

Volume 24

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CONTRADICTIONS

Feature:

*The intelligent service system
used by “Wir Hier”*



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**Danke, für die
Aufmerksamkeit**

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Who and Where? – “Wir Hier”

How a group of students came up with a ground-breaking service system

Almost two years after the initial establishment of “Wir Hier” in Merowinger Straße, Cologne, the ideas and services of the task force have been reproduced and imitated all across Europe. Their work has managed to change the way in which urban society functions forever.

It all began in November 2004, when the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce) in London decided to run their first competition for what was regarded at the time as the relatively new discipline of Service Design. “Re-Designing States of Mind” was the overall title of the competition, and ‘Contradiction’ was the theme.

A small group of students from Germany decided to enter the competition in addition to their usual studies. After generating many ideas, the contradiction they decided to work on was:

You don't see what you already have



The Behaviour and Mindset

How did initial research shape the direction of the project?

The first phase of research carried out by the task force made it clear that local people took their amenities for granted, without ever realising how important they really are. Other evidence, from numerous questionnaires, suggested that most people have a tendency to appreciate only the things that relate to private matters, rather than anything in terms of a group.

The task force contacted the Communication Specialist and Psychologist, Dr. Wayne Fletcher to get a professional point of view on the subject.

“Often we will focus our attention on the things we don’t have in order to accumulate more. It’s about the division of attention and labour. If we were to pay equal attention to the things we don’t have as the things we do have, there would be a strong chance we would miss out on reaching our goals.”

They also felt that it would be worthwhile to contact someone who came from a more spiritual background, rather than a scientific one.

“...human beings have an innate inner restlessness. We believe that this feeling of dissatisfaction would go if we could only get those things that we desire. [In fact] the only way to stop this ongoing cycle is to bring an end to the inner restlessness itself.”

“In other words we are not unhappy because we haven’t got things we want but because we are constantly wanting something.” *Venerable Sochu, The Buddhist Society, London.*

From these early findings they felt that it was worthwhile not only to attempt to help people stop taking things for granted, but more importantly, prove to them what was possible when you use what already exists in a better manner.

The area for the second research phase was Merowinger Straße, in the southern part of Cologne. It focused on communities, rather than individuals.

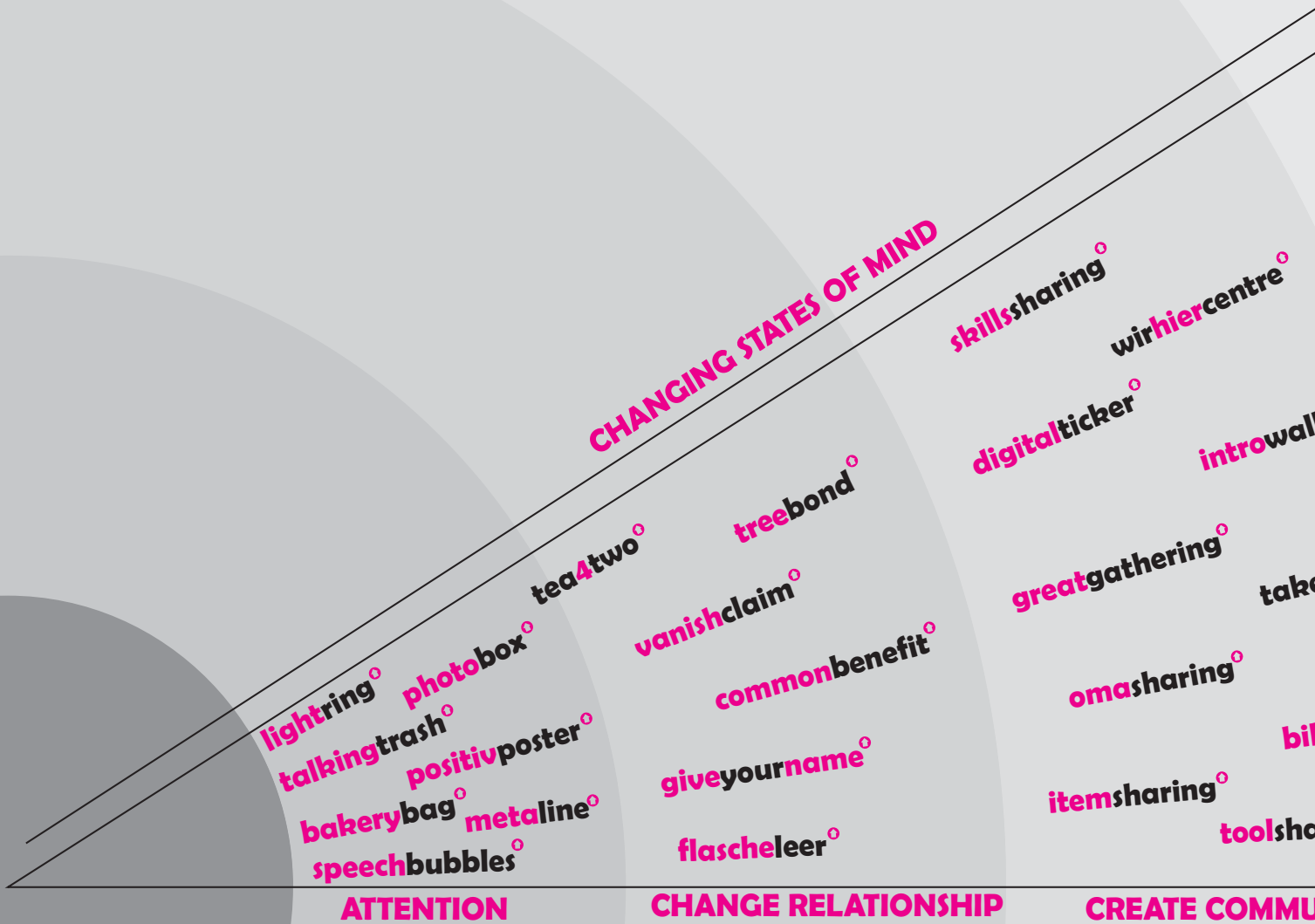
The group observed that there was a lack of interaction among people on the street, for example, avoiding eye contact with others. The main population usually visited the same shops, and were likely to have the same social contacts for months on end.

