

## Mapping alternative usages

by Johannes Hollenhorst

When I applied to the Never Never School, the question which I had in mind was predominantly how to grasp the connection between a river and its surrounding. In a way it is clear that rivers shape the landscape very much and that they are especially important for the ecological life in the area it flows through – human life included, whether in cities or on the countryside. But on the other hand, there is a huge distance between today's daily lives and the continuous flow of rivers.

Shipping on rivers has become far less important than it was before the creation of railways and even more so since the creation of highways. The reason for this seems also obvious: Cars and lorries are much more flexible in reaching diverse locations without changing the mode of transport. Rivers have also been changed drastically to be easier accessible for transport, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But while it is possible to straighten or deepen a river or even to create canals to connect rivers like the Tisza and the Danube, it is much harder to create water streets from scratch. Especially because water always flows and moves in one or the other way and is depended on the weather. The positive side of this push of transport to other means than the rivers is that it becomes more likely that rivers will no longer be intervened in with very technical ideas in mind. Instead the last years have seen a slow shift towards renaturalization of rivers. In Hungary, some of these attempts even try to take pre-modern ideas of the relation between humans and rivers into account: Based on the documentation of former practices of land and river cultivation in Hungary by the ethnographer Bertalan Andrásfalvy, some contemporary suggestions for the recreation of floodplains like those from the geographer Dénes Lóczy take the notch (Hungarian: *fok*) system into account.

The summer school of the Spolka collective did, however, not take place along the Danube or the Tisza, but along the Hornád. More specifically, we met in Kosice for 10 days of exploring, thinking and creating something in relation to a site directly next to the river. Over the last years, the place which is encircled on the other side by a bunch of railroads, has seen already a lot of discussion in the city. While there were already officials from the city administration and students from the local university who studied the area and suggested projects for it, our task was to offer a slightly different perspective. Instead of having a clear goal and different functionalities in mind, we were first allowed to explore the site through different means: Watching closely, listening carefully, feeling intensively, drawing and writing in details. This was what filled our first days. Different specialists offered us their perspectives in the process: A sociologist explained how fieldwork can look like. An ecologist told us a lot about the different species in the field. A performance artist and a student of music and art opened ways to receive impressions of the site on levels we usually tend to ignore in the everydayness.

Throughout this collection process, I was always trying to go back to the river. While the site was quite huge and made it impossible to grasp everything during one specific way of interpretation, the most important aspect for me was in any case the connection between the river and the site. Even though the Hornád is very much straightened and hidden through a very high levee, there is a lot of life in and through the river. During the fieldwork exercise, I was finding myself a place under a tree next to one of the two bridges that were the limits of our site to the north and to the south. Sitting there, the noise of the street disappeared as it was drowned by the rush of the water. Later someone of the group suggested that this was the ideal place for a party next to river because it had this own sphere of sound. Obviously, this sphere was in a way a hybrid sphere: It was not "nature" creating the sound of rush alone, but the combination of the bridge and the water flowing underneath which created it. While one could argue that the function of the bridge is to cross the river and allows for the city life which relies on the circulation of goods, those who dare to, can also find alternative realities just at the same spot.

This small example shows the strength of alternative modes of mapping. It allows to reimagine space and gives a ground upon which alternative ways to use it can emerge. While the idea of

renaturalization would require a huge change to the way of life along the Hornad in Kosice, this form of reimagination is more pragmatic. It takes up what can already be experienced and tries to draw a new map from there.

A similar idea emerged from a place not directly next to the river but a little bit into the forest at the upper northern part of the side we dealt with. The ecologist who gave us a tour around the place stressed that this part was in a way preserved in the way it was during the times when it was still sometimes covered with floodwater. In 20<sup>th</sup> century river planning, flooding was considered solely as a threat to human life in the city and was therefore to be prevented by all means. While more recent approaches try to give the river more space through compensation areas outside of largely populated areas, this prevention before meant for a long time to build higher and higher levees. While it seems hard to imagine how this former flooding area could be recreated as such in the middle of the city, it would diversify what we today understand as urban area and experiment with what can be understood as a livable place. Yet another shopping center at the riverside would just continue to create a singular access point to life in the city, which is consumption. Still, a new shopping mall was also part of the portfolio the chief planner of the city was looking into in recent years. Pointing towards the supposedly successful development of the Eurovea in Bratislava, he held that the main objective would have to be that the area stays accessible to everyone. This accessibility does however not allow for different ways of life in the city. A shopping mall has an own understanding of conduct, and so does a floodplain area.

Both examples, the bridge across the river and the former floodplain next to the river, confront us with a certain distinction and distance. This can be understood as the effect of trying to optimize life in the city, creating lifestyles which allow for the easiness of consumption and production. By experiencing the sites with the senses of our bodies and looking at it with forms of alternative knowledge of space like ecology, we are able to spot and develop alternative usages of which there are still traces left. These traces do not become visible on a geographic map, but they can be made visible and exemplified on maps that embrace such situated and embodied experiences.