

# IRS AKTUELL

Newsletter for Research on Society and Space



## Digital Tools and Visual Media

How digitalisation and mediatation change the process of planning

How villages use digital applications to address their problems

How the IRS's Scientific Collections make planning documents accessible online



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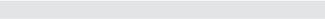
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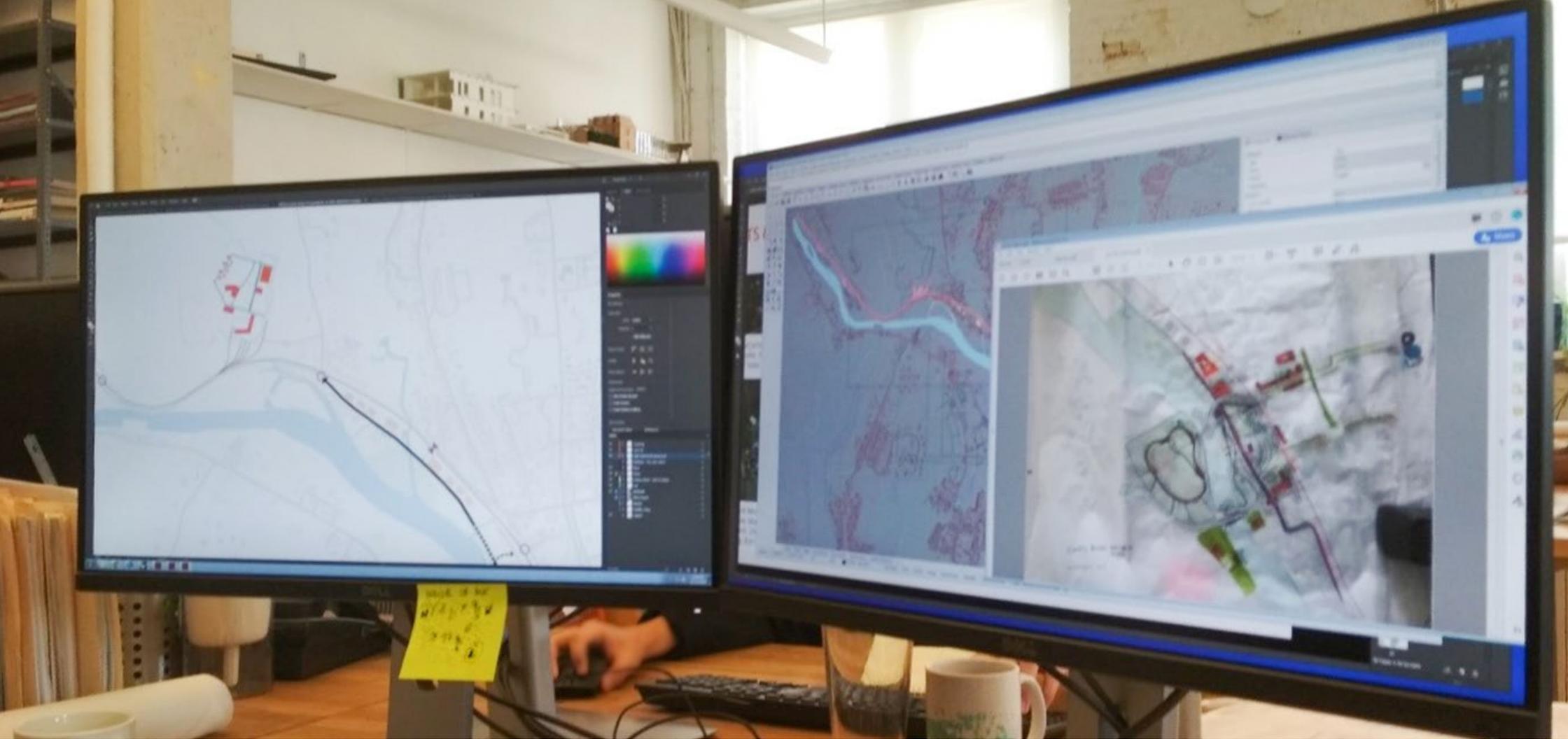
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An urban planning office in New York City

Photo: Martin Schinagl/IRS

## Virtual Models and Public Spheres: How Digital Technologies are Transforming Urban Planning

IRS scholars are examining the way digital technologies are transforming the world of urban planning in the context of various interconnected research projects. Scholars are investigating how planners go about their work in this day and age, yet also attend public planning events, explore neighbourhoods, and talk to locals and experts about their experiences. They document their findings by taking videos and pictures, trawl through archives and websites, and analyse countless architectural visualisations.



### Martin Schinagl

Martin Schinagl's doctoral thesis examines how urban planners utilise vast quantities of geodata, virtual models and software to analyse urban spaces. He has studied urban planners in New York City using such tools, and plans to do the same in Lagos, Nigeria.

Thomas works as an urban planner, sharing an office with 50 other planners and architects in Manhattan, New York City. Today, he is browsing the open data website of a US municipality located some 350 kilometres away. Thomas reviews an intricate directory of geodata, organized by category. He scrolls through a list of datasets, downloads a shapefile to his computer, and opens it in QGIS, a programme for viewing, analysing and editing geospatial data. He carefully examines the map section of a semi-urban, semi-rural space. Thomas then loads up a PDF file with the municipality's zoning plan. Nimble, he switches back and forth between the PDF reader, his browser window, Google Maps, word processing software, and QGIS. He takes down some observations, puts up some sticky notes, and documents the size and density of various allotments, what they are used for, and much else. Thomas wants to get a feeling for the map section in question, and understand the area's defining characteristics. He is interested in its housing density, and wants to learn what kind of development is promoted here. But has he ever visited this region in person? "No", he tells ethnologist Martin Schinagl, adding that a colleague occasionally goes there. Thomas tells Martin he might visit one day, though he says with all the data available to him, he can study and understand the region in question without leaving his New York office.

### IRS and TU Berlin in close cooperation

Martin Schinagl is a doctoral scholar working on the "Digital Urban Planning: Planning Practices and Physical Arrangements" research project which is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and hosted by the IRS. He says studying New York City urban planners is very insightful, explaining that "the Big Apple is a perfect place for investigating the use of geodata in this profession." He says the city offers ample opportunities for urban planners to experiment with coding and new technological applications. According to Schinagl, New York City urban planners were quick to adopt novel digital tools.

