

## 9 Munich, Blind Activism, Participatory Urban Design, November 2015

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In August 2015, I moved to Munich to join as a researcher in the fresh start of the Munich Center for Technology in Society, a science and technology studies hub initially conceived at the crossroads of different STEM disciplines. The singularity of this job lay in that I was to work at a chair populated by anthropologists, part of Technical University of Munich's Department of Architecture. At the official inauguration, we created exhibits of our work and invited local personalities and interested parties. I displayed a long TV report on the urban accessibility activist design collective with which I had been working for four years in Barcelona. That day, I met Erika Mühlthaler, at the time the architect responsible for the accessibility division of the Bavarian Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted (BBSB). As I was interested in undertaking research on the local urban accessibility context, she invited me to witness a very intriguing pedagogic experiment on which they were working: a project where landscape architects finishing their BAs were hired as *Praktikant:Innen* (paid trainees), working as "technical assistants" to blind activists in their in/accessibility reporting activities.

This note, then, is part of my attempt at doing fieldwork with the BBSB. It captures one of the organization's in/accessibility explorations of a square in Munich on November 12, 2015. This took place after the square had already been finalized by the city administration, an anomaly in how to involve disabled people in design projects. As the blind activists already knew, the square presented many inaccessibility issues: the architects had tried to tackle accessibility issues in aesthetically driven "inventive" or "creative" ways, despite that the blind and other disability

rights groups support regulated norms and standards. That day, the BBSB had agreed to meet the architect in charge of the sidewalks of the project. The plan was to explore, test, and demonstrate the inaccessibility issues, establishing paths for a future dialogue. I followed them for about three hours (from nine in the morning to noon) as they went about different aspects: the tactile differentiation of the creative pavements, the color differentiation of the pavements, and a few other things.<sup>1</sup>

Erika, the architect, accompanied me and translated the more complex German issues: we spoke in English between us. Doing fieldwork in a very graphic-intensive field like architecture requires one to think from the visual materials, so when I was handed the promotional brochure, including pictures and renderings, architectural diagrams, and an explanation of the urban intervention, I took a very fast decision: I put away my phone, which I used only to take my own pictures, mostly to remember the details they were talking about as well as the steps, and I opted to scribble on top of the brochure. I had a green pen and thought this would allow me to highlight the spots and places where contentious issues were constantly emerging over that morning. The scribbled notes are in English, and they derive mostly from my conversations with Erika. The whole situation happened in German, and I sometimes also noted down specific concepts or terms they had been repeating in previous meetings. My scribbled notes were rather nonlinear interjections, taken at different moments in the brochure. The pictures, for their part, allowed me to have a sense of sequence afterward. As I was taking pictures and archiving them directly on Evernote, I also wrote some brief remarks on the phone in Spanish (the language in which I think); these consisted mostly of quick remarks to create a thread of the pictures but also some “more theoretical” blurbs that I made in bold of things that inspire me to continue thinking about the case.

Later on, I scanned the brochure and added it to my Evernote archive, where I centralize all fieldwork materials. For the purposes of this volume, I’m also enclosing a transcript of the scribbled notes.



Landeshauptstadt  
München  
**Baureferat**

# Pasing Zentrum

Gestaltung von Straßen und Plätzen



FIGURE 9.1. Front page of a brochure from the municipality of Munich, describing an architectural intervention in downtown Pasing. *Top*, logo of the city of Munich and title of the brochure (*Pasing Zentrum: Gestaltung von Straßen und Plätzen*). *Center bottom*, a bird's-eye view of the main square in Pasing, a pedestrianized roundabout between buildings on one side and a road on the other. *Center*, a statue of the Virgin Mary in Marienplatz, surrounded by rings of different materials (light gray and dark gray).

