

# 04

## SWIMMING FREE



### The Citizen-Driven Transformation of Neubad Lucerne

2012-2017

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#### Introduction

In March 2012, the City of Lucerne, Switzerland, announced the strategic objective to become a “Creative City” by 2020 and launched an open call to tender for concepts aimed at concentrating the creative communities in the city in the building of the former public indoor swimming pool. The call required the place to be run in a self-financing manner. The winner of the competition was a self-organised polycentric network of approximately 100 people from the creative scene of Lucerne called the “Neubad Association.”

This chapter describes the remarkable cooperation of formerly disconnected players from the creative economy, cultural organisations, science, innovation promotion and residents of the neighbourhood. The Neubad concept foresaw turning the former public swimming pool into a place for inspiration, incubation and innovation in an open source manner. Architects, professional gastronomes and many voluntary workers helped with the transformation. Today, Neubad consists of co-working ateliers, an Open Pool used as a unique venue for exhibitions, seminars, and events (flea markets,

FIGURE II.4.1 Neubad Pool Dinner. Foto by: Christian Felber.



repair cafés, etc). The Neubad Bistro connects users of co-working spaces with visitors and people from the neighbourhood. Neubad's location in the city centre with its extraordinary interior spaces affects the social and economic development of the city.

The case illustrates and analyses the challenges, with a focus on joint knowledge production, within the frame of an interdisciplinary research project that accompanied and investigated the transformation. The research team, whose members were architects, designers, management scholars and social work researchers, had to deal with processes of high complexity and uncertainty. Involving diverse actors in such a research process necessitated managing the integration of diverse perspectives, problem definitions and research practices as a cognitive task. The analysis highlights how the research team, whose members knew each other from previous long-term collaborations, managed these challenges by means of co-designing the research project, co-producing knowledge and regular reflection.

## Neubad

In March 2012, the government of the City of Lucerne, Switzerland, set the strategic objective to become a “Creative City” by 2020. One of the measures to achieve this objective was the launch of an open call for tender for the four-year temporary use (2012–2016) of the former public indoor swimming pool building. The call asked for concepts aimed at concentrating the creative communities in the city. It included the requirement to run the place in a self-financing manner.

The Neubad (which translates as “New Pool”) Association, a self-organised polycentric network of approximately 100 people representing organisations and individuals from the creative scene of Lucerne, won the bid. This newly funded association included players so far largely disconnected from each other, such as actors coming from the creative economy, cultural organisations, science, innovation promotion and residents of the neighbourhood.

Although not used to collaborating in urban development projects, some of the players had been contacted together at about the same time when the call was launched by researchers from Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts to participate as external experts in a research project called “Urban Vision Lab.” The interdisciplinary Urban Vision Lab research group aimed at setting up a continuous dialogue between citizens and institutions on questions related to city development and shifted a part of the project's budget and resources to the support of the Neubad Association during the phase of writing up the tender proposal. They managed to overcome initial suspicion about the engagement of Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts by emphasising their sincere interest in the initiative, not only as researchers, but also as citizens who were not just “sent” by Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts to “study” what was going on.

The space is situated close to the city centre and has access to public transport. The Neubad concept foresaw turning the former public swimming pool into a place for inspiration, incubation and innovation in an open source manner. Architects, professional gastronomes and many voluntary workers helped with the transformation. Nowadays, Neubad consists of the following elements (Neubad, 2015):

- **Co-working and ateliers** for creative economy start-ups, knowledge workers and culture pro-ducers.
- **Open Pool** – the large swimming pool and its adjacent area are used as a unique venue for exhibitions, seminars, conferences, theatre/dance/music events, flea markets, repair cafés, etc.

- **Neubad Bistro** connects users of co-working spaces with visitors and people from the neighbourhood.

Today, Neubad claims a central role as a place for creativity, culture, education and social engagement. The location, with its extraordinary interior spaces, impacts the social and economic development of the city. The initial period of four years was later extended to eight years.

