

## Experiencing third spaces in between university and society: transdisciplinary learning experiences in a shopping center

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### **Abstract**

*What happens when a university leaves its campus and enter spaces that seem reserved for completely different functions and areas of life – such as shopping? What opportunities and potentials arise from such a shift for the dialog between science and society? Is it an innovative way for science communication to reach groups other than the education-oriented middle class? What skills do academics need to succeed in such a setting? These and similar questions formed the starting point of the Berlin project “Mall Anders - Open Learning Lab for Science and Society”. For seven months in 2021/22, TU Berlin used a retail space in a shopping mall to test new ways of communicating science and co-producing knowledge in a dialogue between the university, business, civil society, politics, and culture. The relocation of university life to a public shopping center enabled broad public involvement in teaching and learning, high activating potential in overcoming the rifts between university and society and new impulses for science communication, participatory research, and student-organized teaching.*

**Keywords:** *Transdisciplinary learning; knowledge transfer; didactics; transformative science; participatory research; science communication.*

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## **1. Introduction**

A central question in the debate about participatory ways of knowledge production concerns the forums and infrastructures of collaborative research and learning alliances on major societal problems (Bergmann et al. 2012; Fam et al. 2019; Gibbons et al. 1994; Thompson Klein/Philipp 2023). How can inter- and transdisciplinary spaces be created that mediate between academia and society – and how should they look like in practice? What are the requirements of experimental learning facilities that follow a transdisciplinary objective, and which kind of learning dynamics do they enable?

To plausibilize these problems and related questions on hybrid areas, transfer practices, and *thirdspace* (Soja 2007), which increasingly accompany the debate on academic research and teaching, this article makes the case for a specific pioneer project in Berlin: *Mall Anders - Offenes Lernlabor für Universität und Gesellschaft* (Mall Anders - Open Learning Lab for University and Society). *Mall Anders* (ambiguously translatable as “The Other Mall” or “This Time Differently”) was a transdisciplinary teaching and learning space in the core of a shopping center that operated over seven months in 2021/22. This article presents (1) idea, genesis, and shape of the project, (2) theoretical foundations and didactic methods applied within it, and (3) central learning experiences for different participants at the interface between university and society.

## **2. “Mall Anders” - Origin and Design of a Public Learning Lab**

*Mall Anders* was established in fall 2021 in the middle of *WILMA Shoppen*, a retail shopping center in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Its genesis was the result of TU Berlin’s transfer policy and continuous efforts to strengthen the cooperation between the university and representatives from business, politics, civil society, culture, and media. With the mediation of the municipal administration of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, the university obtained a 380-square-meter retail space whose previous user, a retailer specializing in gift items, had gone bankrupt during the first phase of the pandemic and left the entire interior (shelves, lighting, cash register systems, etc.) along with plenty of merchandise in the shop.

A service-learning course at the TU Berlin had the task to redesign the retail space with the given materials. The *Natural Building Lab* (2021) of the Faculty of Architecture, which specializes in practices of circular building, offered students an interdisciplinary design seminar with the creative task of exploring the space, its context, its intended purpose, and the range of materials left behind with the task to prepare it for a transdisciplinary learning site. After eight weeks of analysis and reflection, the students decided on a flexible, easily changeable interior design that consisted almost entirely of upcycling the given materials: shelf combinations became room dividers and projection surfaces for video installations, drawers were transformed into seatings, stuffed animals served as seat upholstery –

civilization trash became interior architecture (Mall Anders 2022). Mall Anders inspired the discourse of sustainable development both materially and didactically (cf. Philipp 2023) and thereby aimed at contributing practical knowledge to the ongoing transdisciplinary debate

### 3. Theoretical Foundations and Expectations

Transdisciplinarity has been negotiated and elaborated since the 1990s (Vilsmaier et al. 2023). As academia is increasingly expected to be impactful for society, new responsibilities arise that force researchers to consider their role in the research process. In the face of systemic uncertainties and normative plurality, scholars alone can neither represent the various perspectives and interests nor make reliable predictions about future developments. In addition to ‘applied science’ and ‘professional consultancy’, Funtowicz & Ravetz (1993) recommend a *post-normal science*. This calls for constructive stakeholder involvement and thus aims at the establishment of democratic research structures which consider the concerns of those people ‘affected’ by the research results. It is therefore a prerequisite of transdisciplinary learning to recognize the plurality of knowledge resources (Philipp & Schmohl 2023) and the necessity of horizontal and dialogical processes.

