A Catalogue of Cryptids:

Fostering Environmental Awareness through Cryptozoology

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Abstract. Contemporary urbanism increasingly shifts away from top-down, capital-driven infrastructure projects toward bottom-up, culture-led urban regeneration. This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between culture-led regeneration and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), proposing that culturally driven, participatory placemaking can transform cities into living classrooms that foster long-term sustainability literacy. To illustrate this paradigm in practice, the paper introduces *transSCAPE: Cultural Spaces of Knowledge*, a transdisciplinary research and transfer project based at the Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg. Funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR), *transSCAPE* works to regenerate Magdeburg's defunct trading port into a socially inclusive, multifunctional knowledge space (lieu de savoir). Specifically, this study examines an exemplary multi-tiered outdoor workshop series for secondary school students titled *A Catalogue of Cryptids: Exploring the Harbor through Cryptozoology*. Utilizing Daniela Conti and Richard Dawson's Real World Learning (RWL) model, the workshop leverages the engaging, low-threshold theme of cryptozoology alongside documentary photography and creative writing to anchor students emotionally and physically to their local geography. By contributing their creative outputs to a permanent, gamified knowledge-parcours, the young participants actively transition from passive consumers of space to empowered co-creators of their urban environment.

Keywords: culture-led urban regeneration, cultural sustainability, environmental awareness.

1 Introduction: Education for Sustainable Development in Culture-Led Urban Regeneration

Beyond the bricks and plans that make up today's cityscapes, urbanity is a palimpsest of collective memory, human experience and shared practice. While urban regeneration efforts in the past have relied on a top-down, capital-driven logic that prioritized spectacle and monumental infrastructure, contemporary city scripting highlights the cultivation of local, bottom-up culture as a catalyst for sustainable change. In this context, culture-led urban regeneration transcends mere aesthetic renewal to become a powerful pedagogical process that synergizes with the broader project of education for sustaina-

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ble development (ESD). By shifting citizens' role from passive consumers of their environment to co-creative participators, this new approach sees the city transform into a living classroom that fosters the skills and perspectives necessary for building a more resilient and equitable urban future.

This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between these two paradigms, examining how culturally driven, co-creative initiatives in urban regeneration can serve as platforms for teaching and practicing sustainability from the ground up. After briefly introducing the Magdeburg-based research-project *transSCAPE*, this chapter will illustrate one of its exemplary transfer-formats in more detail: a co-creative workshop framed by the topic of cryptozoology that seeks to culturally regenerate Magdeburg's former trading port.

transSCAPE: Cultural Spaces of Knowledge is a transdisciplinary research- and transfer project based at the Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg, funded by the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) as part of the T!Raum-programme. The project promotes the culture-led, participatory regeneration of Magdeburg's defunct and derelict trading port into an open and diverse "lieu de savoir". Adopting the term from Christian Jacobs (cf. 2017), the goal is to transform the current brownfield into a multifunctional knowledge space via three interlinked focus points:

1. Space: By Identifying spaces within the harbor area that hold the potential for hosting activities and community-projects that benefit local stakeholders, *transSCAPE* works to connect and expand physical infrastructures of knowledge generation and dissemination (such as a medical research campus located in the southern part of the harbor) and knowledge conservation (like an open-air museum for historical ships located in the northern part of the harbor basin).
2. Knowledge: *transSCAPE* promotes interdisciplinary exchange between a growing international university-network and the broader public by conceiving co-creative transfer-formats that facilitate a multidirectional exchange of expertise.
3. Participation: *transSCAPE* seeks to infuse the harbor area with socially inclusive and culturally diverse activities and events to promote identification with the urban quarter and benefit people's well-being in the city.

It is the third focus point in particular that links the work of *transSCAPE* to the broader framework of ESD, as the project seeks to connect people both physically and emotionally to the urban environment they inhabit as well as to re-configure that environment to better suit people's needs. Although it lies in the nature of sustainable education to predominantly focus on the preservation of natural environs that are under critical threat in the Anthropocene (cf. Gough et al., 2020), it has rightly been argued that the urban environment is just as central for exploratory examination – "[w]e need not just think of parks or areas of cultural, historical or natural heritage as significant places for field study" (Conti & Dawson, 2020, p. 63).

Indeed, discourse surrounding sustainability highlights the term's multifaceted meaning, reaching from environmental efficiency to social ecology (cf. Cardullo, 2021, p. 52), as well as cultural sustainability and heritage (cf. Crisman, 2022, p. 344). Achieving sustainability thus requires more of cities than minding carbon-footprints

and optimizing resource management. Sustainable cities support culture and community in ways that effectuate a common right to the city.

Originally formulated by Henri Lefebvre (cf. 1967) as a counter-model to the capitalist-driven city-development he witnessed in the 1960s, the right to the city expresses a fundamental and collective right of urban inhabitants, particularly marginalized groups (cf. Gebhardt & Holm 2011, p. 10), to actively shape and reclaim the city according to their needs. Envisioning the city not as some static entity emerging from top-down masterplans, but a dynamic "work of art" that is under procedural creation by "people's daily practice" (cf. Cardullo 2021, p. 135), the purpose of urban life shifts from passive consumption to active production, underlining a demand for the "urban promise" of personal freedom, cultural exchange and social encounter to be effectuated (cf. Schmid 2011, p. 28).

