

"Not moaning on a high level, but becoming active": Social mixing and emerging activation practices at Schwendermarkt.

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Hardly anyone in Vienna knows the Schwendermarkt in Rudolfsheim-Vienna, although it gained popularity as being the oldest daily street market in Vienna. Established as a former fish market in 1833, its popularity decreased over time. Not only due to physical decay, but also because of structural changes in food supply – the emergence of supermarkets – and consumption behaviour. It seems easily comprehensible that an increasingly vacant market might be ready for change. At least, district politics assumed that there is the time for change in order to improve the built environment in the neighbourhood.



Picture 1: Crowd of people at Schwendermarkt (Source: <http://ww1.habsburger.net>)

Picture 2: Scene from everyday life (own picture)

During the silly season (in German “Sommerloch”) of 2013, the local government announced the physical redevelopment of Schwendermarkt as this place seemed to be underused and no interactions were taking place that might be of support for a vibrant neighbourhood life. Local media interpreted this announcement as a “demolition” of the market. Unsurprisingly, the remaining market stall owners feared the loss of their economic base. But more surprisingly, residents articulated also a fear – meaning: the loss of identification and the loss of an important place for social contacts.

„I like the Schwendermarkt. It has been changing since the last year in a positive way. I was sitting there, before. You can meet there the residents from the 15th district, but there are also public movie events and nice eating stalls.”

(Longterm resident)

A collective resistance developed resulting in a petition signed by local entrepreneurs, residents and community initiatives. This petition aimed at preserving the Schwendermarkt as a “non-obvious” but important space for social interaction. The collective practice of resistance also formulated the need to recognize “hidden non-commercialized spaces” as important for the neighbourhood and to involve the local neighbourhood in planning decisions. Interestingly, the local media covered the collective resistance as “community activism” which had a huge impact: Due to upcoming elections,

local politicians feared a loss of votes and recognized the need for a more integrative approach in planning decisions. As a result, an official civic participation campaign was established accompanied by the designation of a new urban renewal zone – which basically provides more financial subsidies for physical redevelopment and improvement of public space.

All of these steps have been discussed in regular round tables formed by the entire chain of local actors. Here, not only the importance of social mixing has been discussed conceptually. Rather, the social mixing and activities on the market seem to increase continuously, also.

The Viennese (mis)understanding: Positive gentrification?

This revival of Schwendermarkt is currently covered as “positive gentrification” in local media. Residents refer to the over-optimistic media coverage in two ways: One group is reacting to “evidences of gentrification” with a fear of expensive hipster restaurants and increasing rents. The other group is referring to the positive changes in a former “no-go neighbourhood”. Interestingly, real estate investors are taking up the “positive spirit” at Schwendermarkt by branding the place as a market “where old and new coexists”.

What can we learn from Schwendermarkt for social mix policies?

One can learn a lot from the case of Schwendermarkt. As resident you may be interested in your possibilities to interact and participate, entrepreneurs and community initiatives might use the momentum to find an audience for their messages. More interestingly, policymakers and planners might see the Schwendermarkt as “social laboratory” that reveals starting points for their work:

- Policymakers need to have an „antenna“ for these singular events and – even more – the capability to embed those singular events into framing conditions
- There is no such thing like a repetitive manner or „travelling concept“
- Social mixing cannot be designed or planned.

However – and this might be of great importance to not abandon the positive potential on social mixing in upgrading neighbourhoods: The conditions for social mix have to be supported, meaning:

- **Access & open use:** Accessible open spaces without consumption requirements or overregulated functional use.
- **Coaching:** Support of neighbourhood initiatives in terms of knowledge, space and financial support.
- **Consulting:** Taking local demands serious in order to motivate co-responsible residents.