

Urban Future Projections

Ethnographic Encounters with Temporalities and Practices

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Introduction

Long-term urban development projects usually span decades, unfolding across past, present, and future. In this contribution, the future is understood as an interactive, practical, and socially produced imaginarium, which unfolds in situ, fabricated by heterogeneous members of these situations (e.g. planners, engineers, citizens, scientists). The focus is on urban future projections and how such futures are practically accomplished within urban development projects. I show how projections, as a specific modality of future-oriented practice, are made in planning and participatory formats, and how ethnography can contribute to their analysis. Empirically, it demonstrates how projections and projecting as practice become observable in situated interaction and how it differs across planning and participatory arenas. Conceptually, it treats projections as a practical modality through which uncertainty and temporality are organized in long-term projects. The contribution first outlines the empirical setting and the study's theoretical and methodological background, and then presents selected findings from ethnographic encounters in the form of empirical vignettes from an urban development project in Germany.

The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in a city in southern Germany near the Swiss border, where a new residential district for approximately 3,000–3,500 housing units is planned for expected completion by 2038. Since the early 1990s, the area, which is called "hafner", has been designated as a settlement reserve in the municipal land-use plan. Over the past decade, largely in response to expected population growth, the city has gradually acquired land there in preparation for this large-scale project. The landscape is characterized by numerous fields, orchards, and hillsides where meadows, garden plots, and farmland coexist. For decades, residents from nearby neighborhoods and from the city have used the area for cultural and recreational activities such as going for walks, exercising, celebrating the local carnival, or sledging in winter.

Following the city's declaration of a climate emergency in 2019, municipal investment in climate sustainability increased. In this context, the scientific project on which the present analysis is based ran from 2020 to 2024 and constituted one of the first large-scale attempts in Germany to develop and assess the feasibility of climate-neutral objectives including the energy supply technologies for a district this size. The project was organized as an interdisciplinary collaboration between city officials, planners,

engineers, architects, and sociologists. Its sociological sub-project work packages included expert interviews, focus groups, ethnographic fieldwork, and participant observation. As part of broader accompanying sociological research, beyond documenting and observing planning processes, the ethnographic component also proceeded through taking a “second-order” (Schütz 1971) perspective: it traced and reflexively analyzed practices of future-making as “first-order constructions” by the members in urban development practices.

Theoretical Foundations

For the theoretical foundations, I first draw on what Andrew Barry and Evelina Gambino (2024) describe in their study of long-term development projects as “projects of transition,” emphasizing the dual character of the term *project*. As a noun, *project* refers to a configuration of work, knowledge, materialities, capacities, legal frameworks, and so forth that is structurally and temporally anchored. As a verb, *to project* refers to the designing and production of futures in which past and future are folded into the present. In German, this distinction can be rendered particularly explicit with the difference between *projizieren* and *projektieren*. This perspective can be useful because it directs attention to how a project, and its members, simultaneously organize work in the present and produce a future to work toward. It also invites analysis of the concrete practices through which this future orientation is maintained.

I combine this perspective with phenomenological elements, such as intentional access to the future in the present, through protentions, projective retrospections, and anticipations, as described by Alfred Schütz (1971) building on Edmund Husserl (1985) and an ethnomethodological approach, and argue that projections are brought intersubjectively to life through interaction, talk, gestures, and communicative genres (see Garfinkel 1967; Streeck 1995; Ayaß 2023). Projections thus appear as forms of future practice in which actors create their own temporalities and futurities in enactment, entangled with doings and sayings, bodies, materials, artifacts, and so on (see Koch et al. 2016, Krämer 2019).

To project in this sense is the communicative and practical work of designing and shaping possible futures that are imagined, stabilized, implemented, and ultimately realized. Within the urban development project itself, futures are designed, imagined, shaped, and translated into plans, tables, decisions, and “next steps”. Such projects and the practices inherent to them are projective, that is, oriented towards the future.