## The Accompanying Research Project

Research on entrepreneurial cities (for a summary, see Wolf, Schuchert, Amstutz, Minder, & Wil-lener, 2018) indicates that

- (1) Play instead of managerial approaches as planning and governance strategy,
- (2) Stimulation of grassroots movements that drive initiatives, and
- (3) (Re)use of temporary spaces for initiatives that have a meaning to communities

are approaches which potentially act as enablers for initiatives concerning a creative entrepreneurial city. However, to date, knowledge about how cities can apply these three approaches in their initiatives for an entrepreneurial city remains a puzzle. There are pieces and parts in different bodies of literature, but they have not yet been put together into a comprehensive picture. The set-up and transformation of the old public swimming pool was therefore accompanied by the above-mentioned research project that focused on shedding light on the following research question:

*RQ: How can city governments and municipalities stimulate grassroots initiatives towards an entrepreneurial city in a playful way?*

The project was funded by the Future Laboratory CreaLab (CreaLab) at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The CreaLab emerged originally in 2010 as one of the four interdisciplinary programmes funded by Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Its mission was to establish collaboration concerning the topic “future of society” across the Departments of Engineering and Architecture, Management, Design & Arts, Music, and Social Work. The programme is composed of a portfolio of about 60 associated interdisciplinary projects, and a core team of 18 researchers coming from all departments of Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

The core researchers involved in the Neubad accompanying research project were core team members of the CreaLab, and they called in other researchers whose competencies were required. The project started with a nucleus of researchers who were interested in the topic of the local development of city residential districts – two architects from the Department of Engineering & Architecture, an urban developer from the Department of Social Work as well as a regional economist from the Department of Management – who then involved a researcher who was studying participative event design methods from the Department of Design & Arts. Together, they approached the director of the CreaLab and asked her for funding.

Researchers gathered data from the initial phase of creating and shaping the temporary use, which lasted from January 2013 until March 2014. During this phase, the Neubad building was reconstructed, the different use types were defined, and the financial and organisational bases were created. They consisted of:

- a) A design phase where the mechanisms of financing and organisational elements were set up;
- b) A reconstruction phase that included the collaborative creation of new space concepts and the building of them; and
- c) A transition phase where the building started to be inhabited but was still in a provisional status.

As one of the researchers was also a member of the board of the Neubad Association (the same person who was previously the project manager of the Urban Vision Lab project) and there were very good relations between the CreaLab core team and the Neubad board, there was no suspicion between the research group and the Neubad initiative.

### The Process of Joint Knowledge Production

Inter- and transdisciplinary research projects face several challenges to joint knowledge production because they usually deal with themes of large complexity and uncertainty, and involve diverse stakeholders (Hirsch Hadorn, Pohl, & Bammer, 2010). This necessitates managing the integration of diverse perspectives, problem definitions and research practices as a cognitive task (Hollaender, Loibl, & Wilts, 2008; Kruse et al., 2015).

One of the enablers in the interdisciplinary project team was that the researchers knew each other from intensively working together for almost three years in the CreaLab. They were aware of the challenges of inter- and transdisciplinary research projects regarding joint knowledge production, and they regularly reflected on this. Their approach was very much influenced by the findings of a study conducted earlier by other researchers from the CreaLab (Wolf, Harboe, Kummeler, & Kipouros, 2016). Based upon a literature review and interviews, this study identified four principles that seem to enable and foster integrative transdisciplinary research. These principles are (ibid, p. 797f.):

1. Dialogue acts as a development and communication tool – from meetings to a conscious exchange and development process.
2. Materiality creates objects and images by concrete modelling and visualising (including prototypes) that allow the team targeted negotiation processes.
3. Iterativity provides a dynamic process flow and flexible planning.
4. Reflexivity supports a continuous placing and reflection of the team in relation to the project objectives and results.

The interdisciplinary project team thus consciously approached and reflected challenges using the framework of these principles. Continuous reflection is identified as an enhancing factor for transdisciplinary projects (Polk, 2015).

As this was a transdisciplinary project, it was important that also external stakeholders, i.e. the Neubad team, would a) participate in the data gathering and b) make use of the study findings as a learning and reflection opportunity. The Neubad team members were very busy transforming the Neubad. They were, however, also interested in a careful and science-based documentation of the set-up process and therefore very open to participate in interviews and in reflection sessions and group discussions where findings were regularly presented and interpretations by the researchers were challenged. The opportunity of gaining “free” process documentation, the mechanisms of reporting back results to the interviewees and intense discussions certainly acted as enablers for the research project.

As mentioned above, communication between research team members was unproblematic in this case. The same applies to the communication between the project team and the Neubad actors. One important factor was that some members of the research team were involved in the “Neubad Association”; one of them was even a member of the board. This might in general produce biases in research projects, but the regular reflection mechanisms described above helped here. For the research group, this situation produced the opportunity to have their work present in the minds of the people whom they wished to support with their research, and to feed findings back to the Neubad board in almost real time.

