

“We Want No Flats...!”

***Bauwagen* Culture and the ‘Desired’ Urban**

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In the autumn of 2002, police evicted Bambule, one of Hamburg’s alternative trailer parks, which for eight years had been tolerated on a centrally situated plot of wasteland owned by the city. In the months that followed, the inhabitants and supporters of this experiment in anarchic, cheap and free communal living organised weekly protest marches through Hamburg. The city attempted to keep these demonstrations out of the main shopping area, allegedly for fear of vandalism. The shopkeepers’ association pleaded for a ban on inner city demonstrations during the Christmas season in order to safeguard commerce on Saturday afternoons. Media coverage was intense, but disappointing; newspapers carried only the usual pictures of police and demonstrators, failing to represent the vibrant cultural and architectural contributions made by the inhabitants of the trailers.

Starting out on a three-year photographic project in the aftermath of the Bambule eviction, it was my intention to document aspects that had been ignored by the mainstream media: the visually unique world of Germany’s mobile squatter settlements.

Bambule was part of a nationwide phenomenon. In the 1980s, people began to use circus wagons, lorries, busses and *Bauwagen* (oblong trailers about 2 metres wide and 3-10 metres long, with a curved roof); these were originally produced to accommodate workers on building sites and to occupy disused plots of inner-city land. The changing practice of local authorities at this time had made squatting in empty houses increasingly difficult.¹ Long-term squats were legalised by rent contracts, and new squats were largely prevented by immediate evictions. To bring one’s own house – in the form of a trailer – to squat on urban wasteland was not only an alternative, but offered the possibility for an even more open, self-defined way of living. Today there are about 100 *Bauwagen* sites in German towns and cities, from Flensburg up on the Danish border down to Tuebingen and Munich.² There may be as many as 10,000 people living in disused wagons, trailers, buses and trucks, recycling and modifying them into highly unique, mobile, low-cost, permanent living spaces (Kropp and Ulferts, 1997).

Individual motivations for moving out of a flat and into a trailer are quite diverse. As one *Bauwagen* owner, Rolf, tells the story of Hamburg’s Wendebecken site, which was evicted in 2004:

People were coming out of the squatter scene, like me, but also out of the ecological movement. There were punks who were drunk all day every day, students with a taste for the extravagant, and hippies. We were inspired by friends who were already living on sites, by a longing for a collective way of life and the wish to reduce costs in order to have to work less. It's hard to explain what I liked about it. I liked the communal spaces, the freedom to improvise, to create something. I liked to live in the open. The economic factor was important, too. I simply don't like selling my labour...

Philipp, another *Bauwagen* owner, stresses the point:

I consider it madness having to pay hundreds of euros every month just to be allowed to be and live somewhere. When I came back from a year in Spain, I parked my truck next to one lone *Bauwagen* on some parking lot and just lived there. I still had a flat rented under my name and sub-let to someone else, but I had no desire to move back in. It feels different. The flat would have meant little light, a narrow staircase, noise from the neighbours – and the financial burden of having to pay a monthly rent of 300 or 400 German marks. No, I lived in the truck, and in a cellar where we also made music. Eventually that parking lot grew into a large *Bauwagen* site, with up to 50 people living in trucks, trailers and self-built houses – it was utterly wild, because there was no one there to decide anything.

Reducing the cost of everyday life is a major argument for most of the mobile squatters. Surplus time, energy and money afforded by this lifestyle allow new ideas to spring up. Some *Bauwagen* inhabitants run small businesses related to the music and media scene and consider themselves merely temporary users of these undefined urban spaces. Others emphasise the wish to live within a group of people who share their outlook on life and political beliefs. Near Bremen there is a site occupied by ATTAC³ activists, while the Schwarzer Kanal in Berlin define themselves as a community of women, lesbians and transgender people. On the other hand, there are sites where activists live alongside people who have fallen through every social net and could not make it anywhere else.

The kind of self-determined, communal lifestyle that *Bauwagen* dwellers envision for themselves would be impossible to realise within the usual economic, social and architectural constraints of the inner city. Challenging the notion that centrally situated urban plots of land are to be defined first and foremost in terms of monetary value, they claim the right to settle in disused areas and set up self-organised micro-communities in which all building activities respond to the exact needs of the inhabitants.

In Hanover, *Bauwagen* dweller Christian founded Trebe e.V., a charitable organisation for homeless children. Next to the trailer he lives in are his kitchen shed, a second trailer serving as a communal space, and an additional shed divided in two that acts as a functioning office and homeless shelter. For seven years, his site was the first and only homeless initiative in Hanover that would accommodate guests anonymously. The city eventually followed his example with its own Bed By Night⁴ institution. Trebe e.V. has

counted up to 450 overnight stays per year, the communal trailer serving as a second shelter during high occupancy times. As Christian says:

...We had squatted a house with a large garden and people came to stay there with their trailers for a few days or weeks. So when I moved into my first trailer I didn't think about it too much; it was something that was already being done. I had a chassis and there were a lot of building materials left over from the construction of Hanover's underground. They were bringing us truckloads of untreated wood for which they had no further use. From this I built the trailer and a shed. This place here used to be a parking lot. There is still concrete underneath the soil. The squatters next door dug holes into the concrete and planted all the trees. Some of the soil I fetched with a wheelbarrow from another construction site down the road. And then it turned out the squatters had a cellar full of earth from when they had begun to dig an escape tunnel leading from their house to the next. That's where the rest of the soil came from...