Older residents tended to stay within very close proximity of their homes because they didn’t have the energy to go for longer journeys. Whereas the younger generations were only interested in meeting people of the same age group, and spent a lot of their time at the local Youth Centre. One of the interviewees mentioned that they felt this was a large problem throughout Germany, that the differences in people’s interests, their needs, and the age gap, stops them from establishing a better relationship despite the fact that they live in the same community. The task force decided that the key to success for the community was to change the way in which people were interacting with it, and to foster the idea that the street had its own community.



The Service Structure

This is the diagram that the “Wir Hier” task force uses to ascertain how the entire service structure is working.





The diagram on the left is one of the tools that the task force developed when first working on the idea of ‘Changing States of Mind’. They decided that it was important to learn how people can change the way they interact with their surroundings, and what phases they might go through when doing this. The task force also discovered through their research that it is not possible to change things in an instantaneous fashion. If it is to be done successfully, the changes need to happen in small ‘shifts’.

Attention: Before someone will even think about a problem, it must first be highlighted.

Change Relationship: The relationship to the problem, object, or other people, must begin to change gradually if things will be different in the future.

Create Community: Once a change has begun to take place it is important that it no longer applies only to the individual. It has to take hold in a group of people for it to last.

Continuity: How can the changes be made more definite? Is there any weakness in the long term that would allow things to revert back to the way they were before?

The task force also came to the conclusion that rather than trying to do one service, it would be more beneficial to create a large, dynamic and interlinked group of services. One service might only work with a single target group, whereas a group of services could make changes in more than one place and in more than one phase of the transition. The diagram shows all of the services that “Wir Hier” developed for their first project.



Selected Services Examples

Bakery Bags

In Germany it is very common for almost everyone to start their day with fresh bread from one of the local bakers. One of the methods that the “Wir Hier” group employed to let people know about the new community fostering services was the idea of working with the local bakeries, in a joint campaign, using paper bags as tools for the spreading of information.

On one side of the bags the logo of the bakery and a teaser sentence were printed. The teaser focused on a positive attitude towards something that is usually taken for granted. For example:

“We have electricity!”

On the other side of the bag they printed a short article about one of the new services and contact information relating to the service. The bags were then given to the bakery free of charge so that they could distribute them to their customers.

By using the Bakery Bags, which are usually kept until the last piece of bread is eaten a couple of days later, it allowed the people of the street to read through the article as they sat having breakfast.