### The Methods Applied for Joint Knowledge Production

The methodological approach of the project was designed in a way such that all methods of data gathering stimulated the continuous discussion and reflection of the process between the researchers and the Neubad team. As the core sample of a qualitative case study must include informants able to provide essential insights to answer a research question – the so-called “pivotal target group” (Davies, 2007, p. 143) – researchers focused on three groups of actors who were strongly involved in the first phase, directly influenced the atmosphere and transformed the physical building of Neubad: (1) operators; (2) members of the board; and (3) volunteers and users. As researchers were particularly interested in the subjective viewpoints of actors from the three groups, they accepted Flick’s call for triangulation (2009, p. 26) and used different qualitative methods, i.e. interviews, observations and group discussions. This approach allowed them to improve scope, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings.

The researchers first conducted 12 problem-centred interviews (Witzel, 2000) with representatives from the three actor-groups (four operators, four members of the board, four volunteers and users). Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, were transcribed verbatim and resulted in 42 pages of transcripts. Furthermore, interviewees were asked to take pictures of their favourite places. Flick (2009) emphasises that what interviewees “select and take as a picture allows the researcher to draw conclusions about the views of the subjects towards their own everyday lives” (p. 242). Although this approach to documenting changes in buildings and perspectives of the people involved is not new, it is rarely used. In this project, it proved to be very helpful not only for the analysis, but also for the discussion with the stakeholders. The photos reflected their point(s) of view, and it was easy to communicate research findings while providing a visual hook at the same time.

Second, the researchers ran two three-hour group discussions (Flick, 2009; p. 196) with the six members of the board, four operators, and nine volunteers and users in March and October 2013. Such group discussions help to filter extreme attitudes and render common opinions (Pollock, 1955). They were documented by means of videos, photographs and field notes. Participants felt that these discussions were particularly interesting because they brought together different types of people involved in the set-up process of Neubad. The researchers gave them a kind of “organised reflection time,” something they would not have done if there was no applied research project, and this was perceived to be helpful.

Third, researchers observed the process with the aim of getting hold of the changes in the space and its use. They regularly took photos of important spots like the pool, the co-working area and the bistro area at different points in time to document changes in the observed environment that are too complex to catch for the eye without such documentation (Flick, 2009, p. 241). These photos helped the researchers to document and map changes while they were happening.

The findings of the study were presented at different points in time during the two group discussions, twice to the board of the Neubad Association and to all members at the general assembly. The board referred to them in the annual reports, which were in turn cited by the local media. The findings highlighted the significance of the achievements of the Neubad for city development and explained in an understandable manner the mechanisms by which these achievements were accomplished. They confirmed that the board of the Neubad Association and the initiative were on the right track, and provided the board with opportunities to reflect upon the observed challenges. For example, the observation made by the researchers that some of the board members were suffering great pressure led to the removal of operative management tasks from the board.

### Funding Aspects of the Context

From the start, the project suffered from difficulties in accessing funds. Although funding bodies approached by the Neubad Association liked to fund the “action,” i.e. the transformation of Neubad, funding accompanying research was considered as less interesting and seen as “nice to have.” Thus, the only possibility was to try to acquire internal funding from Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Two interdisciplinary programmes – one focusing on urban studies and the CreaLab – offered their help. However, some powerful actors at the university felt that it was risky to engage in funding such a study, because in the case of Neubad failing, the university might become associated with this failure. The urban studies interdisciplinary programme was therefore not allowed to use its funds for the study. The CreaLab therefore decided to fund the research project in a way that this support would not become visible until the findings were achieved: they allocated funding to the account of an already existing project with almost the same team to allocate funding that was then used for the study. Since the Neubad was a success, the university is now happy about the research results.

As in other transdisciplinary projects, time was an important issue. The research team was very busy with collecting data, analysing them and discussing findings with the stakeholders – something that is not very common in science, although it is important for transdisciplinary research projects to support stakeholders by “providing a basis for justifying their decision-making and actions” (Tranfield, 2002, p. 378). In this project, publication of research results was delayed, and was not covered by the funding, which was completely required for data gathering and analysis. It took the researchers almost one year to write up a working paper after the project. Then, they became involved in a COST action, which provided the idea to publish the results within the scientific community in a new drive. Researchers managed to acquire internal university funds for publication and, during the last year, two book chapters, one conference paper and one article for a peer-reviewed journal were written.