*Mall Anders* aimed precisely at this goal, to provide space for the interplay of plural knowledge resources, to allow heterogeneous forms of knowledge to meet and to enable interaction. The claim to test different ways of knowledge communication and production, however, presupposed a reflexive opening of academic knowledge culture in order to unfold effectiveness (Marej 2020). *Mall Anders* therefore rejected traditional transfer logics of unidirectional knowledge transmission and aimed at the multidirectional flow of knowledge between diverse members of society. By confronting academic knowledge with local everyday and practical knowledge, the experimental space triggered processes of reflection and learning about tacit forms of knowledge (Polanyi 1966) as well as power differences of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). Against this background, the question arose where and how such a place could be created and which challenges would emerge. On the one hand, non-participation or fake participation (cf. Arnstein 1969), which would only serve academic self-assurance, should be avoided. On the other hand, the widespread problem was that only members of the educated middle classes participate and that other population groups are not included. Therefore, first, a place in the city was sought that was accessible to everyone and had no educational barriers: a shopping mall. Moreover, the content of the project was conceptualized in a democratic way with a plurality of themes, methods and techniques.

*Mall Anders* opened its doors in December 2021. Its program was conceived through an open call for projects: students, teachers, and other staff members of Berlin’s universities, and public actors from the arts and civil society were invited to use the space temporarily by proposing an interactive educational aim and concept. The applicants had to explain the

communicative methods and potentials they were aiming for with their project. There were no thematic requirements. The use of the site was free of charge for all groups and was organized, supervised, and supported by a team of student assistants and early career researchers.

During its seven-month duration, *Mall Anders* hosted over 250 events. The content spectrum was broad and comprised sustainability (e.g. circular economy or mobility), urban development, digitalization, pop music research, and linguistics up to ancient cultures and numerous other topics and disciplines. The methodological approaches included workshops, (interactive) exhibitions, science slams, short lectures, quizzes, infomovies, creative workshops for children, artistic performances, and individual counseling (see: Berlin University Alliance 2023).

The primary user groups were: (1) *students*, who used the space in the context of project workshops or student research, e.g. to present their own research or to collect data in conversation with visitors, etc. (2) *Senior researchers*, who presented their research on current issues such as the future of liberal democracies or the latest developments in catalysis research. Their favorite communicative methods were exhibitions, panels, storytelling events, and science slams. (3) *Representatives of civil society*, who addressed either locally relevant topics such as urban transition, mobility, land use etc. or overarching societal challenges such as conflict resolution techniques. Furthermore, Mall Anders was also an arena of (4) *artistic intervention*: the co-production of knowledge at the intersection of art, technology, and science (Chemi/Du 2017) created knowledge exchange through artistic products, artistic practices, and interpersonal exchanges. Finally, the (5) *curators* of the site used it as a display and experimental space of current science theory debates. The whole project was an open invitation to reflect on the cognitive, communicative, and organisational tasks of science and academic learning through the confrontation with new audiences. This enterprise included theoretical preparations and structured reflection workshops, but also daily tasks such as creating an inviting atmosphere for everyone involved and explaining the learning space and its program to the visitors.

Different forms of learning and interaction defined *Mall Anders*: in (1) *everyday mode* during the few time slots when there was no program announced, a team member welcomed visitors at the entrance area to answer questions. The space was open to the public on a daily basis, and Mall Anders' visual identity of color coding, palm trees, lounge chairs, and modular-mobile furnishings attracted people to enter, linger, and interact. Another free form of interaction was what we called (2) *Open House or Project Display*. Mall Anders became a publicly accessible co-working space for students, scholars or artists who transferred their work to the mall and thereby provided insights into their work processes and research practices. In addition, *Mall Anders* served as a (3) forum for exchange and reflection for *workshops and conferences* with experts on transdisciplinarity and science communication.

This interaction largely took place between actors of the academic and other professional communities. Visitors participated by joining the conference, sharing thoughts and topics. The most frequented formats were the ones explicitly oriented towards interaction: *events curated by cooperation partners* (4), which significantly determined the program. The cooperation partners announced their respective event via the website and through their networks, they planned and designed their learning arrangements, and prepared how to address passers-by and visitors. The events ranged from one-hour to multi-day exhibition, dialog, experiment, and workshop formats.

