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RECONNACT BLUMENTHAL TO THE WATER

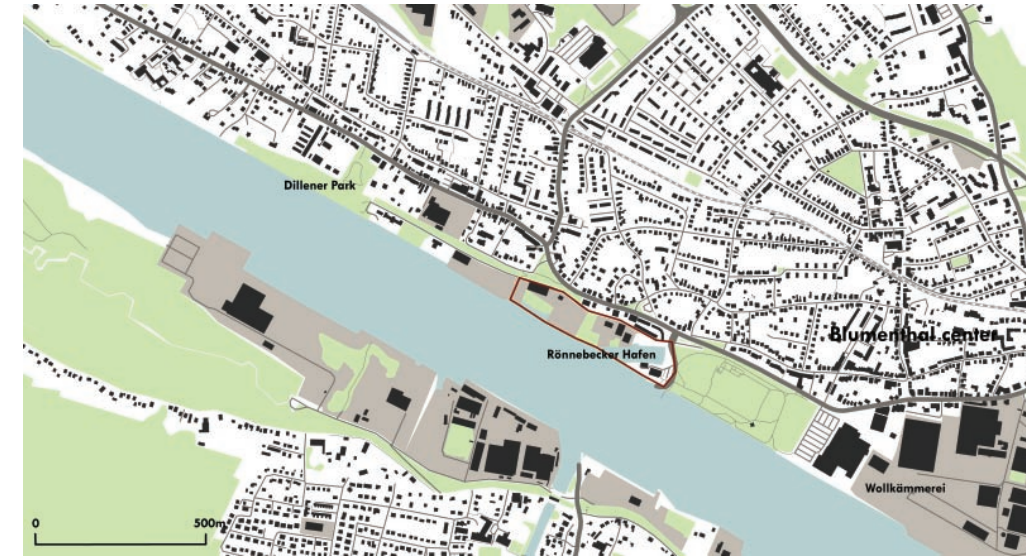
INTRODUCTION

The concept “ReconnACT Blumenthal to the water” is made for a particular area in the north of Bremen, Blumenthal, which is currently in a transition phase from an industrial to a post-industrial urban district. In line with the general theme of the summer school, “City on Water”, making connections between the water and the city is central to this concept. Blumenthal’s proximity to the river ‘Weser’ is considered as a main chance. However, Blumenthal is not an area where usual waterfront developments, i.e. creating space for retail and rather luxury housing as can be seen in Hamburg, Barcelona, London and elsewhere, would work. Given the magnitude of social problems in Blumenthal, we aimed at creating a socially acceptable waterfront. Our concept therefore does not only stress physical connections with the water, but also social connections, which may pave the ground for revitalization and social integration in the future.