Schinagl is one of numerous IRS scholars studying the transformation of urban planning in the digital age. In 2017, the institute defined a new cross-departmental and interdisciplinary research topic called "Mediatization and Digitalisation of Forms of Action". It applies a spatial social science perspective to examine how digital technologies, and communication technologies in particular, shape society and influence social action, including urban planning. Aside from this endeavour, the IRS participates in the Collaborative Research Centre "Re-Figuration of Spaces", which is funded by the DFG and hosted by Technische Universität Berlin since 2018. It focuses on how intensified transnational economic activity, radical changes in political geographies, and the proliferation of digital communication technologies are causing wide-ranging spatial restructuring across the globe since the late 1960s. Professor Gabriela Christmann – who heads the IRS research department on "Dynamics of Communication, Knowledge and Spatial Development" – manages the "Spaces of Communication" project area within the CRC, which investigates how mediatization processes shape and transform communicative action, a research field of great interest to IRS scholars.



**Sophie Melix**

Lagos is one of Africa's fastest growing cities. New York City, meanwhile, is deemed the epitome of a global metropolis. In both, urban development is largely driven by private mega projects. Doctoral researcher and urban planner Sophie Mélix is studying and comparing the Eko Atlantic real estate project in Lagos with New York's Hudson Yards urban development undertaking. She is particularly interested the creation and dissemination of digital architectural models, how they impact planning processes, and serve to legitimise controversial real estate projects.

The "Digital Urban Planning" project mentioned above is pursued within the framework of the CRC and affiliated with Gabriela Christmann's department in the IRS. A number of third-party funded research endeavours, which also focus on the impact of digital technologies and visualisations, are associated with this sub-project: They have a certain thematic overlap, yet pursue distinct research questions.

Martin Schinagl and Sophie Mélix are doctoral researchers contributing to the Digital Urban Planning sub-project. Their respective dissertations centre on the cities of New York, Frankfurt am Main and Lagos, yet differ with regard to their thematic focus. Schinagl's dissertation examines how the advent of digital technologies has changed the way urban planners work. Email messaging, video conferencing and other digital technologies, after all, have radically transformed the way most individuals go about their jobs today. In addition, many urban planners now use computer-aided design (CAD) software and geographic information systems (GIS). Some also utilise drones, tablets, simulation software, algorithms and big data to aid their work. Taken together, these technologies enable and necessitate an entirely new way of communicating with co-workers, actors involved in planning processes, and the wider public. These days, some urban planners have even begun networking and collaborating globally.

While planners rarely use light tables, rulers and water colours to visualise their ideas, maps and foam models still remain widespread. Yet thanks to digital technologies, planners can now analyse spaces in manifold new ways, as illustrated above. Even so, this does not negate the occasional need for planners to visit urban spaces, engage with locals, and map areas. Yet travelling to a far-flung location no longer appears to be a prerequisite for strategic, long-term planning and devising master plans. Schinagl argues that "these days, it seems planners can save themselves a bit of travelling." He has found planners to be "well connected with various actors, and that plans no longer require tedious groundwork." He says "many cities have started providing a host of geocoded data on online platforms."

### Exploring neighbourhoods and measuring light emissions

How accurately do digital architecture models depict reality? Do they allow planners to reliably predict the impact of the built environment? Digital renderings, after all, have been suspected of creating idealised depictions of urban quarters. Moreover, such models are typically commissioned by profit-driven urban developers. As such, they often depict flawless worlds, where sunlight reflects off gleaming facades and happy locals saunter through lush estates. Yet what effect do such models have on the way we communicate about planning endeavours? How realistic are they really? Do they provide a reliable image of how shadows will be cast, or sound reflected, in these new neighbourhoods? Will new buildings blend into the surrounding urban environment? And how will those who live there experience these spaces? Will they feel at ease?

The IRS is running a number of research projects to look into these and other related questions. One of them is the "Assessment and Improvement of Urban Security aided by Semantic 3D City Models" project set up and funded by Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Launched in 2018 and set to conclude by 2021, it seeks to analyse which aspects of built environments give rise to a sense of (in) security among locals. With the help of algorithms, the project aims to predict which elements – such as poorly lit pedestrian subways – make



### Mandy Töppel

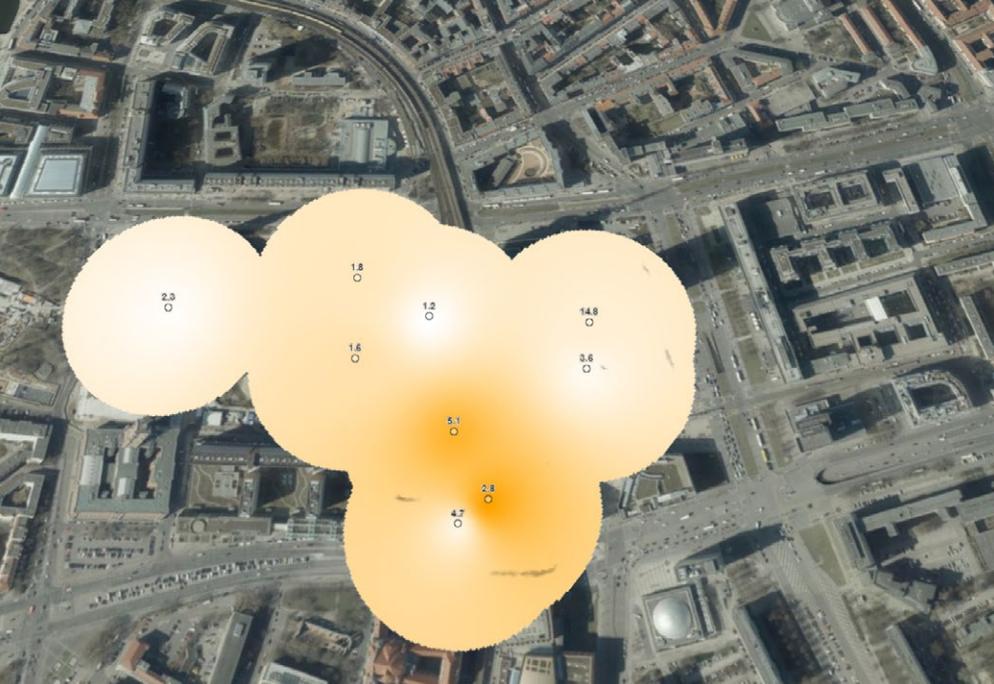
Mandy Töppel's diploma thesis utilised geotagging technology to study how individuals in power wheelchairs navigate Berlin's urban environment. Her latest research project entails her visiting Berlin neighbourhoods with locals to learn why and when they feel insecure. The findings will contribute to developing a prognostic urban planning tool.

locals feel unsafe. The long-term goal of the undertaking is to improve the practice of urban planning, and to enable planners to analyse whether structures designed in virtual models will add to or undermine locals' feeling of security. Urban planners involved in the undertaking will get to test a digital tool to this end. It will be integrated into 3D model developed by virtualcitySYSTEMS Berlin, who are project partners.