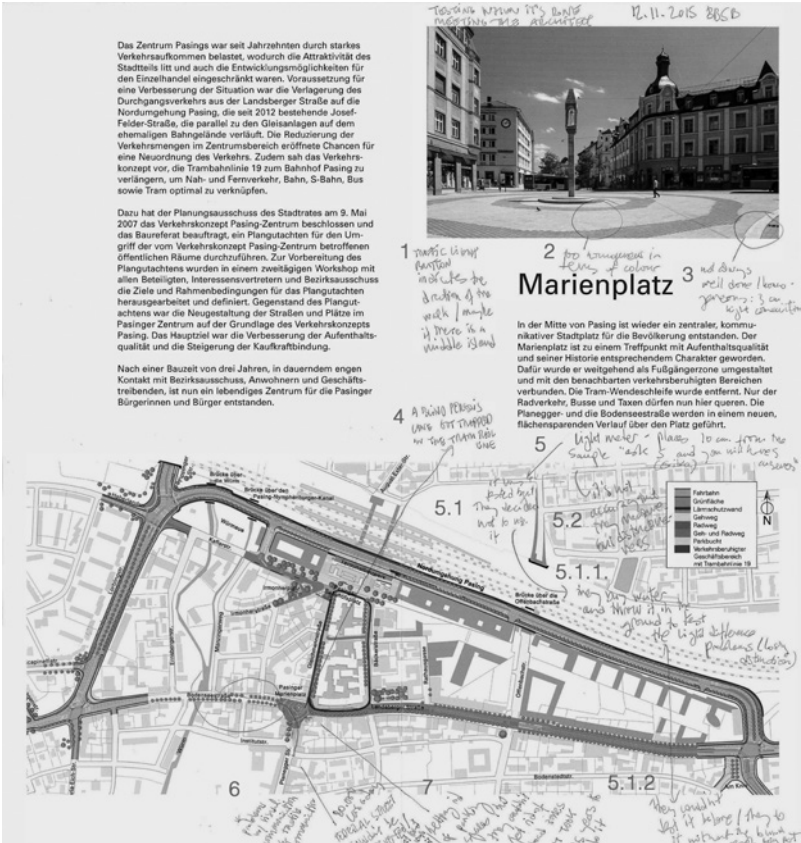


FIGURE 9.2. Second and third pages of the brochure on which the scribbled notes were taken, including a computer-assisted map of the area affected by the architectural intervention. The main roads affected are highlighted, creating a trapezoidal area whose borders are Lortzinger Str. on the left, Nordumgehung Pasing on the upper part and the right (also including Pasing's train station), and Landsberger Straße and Bodenseestraße at the bottom, with Marienplatz at the bottom center of the image, connected by a shopping area shared with the train station. The map is drawn light gray on white, with the areas to be intervened on being represented with dark gray (roads), green (trees and parks), yellow (sidewalks), brown (bike lanes), orange (mixed sidewalk and bike lane), and burgundy (shared street commercial area).

