

FINDING PLACES

Good Practice Summary

The problem

In reaction to the sudden influx of ten-thousands of refugees to the city of Hamburg in 2015, the Lord Mayor had requested the CityScienceLab at HafenCity University to facilitate a public discussion and decision making process about locations for refugee accommodation in Hamburg's neighbourhoods. The actual project was carried out in summer 2016. The key dates and milestones of the project were an opening event held on May 11, 2016, a workshop phase from May 26 through July 15, and a closing event with the Mayor and other governmental representatives on September 15.

Solutions

Being a socio-politically highly sensitive endeavour, this project demanded a well-designed technological as well as procedural approach. The solutions offered by the FindingPlaces project are twofold: methodological and technological.

The methodological answer is a fine-grained participatory workshop concept, designed especially for facilitating effective interaction of multiple stakeholder groups and allowing direct involvement of citizens in the decision making process re. the allocation of refugee accommodation in the city neighbourhoods. As the task of establishing refugee accommodations (emergency and long-term) usually stirs up heated debate and controversy, a well-defined interaction format was devised that comprised moderated group discussion and modelling sessions, proceeding stepwise from basic urban data towards precise location of built structures.

The technological solutions consists of a digital modelling table based on the CityScope technology developed by the Changing Places Group of the MIT Media Lab, Boston. CityScopes are able to represent urban data (e.g. catastro plans, functional zoning, accessibility information) on large projection tables, which can be augmented by simple building blocks (Lego bricks) as carriers of planning information (in this case: construction of refugee shelters). The visually coded blocks are scanned and digitized by cameras from beneath the table. Thus, the impact of the modelled solution on the overall cityscape can be computed and projected as a real-time response on the tables. This made the CityScopes a rapid decision making tool.

Results

The project turned out a success with ~400 participants being able to identify in nearly workshops ~160 locations accepted by Hamburg's citizenship, out of which 44 passed legal confirmation by the authorities. From these 44 places, 6 were actually used for construction, 12 further are in waiting line for construction begin. On a qualitative level, FindingPlaces facilitated a surprisingly constructive and collaborative interaction. The CityScope was recognised as a highly supportive tool, becoming an enabling technology for public participation and decision making.

Its key success features were:

- advanced urban data visualization
- comprehensive use of tangible user interfaces
- design of a straightforward decision making process
- multilateral stakeholder participation & expert discussions on site.

The workshops hosted and facilitated by HafenCity University's CityScienceLab demonstrated a feasible approach how to combine public participation and digital technology. For each city ward, separate workshops were published. The invitations were publicly announced; workshops were free and open to everybody to attend. In these sessions, participants were requested to suggest and discuss locations potentially suitable for refugee accommodation in their respective city ward. To supply the workshops, information on local conditions of the plots (quantitative data, legal constraints, zoning law) was prepared by the CityScienceLab and made available on the interactive CityScope tables. That way a shared and objective basis for discussion was given, and a well-informed pre-selection of potential sites for refugee shelters could be made. In following steps, the pre-selected sites were discussed and commented in detail, and enriched with expertise from municipal authorities. In the final step of the workshops, the group decided for specific locations to be suggested to the city government for the execution of refugee shelters.

Application to other contexts

As a problem solving tool, the Finding Places approach opens up rich opportunities for re-use and adaptation to different cities and contexts. The adaptation and upgrade to different circumstances is possible on two levels:

(1) Refugee accommodation in other cities: For this, the procedure and technology can be fully used as it is in the current format; only the urban data of the respective city need to be prepared (cataster plans, road and access maps, population statistics etc.). Workshop moderators may be either trained by HafenCity University, or members of HCU's CityScienceLab carry out the workshop facilitation themselves (if possible languagewise).

(2) Challenges and problems typologically identical to refugee accommodation, but different in particular matter: Current work of the CityScienceLab has widened the scope from searching only places for refugees to a systematic participatory search of any kind of locations (e.g. social or commercial infrastructures) in city environments.

Part of Hamburg's Digital City transformation strategy, the Finding Places approach has paved the way for multiple spin-off projects, especially in the context of participation urban development. The university is collaborating closely with local authorities and international institutions (e.g. the Medai Lab at MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology) to make the knowledge and technology from this successful project available to a larger audience.