To develop such a tool, researchers must gather detailed data on the make-up of urban environments, their physical characteristics with regard to lighting and acoustics, and how (in)secure locals feels there. This is a practice called hybrid mapping, which fuses social science research with structural surveying (▶ see [interview on page 17](#)). To gather this data, IRS scholar **Mandy Töppel** has been meeting with and talking to locals in three Berlin neighbourhoods: the Huttenstraße area in the city's Mitte borough, the so-called High Deck housing estate in Berlin Neukölln, and Berlin's Alexanderplatz square. This go-along research method has locals guide her through their respective neighbourhoods, telling her about areas that make them feel uneasy – for instance due to loud noise or poor lighting. The research team also organises workshops for locals to pinpoint particularly unsettling spaces in aerial maps. The respective locations are then photographed and geotagged. This way, this information can be fed into a 3D model and planning tool to be developed by virtualcitySYSTEMS. Aside from this, the scholars are interviewing volunteers, social workers, police officers and other actors involved in the respective neighbourhoods. In addition, research assistants measure light and sound emissions at the aforementioned locations, as well as distances between various buildings. By doing so, they derive three quantifiable parameters relating to specific built environments. These are: 1) Visibility, i.e. is there a clear view on certain spaces, or is it obstructed? 2) Lighting, i.e. how well is the space lit, especially at night? 3) Sound, i.e. will a person calling for help be able to make him or herself heard?

The Fraunhofer Institute for High-Speed Dynamics Ernst-Mach-Institut (EMI), which coordinates the project, will later analyse this data. The purpose of this analysis is to develop algorithms, i.e. mathematical rules, that show which aspects of the built environment give rise to feelings of urban (in)security. They will be integrated into the prognostic urban planning tool.

Mandy Töppel has already gained tremendous insights on factors contributing to feelings of unease and insecurity. She says that by and large, "poor lighting is a problem in all studied areas". The neighbourhood around Huttenstraße, for instance, is characterised by large factory buildings and tall walls blocking out the sun. Neukölln's High Deck housing estate, typical for estates built in the 1970s, is marked by numerous foot bridges and pedestrian subways that make it difficult to see what is going on. Huttenstraße neighbourhood and this estate, meanwhile, are both marred by poorly lit spaces. Humans depend on sufficient lighting to make out other peoples' facial expressions and gestures at about four metres distance – otherwise, they feel uneasy or scared. Neither neighbourhoods meet this requirement, and often feature brightly and poorly light spaces side by side, which further adds to locals' sense of unease.



A visualisation of light emissions at Alexanderplatz as part of the interactive 3D map of the space

Photo: <https://stadtsicherheit.virtualcitymap.de/storymap>



Rail underpass at Berlin Alexanderplatz train station

Photo: Mandy Töppel/IRS

## Fear and loathing at Berlin Alexanderplatz

So far, IRS scholars have gathered the greatest quantity of security-related data on Berlin's Alexanderplatz square. Much of this data is now available online. By visiting this [website](#), users can explore a virtual, 3D model of Alexanderplatz, read locals' reports, view light and sound measurements conducted there, listen to audio recordings and watch video footage made in the area. The data shows that locals are not particularly fond of the space, variously describing feelings of claustrophobia, disorientation and isolation. The area is comprised of numerous spaces, each of which are problematic in their own right. Rail underpasses are poorly lit and full of litter, while the architecture immediately surrounding the television tower is described as confusing and obstructing clear view. Alexanderplatz train station, meanwhile, is described as cramped. Overall, locals complain about a lack of maps and signposts to help them get their bearing.

Evidently, the built environment around Berlin Alexanderplatz square evokes a sense of unease or insecurity among many locals. So, are these findings sufficient to help urban planners design more appealing environments in the future? Mandy Töppel is uncertain, arguing that additional contextual information is needed, such as what certain buildings are used for. At night, a shop window, for example, will emit light and create a sense of security, whereas an office complex will not. Töppel says contextual data should also indicate who spends time in the respective area. After all, it matters tremendously if it is frequented mainly by older or young people, men or women, commuters, tourists, or other groups. Töppel has also endeavoured to gain feedback from especially vulnerable individuals, such as homeless people and teenagers of foreign decent, who ordinarily would not participate in research workshops.

Speaking to teenagers at the JugendAktionsRaum Alexanderplatz (JARA) youth centre, Töppel learned that they, too, feel uneasy at Alexanderplatz. Yet in conversation with homeless people frequenting the square, she found them to feel differently about the area. Exposed to the seasons, and often subjected to verbal and physical abuse, the homeless tend to gather in groups underneath rail underpasses to stay dry and, above all, safe. While some locals might dislike this, Töppel urges us to empathise and take the needs of vulnerable individuals seriously. She says "it is possible to quantify some parameters, but not all." Adding that "you need to also study the interrelations between individuals' needs, and that requires exploring neighbourhoods and talking to locals." Töppel says even if a prognostic urban planning tool has been developed, this will not negate the need to actually visit spaces.





### Ajit Singh

Ajit Singh research's centres on urban planning, public participation, as well as manifold forms of communication and social interaction. His post-doctoral dissertation seeks to shed light on the emergence and make-up of district public spheres in the context of urban planning endeavours. To this end, he has been studying citizen involvement in urban planning events, and the way they communicate online, for instance via participation platforms and social media.



Photo: Landratsamt Böblingen/Orange Edge



Photo: elenabsi/shutterstock.com

## A digital public sphere?

Urban planning in Germany has grown more participatory since the 1970s. Today, planners are expected to present their ideas at town meetings, seek feedback from the public, and heed locals' needs and wants – irrespective of whether they are residents, or only come to an area to shop, mingle or use public transport. How, then, has the internet changed public participation in urban planning? Initially, the internet was hailed as a kind of digital agora, or public space, allowing anyone to freely swap and debate ideas. More recently, however, this optimistic perspective has given way to more sombre assessments that stress the dangers of online hate speech, fake news and surveillance.

Scholars Ajit Singh, Kathrin Meissner and Mennatullah Hendawy are investigating how communication surrounding urban development planning has changed in the digital age. They are part of the "Mediatisation of Urban Development Planning and Changes to the Public Sphere (MedPlan)" project, which brings together scholars from the institute's "Dynamics of Communication, Knowledge and Spatial Development" research department and the Department for Historical Research, as well as the Chair for Urban Design and Urbanization at TU Berlin. The MedPlan project is headed by Gabriela Christmann (IRS), Christoph Bernhardt (IRS) and Jörg Stollmann (TU Berlin).