The “Wir Hier” team decided to use this method at the beginning of a new service because they felt that the fresh bread was a good metaphor for their services.

“Fresh bread – Fresh Ideas”

Tea 4 Two

In the middle of November 2004 the task force accomplished another step in promoting the service system for the community at Merowinger Straße. As the community already existed on a physical basis it was the aim of the “Wir Hier” task force to raise consciousness of this status and add value to it. To raise curiosity and attention for the services the task force started the “Tea-4-Two” campaign.

The idea of the campaign was the distribution of “Wir Hier” branded tea-bags, with the slogan “Tea-4-Two” on them, to randomly selected mailboxes in Merowinger Straße. On the back of the tea-bag packaging was the address of the “Wir Hier” centre, a date and a time. The inhabitants decided whether or not they wanted to go and find out more, and thankfully for “Wir Hier”, most of them did. When they arrived at the centre they were greeted by the team and invited to take a seat with some of the other inhabitants of Merowinger Straße.

“I really liked the idea of the ‘Tea-4-Two’, at first I was a little bit anxious but everyone was very friendly and the relaxed attitude of the other people there made it very easy to get to know one another. It seems a little bit silly to me now that I didn’t know anyone else living on the same street as me.” *Hans Schneider, member of the community.*



Skills Sharing

One of the fastest growing of all the services “Wir Hier” developed during their first project in Merowinger Straße was the ‘Skills Sharing’ service. It was developed at roughly the same time as the ‘Item Sharing’ service at the centre so that the two could compliment each other.

“The concept behind the “Skills Sharing” service is the fact that people have many skills and a lot of knowledge that they seldom pass on to others. This is very close to the basic contradiction that we used at the start of the “Wir Hier” project - ‘You don’t see what you already have’”
IC, task force member.

“Wir Hier” developed two separate ways for the service to be used because they discovered during their research that many of the people who live on Merowinger Straße do not have Internet access. Both methods involve the process of posting a request and an offer. For example, one that I found on the board read:

Name: *Nezir Özdemir*

Age: *42*

Contact: *Tel. 0221 3483 552*

Skills wanted: *To know how to build a PC and install the software.*

Skills Offered: *Good at most handy work, including plumbing and woodwork. Could teach someone Turkish at almost any level.*

The posts are either on a pin board in the centre or placed on the website section dedicated to “Skills Sharing”. The assistants then update both so that everyone has access to the information.

Coupon Service

The ‘Coupon Service’ was more successful than even the task force imagined it was going to be. The principle behind this service was allowing people the opportunity to give a donation to someone else on the assurance that it will not be spent on certain things, for example, cigarettes and alcohol.

In response the group developed a very simple and practical tool. The “Food Coupon” is a small plastic coupon, designed to look like a coin. One side of the coin has the value that it is worth and the other is branded with the supermarket at which it can be redeemed. In its essence, the coupon is money with certain limitations. Rather than a completely free exchange tool, it allows the giver to have some control over what it is spent on.

People are able to purchase a coupon for 1 Euro in a partaking supermarket and give it to any person they feel that they want to support. Alternatively it is possible to place the coupon into a collection box that is placed next to the point of sale. This box is emptied twice a month by a member of the “Wir Hier” group; who will then distribute the coupons at the center to those who are in need.

This service has been running successfully for over a year now and the Co-Operative Group is looking at the possibility of bringing it to the UK. Encouraged by this success the task force are contemplating extending the use of the coupon so that it can be redeemed for clothes, given to certain charities or even used for medicine.

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omasharing 
tea4two 

Corporate Identity.

The Corporate Identity of “Wir Hier” was developed to look friendly and inviting. The speech bubble was used to make it seem more personal and to set it apart from other signs.

The logo has a house in the middle as a symbol of community, but is also intended to be seen as the gesture of an upwards arrow. It is always used in combination with the text.



Stories from the Street

Regular service users give their point of view

Elfriede Müller, 42

Elfriede Müller is 42 years old, and the mother of two children: Sophie and Alex. She and her husband had just moved to Merowinger Straße when the task force began their work there.