Furthermore, the project team aimed to study for a longer time period – not just the initial phase of the Neubad transformation – but was not able to acquire further funding during the set-up phase. This issue has now been partly dealt with: the case study results are published in well-recognised outlets, which provide evidence on the (scientific) importance of the topic and the experience of the team in undertaking such accompanying research within the context. Also, the COST action helped the team to understand where in Europe there were other similar initiatives, create networks and think about common projects at a European level. This will hopefully allow them to secure funding for follow-up projects.

### Discussion and Lessons Learned

Inter- and transdisciplinary research has a relatively long tradition in Switzerland. For example, since about ten years ago, transdisciplinary research has been supported by the Network of Transdisciplinary Research (td-net), which was set up by and “assists the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences in facilitating exchange and collaboration between disciplines and between science and society” (td-net, online). Urban study research is accustomed to inter- and transdisciplinary practices. This is also reflected in the td-net award, which is relatively regularly given to urban study research projects. For example, in 2015 it was won by the architect Emmanuel Rey and his team from the Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne “who engaged in a scenario process with sixty students and integrated authorities and other stakeholders in order to explore urban densification issues” (Zinsstag, Perrig-Chiello, Paulsen, & Truffer, 2016). Such types of inter- and transdisciplinary urban study research projects where architects, engineers and urban planners are integral parts of a joint knowledge production process in which urban scenarios and visions are created or new neighbourhoods are planned are relatively common in Switzerland. Rare, however, are inter- and transdisciplinary urban study projects where researchers are not a central part of the action but just observe and accompany it – as in the case presented here. This research project is even more innovative in so far as it managed to study *in situ* one of the rare cases where playful rather than managerial city government processes stimulated the emergence and activities of grassroots initiatives in city development. It is thus instructive to city municipalities and similar grassroots initiatives, but also to interdisciplinary research. The following conclusions and lessons learned can be drawn from the case.

One of the major success factors of the project was that the project members had already worked together in inter- and transdisciplinary projects (Hirsch Hadorn, Pohl, & Bammer, 2010). They were thus aware of the general challenges regarding joint knowledge production and consciously built in reflection mechanisms to ensure the integration of the diverse perspectives, problem definitions and research practices. Such activities are suggested to similar research projects.

Regarding the cooperation between the project members and the Neubad actors, there was a considerable amount of trust involved from the beginning, which was the result of the convincing engagement of members of the research group as participants of the initiative and as citizens. This is, in general, regarded as a problem in research as it can produce biases (Flick, 2009). In this case, the research group consisted of members who were participating in the initiative and others who were not, and together they consciously and regularly discussed whether and how far observations and conclusions were biased. This helped them also to differentiate between perspectives from inside and outside the initiative. In the end, they benefited from this a lot because it helped them also to better understand what they observed – but to stay neutral at the same time.

Of similar importance were the regular presentations of findings to the Neubad actors for the researchers to validate their interpretations through member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1995), but also for the Neubad actors to benefit from an external perspective on their recent actions. That the research and the observed transformation process were strongly interwoven contributed to this in many ways; it ensured the relevance of the research findings to those whose actions were studied and stimulated reflections at the point in time they were useful to manage the initiative.

To the researchers, this represented a dilemma: they wanted their findings to be useful to the Neubad actors (Tranfield, 2002), but at the same time, they were not able to allocate resources to the equally important tasks of publication and securing follow-up research grants. Similar research projects are therefore strongly advised to acquire greater funding at the beginning, which will allow more resources to be allocated to tasks other than data collection and analysis.

Another idea might be to benefit from the goodwill and interest of the citizens in the same way in which the initiative that is studied here does. As Neubad benefited in many ways from the volunteer work of citizens, the project team might have launched a call for volunteer citizen scientists. As social media were very popular among the Neubad crowd, the team might have asked the people involved to contribute observations and pictures of changes through an app instead of interviewing and observing people. In this way, they would have had to invest less money from the research budget for data collection.

Yet another way of making better use of a small research budget might be to design the project in such a way that less data would be collected at the beginning of the research project, and once the first convincing findings had been achieved and the importance of the research to the Neubad actors had been scientifically proven, more effort could be put into the acquisition of follow-up funding which in turn would, if successful, allow the study of the initiative for a longer period.

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