**Ajit Singh**, who is pursuing his post-doctoral research, is keen to understand how digital technology has given rise to distinct public spheres surrounding planning endeavours, and what defines them. As part of his research, he has been trawling through [mein.berlin.de](http://mein.berlin.de), an online platform set up by the city of Berlin designed to encourage citizen participation in urban planning. It features a city map locating over 100 urban development projects across Berlin, along with the possibility for citizens to provide feedback and suggestions. One project, for instance, asks citizens to detail what they use a certain park for. Another project invites citizens to pinpoint, describe and upload images of locations particularly affected by noise pollution. Documents like development plans are also available online. But Singh says that despite these manifold opportunities to provide feedback and access a wealth of documents, the platform still "gives no sense of what urban planning processes actually entail, how complicated they are, and how actors disagree and cooperate."

This is why he decided to visit events designed to encourage public participation in the planning of a controversial, large-scale development project in Berlin. He attended these meetings for over a year, and says he observed “powerful civil society activism.” About fifteen citizens’ initiatives are currently involved in the planning process. They have close ties to urban researchers, policy-makers and activists. Singh found citizens’ initiatives attending the events to be very knowledgeable, well-prepared and aware of planning produces. He observed that they have a considerable influence on urban planning processes, tend to focus on the common good, and often oppose investors’ interests.

Granted, citizens’ initiatives have been around for thirty years. How, then, do they differ today? Singh says what makes these groups special now is “their ability to mobilize people, and to create or address a public sphere focused on a specific planning endeavour.” He says these groups tend to have professional websites and are skilled at using social media. They use hashtags to latch onto broader discourses, and generate punchy memes. And thanks to online media, discussions held at planning events can be shared with the wider public. The initiatives then frame or re-interpreted the outcomes of such meetings according to their own agenda. They upload planning documents and visualisations, encourage feedback, and can swiftly organize counter measures if so desired. This fluid, ever changing public sphere – comprising both physical events and protests, as well as online participation, Twitter tirades and much else – has radically transformed the way we communicate about urban planning. This communication tends to develop a dynamic of its own and poses a formidable challenge for city planners organising public participation events.



### Mennatullah Hendawy

Anyone visiting the Egyptian capital Cairo will quickly notice the many placards advertising gated communities being developed on the city’s outskirts. Mennatullah Hendawy’s doctoral dissertation deconstructs these ads. Her aim is to show how Egypt’s centralised urban planning system and media landscape promote a neoliberal urban development agenda that perpetuates social and spatial inequality.

### Photorealistic real estate renderings

What impact do real estate visualisations have in this context? Do they allow for more transparent, honest and fact-based communication about urban planning projects? Or are they instead tools used by investors to mould and manipulate public opinion? Kathrin Meißner, a researcher with the MedPlan project, has been examining these and related questions from a historical perspective for her doctoral dissertation at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Meißner has been trawling through Berlin archives to collect and analyse minutes, articles and planning documents relating to six now completed urban development projects in former East and West Berlin. She is particularly keen to understand how visualisations have shaped or influenced the public discourse surrounding these projects. Similarly, **Mennatullah Hendawy**, a doctoral researcher at TU Berlin, is investigating in what sense Egyptian real estate models manifest or perpetuate social inequality.

The MedPlan and Digital Urban Planning projects both look into the role of urban planning visualisations. In this context, Sophie Mélix has been examining the creation and effect of digital real estate visualisations. For her doctoral thesis, Mélix has created a data base with hundreds of photorealistic renderings of New York’s vast Hudson Yards urban development project. Later, she will create a data base with visualisations from the Eko Atlantic real estate project in Lagos – a tremendous private undertaking that will entail the creation of an artificial peninsula outside the Nigerian capital. Creating such elaborate visualisations requires tremendous skill and processing power, as well as expensive computer software. Mélix has found that over past ten to fifteen years, real estate developers and architectural studios have been commissioning highly specialised companies to produce photorealistic renderings of real estate projects. Mélix says renderings that look like actual photo-



graphs "give the impression of a concrete reality that does not really exist." Renderings are produced using virtual 3D models, and can be tailored to specific audiences, such as potential buyers, or the general public. Certain visual effects can then be added in post-production. "You can apply and incorporate analogue techniques, such as Indian ink or collages, to these visualisations," says Kathrin Meißner. Adding that afterwards, viewers cannot tell for certain if the image they are looking at is real, or computer-generated. Renderings, therefore, possess a certain manipulative power. Sophie Mélix, who has already conducted a first analysis of various visualisations, finds that photorealistic renderings are produced for certain, strategic purposes. "It seems that during the early phase of the Hudson Yards project, individual skyscrapers were accentuated," she says. Adding that "later, renderings emphasised how well the new buildings harmonise with the surroundings."

In the early stages of a real estate project, articles and rough sketches will provide a broad strokes idea of the undertaking. Once elaborate renderings are produced detailing what the completed project could look like, however, some individuals may begin expressing their disliking in the context of public participation events, or evaluation panels. In addition, citizens' initiatives may begin archiving, commenting on and tracking changes in visualisations online. They will register all changes made to further a certain agenda. Every visualisation commissioned by real estate developers, in other words, incrementally weakens their power to define the discourse surrounding the project.

### "More Glow!"

**Kathrin Meißner** has been studying the history of urban planning in former East and West Berlin for her doctoral dissertation. She found that in the late 1980s, the East German government wanted to tear down most residential buildings on Berlin's Oderberger street – dating from the turn of the twentieth century – to replace them with pre-fabs. This idea, however, sparked local resistance. Citizens' initiatives drew up alternative urban development plans of great sophistication and detail. "Some state planners lived in this area and became involved in these initiatives because they were frustrated with East German urban planning," Meißner explains. Their activism paid off and the buildings were spared.

Does this mean that now, in the digital age, citizens have even greater power to influence urban development projects by drawing up alternative models? Not necessarily, says Meißner. After all, visualisations these days require tremendous skill and processing power to produce. Besides, public participation is more effective in the analogue than digital world. Meißner says public participation works well when citizens express their respective wishes or needs on prompt cards. She says these are "then collected and clustered by topic." Unlike children, most adults are

Skyscrapers developed for New York City's Hudson Yards project  
Photo: commons.wikimedia.org/CC BY-SA 4.0/Rhododendrites



### Kathrin Meißner

Kathrin Meißner is a doctoral scholar with Berlin's Humboldt University. She has been investigating and comparing three urban development projects each in East and West Berlin between 1959 and 1989, especially with regard to the role of communication and visualisations. While the practice of urban planning differed in former East and West Germany, it also underwent similar development trajectories.

not interested in visualising their ideas "because they are too scared to make mistakes," Meißner says. Sophie Mélix shares Meißner's view. The researcher says "producing elaborate renderings of their own would go against what citizens' initiatives stand for." Instead, these groups tend to appropriate and re-interpret official visualisations. Mélix says it is not uncommon for activist to create posters with official renderings and then add scathing captions like: "An investors' wet dream." This way, she says, activist help mobilize resistance.