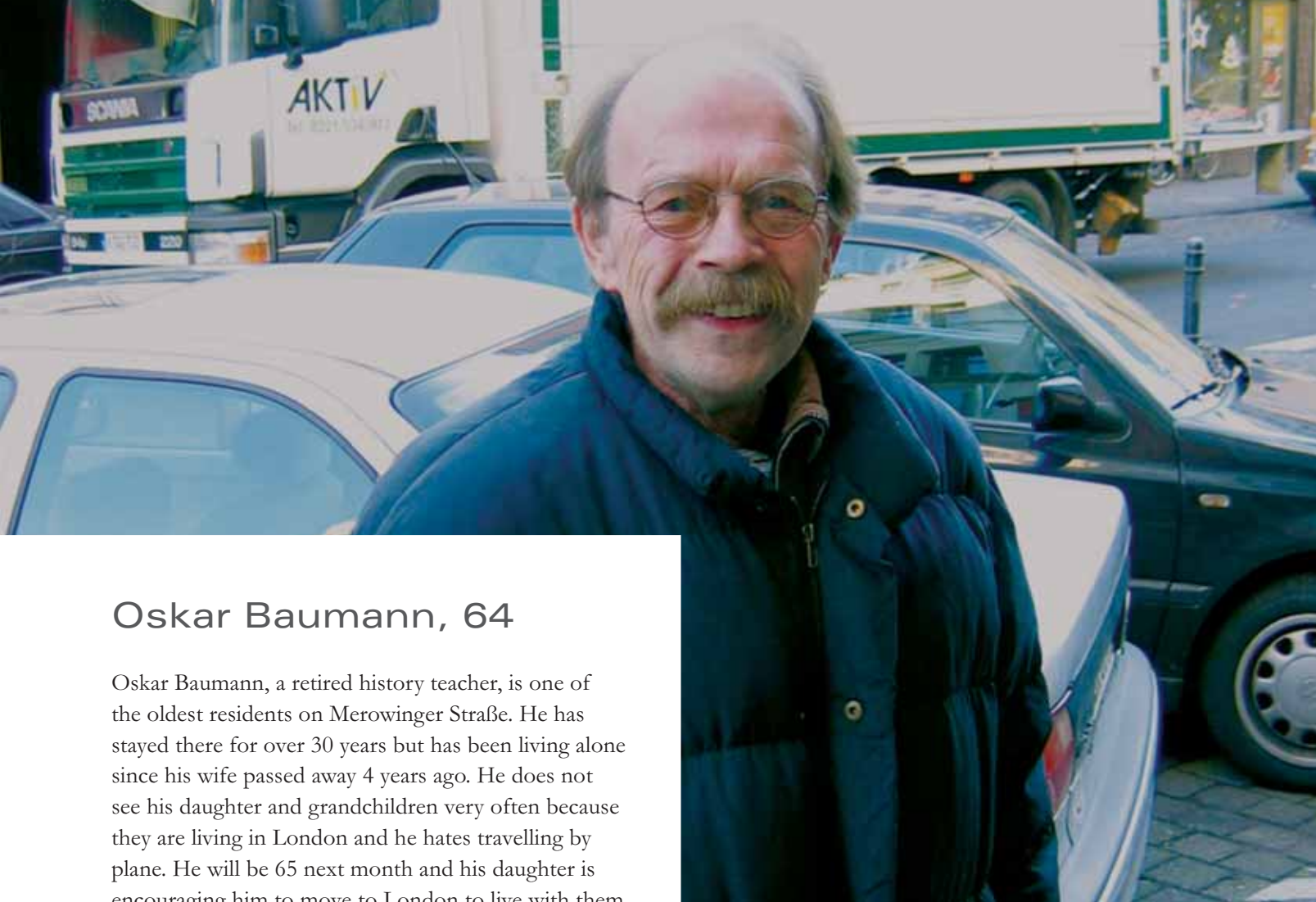
Her first experience of “Wir Hier” was through one of their ‘Bakery Bag’ articles. She has forgotten exactly what the article said but she recalls that it discussed the ‘Coupon Service’ that the task force was prototyping at the time.

A few days later she was in the local supermarket when she noticed the same “Wir Hier” symbol near one of the checkouts. After reading how the scheme worked she decided to purchase some of the coupons to give to a lady who was always sitting on the ground a little further down the street.

Elfriede explains that she feels many people worry about whether or not giving money to someone is the correct thing to do. She thinks that the service has managed to let those who are willing to give money less to worry about and henceforth more people are deciding to do it.

