

OUR STORIES – UNSERE GESCHICHTE(N)

Oral History as an Identity-Shaping and Community-Supporting Element in Residential Building – a Pilot Project in Monte Laa

At the focal point of the project stands the question, if and how a “tool” to help build community spirit in funded housing could be developed from the method of oral history, which aside from considering documentation and texts, is mainly based on interviews and stories of contemporary witnesses.

At first, a newly built residential neighbourhood has no story of its own. Also the personal experiences and stories of the new inhabitants can seem to be separative rather than connective, especially in light of increased migration. In contrast to this, the project “Our Stories” wanted to conceive the individual life stories as well as the story of the location where they would encounter one another as opportunity. During this process the biographies of the inhabitants should get connected with each other and the location. This should contribute to the development of a stable community.

“Our Stories” was devised as a pilot project to research an approach based on the oral history research method in the newly built neighbourhood of Monte Laa. In accordance with this, qualitative interviews with inhabitants formed the deciding element in the process of gathering materials. Three aspects formed the focal point of the interviews: Today’s experience of Monte Laa, the history of the area itself, and finally the life stories of individuals before they moved to Monte Laa; A broad field of topics that focused on the current life situation, but more than that made the actual act of remembering something from the past to a central element.

Within the scope of the study, focus was kept on buildings that had just been completed, but also areas that have been inhabited for a few years. Interviews were held in three government-funded buildings erected between 2007 and 2011. However, these three buildings were not to be seen as isolated units within the project, but rather as a slice of the newly created neighbourhood of Monte Laa, which also encompasses older funded buildings (built between 2001 and 2007) as well as the allot settlement “Garten- und Tierfreunde am Laaerberg” (Friends of Garden and Animals of Mount Laa). There were a total of 43 in-depth interviews, whereby linguistic and cultural diversity in the neighbourhood was reflected in the selection of interviewees. The interviews were done in German, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and English.

We wanted to create a framework in which the individual, personal story of the inhabitant enters into a correlation with the story of the neighbourhood, even becoming part of it. Telling the story of Monte Laa should therefore become a community tapestry, at which each individual can weave. Coming from this basic idea, there should be a tool that strengthens the individual inhabitant’s identification with his/her surroundings, that encourages curiosity for one’s neighbours, that is integrated into already existing structures and enhances them.

Against this background, two specific building blocks were developed:

Online portal “www.UnsereGeschichten.montelaa.net”

The basis of the portal content is made up of the materials gathered by the project team. Sequences were selected from the interviews and were elaborated into articles about the history of Monte Laa and its inhabitants, respectively. Every article was assigned a photograph, and thematically ordered; they can be accessed online. Following the idea of the oral history, selected texts were taken from interviews, read aloud by teenagers, and saved online as audio files, so the youths become the storytellers of their neighbourhood. And finally, all locations where inhabitants of Monte Laa lived previously were marked on a map of the world. And so a digital exhibit about the history of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants was created, told by the people who live there. Starting from this solid base, the inhabitants can continue to expand their history online and have their previous locations entered on the map.

A cooperation partner was found in the association “Miteinander am Monte Laa – Laaer Berg” (Together in Monte Laa) for the implementation of the website. An internet platform was created together, in which the project “Our Stories”, as well as the newly structured portal “montelaa.net”, which is run by the association, form an interactive structure. The lasting effect of the project is supported by the validation of the already existing local structures. Come the official end of the research project, all content and editing of new entries will be taken over by the association “Miteinander am Monte Laa – Laaer Berg” (Together in Monte Laa).

Exhibition “Our Histories – Monte Laa”

With the publication of the website, also the exhibit “Our Histories – Monte Laa” was showed in Monte Laa. For over two weeks, one could read short excerpts from interviews with inhabitants all over the neighbourhood: on posters hung inside the buildings, as well as a total of 75 banners hung from balconies. The main part of the exhibit was showed in several community rooms as a “wandering exhibition”. In those rooms, one could listen to longer excerpts of interviews, and objects belonging to the interviewees were shown in the form of a photo series. Furthermore the residential paths of those who were interviewed were shown with the help of maps.

Concerning the identity- and community-forming aspect of the project, it can be said that the immediate effects were considerable. On the one hand, over forty people were interviewed, mostly in their native language, and on the other hand thanks to the exhibition and the conscious collaboration with students and teenagers, many different groups of inhabitants were addressed directly. It will be most interesting to observe the foreseeable lasting effects: Following the intense collaboration of the team with dedicated inhabitants, some of those participating started to feel a very strong connection to the project. This is not least expressed in their willingness to take responsibility for the continuation of the website. Furthermore, already existing structures that were able to be included in the project, were upvalued by the process and certainly strengthened for the long term. One example of this would be the internet portal “montelaa.net”.

Finally the function of the website www.UnsereGeschichten.montelaa.net could contribute to the long-term development of a sustainable community. On the one hand, because

different people could continue to be bound to a communal project by further expanding the writings, and on the other hand, it could become a common, identity-promoting element for the inhabitants of the various older and younger areas of Monte Laa. This would be accessible to new inhabitants, or those as yet not interested in community life.

The buildings selected in Monte Laa have thus far proven to be a very apt framework in which to test and develop the principles behind “Our Stories”. The already existing structures and networks were decisive for their selection. However, in the framework of the project, the know-how to test “Our Stories” in other contexts was developed as well. For example, the functional layout of the website, which was developed together with the inhabitants, can also be applied elsewhere. However, this work experience has taught us that there must be one prerequisite for a project like this: There needs to be a modicum of already existing structures to which the scheme can adhere to. This idea’s greatest strength is using, validating and strengthening already existing structures.