Real estate developers, meanwhile, are dependent on external companies who are commissioned to produce renderings – and who are bound by their own set of professional ethics. Mélix says the companies she spoke to prioritise realism in their renderings, and strive for utmost accuracy. The companies do not want to manipulate viewers, and know full well the effect of depicting humans in photorealistic renderings. Real estate developers, in turn, have a difficult time communicating exactly what they want renderings to look like due to their own limited technical knowledge. So instead of asking visualisation companies to, say, rotate a skyscraper model by two degrees, or increase colour saturation, they resort to the vernacular of the common man. And might simply ask the company to add "more glow." ■

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Christoph Bernhardt heads the IRS Department for Historical Research / Scientific Collections for the History of Building and Planning in the GDR. He also serves as the institute's deputy director. Bernhardt is an adjunct professor for Modern and Contemporary History at the Department of History at Berlin's Humboldt University. His research focuses on European urban and environmental history.



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Jörg Stollmann is an architect and urban researcher based in Zurich and Berlin. He holds the Chair for Urban Design and Urbanization at TU Berlin's Institute of Architecture. Stollmann co-founded urbaninform, an online platform showcasing architectural, landscaping and urban planning projects aimed at creating sustainable, as well socially and economically just, cities.

# Digital solutions for peripheral villages

No discussion about the future of villages and rural spaces can ignore the issue of digitalisation. There were abundant specialist sessions related in one way or another to the topic at the 2020 "Forum on the Future of Rural Development", a kind of seismograph of current rural developments that accompanies the annual Green Week in Berlin. But what does digitalisation mean for rural communities, and for villages in particular? What opportunities and challenges are introduced when one considers not only the issue of network coverage, but focuses instead on the use of digital media in village life?

Presentation of the village car in Barsikow.  
Pictured centre: Local mayor Willem Schoeber  
Photo: Ariane Sept/IRS





Photo: kostas/stock.adobe.com

“Weißer Holunder” (“White Elderberry”) is the name of the digital radio station in the Thuringian village of Kannawurf in the district of Sommerda, home to 800 inhabitants. Once a week the home-grown broadcaster, run by a team of volunteers and accessible via SoundCloud and Facebook, discusses local matters – the condition of paths, the depleted songbird population, or the local mayor’s consultation hours, for instance. The combination of locally produced radio and social media counteracts a problem that many villages face: the loss of communication and its corresponding implications for community.

Some villages – especially those in peripherally situated rural spaces far from the next city – are using the possibilities offered to them by digital applications to tackle the typical problems of village life in new ways, be it the loss of local supply structures, of places providing opportunity for exchange and communication, or issues of limited mobility. In part, villagers develop their own digital solutions tailored to their needs. Now and then they also improve already-existing digital infrastructures. The IRS in its research deals with such cases, speaking in terms of digitally supported social innovation. In the internally financed

lead project “Smart Villagers: Digitalisation and Social Innovations in Rural Spaces”, researchers analyse the kinds of initiative found, the novel solutions they provide, the actors involved, and how they develop their solutions, but also what effects these new (digitalised) solutions have on village life or even on the development of the community. The project thus seeks to provide a contribution to innovation research at the intersection of social and technological (in particular, digital) innovation and, at the same time, to gauge the possibilities that such innovation offers to rural areas – including in the balancing out of spatial disparities.

As part of this, the lead project team, comprising Gabriela Christmann, Christian Reichel, Ariane Sept, and Nicole Zerrer, have since 2019 examined five regional, peripherally located German villages. The locations investigated are situated in various regions in Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Bavaria. They share in common a weak infrastructure, which means that buses are infrequent, that the last remaining food market and pub have long since closed, and that mobile phone coverage, especially for Internet usage from smartphones, is still not ubiquitously available. Considered purely statistically, not all of the villages studied belong to the so-called structurally weak rural areas. However, the local supply of everyday goods, of services of various kinds, of schools, medical practices, and local public transport is equally eroded. And the next town centre is quite some distance away.

On the one hand, the ideas and initiatives investigated in these places are, when one considers their content and their actors, completely different; on the other hand they also display structural similarities. What connects them is that digital technologies are always involved in the development of novel solution or comprise a part of those solutions. Differences are also apparent in the individual or constellation of actors involved: central actors might in some places be younger creatives called in from the cities, in other places it could be unpaid representatives, the local mayor, an employee of the municipality, or volunteers with an affinity for digital technologies who act as the driving force. In some places one even finds a healthy mixture of these actor-types working hand in hand. What unifies all actors in such initiatives is their high

level of optimism, and a conviction of the need to break new ground to meet the challenges of rural life and of the usefulness of digital technologies. The mayor of Barsikow in Brandenburg, for example, is convinced that digitalisation is the "saviour of villages" and that he will in ten years be able to call up a self-driving car with an app in order to be driven (or to share a drive with others) to the nearest railway station.

It appears repeatedly that a large part of active village life is based on voluntary engagement – from management of the community centre to the organisation of events and of regular shopping trips on behalf of more senior inhabitants. Here it is often older people who, having left active professional life, dedicate themselves to social responsibilities in the village. In several of the places investigated, it was interestingly also older inhabitants who recognised the possibilities offered by the use of digital technology, above all to assist with everyday tasks – be it

the booking of a train journey or the arrangement of a bank transfer. Many pensioners in the countryside seek, above all, to remain in contact with family members and friends no longer living in the region by means of new digital and social media. It can be seen that some of those "digitally enthusiastic" older inhabitants even offer courses in their villages on using the Internet, so that others may profit from digital opportunities. Professionally developed instruction is also available for this group of people. By such means the project "Smart Country Side" in the North-Rhine Westphalian districts of Hoxter and Lippe aims to position sixteen villages for a promising future by strengthening the digital competency of older rural residents. Even if many elderly people (initially) participate only to learn what advantages a smartphone can bring them, there are others contemplating how village life can be revived, or how a communal village car can be managed, using digital tools.

From this perspective, the research at the IRS suggests that the digitalisation of rural regions merely in the form of broadband provision is not enough to meet the challenges of the countryside. Needed in addition are measures for the strengthening of the digital competence of rural dwellers, as well as specific digital applications (apps) tailored to the challenges of everyday life in the countryside.

In fact, many smart applications and solutions already developed for the future of the digital village are now being put to use. Thus the "Smart Civic Hall" in Wehrden in the district of Hoxter (North Rhine-Westphalia) has made it possible for people to use their community centre with the aid of an SMS code, doing

away with the need for cumbersome arrangements for the handing over of keys. With this solution it is hoped that more community events and meetings will once again be arranged, a rare occurrence since the last pub was closed. But it is not only the local community for which digital solutions are being conceived; visitors and tourists, too, will in future be able to inform themselves about the special features of the village thanks to digital technology. With "digital tour experiences", the village seeks to make its historical buildings accessible by QR code and videos recorded especially for smartphone displays, encouraging visitors and tourists to stay a while. To this end, a village-wide wireless LAN is being installed to improve its weak and patchy mobile coverage.