To be 'on Trebe' is another expression for being homeless, for being a tramp. Jurisdiction at the time was such that Hanover's institutions could not provide shelter for homeless minors. We developed our concept and coordinated it with the official in charge of the safety of children and youths in the city. Kids and young adults came to us who had run away from home, fed up, or from an institution, saying, "The teacher hit me", things like that. Here they could just *be* for a while, without feeling they were being interrogated. We would give them a chance to calm down for a few days, and then try to clarify their situation. "Don't you want to phone your mother, she'll be anxious to hear from you? No way? Then how do you want to live? You can't go on stealing..." By and by we would try and establish contact with the parents or the authorities, to find a solution. Where can he go if he doesn't want to go back to where he came from?

Some *Bauwagen* sites developed gradually in places where no one seemed to mind a growing number of trailers. More often, these settlements are the result of prior planning. Their process involves systematically roaming the city in search of suitable pieces of wasteland, briefly occupying – and being evicted from – numerous plots in order to emphasise the need for a place to live, and garnering support of local politicians (especially valuable if the city owns the land in question). Rolf, who was active in all the squattings that preceded the establishment of Hamburg's Wendebecken site, notes:

We decided on a district and established contact with citizen's initiatives, cultural centres, people who were active in any kind of grassroots organisation and who might be able to support us by their presence. One by one and over a period of a few days, we moved the trailers to that district, in order not to attract too much attention. We mobilised people, tractors, wrote flyers, got in contact with the press and some lawyers.

Then the actual squatting, at five in the morning. That was how the first squatting was done. Later it was much reduced, roaming a district by bike, looking for suitable plots, using political contacts to find out who owned them, taking a vote within the group, and then go!

In the beginning we used 10 trailers for the squattings, which constituted an enormous logistic effort. Later on we only took 3 trailers, which was much easier because we had three tractors for as long as we needed them. We used to stay between one and five days, until the police came to evict us. At the last minute we would obediently tow the trailers from the site and move on to the next. It was somewhat absurd. This went on for three months, with a largish demonstration now and then, and always a lot of press coverage.

Then we refused to move from the empty lot next to the autonomous cultural centre Flora. We were evicted by force, which was quite rough. The district authorities towed our kitchen trailer onto a parking lot belonging to the local football team, where a few homeless people were living in trailers and self-built houses. We took this as an invitation and moved there with 12 trailers. One-and-a-half years later we were again evicted and squatted ten more sites, in vain. Eventually another *Bauwagen* group was offered the Wendebecken site, and we just went and stayed there too.

Once established, all *Bauwagen* sites set up their own infrastructure. As long as they have no contract with the city and are merely tolerated, compost toilets must be built. Electricity is generated through solar panels and stored in truck batteries. A supply for drinking water must be found in the neighbourhood, perhaps at a gas station, or a public building. The Wendebecken was the first *Bauwagen* site in Hamburg to obtain a lease from the local district, which obliged the squatters to pay modest sums for electricity, water and connection to the district's sewer. Most sites hold a weekly plenary, where residents debate questions concerning the community. Space for trailers is limited, so new arrivals are decided on collectively. Often a *Volksküche* or communal kitchen is set up, to which visitors are welcome. Concerts, workshops, demonstrations and other events are organised. The trailers are constantly being reworked with discarded materials like wood left over from building sites, old window frames from condemned houses, pallets, styrofoam, metal sheeting, plastic foil and tar. Second storeys and winter gardens are added to the wagons, sheds and huts are built onto them, and some have gradually been transformed into houses in which the original trailers have been all but completely obscured.⁵

Although *Bauwagen* sites are politically controversial, a number of them have been legalised through contracts with the city or local district. In Hamburg and Bremen, legislation introduced in the 1950s still treats the self-constructed homes and settlements as if they were the undesirable result of poverty in the bombed-out cities after the war (Schulz, 2002). Politicians and the public alike find it hard to accept that *Bauwagen* sites are the physical manifestation of a conscious decision to live differently. Today, people living in trailers may still have to carry their drinking water in canisters, but most of them

emphasise the fact that they actually save a lot of water because of this. They may have to chop wood to heat their trailers in the winter, but they are fully equipped with mobile phones, computers, and high-speed internet access. Time and again, *Bauwagen* dwellers have rejected moving into flats offered to them by local administrations. Flats just cannot be modified as quickly and as radically as *Bauwagen*, nor can they be towed from one site or city to the next. Flats are not easily turned into a visible political statement. Most importantly, flats cannot be grouped together at will to claim space and form a community.

