

# BMW Guggenheim Lab greeted with hostility, but sent off with gratitude

After the Lab's closing, organizers and local authorities reflect on the project's accomplishments and shortcomings

The BMW Guggenheim Lab in Berlin may have had a difficult start, but in retrospect, the project was a fruitful one. "I am very happy that it did take place," Matthias Köhne, mayor of the Berlin borough of Pankow, told the news agency dapd on Friday. After the proposal for the Lab was met with hostility in the popular but socially deprived Kreuzberg neighborhood in June, the future of the project remained uncertain. Köhne, a politician from the Social Democratic Party, supported its relocation to his borough. "The people from New York were a bit afraid after that, and they said, then we're going to leave. At first it was a big struggle, a big effort to make sure that the Lab stays in Berlin," Köhne told dapd. In the end, the Guggenheim Lab found a home in Prenzlauer Berg, a more upscale area in the Pankow district in northern Berlin.

Now, after the Berlin phase of the Guggenheim Lab project is over and the open-air structure is set to travel to Mumbai, the team of organizers reflected on its outcomes. On a round table in the Lab on Friday, the team discussed the lessons they are taking from the city that greeted them with harsh resistance, but is sending them off with gratitude.

The purpose of the Guggenheim Lab is to present new research on the way big cities function today and to foster discussion. Architect and researcher Carlo Ratti explains that it is part of a global movement he would call the "Urban Spring." The project aims to "really show how we can understand and, most importantly, change our cities to an unprecedented degree today," due to rapid improvements in technology, Ratti said on Friday. "The incredible thing is that today you can put not 15 people around the table, you can put 1,500, 15,000, 150,000, just because we can connect through networks." Ratti compares the Guggenheim Lab to the Arab Spring as an example of how large numbers of interconnected people can bring about structural change.

Rachel Smith, an urban planner from Australia and a member of the Lab's team, also looks at the project from a primarily global perspective. For her, indications that her programming was successful were not so much attendance on site as the global contacts that the project fostered. For instance, a man from Brisbane, Australia wrote to her that he had started a project called Maker's Space, following the Lab's example, as she said on Friday. "If we're just gonna talk about people who sat on seats in the lab, we are doing ourselves an injustice," Smith said. "I think it's what's happening outside, the changes that the lab is making globally." She added, "I think that's as important, or in fact even more important than the people who sit here."

That, however, leads back to the problem that the lab's stopover in Berlin began with – what is its relation to Berlin itself? Among the discussions of urban planning strategies and global mass movements, how did the Lab stand in the tranquil inner courtyard in Prenzlauer Berg, and how did it engage with the city?

“I think the lab has learned much more from Berlin than Berlin might have learned from the lab,” Curator Maria Nicanor admits. “It’s nothing new in Berlin to be participatory or to self-organize.” The conflicts in Kreuzberg in the beginning, but also the programming after the Lab opened in Prenzlauer Berg have motivated the team to improve and perform even better, Nicanor explained.

The Lab did have some concrete effects on Berlin. Team member Corinne Rose named the Social City day on Friday, July 13 as an example – then, Ephraim Gothe, the state secretary for city development, discussed the issue of rising rents in the Kottbusser Tor area of Kreuzberg with members of the public. Another example is a community garden that Corinne Rose started with people from the neighborhood. What effects, if any at all, these initiatives would have on the city is still too early to determine, according to Maria Nicanor. “We have to wait and see if those connections that Corinne was talking about ever flourish. And that’s not up to the lab - that’s up to whoever was here, who is willing to do something,” Nicanor said.

Mayor Köhne, although he values the project very positively, said “I don’t believe it has any immediate effects on anything.” He explained that he would like to receive a report from the organizers summarizing their accomplishments and the project’s next steps. Köhne is glad that local restaurants “profited” from the Lab, and that, because of it, many people came to visit his borough. “It is always good when people come to Pankow – we are an attractive borough and we want to remain so,” he said. But overall, the concrete effects are minimal, he thinks.

A larger discussion that the Guggenheim Lab leaves open here is not one about urbanism, but rather about funding for the arts in times of austerity. In the beginning, Kreuzberg locals criticized the lab not only because of the gentrification that it could bring to the area, but also because of its corporate sponsor, BMW. Critics implied that this type of sponsorship was unethical – but, as curator Nicanor and mayor Köhne agreed, it is in any case necessary. The lab, both said, is a model of how culture would be funded in the future.

“The accusation that BMW is the sponsor is absurd,” Köhne told dapd. Without BMW, there would be no Berlin Marathon and no Berlinale, he said, and added: “Alongside publicly funded culture, I believe, much more is going to take place in privately funded culture.” Also in Pankow, the cultural initiatives that the municipality administers are “mostly private”, Köhne said.

“There’s, of course, terrible examples of funding of a project by certain corporations,” Maria Nicanor acknowledged. “But there are ways of doing it right.” Like Köhne, she believes that private funding is inevitable: “frankly we couldn’t have had this happen without this support,” she said. Like Pankow’s mayor, the New York curator is optimistic about novel funding structures. “There are solutions to that, and I think it’s finding this hybrid model” that combines public and private funding.

Carlo Ratti commented, “If it is not BMW, it is another company. You should judge by the ideas, the lab itself.”

The BMW Guggenheim Lab is a long-term project planned to travel to nice cities over a span of six years. It launched last summer in New York, and its next traveling to Mumbai in India, where it will open later this year.

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