

## **New Perspectives Through Joint Research Activity**

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In this presentation for the WasteSafe 2017 I will bridge two geographic locations as I describe the collaborative research undertaken by Prof. Eckhard Kraft and Prof. Jörg Londong and myself along with students and teachers from Free Art, Urbanism and Engineering of the Bauhaus-University Weimar. Since 2009 we have been on joint field trips to Bangladesh and to Tijuana/San Diego. Upon return visits to both places we have witnessed dramatic changes due to political and economic upheaval, compounded by natural catastrophe. To illuminate our research Florian Wehking and I will preview our documentary film „Handmade in Bangladesh“ and show slides of the last excursion to the Mexican-American border.

In my lecture for the WasteSafe 2015 conference I described the ways in which artists and environmental engineers collaborate on projects in the public realm, the point of departure being what I call „The Bauhaus-Project“: cross-disciplinary work designed to approach real-world issues from an integrated perspective. Addressing issues from multiple viewpoints often uncovers new tools and possibilities. For me the tremendous advantage of teaching at the Bauhaus-University is the proximity to other disciplines. In more than 20 years of teaching it has been the environmental engineers - the discipline most „foreign“ to Free Art - who have been most attuned to the contribution that artists can make to interdisciplinary research.

Joint research activity between artists and engineers begins with careful consideration of the working processes of the other discipline. Artists leave the studio and enter the public realm to be confronted with real-world problems, for example the shocking contrast between rich and poor and first-hand observation of the ecological and social impact of global treaties like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP). Based on scientific and technical knowledge and experience, environmental engineers find and build solutions to immediate infrastructural problems. It is their expressed goal to collaborate with local experts in order to improve infrastructure for all citizens. While doing this they avoid introducing a technology that the local population can't operate and maintain. Our interdisciplinary research is not only based on statistics, analysis of infrastructural problems or reports of political events. For the artist involved it is an emotional and intellectual process and a search for the appropriate aesthetic form and medium to frame and communicate life experience. Spending time in another culture, speaking with citizens and hearing their stories and watching how people interact enables a complex understanding of place. Communicative processes involving the public can help mobilize the political will for change on the local level by offering a new perspective.

Struck by the ingenuity and dedication of small business owners in Khulna, by the dignity and industriousness of the workers, and fascinated by the dramatic contrast between the makeshift, informal architecture and the stunning beauty of traditionally crafted objects I decided in 2015 to document the workshops, studios, small businesses and home industries that I had toured several times with our students and Prof. Alamgir's assistants, starting in 2009 at the first WasteSafe conference. Clearly the most appropriate medium for this endeavor is documentary film. Together with the photographer and filmmaker Florian Wehking and with funding from the Bauhaus-University we shot footage and conducted interviews in Khulna and Dhaka. During the film shooting we received additional help from Prof. Afrosa Parvin, Khulna University, Faculty of Architecture and her graduate assistants who acted as scouts, tour guides, translators and organizers. Because of their support we

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had access to people and places that outsiders normally would never have been. A sneak preview of the film „Handmade in Bangladesh“ will be shown at WasteSafe 2017 as a gesture of thanks to all of those who helped us realize it.

In a slide lecture we will be showing images of the most recent 2016 excursion to the US/Mexican border at San Diego/Tijuana. Prof. Jörg Londong and myself along with 10 students and assistants from the Bauhaus-University met with our colleagues from the partner University of California San Diego (UCSD) Prof. Teddy Cruz and Prof. Dr. Fonna Forman, who have been intensely involved in research at the Mexican-American border for the past 17 years. In a joint seminar they emphasized the cultural and historical connection between the two regions and described a mutual dependency that is so strong that short-sighted, populist rhetoric will not be able to undermine it. Culturally and economically there is a lot more connecting the region than dividing it. Fonna Forman and Teddy Cruz were also able to make clear to us just how differently the urban regions of San Diego and Tijuana have grown: On the American side of the border there is a master plan, which controls zoning and steers urban development. On the Mexican side of the border growth is informal. Residential, industrial and commercial zones evolve. Infrastructure - water, waste, septic systems and electricity - are installed after a neighborhood organizes itself, often with the help of local activists. We visited community centers involved in neighborhood-building, literacy programs and the „Casa della Idea“ that offers art projects for children and youth.

On the last day of our stay in Tijuana we volunteered at the Padre Chava Soup Kitchen, an organization that serves breakfast to drug addicts, homeless people and refugees stranded at the US-Mexican Border in Tijuana. Serving breakfast to 1200 people is a well-choreographed event managed daily by a small staff and an experienced team of volunteers. For us it was a highly emotional and moving confrontation with the difficult situation of refugees from Syria, Haiti, Africa and Latin America who are fleeing war, poverty and climatic upheaval. The process of feeding people and meeting their basic needs was, in contrast, organized in a very rational and effective way. People in need are helped - no questions asked - with food, clean clothes, medical treatment and the opportunity to take a shower or get a haircut. The organization depends on contributions of money, goods and labor as well as the work of the volunteers from Tijuana and San Diego.

An analysis of the border situation is more topical than ever because of the walls being erected around Europe in order to keep out refugees from the war-torn countries of Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as others who risk their lives for the dream of a better life in Europe. In the interim Donald Trump has been elected president of the United States on an anti-immigration platform. There is a rise of rightist political parties all throughout Europe - and no one can predict what the future will bring.

Both the artists and the environmental engineers on the joint field trips took advantage of their unique point of view as outsiders to perceive a situation in new ways - and to respond to it with the tools available to their discipline. Combining the pragmatic, problem-solving orientation of the environmental engineers with the communicative, playful, emotional and subjective view of the artist in confronting real-world issues could result in proposals which change individual and public perception as well as offering technical solutions to infrastructural problems - we are working on it!