Photo: Jacob Lund/stock.adobe.com

Time and again, an important requirement of rural inhabitants appears to be the maintenance of local communication. In many places one therefore finds experimentation with digital alternatives to the village noticeboard. Several apps are now on the market to this end, such as the "Digital Villages" of the Fraunhofer Institute for Experimental Software Engineering (IESE) in Rhineland-Palatinate. Others worth mentioning are the Emsland app and the application "Village Life Digital" from the company Distama in Gießen. Despite their differing functions, these apps are meant to make it possible for village residents and non-residents not only to stay informed about current events (one-way communication), but especially to enter into interpersonal exchange (two-way communication), be it to recap the results of the local football team's last match, or announce a village barbecue, the current citizen surgery hours, the meeting point for the local hiking group, or the retrieval of a forgotten motorbike helmet from the playground. The technologies involved are continually developed, often in tandem with those that use them. Here it is apparent how demand for novel solutions on the ground influences technological developments.



Photo: [www.digitale-doerfer.de/mitfunken/](http://www.digitale-doerfer.de/mitfunken/)

A feeling of security in daily life is meant to be imparted by another app, especially for elderly people living alone. If there is a power outage, or someone is spotted prowling through the garden, such users can make use of the "Village Distress Call" app to obtain assistance. They then receive prompt assistance from a local volunteer. The idea for this app was developed out of a home-grown village initiative, tailored to the requirements of village residents, tested, and implemented together with a small firm. In the Bavarian Forest – to name one more example – there is an initiative by which hikers who have injured themselves can be better tended to: Trained personnel in huts and refuge houses can set up a video link to the nearest hospital over their tablet. First aid can be thus improved and the deployment of a rescue team arranged.

Quite a variety of smart solutions was observed in the initial stage of the "Smart Villagers" research project. Typical for them is that they offer not only novel solutions for everyday problems, but rather that they at the same time innovate the nature of coexistence within the village. One frequently observes that the various solutions go hand in hand with strengthened communicative processes and collaboration in the village. How digitally supported social innovation develops in the villages, and the extent to which life is possibly altered, will be investigated as the project continues. One thing is already apparent, though, says the project leader Gabriela Christmann: "Digital tools in the form of village apps do not lead to the isolation of village inhabitants. People are not withdrawing into their homes to solve everyday problems of living in the countryside. They aren't only sitting in front of their PCs, tablets, or smartphones and communicating digitally. Smart applications are having much more the effect that villagers are once again renewing direct interpersonal communication and meeting in person through delivery apps, car-sharing apps, or village radio apps. A close meshing of digitally mediated and direct, analogue communication can be observed in the villages." The inhabitants themselves have noticed that digital solutions have brought about new forms of reanimated communication. Some even state that their assessment of the village community has been improved.



Photo: tramp51/stock.adobe.com

With the topic of digitalisation in rural spaces, the IRS has advanced into a fast-changing field of research. "We can't keep an eye on all initiatives that come and go in rural areas. In the 'Smart Villagers' project our focus is much more on investigating a selection of cases in depth," says project member Ariane Sept. Alongside specific innovations, the individual histories of digitalisation in the villages investigated will be traced and personal biographies of digitalisation will be discussed with a number of engaged villagers, that is, relating to the way they encountered digital technologies over the course of time. "The special additional value of the project is that we are gaining a comprehensive picture of digitalisation in rural areas." ■

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# The architectural heritage of the GDR on the Internet

Those who wish to study original sources not published in book form – plans, contracts, or the minutes of meetings, for example – research in an archive. This requires effort and occasionally a long journey. Today ever more archives are offering online access to their holdings in order to better justify their role as social knowledge resources and at the same time to protect their original documents. Such is the case for the Scientific Collections of the IRS, the most important specialist archive for the history of building and planning in the GDR. At the start of 2020 the Collections initiated an ambitious programme of digitalisation.

Design for Berlin's Stalinallee by Egon Hartmann, presented by the Scientific Collections of the IRS at the Long Night of the Sciences 2019

Photo: Felix Müller/IRS





The Scientific Collections at the Long Night of the Sciences 2019

The history of building and planning in the GDR has long held a strong interest far beyond Germany itself. In recent years, for instance, visitors have come to Erkner from France, Israel, Turkey, and the USA in order to make use of the Scientific Collections at the IRS. Rosemary Wakeman, Professor at Fordham University in New York City, even writes in the foreword to her 2016 book on the intellectual history of the planned city that “the best illustrations of East German new town plans are from the extraordinary IRS archive.”

As the most important archive for the history of planning and building in the GDR, running to approximately 700 metres with an array of materials broad in both form and content, and holding the legacies of more than 100 architects and planners alone, the Scientific Collections at the IRS receive almost 300 users per year. Researchers, historical monuments conservationists, the media, and museums are all appreciative users of the collections' holdings, as are architectural offices, citizens' initiatives, and private individuals: The queries are simply inexhaustible. Through its exhibitions and its online portal at ► [ddr-planungsgeschichte.de](https://ddr-planungsgeschichte.de), the Scientific Collections communicates its topics actively and always in close cooperation with the entire team at the Department for Historical Research. It is now important that the Collections' highly valued resources find even greater application through the use of digital possibilities.

For some years it has already been common for (in particular, experienced) researchers to study sources such as drawings, letters, and photographs both in the original on location, but much more frequently as digital versions that either already exist in such a form or which are then especially created. Specialists, in particular, will continue to employ digital and analogue work techniques hand in hand. Ever more artefacts from the holdings at the IRS will be made available in digital form and, where possible, for free on the Internet. For several years, too, virtually everything has been available to photograph for personal use. In the long term, however, it probably won't be possible for archives to scan all of their materials at high resolution and to index them in detail. Moreover, experience shows that offline usage of archives is increasing precisely due to objects and descriptions being available to find online. The team at the Scientific Collections are therefore unlikely to see themselves made redundant – quite the opposite. Not only will specialist cooperation with other institutions be ever more important, but users might also at certain work stages be increasingly involved behind the scenes.

The successful evaluation of the IRS in 2017 was a good opportunity to apply for funding for the Scientific Collections, which from the start of 2020 will operate under a special status. In practice this will take the form of an institutionally financed project over several years to improve the digital infrastructure of the collections. Behind this lies a series of different but interrelated measures. To begin with, it is especially important that the archival software in use and the management of the already very numerous and heterogeneous data stores be raised to a new level. Both the team working at the collections and the interested public will profit from this, not least as it entails an improved web presence providing even more information than at present, together with the delivery of IRS data to Germany's digital library, the Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek (DDB), as a central port of call. Presence in the DDB and its archival portal is, moreover, becoming essential for archives seeking to



make applications to the DFG. With the digitalisation project, the IRS is thus keeping up with the times and has the chance, among small to medium-sized archives, of numbering among the pioneers.