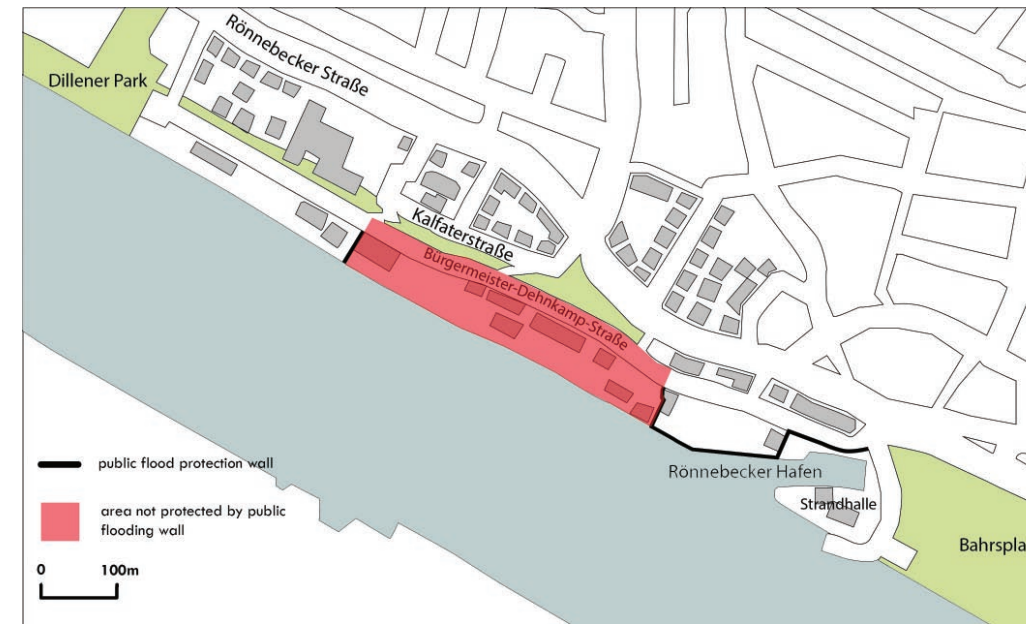
CONTEXT

Blumenthal is situated in the north of Bremen in Germany. The study area that was given to us by the planning department of the City of Bremen is located in Rönnebeck, which is the biggest district of Blumenthal. It lies directly at the waterfront of the river Weser (see picture 1). Blumenthal has a population of 30.690 in total; in Rönnebeck itself live 4.264 people (numbers from 2014). The overall area of Blumenthal is 2267 hectare, which means that population density is rather low with 14 capita per hectare¹.

Blumenthal’s history is closely connected with the river Weser. The wide and deep river course connected with the North Sea sets Blumenthal and wider Bremen into a strategic position for export, import and far sea



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transportation. Blumenthal’s waterfront was therefore dominated by industrial uses in the past. Nowadays, however, the centre of sea navigation shifted to other places; various shipyards and other port-related businesses went bankrupt or departed for better opportunities. For example, the *Bremen Wollkammerie*, a worldwide operating company for manufacturing wool and trading in wool, closed down in 2008. Blumenthal is hence a post-industrial urban district with huge abandoned areas nearby the river front.

The transition from an industrial to a post-industrial district did not happen without social consequences. Employment opportunities in Blumenthal have dropped significantly, leading to a general population decrease. Whereas in 1975 there were living 36.507 people in the urban district of Blumenthal, this number dropped constantly. Today we can only count 30.690 inhabitants². The unemployment rate of 18.8% is very high also in comparison with the city as a whole (11.3%)³. Housing in Blumenthal is therefore rather cheap, which has changed the social composition enormously. Blumenthal can therefore in general be considered a socially weak urban district.

The study area itself faces another challenge which needs to be addressed: a significant part of the area has no public flood protection (see figure 2). For all planned developments, flood protection hence needs to be organized privately. This can be considered a challenge as well as a chance at the same time. On the one hand, costs for flood protection need to be covered privately. On the other hand, it provides the opportunity to implement a ‘living with water’ strategy by making the waterfront accessible without public flood protection as a barrier.

explained that the inhabitants of these blocks, predominantly Turkish and Russian migrants, drop their garbage onto this parking lot, so that the fire brigade needs to come once per week to clean up the parking space (see picture 12). According to our guide, the whole area has a very bad reputation and Germans try to stay away from it. The street to which these linear blocks belong, the *George-Albrecht-Straße*, is so stigmatized, that Germans living in the southern part of the street in individual houses asked for a change of the street's name. The authorities approved, so that the southern part is now called *Emmalene-Bulling-Straße*. "The street with two names" came back in all our mental maps, as the strongest sign for social segregation in Blumenthal.

Blumenthal is hence a socially segregated urban district with a deserted centre and an inaccessible waterfront. In addition, our guide stressed the lack of offers for young people. In a socially problematic urban district, facing unemployment and social segregation, a better offer for young people could help to overcome ethnic tensions and a lack of prospects for the future.

BLUMENTHAL'S STRENGTHS: PROXIMITY TO THE WATER, INDUSTRIAL AND RECREATIONAL HERITAGE, AND MUCH SPACE FOR INTERVENTION

Many of the weaknesses can also be turned into opportunities. Although the waterfront is not yet accessible in various parts of Blumenthal, the study area itself – mostly vacant land – is directly located at the waterfront. Therefore, we have the possibility to make the water accessible as part of our concept. Also in other parts of Blumenthal, there is a move into this direction. The area of the former *Bremen Wollkämmerei*, a bit more down south from our study area, is currently in transition. According to the plans

of the city, the historic buildings will be kept, and at the waterfront open space shall be created⁴. If we continue with this in our study area, the whole waterfront could be publicly accessible from the areal of the Bremen *Wollkämmerei* via the public park *Bahrspalte* and our study area to the existing *Dillener Park*.