Sometimes she gives the coupons to Alex, who is 15 years old, as money for his lunch, because she knows that he and his friends have started smoking.





Oskar Baumann, 64

Oskar Baumann, a retired history teacher, is one of the oldest residents on Merowinger Straße. He has stayed there for over 30 years but has been living alone since his wife passed away 4 years ago. He does not see his daughter and grandchildren very often because they are living in London and he hates travelling by plane. He will be 65 next month and his daughter is encouraging him to move to London to live with them, so that they can spend more time together.

He first heard about “Wir Hier” after overhearing people discussing work on a new centre where it would be possible to share possessions. Intrigued by the idea he decided to bring some of his history books to the centre as items for sharing.

The service that he feels has been the most useful for him since then is the ‘Skills Sharing’ one. The following example took place just after he began visiting the centre more regularly.

Whilst looking at the ‘Skills Sharing’ board in the centre Oskar noticed a posting by a student called Stefan who was looking for someone to help him with an essay he was writing on World War II. Oskar felt that with his background he could help Stefan to write the essay with first hand research so he responded to the posting. In addition Stefan had written under ‘Skills Offered’ that he had a lot of experience using computers. Oskar says that this was particularly interesting to him at the time because he had never used a computer before, even though his

daughter often suggested it. Stefan and Oskar met one afternoon at the centre and spent a long time together talking about the war and the benefits of learning how to use a computer. They decided to start meeting for a few hours once a week, either in the centre or at Stefan’s house. After a couple of months Stefan and his family moved away from the area, but they still keep in contact occasionally.

Oskar now has a computer and a web cam at home so that he can chat with his daughter and his grandchildren. He still goes to the centre sometimes, either to bring more items of his own or to borrow other peoples. One of his favourite pastimes is going there to meet new people and every Friday he plays chess with a group of his friends.

The centre seems to have played an important role in allowing Oskar to have a more active social life than he did before. He is a very interesting man with lots of experience and time and “Wir Hier” seems to have given him the opportunity to share this with others.

Katja Fischinger, 21

Katja moved to Cologne last year to study Sociology at university. She lives just one block away from Merowinger Straße but comes here often with other students to help with the “Tea 4 Two” service. She usually distributes teabags and helps to co-ordinate everyone when they arrive at the centre.