The encounters presented below are drawn from situations in which the projection work across different stages and arenas is captured. The following data excerpts are based on the previously mentioned ethnographic participation and the audiovisual documentation of interaction in selected situations.

First Encounter: Planning

The first encounter comes from a quarterly planning meeting in the research project, held on Zoom, where energy planners (S and L) discuss whether waste heat from a local jam factory can be used for the new district. The debate circles around the uncertainty of whether this case falls under environmental law and requires a preliminary assessment. L argues that it has to be checked, while S insists that it does not matter whether the factory produces jam or burns oil, in the end it is always just heat. They discuss and then decide to check the specifics of the law before getting the plans approved. Checking

the specifics functions here as a practical next step that keeps the option open while suspending a definitive decision. It can be a way of turning uncertainty into an actionable task within the project.

Transcript 1 (translated)¹

- 41 **L** I think they also have to check
ich denk die müssen dann eben auch schauen
- 42 what kind of facility it is, I mean
was ist des für ne anlage ne ich mein
- 43 zubana grapes mainly produces jam
die zubana grapes die produziert hauptsächlich jam
- 44 if I understood that correctly
wenn ich des richtig verstanden hab
- 45 **S** yes, but that doesn't matter for the heat that comes out
ja aber das ist ja egal für die wärme die rausgeht
- 46 whether they produce jam or burn oil
ob die marmelade produzieren oder erdöl erhitzen
- 47 but fine, I can look into that again
aber gut ich kann mich da auch nochmal mit beschäftigen
- 48 or ask about it, yes
oder mal fragen ja
- 49 **L** yes, exactly, that's what I would clarify, because in the end
ja eben des würd ich eben klären weil im endeffekt gehts ja drum
- 50 it's about the fact that we need this pipeline
dass wir diese rohrleitung brauchen
- 51 **S** mhm, exactly
mhm, genau
- 52 **L** it says there that you need this environmental pre-assessment
des steht dran man braucht eben diese umweltvorprüfung
- 53 and there are different ones (-) "S" stands for site-specific
und da gibt's unterschiedliche (-) „S“ steht für standortbezogen
- 54 and "A" stands for general
und „A“ steht für allgemein
- 55 I actually can't really fully imagine now
ich kann mir jetzt tatsächlich auch net ganz vorstellen
- 56 what could be bad about that
was da jetzt dran schlecht sein soll
- 57 if the heat comes from jam or from something else
wenn die wärme aus der marmelade kommt oder aus irgendwas
- 58 we'd have to ask the person who drafted this law
da müsst mer halt den fragen der dieses gesetz aufgestellt hat
- 59 what considerations he saw there
welche hintergründe er da sieht
- 60 no idea, some kind of bacterial contamination
keine ahnung irgendwelche bakterienbelastungen
- 61 or whatever else

¹ The transcripts presented in this text are translated from German to English.

- oder was weiß ich
- 62 S yes, exactly, it would generally be interesting to clarify
ja genau, wäre ja generell mal interessant auch zu klären
- 63 which procedures have to be followed
welche verfahren müssen durchgegangen werden
- 64 when a local heating pipeline is built to the hafner
wenn eine nahwärmeleitung zum hafner hingeführt wird
- 65 L exactly
genau
- 66 S regardless of where it is decoupled and what time horizon
egal wo die dann ausgekoppelt wird und welchen zeithorizont
- 67 the whole thing has, okay
das ganze hat, alles klar
- 68 L exactly
exakt