Moreover, Blumenthal has an industrial as well as recreational heritage. A port identity is shaped through various port-related businesses of which some are still there today (e.g. shipyard building red rescue boats on the other side of the river). In our study area itself, there is one former factory hall which could be kept to remind of this industrial heritage. Recreational heritage is manifested in the fact that Blumenthal used to have a beach in our study area (check <http://blumenthal-magazin.de/2014/01/lebensfreude-an-der-weser/> for picture). The beach heritage can still be recognized with the 'Strandhalle' (In English: beach bar), where people would go to dance at night in former days. Nowadays, the Strandhalle is



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vacant (check <http://blumenthal-magazin.de/2014/03/das-aergert-mich/> for pictures). The owner of the place is dreaming of a new beach bar with catering, but so far authorities do not allow any new function; some politicians are even in favour of demolishing the building (see http://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen_artikel,-Gastronom-traeumt-vonder-Strandhalle-_arid,121967.html). Next to the Strandhalle is the 'Bootshaus' (in English: boat's house). Here people can eat and drink something while enjoying the view on the small harbour. The harbour is currently used by some smaller sailing boats as well as motor boats. Water sports are hence already present, but could be more strongly supported in future. Overall, the *Strandhalle* and the *Bootshaus* are located on a sand spit shape extension into the water. It is a remarkable location to improve the connections between the land and the water.

The fact that Blumenthal has so much vacant places and spaces also offers various opportunities; in particular, because some of

the vacant places are in fact appealing historic buildings. For example, due to the relocation of the town hall, the historic town hall is at the moment vacant (see picture 13). Right next to it is the former post office, also an impressive historic building; not to mention the ensemble of the *Bremen Wollkämmerei* (see picture 14). Although new functions are sought for the *Bremen Wollkämmerei*, the buildings are still vacant at the moment. Rather short temporary uses could therefore still be possible. Next to vacant buildings, there is also the former shopping street *Mühlenstraße* or the 'garbage parking lot' which both offer space for intervention.

Last but not least, also the diversity of various social ethnicities can be turned into an opportunity. Blumenthal could strive for cultivating a 'multi-kulti' (German word play for multicultural) neighbourhood. The word 'multi-kulti' has a positive connotation in German; expressing not only the diversity of social ethnicities, but also liveliness, street life and social interaction.

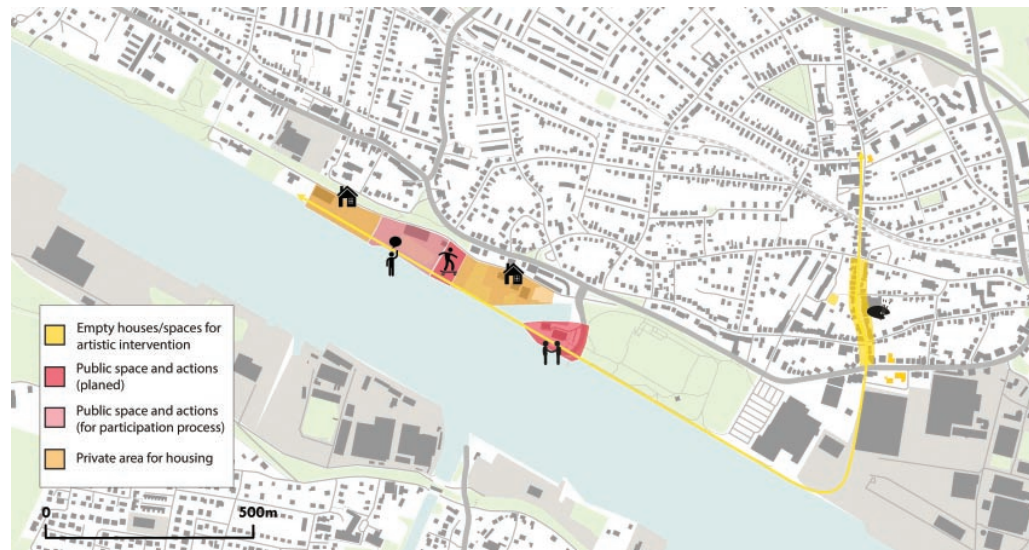
THE CONCEPT: RECONNECT BLUMENTHAL TO THE WATER

We chose for the wordplay ‘ReconnACT Blumenthal to the water’ because our concept is not only about reconnecting Blumenthal with the water and making connections between the green areas, but also about stimulating social connections. ‘ACT’ stands for engaging with the local community and empowering them to have a say in what is going to be developed in the area. Our masterplan therefore includes areas for which we made more detailed plans and areas which we left open (see picture 15). These areas should be developed according to the outcomes of a bottom-up participation process. Overall, the concept includes five crucial elements which will be explained in the following.