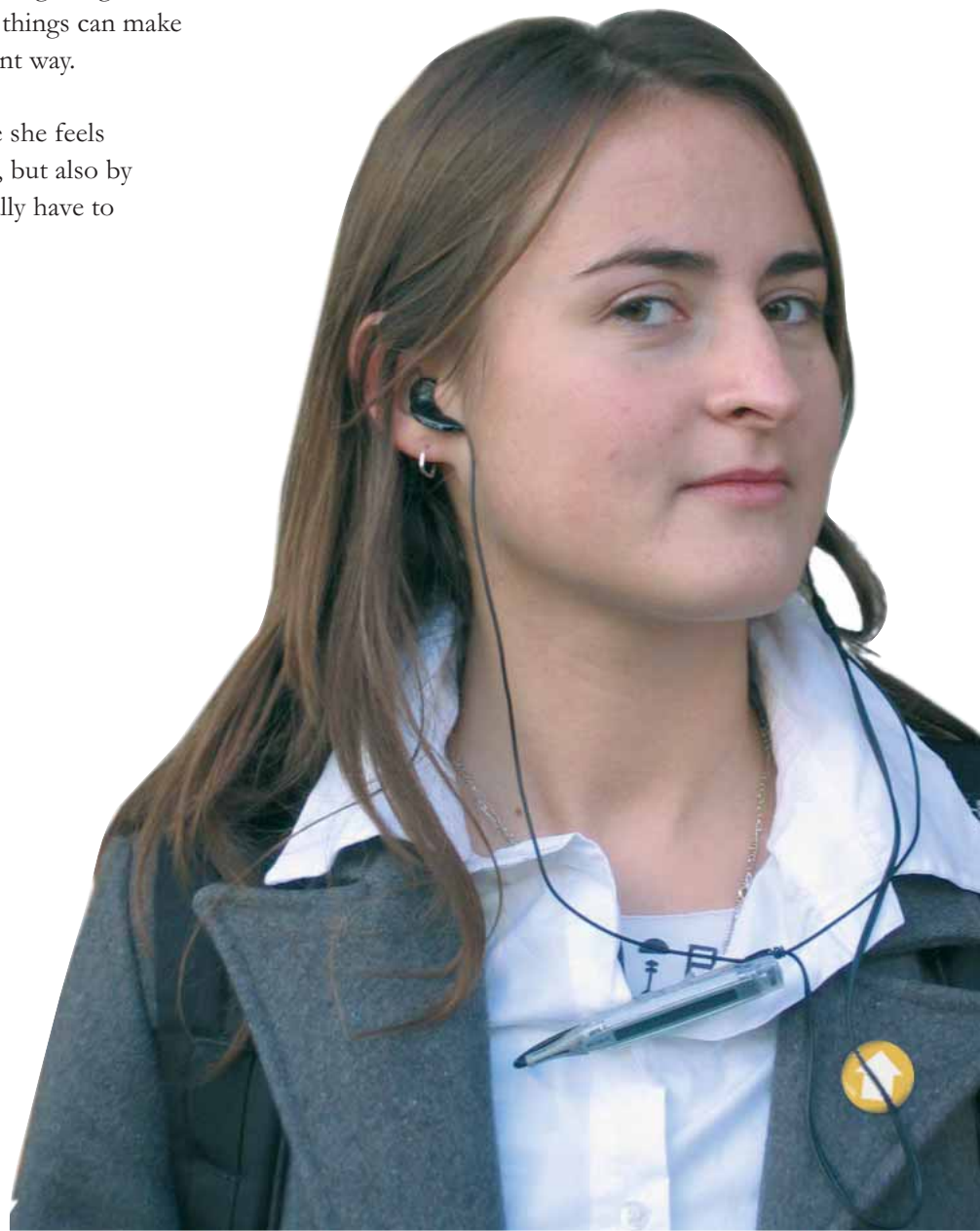
Through working with “Wir Hier” Katja has become friends with many people living in the neighbourhood and now she says that she feels like part of a strong community. Her interest in Sociology may be one of the reasons why she enjoys speaking to so many different people.

Another service that Katja has recently become involved in is the ‘Tree Bond’. She really likes the idea because she thinks that it is important to show how making a slight difference to the relationship between two things can make someone appreciate it in an entirely different way.

Through being able to give the tree a name she feels that not only is it viewed differently by her, but also by everyone else on the street. She doesn't really have to

care for the tree itself, only keep the plaque clean, but she checks it every time she walks past. Katja decided to name the tree “Annemarie” after her mother.

On a personal note, the first time I walked down Merowinger Straße I was very surprised to see that all the trees had been named. There are trees on most streets in Cologne, but I had never actually paid them any attention until I noticed the names. It is very interesting how such a small change can have quite a large effect.



They're Here!

David Anderson interviews the “Wir Hier” task force

Q: *Which problems did you face at the very beginning of the project? What was the biggest setback you had to overcome?*

A: During the start of the project, when we were working on the original services, the biggest problem for most of us was learning how to use the skills and different backgrounds of the group to their maximum effect. Another factor was combining the different points of view on what service design includes and how it is defined.

In some ways there was a parallel between the formation of the task force and the ways in which we managed to create a stronger community in the first street. We had to learn how to work more efficiently as a very diverse team, and this in turn, affected how we approached the existing community.

Q: *You mentioned that the services started to become more independent after you finished the prototyping, did you expect that to happen?*

A: Well, of course we were convinced by what we were trying to achieve through the concepts, but after we did our prototyping with the people in the street, we realised that they were very keen for the services to happen as soon as possible. Some of the prototypes were developed whilst still in use, the ‘Skills Sharing’ service, for example, was almost completely worked through whilst people were using it. There was a feeling among the group at that stage of the project that we had a large responsibility to make sure that the services were completed. We had hoped that the community and ideas would grow to a much larger extent, but none of us believed it would ever get to the scale it is today. Something that was

definitely unexpected was the pace at which it grew, before we knew it, our ideas were being used everywhere.

Q: *How did you manage to establish your services in so many cities, in a very small amount of time?*

A: Every time we were asked to go to a new area or city, we had learnt from the experiences of the last one. The ‘portfolio’ of services grew as well, because the last thing we intended to do was to take our ideas and force them on a community without understanding their real needs. This is why we developed a set of research methods to learn as much about the area and the people inhabiting it as possible. Almost every new area requires at least a couple of new services, in addition the others usually have to be modified too.