Since January 2020 the Scientific Collections has employed a recognised expert, Rita Gudermann, to head the digital-infrastructure project. A doctor of economic history, Rita Gudermann has long-standing experience as an IT consultant in the private sector as well as in the development and maintenance of a large image database. Among the first steps in her work at the IRS are the testing of software and the revision and indexing of data stores. The intensive networking of the project between Brandenburg, Berlin, and beyond also plays an important role.

The approximately 30 archives at institutions of the Leibniz Association have long provided an important contribution to the preservation of Germany's cultural heritage, each possessing a particular charm owing to their proximity to specialist fields of research. The Leibniz archives are thus characterised by their strong thematic focus manifested, for instance, in the successful acquisition of relevant legacies that are subsequently in much demand. The archives represent a significant research infrastructure, and digitalisation offers the chance of making its holdings, whether at individual institutions or within the whole association, much more accessible and more straightforwardly so, and to place them in relation to other knowledge resources. In this way the originals, which are usually unique documents and objects, can also be protected and the information they contain by preserved for the longer term.

There are, however, various conservation and legal aspects to consider that might entail some holdings being presented only partially on the Internet. Besides this, there is a broad spectrum of materials and media for which an alternative solution is required: slides and glass-plate photos, blueprints, fragile paper carbon copies, a number of larger architectural models, as well as analogue and digital recordings of interviews with contemporary witnesses. Not to be underestimated is the effort required to combine digital objects and information and to provide some elucidation of their contexts. It is increasingly the task of archives to curate their stores of knowledge in a way that goes beyond mere formal description. Archives, after all, are not self-explanatory. Public interest is tending to grow, but at the same time, knowledge of the GDR's past and of historical working methods cannot be assumed. A further challenge is the issue of to what extent the (as a rule) German sources at the IRS, or information provided about them, can be translated into English.

Any such issues are clearly outweighed by the opportunity to further develop, preserve, and make available for use the holdings of the Scientific Collections at the IRS by means of the new project and through novel digital solutions. This is something the individuals and families who entrust their legacies to the archive will also appreciate; it is, after all, their wish to see these materials valued and worked with.

As an interdisciplinary topic, digitalisation has long been very important to the work of the Scientific Collections and, as part of the Leibniz Association, the IRS has already been successfully involved to two digitalisation projects, along with the creation of a thematic Internet portal: In the course of DigiPEER (► [digipeer.de](http://digipeer.de)) and DigiPortA (► [digiporta.net](http://digiporta.net)), the IRS alone was able to make high-quality digitalisations of thousands of large-format drawing, maps, plans, and personal portraits, and provide access to these online. "The recently begun project to improve our digital infrastructure once again offers new possibilities to comprehensively position ourselves as an archive at a higher technical standard and to be correspondingly still better perceived", says Kai Drewes, head of the Scientific Collections.

The increasing interest in the architectural history of the GDR found outside of academia will also profit. New forms of online citizen science in IRS projects are conceivable, for example. The Scientific Collections, as a service provider with a diverse and constantly expanding Internet presence, thus increasingly contributes to social self-reflection in eastern Germany. ■

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Rita Gudermann is a historian and since January 2020 head of the institute-funded project to improve the digital infrastructure of the Scientific Collections of the IRS. Her specialist emphases lie in agricultural and environmental history, as well as the media economy of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 2010 she founded a historical image database, still in use today, as part of an EXIST scholarship from the BMBF.



## "We draw more by hand"

*Interview with Séverine Marguin, Jamie Scott Baxter, and Vivien Sommer about the working group "Hybrid Mapping Methods", a team of young spatial scientists rising to the challenge of developing a new research method.*

Maps help us to orient ourselves every day. Navigation apps on our smartphones frequently guide us through traffic. Maps are also the preferred means for presenting the spatiality of countless phenomena, from election results to soil desiccation, visually and intuitively. In print and in (often interactive and dynamic) online media, we are used to recognising the familiar contours of our city and its subunits, in ever recurring colour gradations, bringing tidings of developments for better or worse.

Mapping workshop in the coworking space Coconat in Bad Belzig



Jamie Scott Baxter and Séverine Marguin

But how many deliberate and unconscious decisions, and how many unquestioned assumptions, feed into such a map in the process of its creation? What can be discovered by turning away from the finished product in order to address the great variety of possible mappings? Should mapping not be more comprehensively understood as a research method and as an object for reflection in all disciplines of spatial research?

The DFG-funded Collaborative Research Centre "Re-figuration of Spaces" (CRC 1265) at the Technische Universität Berlin, in which the IRS is also participating, investigates the comprehensive spatial reorganisation caused, among other things, by globalisation and the spread of digital communications technologies. The working group "Hybrid Mapping Methods" is also located there, and seeks to develop mapping as an interdisciplinary research method with a focus on the issues mentioned. All the disciplines that form the CRC are represented within the group, namely sociology, architecture, and urban planning. It has six permanent members, five of whom are employed at the IRS. In the interview, sociologist Séverine Marguin speaks together with the architect Jamie Scott Baxter and the sociologist Vivien Sommer about what the group seeks to achieve.

How did the working group  
"Hybrid Mapping Methods" come into being?

**Séverine Marguin:** The concept of "hybrid mapping" was already present as an idea in the application for the collaborative research centre, so it first arose there. In the CRC I head the Method-Lab and decided to give the topic of visual methods, in particular mapping, a high priority. Through Martin Schinagl and Sophie Melix, the team comprising the CRC-project "Digital Urban Planning" based at the IRS, came contact to additional researchers at the IRS interested in the topic. In 2018 we had our first meeting in Berlin-Mitte.

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** Since then we have met regularly. Although we didn't know at first exactly what a hybrid map is, there was a good energy in the group. Fruitful discussion quickly emerged and we had the feeling from the start that we were speaking from various perspectives about a common problem that we wanted to address, even if we weren't yet able to define it precisely. This has sustained the group until now and provided us with enough topics for discussion to bring us around a table once or sometimes twice a month.

**Séverine Marguin:** We also have memorable parties (laughs).

So what does "hybrid mapping" mean?  
What is hybrid about it?

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** Speaking quite generally, this is a new research area focused on maps as a form of spatial research tool to be developed in the CRC. Architecture, planning, and the social sciences all come together here. The field requires further development from this point on – both conceptually and methodologically. That is our challenge. We want to know whether hybrid mapping can be a common, interdisciplinary research approach that can find application within our own specialisms.

