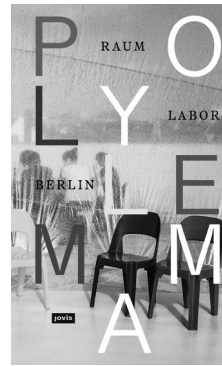


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RAUMLABORBERLIN: POLYLEMMA



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When Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till tried to synthesise the landscape of spatial activism agencies in 2011 – first as a web database, later as the book *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, published by Routledge – we confirmed the uniqueness of *raumlaborberlin*'s practice, highlighting its influence on contemporary spatial activism and experimental urbanism. Schneider and Till presented *raumlaborberlin* as a group of Berlin-based architects who came together in 1999 in response to rapid and unrestrained city development following the fall of the Berlin Wall. *raumlaborberlin* is understood as a space laboratory – an interdisciplinary initiative wherein architecture serves as a pivotal instrument. Working between architecture and public art, they create projects based on events, performance, and theatre. Collaboration is central: engineers, sociologists, ethnographers, local experts, and citizens contribute. Their work is politically motivated, aiming to influence decision-making within governments, academia, or other institutions. Projects addressing social relations often challenge existing norms and private claims, producing lasting interventions. Their practice is simultaneously experimental, pedagogical, and socially engaged, revealing multiple layers of urban potential.

They do not see their profession as problem-solving, but as creating productive problems. Placing themselves in the utopian tradition of the 1960s, particularly Yona Friedman, Buckminster Fuller, and Haus-Rucker-Co, *raumlaborberlin* anticipated experimental and reversible architecture also practised by Urban Catalyst and Exyzt. Their projects transform urban landscapes through “urban prototypes” – temporary interventions such as pneumatic structures or submarines from waste materials. Residents are directly involved in shaping their neighbourhoods. Notable projects include *Working on Common Ground* (2022, Pristina), *Floating University* (2018, Berlin), and *Allmänna Badet* (since 2014, Gothenburg). Their Venice Biennale contribution, *Instances of Urban Practice* (2021), earned the Golden Lion.

Nearly fifteen years after *Spatial Agency*, *raumlaborberlin* released its first monograph, *Poly-*

lemma, awarded the DAM Architecture Book Award in 2024. Although *Polylemma* (Greek poly = many; lemma = assumption or proposition) denotes a situation with more than two – often difficult or undesirable – options, the same cannot be said for *raumlaborberlin*'s practice. They may have had to choose the lesser evil, yet each time emerged richer through experience. The book presents the collective's work: nine members revisit sites, meet colleagues and critics, dissect processes, and reflect on tools and methods. Topics include strategies for collective learning, experimental building, and radical recycling. Their discourse unfolds through exhibitions, lectures, workshops, publications, and radio.

The book resists conventional structure: it lacks chapters or standard contents. Instead, it presents projects and texts with thematic anchor points such as action-oriented practice, experimental building, spaces of encounter, and recycling. Materials are organised as bookwalks, conversations, footnotes, project recipes, archive texts, and commentary by theorist Christopher Dell, guiding readers. The book's design, realised by the studio Bonbon, reflects its playful, experimental, and heterogeneous content, enhancing engagement. All of this can be found in the introductory compass, a navigational guide that helps readers approach the heterogeneous material. Like a city with many entrances and exits, the book can be read non-linearly. Specific projects are presented as stories, experiments, or recipes, reflecting the collective's iterative approach. *Polylemma* challenges us to expand our notion of space and serves as a plea for the city as a sphere of action. This heterogeneity mirrors *raumlaborberlin*'s engagement with cities, materials, and communities – always context-sensitive, socially embedded, and responsive to urban complexity.

At the same time, this work benefit from a more explicit thematic grouping – or a network analysis – to clarify interrelations between methods, collaborators, and sites without diminishing the experimental spirit.

Living with the climate emergency demands systemic change with deep implications for how we produce and inhabit space. *Architec-*

ture after Architecture – Spatial Practice in the Face of Climate Breakdown (2021-2024) examines how spatial practices address the cultural and socioeconomic conditions shaping architectural action. *raumlaborberlin*'s *Floating University* features as a key case study, exemplifying experimental, socially engaged, and climate-responsive practice, aligning with Schneider's initiative *Architecture is Climate: Reconstructing the Curriculum*. The publication of *Polylemma* is therefore especially timely, offering insight into the forms of spatial practice these projects identify as crucial in a climate-critical era.

The *Floating University* project remains a key illustration of *raumlaborberlin*'s approach: a self-organised space transforming transitional sites into platforms for engagement and collective imagination. Beyond physical interventions, the *Floating University* serves as a platform for discourse, workshops, and pedagogical experiments, where ideas about urbanism, climate, and social responsibility are explored. Their use of recycled materials complements interventions, functioning as a practical, political, and conceptual tool rather than only an aesthetic gesture.

For a quarter of a century, *raumlaborberlin* has pioneered new spaces for action, charting unique paths in cooperative urban development and creating places to foster encounters. Together with experts across various fields, they explore forms of urban practice, participation, and the joint production of space. Architecture is understood not as an object, but as a layer of history and a tool for creating cities of possibility – a city of tomorrow.

In conclusion, *Polylemma* is more than a monograph: it embodies a philosophy of practice. *raumlaborberlin* demonstrates how experimental, collaborative, and context-sensitive architecture responds to contemporary challenges. As architectural culture faces social, ecological, and disciplinary turbulence, their approach remains relevant and necessary. Their methods can move beyond activism into mainstream practice, offering a model for future architectural action that merges experimentation with social and environmental responsibility.