When Victor Nolet accordingly calls for "sustainability literacy" to be implemented in school curricula and defines such literacy as the "ability and disposition to engage in thinking, problem solving, decision making, and actions associated with achieving sustainability" (Lane & Ateşkan 2020, p. 247), his call necessarily includes the fostering of awareness for and engagement with the processes of sustainable urban placemaking from an early age. Indeed, urban planning education has partly aligned itself with ESD, as the discipline's focus increasingly shifts from "purely physical planning and land-use matters to a wider concern for social, economic, and environmental and political issues" (Carter & Roberts 2017, p. 47).

Putting theory to action, *transSCAPE* conducts multi-tiered outdoor workshops with students in secondary education that are intended "to build up sustainable communities while leading a transformation in young people's actions with a life-long impact" (Şahin 2020, p. 169). The project works to further what may best be defined as a form of urban consciousness-raising: Students are encouraged to become aware of the role they play as active citizens in the regeneration of urban life as well as to acknowledge and cherish the societal value inherent to cultural co-creation.

Channeling the spirit of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, *transSCAPE* encourages students to reflect critically whose culture and, by extension, whose right to the city is being realized by processes that surround them. While the workshops are locally focused on the harbor area, they aim to generate engagement with the urban environment beyond such confines. To illustrate this endeavor in more detail, an exemplary workshop-series titled *A Catalogue of Cryptids: Exploring the Harbor through Cryptozoology* (henceforth abbreviated as *Cryptids*) will be highlighted for its contribution to ESD in reference to the model of Real World Learning (RWL) as itemized by Daniela Conti and Richard Dawson (cf. 2020).

2 Description of the Outdoor Activity: Objectives and Methodology

Through the multi-tiered workshop-series *Cryptids*, *transSCAPE* works to facilitate the co-cocreation of a gamified knowledge-parcours to be installed in the harbor area with student groups from different grade levels and grammar schools in Magdeburg. The

thematic impetus of cryptozoology (the study of and search for unknown, hidden or legendary animals, such as the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot) derived from a participatory event hosted in the harbor area, where children had expressed their impression of the place through building with construction toys. The prominent use of skeletons and monster figures had highlighted a gloomy, yet curious perception that the research team took up as principal input for conceiving adequate workshop topics.

Cryptids consists of two parts, each roughly scheduled to last for 45 minutes. In the first part, students learn about cryptozoology from the perspective of the humanities, discussing the pseudoscientific hunt for hidden animals as a contradictory practice that sways between dis- and reenchanting the world, using descriptions of historical cryptids (such as the platypus or the kangaroo) to illuminate historical contexts. In the second part, students are encouraged to explore the harbor area to "search" for cryptids of their own, using a mixture of documentary photography and observation protocols to record their findings (i.e. support their creativity and broaden their experience of the urban environment) (cf. Rose, 2016, p. 317; cf. Carpenter, 2022).

In order to effectively synergize this basic rundown with the goals of ESD, Daniela Conti and Richard Dawson's RWL-model was applied as a methodological framework. Made up of five components (transferability, understanding, experience, empowerment and values), their model understands itself as "a fluid, flexible guide rather than a fixed pro forma" (Conti & Dawson, 2020, p. 61), not least because flexible integration into existing curricula is considered ideal for implementing environmental concepts into school settings (cf. Lane, 2006).

In terms of transferability, *Cryptids* works with the "experiences that learners have had" (Conti & Dawson, 2020, p. 61) by latching onto the topic of cryptozoology, or rather the intrigue that cryptids/monsters naturally radiate. According to Noël Carroll's universal theory of horror (cf. 1990, pp. 186-190), stories and images of monsters, due to the violation of ontological categories they represent, inspire human curiosity more than they instill serious fear. Likewise, James Twitchell points out that adolescents, in their transition from child- to adulthood, develop a core fascination for monsters to figuratively exorcise anxieties of selfhood (cf. 1985, p. 3). Our experience overseeing the workshop confirms a genuine interest in the topic by students, kindling their desire to communicate and get creative. Accordingly, cryptozoology serves merely as a topical frame to the workshop and not as its thematic focus per se.

Instead, understanding hinges on a number of possible connecting points that cryptozoology offers in view of German curricula. For instance, approached from a decolonial perspective, historical cryptids provide an activating jump-off point for discussing the British Empire in accordance with the school-curriculum for the subject of English at grammar schools in Saxony-Anhalt (cf. Ministerium für Bildung des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 2022, p. 42). The workshop thus acts as a flexible, low-threshold introduction that supports teachers in their daily work, saving them time and resources (cf. Karaarslan-Semiz, 2020, p. 6). Transferability may therefore refer to the workshop's potential transfer into the existing structures of teaching and learning as well.

When it comes to experience, the workshop aims to connect children and adolescents to their environment in situ: Magdeburg's industrial port becomes transformed into an extracurricular learning environment for task-based exploration (cf. Nunan, 2004, pp.