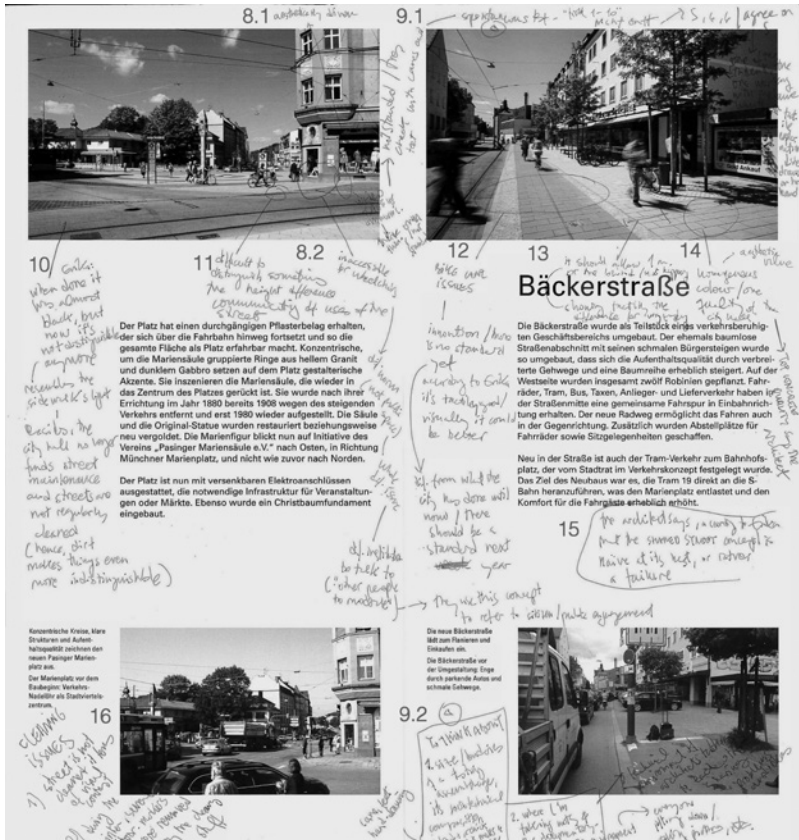


FIGURE 9.3. Fourth and fifth pages of the brochure on which the scribbled notes were taken. The original brochure was as follows. *Top left*, color photograph of one of the sides of Marienplatz after the intervention, particularly showing bikers, tramway lines, and the dropped curb area. *Top right*, color photograph of Bäckerstraße, connecting Marienplatz with the train station, showing the light gray and dark gray differentiations in pavement materials that distinguish the dropped curb shared street, with road and tramway lines on the left and bike lanes in between the sidewalk and the buildings. *Bottom left*, black-and-white photograph of Marienplatz, showing the same angle of the colored photograph from above. The picture shows heavy transit going through the main road, a traffic jam full of trucks, buses, and cars. *Bottom right*, black-and-white photograph of Bäckerstraße, showing the same angle of the colored photograph from above. The picture shows a heavy transit road on the left, with trucks and cars, and a sidewalk full of obstacles, depicting a car parked in the midst of it.

## FIELDNOTES

The scribbled notes—in green on the brochure—have been numbered in red using a computer image editor (reproduced in grayscale here). In this transcript, bold letters offer added contextual cues on which fragments from the brochure have been segmented. I have included some words in square brackets, as they might be required to understand the context (see Figures 9.1 and 9.2).

- 1 (outside of the frame, a reference to something that happened before being given the brochure, when blind activists instructed me how accessible information is conveyed by a traffic light pod including a braille representation of the street they're about to cross)

### TRAFFIC LIGHT BUTTON

indicates the direction of the walk/maybe if there is a middle “island”

- 2 (circle in a panoramic picture from one side of Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the grey and black pavements)

too homogeneous in terms of color

- 3 (circle in a panoramic picture from one side of Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the boundaries between the walkable and non-walkable areas)

not always well done/homo-geneous: 3cm [a too little step] light communication [problems]

- 4 (arrow from an architectural diagram representing Pasing's Marienplatz and the surrounding streets and areas; the arrow comes from one of the sides of the square)

A BLIND PERSON'S CANE GOT TRAPPED IN THE TRAM  
RAIL LINE [railway]

- 5 (under a text paragraph, but possibly continuing the scribbled notes of 3, with lines connecting different bundles of paragraphs, numbered as if they were a logical tree—the scribbled notes are taken over the parts of the architectural diagram at the bottom that were not relevant for the argument)

light meter—[she] places [the device] 10cm [away] from the sample “ask 5 and you will have 5 answers” (Erika)

[she was making reference to the fact that if architects don't make an effort to enforce harsh differentiations things tend to remain just average; the numbers she mentions relate to the self-declared verbal scale of tactile or color differentiation they use as a reference in improvised tests, where they ask themselves how distinct things are ranging from 1—low, to 10—high]

5.1

it was tested but they [architects] decided not to use it

5.1.1

they [Erika and the technical assistants] buy water and throw it in the ground to test the light difference problems (losing distinction)

5.1.2

they [the BBSB] could not test it before [it was built]/they did it without the blind people being part