STARTING POINT: REVIVE THE ‘STRANDHALLE’ – TURN IT INTO A CONNECTOR

The currently vacant ‘Strandhalle’ has a very prominent position in Rönnebeck. It is located on the sand spit shape extension into the water, between the green area ‘Bahrsplate’ and the study area given to us. Due to its former usage as a dance bar, it is known as a point of attraction among people in Blumenthal. All of the above makes the ‘Strandhalle’ a perfect starting point for our concept: it may serve as a connector in a physical as well as a social sense.

From a social point of view, we would like to turn the Strandhalle into a multi-cultural centre with various functions. On the one hand, it can serve as a service centre for the Blumenthal population, where for example German courses for migrants or computer courses for elderly are offered. On the other hand, it should also be a place for leisure. The Röda Sten konsthall, an art cultural centre founded in a former shipyard in Gothenburg, can serve as inspiration. There, dancers, painters and performance artists offer



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workshops and public art events, which are attracting all kinds of people including children and families.

To achieve a mix of culture and commerce, the gastronomy of the ‘Bootshaus’ should be extended. We propose a cantilever terrace built into the water. The advantage is that from the terrace people will be able to see the developments going on in our study area, and therefore make them curious to continue their journey along the river. Highlighting this area is therefore also beneficial for improving physical and spatial connections.

INCREASE SOCIAL INTERACTION AND IMPROVE REPUTATION THROUGH TEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS

Blumenthal is rather a remote area that you usually would not travel to if you live in other areas of Bremen. Our analysis has shown that Blumenthal has beautiful old buildings and much space



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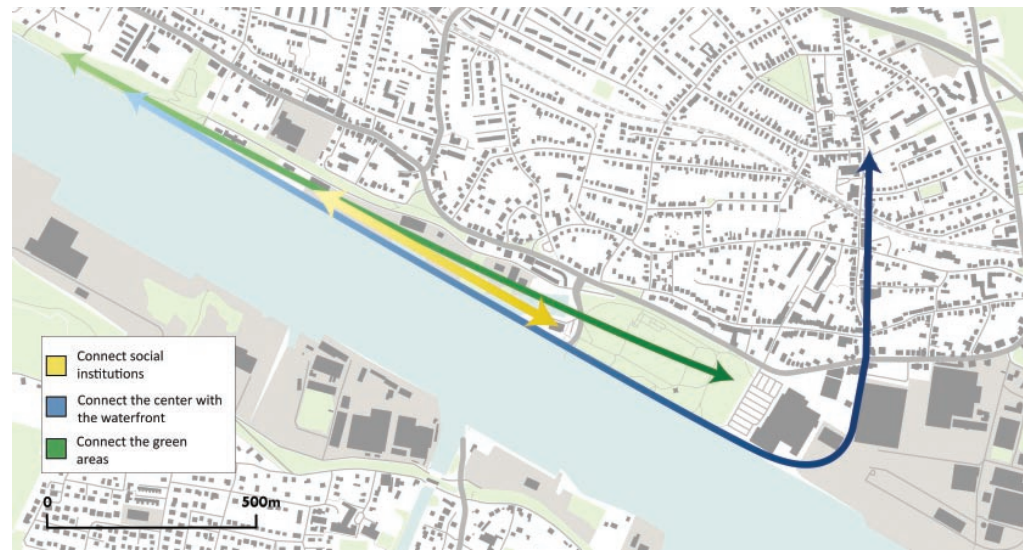
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available for intervention. Due to the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial urban district, Blumenthal has many ‘hidden places’ that call for being discovered.

We therefore propose a summer full of temporary interventions. Artistic interventions can be used to make hidden places more visible and to play with the heritage of the peculiar place. They invite to wander around and rediscover Blumenthal. Something similar was done in Hamburg on the Elbe Island Wilhelmsburg between 2003 and 2009, called ‘Hafensafari’. Through temporary installations, either in a material sense, through light or music, artists expressed their vision of a post-industrial city (see picture 16 and 17).