1-4), where students can see, listen to, smell and touch what is otherwise a peripheral stretch of their urban environment. Transforming the harbor in such a way – not through hard architectural redesign but soft creative intervention – animates the envisioned lieu de savoir organically.

Empowerment and values thus further the effectuation of sustainable urban regeneration in Magdeburg – now and in the future. Through co-creation, children and adolescents become empowered in their role as co-designers of the urban space: the cryptids they envision and describe will be incorporated into a gamified knowledge-parcours to be implemented at the harbor that will offer a low-threshold activity to attract future visitors. Additionally, the observation protocols will form the basis for further activities with children (such as a drawing challenge to be implemented during different public events) and students (as they provide prompts for creative writing tasks that could form the basis of an adjacent workshop series in cooperation with local schools).

The kind of learning environment thus sought to be facilitated may be best described as a lab of "tactical urbanism" (cf. Dlabaja, 2024, p. 246) wherein young participants can experience themselves as "change-makers" (Rieckmann et al., 2017) whose hands-on involvement makes a recognizable impact. Students are confronted with a task in the foreign language that is not only set in a real-world learning setting but actively shapes its future use. This is intended to facilitate a broader understanding that sustainable urban regeneration through co-creation is not only feasible, but preferable to planological, closed-doors strategies, instilling values that will, hopefully, lead to a coming generation of engaged citizens. Seeing how several authors lament a lack of interest on behalf of the public to seek proactive engagement in city development (cf. Benighaus et al., 2016, p. 9), the goal of Cryptids is to contribute to fostering children's sense of personal duty towards sustainable urban life.

Conti and Dawson's insistence that "[t]he critical point of learning triggered by a real-world issue is that students and teachers are not pretending" (Conti & Dawson, 2020, p. 56) becomes ensured by the productive feedback of results in-between workshops (from eyewitness accounts to drawings to stories) as well as their incorporation into the semi-permanently installed parcours. Exploring the harbor through photography and creative writing (i.e. non-cognitive approaches, cf. Şahin, 2020) holds the potential "to capture affective experiences of neighbourhood that are otherwise missed" (Carpenter, 2022, p. 353) as well as "to bring new perspectives into the urban planning process, diversifying the profile of who engages with planning and how they get involved" (ibid., p. 360).

3 Discussion & Reflection

Cryptids follows UNESCO's call for developing teaching methods for ESD that are "learner-centred, action-oriented, exploratory and transformative" (qtd. in Karaarslan-Semiz, 2020, p. 5) by 1) focusing on children's expressed interests and curricular requirements, by 2) inviting students to explore the science harbor as an extracurricular learning environment, by 3) scaffolding a co-creative process that is open-ended, and by 4) flexibly feeding workshop-results into an on-going regeneration effort. Since the

overall objective of the workshop is to raise awareness that an equitable and sustainable right to one's city hinges on "personal affectedness and emotional identification" (transl. Benighaus et al., 2016, p. 36), its applicability goes beyond Magdeburg's former trading port. Post-industrial cities across Germany, Europe and the world are facing similar structural challenges. Engagement, both on the personal and institutional level, is needed to conceive and create urban futures in ways that are ecologically and culturally sustainable. After all, "[t]he rate of socio-economic change is much more rapid than that of the physical stock" (90), having led both Kunzmann (cf. 2004) to argue for an increase in cultural and artistic perspectives in urban planning education and Metzger (cf. 2011) to point to the benefits of creative storytelling when (re-experiencing) the urban environment.

In line with this recognition as well, *transSCAPE's* focus on co-creation aligns with an emerging paradigm found in higher education's humanities departments, where new models, variously termed the "networking", "alternative", "ecological", or "creative" university (cf. Nørgård et al., 2022, p. 14), emphasize a more integrated, community-oriented approach to knowledge production (cf. Carpenter, 2022, pp. 351-352). Especially in view of the current rush by municipalities to transform cities into algorithmically steered smart cities to cope with the consequences of global warming, one needs to pay close attention that algorithm-enabled governance runs an acute risk of "[widening] the gap between citizens and decision makers" (Cardullo, 2021, p. 34). Exploratory and co-creative workshops such as *Cryptids* can counterpose such developments by showcasing in situ that "city-making […] cannot be reduced to computation" (Mattern, 2017, n.p.) and that "[r]egeneration is about people" (Peel & Lloyd, 2017, p. 256).

4 Conclusion

This paper has highlighted how the paradigms of education for sustainable development and culture-led urban regeneration can be brought to synergize in theory and action. Through a workshop-series focused on photography and creative writing, *transSCAPE* works with students from secondary education to transform one of Magdeburg's postindustrial sites into a dynamic knowledge space and extracurricular urban lab. Relying on a co-creative approach to placemaking, the workshop *Cryptids* directly involves young citizens in an ongoing regeneration effort, thereby fostering a critical sense of personal involvement and emotional identification with the urban environment. By shifting children's role from passive consumers of space to its active producers, the workshop aligns with ESD's goal of developing sustainability literacy, i.e. the necessary dispositions to promote a culturally, socially and ecologically sustainable (urban) future.

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