gisela", especially the

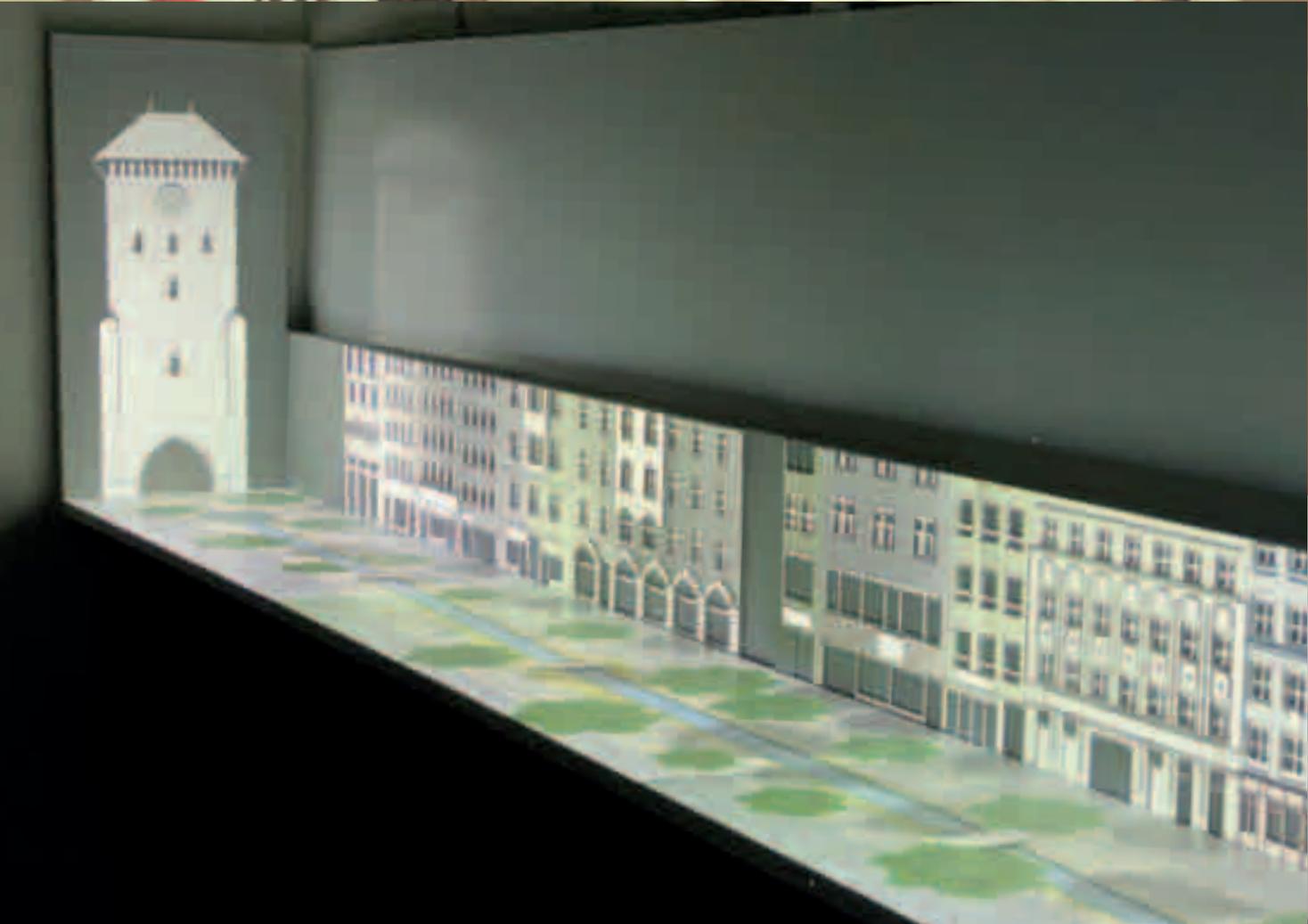
"Mutti Bräu", cinemas and jazz clubs. Leopoldstraße was an artist's boulevard, and life was booming around the university. I also knew the **Tal** because the advertising department of a large food company, where you could earn good money, was located close by on Ledererstraße. Even back then, the **Tal** itself was a non-place, at most a street to be crossed over.

After this little historical digression, which provides nothing more than an insight into the necessity of change, we now get to the point:

It is precisely the fact that the **Tal** with the Isartor, despite its historical importance, was not affected by urban development measures, which makes the change possible there – in the sense of the human-friendly city, following the example of Copenhagen. An extension of the usual "pedes-

trian zone", newly provided with fast cycle paths, is certainly not a solution. You can see that on Theatinerstraße, Kaufingerstraße and their further course. A fundamental intervention is necessary.

The Munich architect Markus Uhrig, who lives very close to Gärtnerplatz, delved into the history of Munich's old town center, studied the function and appearance of the historical **Tal**, saw its earlier meaning and concluded that this is exactly where a utopia could be realized in the best sense of the word. He wants to free the Isartor from the grip of the old town ring – built at that time in the spirit of the "car-friendly city" – and simply make it into a gate again. The **Tal** should get its city stream back, not with horse troughs and washing facilities, but as an aes-





thetic and ecological element in the center of the metropolis. Bridges and places to linger should complement the concept, and the trees should also be functional. A concept to fall in love with, certainly also benefitting the economy. For almost 60 years I have been connected to Munich – as I am to Berlin, this terrible city – through projects and friendships. I have lost touch with Leopoldstraße a little, with its favorite locations. The **Tal** in its new shape would be more than just a substitute, hopefully with an effect on the whole city, and a beacon for other regions.

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