**Vivien Sommer:** The word "hybrid" indicates that we are bringing together various kinds of data to the issue of mapping: geographic maps, a variety of forms of visualisation (e.g. representing patterns of movement), texts, numbers, and even audio data. In addition, the word means that we are seeking to combine opposing perspectives. Maps, for example, have various functions for us. They serve not only to capture,

Why is this important?  
And to what extent does this fill gaps  
in the disciplines mentioned?



Vivien Sommer

Understanding the term quite traditionally,  
a map is in fact a two-dimensional illustration  
of the Earth's surface made with the  
assistance of mathematical rules of  
projection. Specific content is thus represented.  
To what extent does hybrid mapping  
differ from this definition?

Do you have cartographers in the group?

process, and visualise data, but also to analyse and interpret the various kinds of data that have been brought together and which characterise particular spaces. We are interested not only in the finished map, but just as much in the methodical process of mapping.

**Séverine Marguin:** There are, in fact, many dimensions of hybridity. Interdisciplinary collaboration belongs to this, as we've mentioned. We are bringing the social-science perspective on mapping together with those from architecture and design. It is in architecture, especially, that the aesthetics of maps plays a role. Apart from this, we want to integrate various kinds of data – both qualitative and quantitative. Hybrid mapping stands for all of this.

**Vivien Sommer:** Mapping has so far had no role to play in sociology, save for a number of approaches to mental mapping. But space is becoming an increasingly important category of analysis in the social sciences. This is why we need to consider more closely, how space and spatiality have been represented so far. On maps, of course, and through mapping, but also how they might be represented in the future, and certainly not only in everyday use (e.g. as is the case for a city map), but rather more in scientific research and in the visualisation of spatial-science research findings.

(Editor's note: Mental, or cognitive, maps are the conceptions people have of their spatial environment. In spatial research, people are sometimes asked to draw their spatial environment as they perceive it. In this way, spatial perceptions can be investigated.)

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** In architecture the production of maps is very important. We have a fluid understanding of maps, of course. Some would call what we create more of a "plan". Here, for me, drawing and the capturing of various dimensions is a central working method. From my perspective, though, hybrid mapping is also about the issue of how various spatial categories that spatial social research differentiates and considers as somewhat in opposition, such as "relational" and "container spaces", can nevertheless be conceptualised together.

**Vivien Sommer:** The problem with this definition is that it views spatial reality as something objectively given and reproducible. If one understands reality and its spatiality as something socially constructed, however, and seeks to get to the bottom of the processes of their construction, this is not an approach one can work with. Here one needs to reconstruct, i.e. comprehend, the social reality and its spatial dimensions, out of which certain spatial representations (such as maps) have arrived.

**Séverine Marguin:** I would also add that hybrid mapping differs from the approach that one finds in traditional cartography, or from others that use quantitative methods to demarcate spatial areas from one another.

**Séverine Marguin:** No. We have a somewhat ambivalent relationship to cartography.

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** Although we recently took a course in GIS.

(Editor's note: GIS stands for Geographic Information Systems.)

**Vivien Sommer:** Yes, we've now received a GIS certificate! (All laugh) It was really interesting. A cartographer led the course. He showed us where we could download geodata from and how they can be processed in GIS. But all data that we used for our GIS map came from external sources. We didn't collect any data of our own.

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** Yes, and the interpretation of the data didn't belong to the programme. We gained the impression that, in general, much work goes into the visualisation of the data and into the end product, and much less goes into the collection and interpretation of data with the assistance of maps.

**Séverine Marguin:** To date we have spoken more about drawing by hand than about GIS.

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** Yes, we've asked ourselves what it means to draw. What processes occur when one draws? Of these, which are more analytical and which more practical? How does a map, a form of knowledge, emerge out of this? We've walked a few times in the park, or in town, or through the TU campus, in order to carry out mapping exercises. In our first year the focus was principally on sharing our knowledge and developing a common language and common competencies. And, of course, the processes that we've rehearsed by hand can also be found in a mapping made with GIS, except that there it's the computer that's doing the drawing. To us what is important is that the assumptions hidden beneath mapping processes be revealed. For example, that space is static, and that one represents a social reality that is in constant flow before the background of this static space. As a group, we read a great deal – we have literature sessions. We discuss our respective projects, but we also invite interesting guests to our meetings. Some have presented their work, others have undertaken quite concrete workshops with us. In our WhatsApp group we are constantly in contact about what is currently going on in Berlin, such as where an interesting lecture is taking place. We profit from the things happening around us.

**Vivien Sommer:** Our meetings with external guests are really inspiring. They come from sociology, planning, architecture... They expand our understanding of what mapping means in different fields.

**Vivien Sommer:** If one begins from the definition of hybrid mapping as a process, then a hybrid map is something that might emerge from this.

**Séverine Marguin:** There are several examples that our guests have shown us. Dagmar Pelger and Emily Kelling at the TU Berlin, for instance, have created a map about informality in the Berlin hostel economy that combines quite different types of data and information. I would view this as a hybrid map.



Hybrid Mapping Event in Berlin Photo: Jamie Scott Baxter/IRS

If the focus isn't on GIS, what does the group work with instead?

So is there such as thing as a hybrid map?

Is the group working towards any concrete goals?

**Vivien Sommer:** We want to develop a research method and to show how one does hybrid mapping. Regarding the issue of publishing our findings, we tend to use channels of communication beyond those in the classical handbook. But we remain open. Currently we are working on a journal article, in order to have something to which we can point. And we want to develop from a working group into a larger network.

**Séverine Marguin:** We want to continue to do what we have been doing so far, but within a broader sphere. In Berlin there are so many people working on the topic of mapping, and who we could integrate into our work. We would like to see the topic receive more visibility and we would like to be more than an unofficial working group based between two institutions. In order to become a real, formalised network, we have to apply for funding. This is what we are currently preparing.

Are there also any practical uses for hybrid mapping?

**Jamie Scott Baxter:** There is a large practical side. About half of our group also work in practice. Although I'm currently doing research, I see myself as architect and practitioner. One reason for my engaging in this group is that mapping has already been part of architectural practice for a very long time, but with many shortcomings. Taking a sociological perspective, we can deal with these insufficiencies. Unquestioned assumptions, bias, and subjectivity in planning and design processes need reflecting on. This has great practical significance, because if actors cap the urban environment without thinking about how they make selections and decisions, and when on this basis buildings or entire towns are planned and built, then this can have far-reaching consequences.



Mapping Workshop im Coworking Space Coconat in Bad Belzig.  
Photo: Christian Reichel/IRS

To the „Hybrid Mapping Methods“ website



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**Portraits:**

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