Q: *What happens within the community after the task force has left?*

A: In every area that we have worked so far there have been people who are happy to organise and work hard to keep the services going. They are almost always involved at the very beginning of the process and without them our job would be a lot harder. These people normally take on a lot of work when we leave but, because they were the pillars of the original community, they have many contacts and always manage to bring more people into the schemes.

In addition we usually create a link between the people we have just worked with and the last area where the services were developed. In this way the people who have already experienced the transition can help those who are presently going through it. We also try and stay in



contact with all the groups we have worked with in case they need any support from us. It's always very interesting and exciting to see how they have developed and changed over time. Connecting the groups with each other slowly creates a type of large scale "Wir Hier" network that can then act very independently. We tend to think of ourselves as the spark which shows people what is possible through working together and then let them change and create whatever services they feel would be useful in their community.

Q: What are your future plans?

A: At the moment we are trying to promote the scheme outside of Europe. The problems that we try and address, such as solitary living and a lack of sharing services, exist in almost every large city in the world. Part of the team is in Shanghai right now, because Chinese society is going through some difficult changes from a more community-based system, to a somewhat individual one. Because of the significant cultural differences, and a completely different history, we would ideally like to create a new task force there, of which we as Westerners would only play a very small role. The aim as always, is to work closely with people at the beginning, but then leave so that an independent development can take place.

From Humble Beginnings, to Humbled Critics

Contradictions talks to Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Krause, Director of the Institute for Service Design Research and Development.

Q: *How do you explain the success of “Wir Hier”?*

A: Well, basically they developed the right service, the right way, at the right time!

Until early 2000 Germany was known for a rather negative attitude towards almost everything. Germans were seen as critical and sceptical, they were known for their tendency to complain and to demand. At the same time they had high expectations what others were responsible for: the government, the industry, the NGO’s! Probably even more than other industrialized nations, the Germans did not really appreciate what they had - in terms of wealth, health and liberty.

In 2004 there were the first indications of a major change. The “Wir Hier” task force were one of the first groups to take certain social issues as a basis for new services. Parallel with this development, the German Government started to develop a strategy to create

a more positive attitude towards Germany and being German, and to make people take more responsibility for themselves and their surroundings. The Government engaged Söntje Wörthmann to develop a campaign, which of course did not start until the middle of 2005. Leading magazines like “Brand Eins” started to write about “Responsibility” and put the focus on “solution drivers” instead of “problem owners”

“Wir Hier” focused on the ‘bottom up’ approach and offered various opportunities for people to participate and to be an active part in the process of changing the state of mind – towards more appreciation of what people have! The service system was very much down to daily needs and concerns of the customers and helped them to make a change – a change in perception and a change in action! And the team from “Wir Hier” really succeeded in building a network that had strong anchors in existing service systems.



Q: Isn't the idea of "Wir Hier" rather old-fashioned – even in the year 2004 there was more of a technology based orientation in service development?

A: Yes, you are right. Somehow the "Wir Hier" service makes you think about the 70's and 80's, about Greenpeace, Robin Hood and "Selbsthilfegruppen". But maybe this old fashioned look and feel of "Wir Hier" is the reason it was so successful.

Of course in 2004 everybody was talking about the World Wide Web and UMTS, about the most advanced communication technologies. Mobile Phones were already the most common means of communication. But after taking a closer look, it

was clear that the new technologies were not that common in the urban surroundings "Wir Hier" was aiming for. And in addition – clearly people were longing for a service that creates belonging. **The rather personal and simple approach of "Wir Hier", in combination with a easily accessible service system, created trust and emotional acceptance.**

Today "Wir Hier" acts differently than in 2004 and technology is in the heart of the service. "Wir Hier" has obviously integrated a learning process within the service system, to develop the service along with the changing needs and capabilities of the customers.

Q: The early 2000's was when Service Design was established as a design discipline – why was it then, that the idea of Service Design was so successful?

A: Looking at it from today's perspective, I think it was a multitude of factors that enhanced the acceptance and the impact of Service Design: The development of the International Service Design Network, the RSA creating their first Service Design challenge and the success of projects like "Wir Hier".