#### 4. Learning Experiences

Both after each event and at several larger workshops, we reviewed critically the procedure the results and processed them for later events. In two debriefing reflection-workshops after seven unusual months of university life in a shopping mall, we identified four dimensions of learning experiences.

(1) *Visitors and passers-by* often reported that *Mall Anders* was in many ways an irritation in the flow of consumption, a disruption of spatial expectations, a surprising learning experience in a place where this was not to be expected. First-time visits were often stimulated by interest in individual topics, by curiosity about the unusual store and its aesthetics, or by *personal* contact. In the conversation with academic representatives, some visitors recognized *Mall Anders* as a space of information, an opportunity to reflect their own knowledge resources and their own educational biography. Thereby, *Mall Anders* was a means of educational reflection.

(2) *Students, professors, and university members* revealed to us that the communication framework of the mall exposed the limits of their communicative ability when it came to opening up research questions to a new, unknown audience. How do I talk about my research if I am not confronted with scientists? How do I address my audience if I do not know anything about their personal and professional backgrounds? How do I arouse their interest? For many university members, the unusual formats entailed significant challenges. In this respect, *Mall Anders* was also a reflection on the limits and challenges of science communication in a time, in which audience formations are constantly changing and the legitimacy of science is increasingly put in doubt (Bucchi/Trench 2021).

There were also learning experiences on the side of the (3) *shopping center management*. The non-commercial use of store by a university helped to overcome the embarrassment of unused areas. It was capable to attract a new audience and media attention, at least temporarily. On the other hand, the work of students in the shopping center and the unconventional nature of some interventions inevitably led to conflicts with other store operators. *Mall Anders* rather unintentionally initiated the discussion about to what extent

shopping centers are willing to leave behind the outdated doctrine of an “architecture of seduction” (Venturi/Brown/Izenour 1979: 20) and instead embrace the social interaction with their visitors as a process of ‘collective creativity’. However, for the latter, visitors need to be recognized as co-creators rather than as consumers.

A continuous learning experience happened also within our own (4) team of *initiators and curators*: the colleagues who daily managed *Mall Anders*, opened and closed its glass doors, curated the program, advised the scientists and students, answered the visitors’ questions, endeavored to connect with the other stores, and much more. One central learning experience was dealing with the spatial and social threshold between inside and outside. Many passers-by were aware of the challenge of exposing themselves to the risky, unknown space – but how to react? The team learned to shape the threshold permeable: constant attention and unobtrusive personal contact were the keys to signal accessibility and arouse curiosity. Balancing between ‘welcome culture’ and restraint was a challenge. Children, meanwhile, were the ones least shy about entering our space, and furthermore technical and scientific installations and experiments and other playful interaction offers in the entrance area gained attention immediately.

With all these communicative dynamics, *Mall Anders* turned out to be an example of *boundary work* (Gieryn 1983), as it operated on the demarcation of science from non-science and the interrelatedness of various forms of knowledge resources such as professional knowledge, scientific knowledge, embodied knowledge (Gustafson 1999; Freiler 2008), etc. The specific combination of learning lab, upcycling practice, and maker education in a shopping mall turned *Mall Anders* into an experience of public irritation. The building type shopping mall was originally entirely oriented towards consumerism and capitalist exploitation logic (Kroes 1996: XIV; Coleman 2006: 145-167). However, it has long since ceased to be exclusively dedicated to shopping and has become a place for leisure and urban life. The fact that it could also serve as a place of university life and science-society interaction therefore appears to be a reasonable extension.

As an in-between learning space (Vilsmaier 2015), as a transdisciplinary forum of debate, *Mall Anders* enabled the work on rhizomatic intersections (Deleuze/Guattari 1980) of problem contexts and thereby dispensed hierarchical structures. Originally intended as a means of science communication, as a service of university representatives for society, *Mall Anders* turned out to be a learning experience for the universities themselves. At the crossroads of science and society, it was not only a space of risk and rehearsal, but also a marketplace of competence acquisition for scholars of all disciplines and qualification levels. In this respect, *Mall Anders* was also a ‘boundary work’ on the university’s societal role and its communicative potentials.

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