The *Bauwagen* settlements raise important questions about the ways in which a city's inhabitants may use, shape and negotiate their surroundings. Should commercial interests determine how urban space is used, or should localities preserve it as self-determined living space? The city of Hamburg recently sold a huge part of its harbour area to a consortium of private investors. Here, the so-called HafenCity or 'harbour city' is being built, one of the largest urban-planning projects underway in Europe. The consortium promises to develop "playful, lively, maritime and humane" public spaces where visitors may enjoy the "intense experience of the water" (HafenCity Hamburg GmbH 2004: 01) and which will be "permanently open to everybody" (HafenCity Hamburg GmbH 2000: 01).

However, as the local Green Party (GAL) points out, right-of-way lies not with the city, but with the consortium. Whereas traditionally Hamburg's streets have been defined by law as, "spaces for exchanging information and opinions, as well as the cultivation of human interaction", in the contract between city and consortium, the streets of the HafenCity have been reduced to the sole function of enabling locomotion (Streng, 1998, p. 305). The decision to permit or forbid "begging, street music, loitering, sleeping, protesting, handing out flyers, collecting signatures, setting up information booths, etc." will lie in the hands of the owners. As the Green Party website aptly notes (GAL Bürgerschaftsfraktion, 2005):

... In that place where the city stages itself in front of the world it will no longer be public and free, but private and subject to the rights of householders. Even if the design of the projected urban development is pleasing, in the end it will create but a simulation of life, a simulation of urban pluralism... The senate has not only sold property in the city, but a piece of the city itself and the freedom of its citizens with it.

In the shadows of landmark projects like the HafenCity, which aim primarily at enhancing the city's attractiveness to investors and tourists, Hamburg's *Bauwagen* sites become but endangered pockets of resistance against the "craved excesses of modern life" (Nakazato, 2000). Residents willingly sacrifice commodities such as central heating, spacious living quarters and private bathrooms in favour of low-cost mobile architecture, easily adaptable to a person's changing needs. When the Wendebecken was evicted after its contract had expired in the autumn of 2004, the site issued one last communiqué: "There is space enough! Self-determination instead of the logic of commerce! For more substandard living! We want no flats!"











Author's Note

The inhabitants of the *Bauwagen* – just as many women as men – are students, apprentices, pupils, musicians, actors, Tai Chi teachers, gardeners, punks, hippies, etc.; a very heterogeneous group, who nevertheless define themselves as a community through their mode of living. Accordingly, the interior designs are extremely varied. I photograph them from a central point of view: in these images you can compare the possible variations within a severely limited set-up. In order to place the viewer in the midst of the self-built environment with nothing to distract his or her perception of the space, I chose not to portrait the owners of the wagons. It later turned out this was probably the only way to carry out the project: although the owners are generally proud of their trailers, a lot of them are reluctant to being photographed – a direct result of the very adverse press coverage of their ideologies and practices.

Photographing the exteriors was much more difficult. *Bauwagen* are not positioned according to picturesque considerations, but according to necessity and practicality. Since they lack an attic or basement, the surrounding wasteland is turned into storage space. They look untidy. They always seem to face north, or to lie in the deep shadow of a building towering over them. The clash of the improvised trailers with the surrounding city challenges the notion of the well-made, 'composed' picture. One has to accept the fact that a community which rejects the representative use of architecture to "commemorate power and wealth" might look very different from the steel, glass and stone structures surrounding it (Rudofsky, 1965). Some viewers have criticised my representing the exteriors in graphic black and white, fearing that this would add to the negative image of the phenomenon. Yet it is not so much the pictures that challenge our notion of beauty: it is the *Bauwagen* themselves that question our preconceptions of what is 'desirable' within our urban environment.

Notes

1. In Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, people occupied abandoned houses (this act was known as 'squatting') for a number of reasons: to live cheaply, to escape regional housing shortages and homelessness, or to protest against property speculation. Often squatters would renovate houses that had been condemned, winning the sympathy of neighbours. Clashes with police and authorities were frequent.
2. According to a list in *Vogelfrei* (2003), a newspaper published for use only within the *Bauwagen* scene. Each issue is edited by a different site in turn.
3. Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens. A worldwide network of "local groups involved in national and international campaigns whose aim is to propose concrete alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy, based on solidarity" (www.attac.org).
4. Bed By Night offers shelter, food and counselling to homeless children. Admittance is on a voluntary basis, with a minimum of formalities. The institution is based in an ensemble of shipping containers, modified by Hanover University's Faculty of Architecture to provide ten beds, showers, toilets, a kitchen and a dayroom.
5. The *Bauwagen* site at the Aubrook in Kiel has by now been transformed almost completely into a settlement of self-built houses. High-quality clay is available at the site, and only has to be dug up and mixed with sand to be used for building purposes.

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BETWEEN, ACROSS,
BELOW, WITHIN,
OUTSIDE