S and L repeatedly frame the issue in terms of what has to be clarified and which procedures apply, thus making a future pipeline, or object, dependent on present categorizations. Four dynamics should be highlighted here. First, projection is grammatically subjunctive and escalates from the general into the specific, from *could*, *should*, *would* to *have to* and *will*. Second, projection is an ongoing work of subsumption: cases like this specific pipeline are tested against general categories, such as laws, with uncertainty about whether they fit or not. This highlights the ethnomethodological “application problem” of how to make the general intelligible and applicable to the particular (see Meyer 2019, pp. 291–292). Third, projection involves epistemic stance-taking: who claims knowledge, who admits uncertainty, who performs repairs for recipients. And finally, projection stabilizes a spectrum of possible futures, gradually narrowing them down with reasons that count as “good reasons” for a specific option, whether they can use the heat or not, while climate-neutral options still have to be explored and tested as of now. In this way, possible futures are articulated as contingent and yet actionable. This narrowing is itself a form of implementation because it orders what will be pursued, by whom, and under which procedural assumptions. Projection thus appears as work that gradually transforms open possibilities into projectable “next steps”.

Second Encounter: Participation

The second encounter comes from a participatory event on site, where citizens (A, C, D, E, and F) and planners (B and G) discuss the “green belt,” a future artificially produced nature area running through the new district. The situation takes place on the previously described area “hafner”, where signposts were set up in a form of path so that citizens could read about the current plans and get short presentations from the planners. Unlike the abovementioned virtual planning meeting, the on-site situation requires that urban future projections be made publicly intelligible and somewhat defensible in real time with citizens. This adds a layer of demonstrability and, as I would like to show, contestation and repair.

The conversation revolves around the question of where this nature belt and the buildings will be “in reality”. The planner (B) first says “exactly here,” points at an area but then shortly corrects herself after being constantly challenged. In particular, the repeated questioning turns the seemingly straightforward deictic claims of “here” (l. 11, 19 and 25) into a problem that has to be specified and corrected (l. 29). The

following transcript of an audiovisual recording made by the author shows how this correction is produced interactionally after a citizen (A) asks where the green belt will run after the planner (B) finishes her presentation.



Figure 1: The photo shows a crowd in front of a sign, with a person (A) at the back of the crowd facing the sign. Person (B) is facing the crowd. A construction plan and a written description can be seen on the sign. In the background are meadows and trees.

Transcript 2 (translated)

- 10 **A** could you briefly show us, on site, where the green belt is supposed to run now
könnten sie kurz zeigen, vor ort, wo jetzt das grüne band etwa verlaufen soll
 11 **B** exactly, so the green belt runs along here,
genau, also das grüne band läuft hier entlang
 12 connecting so to speak the different construction phases
und verbindet sozusagen die verschiedenen bauabschnitte miteinander



Figure 2: The photo shows the same crowd from the same perspective as fig. 1, with Person (B) now pointing at the construction plan and speaking into a microphone.

- 13 and then it leads to dewauer straße
und führt dann hier auf die dewauer straße
 14 or to the starting point so to speak, or the junction with preußenweg
oder den ausgangspunkt sozusagen, den verknüpfungspunkt mit dem preußenweg
 15 **A** yes, but where is the green belt now?

- 16 **C** here
hier
- 17 **A** here, directly?
hier, direkt?
- 18 **C** here
hier
- 19 **B** yes, yes, here
ja, ja, hier
- 20 **C** here, where we are standing
hier wo wir stehen



Figure 3: The photo shows the same crowd from the same perspective as figs. 1 and 2, now slightly more from the left. Person (B) now pointing at another part of the construction plan, still holding the microphone. Another person in the crowd is making a pointing gesture and looking at Person (B).

- 21 **D** when you say here, here where we are standing
wenn sie hier sagen, hier wo wir stehen
- 22 **B** oh, I see
achso, ja ja
- 23 **E** where we are standing
da wo mer stehen
- 24 **F** here in reality, here outside
hier in der realität, hier draußen
- 25 **B** yes, yes, here in reality it basically runs along here
ja, ja, hier in der realität sozusagen läuft dann hier entlang
- 26 **G** the next board is about the green belt
die nächste tafel da geht's ums grüne band
- 27 **A** yes, okay
ja, okay
- 28 **B** exactly where we are standing (1)
genau, wo wir stehen (1)
- 29 **?** (unintelligible)
- 30 **B** yes here (--) uh, no, actually, not exactly where we are standing
ja hier (--) ah, nein, also nicht ganz wo wir stehen
- 31 but shifted a bit further south

sondern nochmal versetzt im südlichen



Figure 4: The photo shows the same crowd from the same perspective as figs. 1, 2 and 3, now slightly more from above. Person (B) now making a wave-shaped gesture with her hand, to show the course of the planned buildings over the hills behind the crowd. Person B is still holding the microphone.