5.2

it's not accuracy that they measure but distinctive-ness

- 6 (an asterisk from the architectural diagram representing Pasing's Marienplatz and the surrounding streets and areas; it is placed in the midst of the square)

\*problems w/ visual & tactile communication

- 7 (a circle signaling part of the architectural diagram representing Pasing's Marienplatz and the surrounding streets and areas; the circle segments the main lane coming into the square from the side, with many trees, and has two arrows)

80,000 cars a day

FEDERAL STREET

couldn't be diverted/at . . . [illegible] km/h

getting rid of parking spaces, but they couldn't get rid of load[ing] zones

IT TOOK 25 years to do it (see Figure 9.3)

- 8.1 (circle in a panoramic picture from the other side of Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the black pavement)

aesthetically driven

- 8.2 (circle in a panoramic picture from the other side of Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the boundary between the grey walk lane and the car lane)

Inaccessible for wheelchairs

dif. [ferent] norm (not [the one related to] public space)

whole dif. [ferent] issue

dif. [ferent] institution to talk to ("other" people to "moderate")

they use this concept [moderate]

to refer to citizen/public engagement



- 9.1** (circle in a panoramic picture from the other side of the Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the boundary between the grey and the black pavements in the walk lane)

WEIRD TACTILE COMMUNIC.[ATION]

their own thing/not standard

not standard/they check with canes and test

spontaneous test (triangle symbol)—“from 1–10”

Nicht Gutt—5, 6, 6 agree on 5

one of the students, the one working with Melanie wants a tactile explanation

she draws on her hand

- 9.2** A conceptual musing at the bottom of the page, using a symbol to connect it with the other note

(triangle symbol) TO THINK ABOUT

1. size / boundaries of testing assemblage, its sociotechnical composition blind & architect light meter & cane, feet hand-drawing

2. where I'm taking notes & the documentary-prone environment—technical environment of architects talking to each other sharing problems and ideas

– everyone writing down/taking photos, etc.

- 10** (circle in a panoramic picture from the other side of Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the dropped kerb car lane)

Erika:

when done it was almost black, but now it's not distinguishable resembles the sidewalk's light

Besides, the city hall no longer funds street maintenance and streets are not regularly

Cleaned (hence, dirt makes things even more undistinguishable)

- 11 (circle in a panoramic picture from the other side of Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the boundary between the grey walk lane and the car lane)

difficult to distinguish sometimes the height difference communicating dif. uses of the street

- 12 (circle in a panoramic picture from one of the lateral streets connecting with Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the boundary between the bike lane and the walk lane)

#### BIKE LANE ISSUES

innovation/there is no standard yet according to Erika it's tactilely good/visually it could be better

dif.[ferent] from what the city has done until now/there should be a standard next year

- 13 (segmentation in a panoramic picture from one of the lateral streets connecting with Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the boundary between the bike lane and the walk lane)

it should allow 1m. showing tactilely the difference for the blind/not happening

- 14 (circle in a panoramic picture from one of the lateral streets connecting with Pasing's new Marienplatz, highlighting the walk lane)

aesthetic value

homogeneous color/one quality of the city hall

TOP CONCRETE QUALITY says the architect

- 15 Fragment of a conversation, in the midst of the page

the architect says, according to Erika that the SHARED STREET concept is naïve at best, or rather a failure

- 16 Fragment of a conversation, at the bottom of the page

CLEANING ISSUES

- 1) street is not cleaned it terms of visual contrast
  - 2) during the winter, several floor markers were removed by the cleaning staff
- 17 (a circle around one of the architectural firms responsible for the design and planning of the streets and squares, listed in the credits at the end of the brochure)

Erika translates

Herr — [the architect, name redacted for anonymity reasons]  
 “planners are not good moderators of a process like this one”  
 allegedly he reports the mayor saying “no planning anymore  
 without the citizens, but they don’t know how to do it” they  
 are “tech. workers”

**NOTE**

- 1 Tomás Sánchez Criado, “Anthropology as a Careful Design Practice?,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 145, no. 1 (2020): 47–70.