- 32 here the terraced houses would step up
 hier würden sich dann diese reihenhäuser hochstaffeln
- 33 sorry, you are right, it is actually somewhat higher up here
 entschuldigung, da haben sie recht, das ist natürlich hier etwas weiter nach oben

This encounter shows that in urban development future projections are fragile accomplishments, continuously repaired and adjusted in interaction, especially in participatory settings with external participants such as citizens. Projection here involves deictic practices: futures are made tangible by aligning plans, maps, pointing gestures, and bodily presence with the temporal indexicalities of here/now and there/future/past. The reference point of 'here' is negotiated turn by turn, moving from an asserted location to a qualified and shifted one. In doing so, participants recalibrate the relation between bodily presence and the planned spatial arrangement. Material features of the site thus become relevant resources for making those projections tangible.

Third Encounter: Reformulation

Urban futures are also anchored in material features such as slopes or maps which function as projection surfaces, carriers, or devices. From here, the third encounter shifts attention to how such situated observations can be taken up reflexively. For the third encounter, let us return to the abovementioned use of the hillside in winter. This return matters because the hillside is not only a future construction site but also a place already embedded in everyday practices of the citizens and therefore can become a salient surface on which and about which projections and attachments can be articulated. A colleague interviewed locals who said the town is destroying "happy local places" and that such spaces are vanishing, which they felt was bad. City officials took note of this observation, pointed out by an ethnographer and, at a public information event, reformulated it into a positive, nostalgia-evoking projection of future life with saying: "imagine living there where you went sledding in winter." The reformulation shifts the observation from a critique of loss into a persuasive invitation to imagine future life in a familiar place. In that move, ethnographic knowledge is translated into a communicable projection.

This illustrates how sociology and ethnography can be positioned as a kind of “reflexivity authority,” which can be both a risk and a potential. The risk is that sociological and ethnographic observations can be selectively taken up and repurposed in institutional communication. The potential is that such observations can render temporal orientations and attachments accountable and thus shape how futures are articulated and produced. Ethnographic participation allows us to trace projections empirically, making temporalities and practices observable and explicating them for others. In this sense, sociology contributes to the very fabrication and projection of futures.

Conclusion

Across the studied project, projections emerge as practical, interactional accomplishments through which long-term urban development is kept oriented toward a future. In planning meetings, projecting proceeds through subjunctive formulations, categorizations, and procedural clarification that turns uncertainty into actionable “next steps,” thereby gradually narrowing the spectrum of possible futures while keeping options open. In participatory encounters on site, urban future projections become publicly demonstrable and therefore fragile, deictic claims such as a simple “here” must be made accountable in situ, repaired turn by turn and simultaneously anchored in materialities through the alignment of plans, maps, gestures, and bodily presence. A third mode becomes visible when ethnographic observations themselves are taken up reflexively in institutional communication. Then, attachments and temporal orientations can be translated into communicable projections, positioning sociology and ethnography as some sort of “reflexivity authority” with both risks of selective repurposing and potentials for rendering futures accountable.

Taken together, the three encounters show urban future projections as a practical modality for organizing temporality and uncertainty in development projects. They coordinate what is and will be pursued, by whom, and under which assumptions, while continually requiring interactional work of specification, repair, and contestation across different arenas. Ethnography contributes by tracing these situated practices empirically and explicating how futures are not simply planned but are sequentially imagined, projected, contested, stabilized, reformulated, and implemented in and through the practices that make them projectable.

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