For the Blumenthal safari, we propose a route starting at the water tower north of the centre, through the deserted Mühlenstraße, directly to the waterfront and from there to the

‘Strandhalle’, the new multi-cultural centre (see figure 18). It therefore stresses the water connection (from water tower to the river Weser), the green connection (crossing Bahrsplate and strolling along the river) as well as the social connection: it leads along former social agglomeration places (such as the centre and the Strandhalle), new social agglomeration points (the shopping centre close to the river Weser) and current ‘no-go’ areas (the garbage parking lot). Before and during the installations, artists could get a temporary work space in the area, for example in the former town hall, which is currently vacant.

To increase social interaction, there should not only be artistic temporary installations, but also interventions aimed at community-building. For the garbage parking lot, we could for example imagine urban gardening and a recurring food festival. Because food is a shared element across cultures and regions, it can be a common denominator to engage with residents from different cultural backgrounds and hence a starting point to stimulate a multi-cultural community building process. Food and street festivals could also be used to revive the former shopping street Mühlenstraße (see pictures 19 and 20).

REVIVE THE BEACH HERITAGE, MAKE THE WATERFRONT ACCESSIBLE AND GIVE PEOPLE A SAY

The temporary interventions serve as a trigger for a participation process. We reserved one bigger part in our master plan where the design and the function of public space are subject to a bottom-up process (see figure 21); here the local community should decide what they would like to have, and also if they would like to keep the ancient factory hall and give it a new function. Making an area which is particularly welcoming for families with children could

have the advantage that parents from different ethnic backgrounds have the chance to establish linkages through informal communication while the children are playing. Building up a more family friendly environment along the waterfront can stimulate social cohesion and community building.

Therefore, we also propose to revive Blumenthal's beach heritage. A beach could be built on the same location where the former beach used to be. As it is in the area without public flood protection, it may serve multiple purposes. On the one hand, a beach invites people to stay, swim and enjoy themselves. On the other hand, it is a more natural approach in reducing the pressure of flooding by providing more space for water to enter and leave smoothly. It therefore also makes dwellers experience the close relationship between land and water.

Given the lacking offer for young people, we also propose building new sports facilities such as a skate park, basketball court or small football field. As also this area is outside of the public flood protection, a special design is

required. Examples for floodable skate parks and public spaces can be found in Rotterdam (see picture 22). These examples show that including water into the design can even make a public space more interesting.

DECREASE 'THE WALL EFFECT' AND PLAY WITH THE TIDES

As stated above, the current public flood protection wall appears as a strong barrier that separates Blumenthal and the water body. For installing another form of flood protection that would fit more harmoniously in the surrounding urban environment there is unfortunately not enough space available. Therefore, we found other means to decrease "the wall effect" and open up the waterfront for the population again.

First, we propose to build a path along the wall on the water side. As a reference serves an example from Venice (see picture 23). This element connects the beach bar directly with the former beach area with its new activities. It should be built into the water on a fixed level, so that the usage of this path is tide-dependent. During high tide, the path should hence



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be flooded. In former times tides played a very central role in everyday life in port cities. The whole work rhythm was determined by this natural phenomenon. By playing with the tides in our design, people may experience these natural processes again.

Second, we propose to make the wall itself more attractive. Inspired by examples from Italy again, we propose writing quotes and drawing graffiti's on the sea wall (see picture 24). Redecorating the sea wall is a way of combining culture with physical infrastructure; it may serve as a way to engage with the general public and strengthen local identity.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTIAL USE: MULTI-STOUREY DWELLINGS AND FLOATING HOUSES

In our design we defined two areas where residential usage is preferable. The first area lies inside the public flood protection. Here we propose the same style of housing that is already there (see picture 25): multi-family houses of six apartments per object which also households with a lower income can afford. Outside

of the public flood protection we propose to build floating houses. These floating houses should not be too luxury, given the social context from Blumenthal. An example for these types of houses comes from Maasbommel in the Netherlands (see picture 26). Always two houses form a complex that is connected by an overhead crossing to the public road. The technology of floating houses is also a starting point for public participation, discussion and envision about how settlements adapt to short term natural disasters such as flooding and climate change in long term. By mixing two different kinds of housing structures we attempt to create a socially mixed area.

CONCLUSION

To put it in a nutshell, Blumenthal has many physical and social problems. However, several of these weaknesses can be turned into opportunities. The proximity to the water plays a fundamental role: we used it as an element to rethink the territory of the Rönnebecker Hafen in particular as well as Blumenthal in general. We consider it to be crucial to give the waterfront back to the people: it therefore should be completely publicly accessible. Next to rather physical interventions, we would like to highlight the necessity of social interventions as well. Given the socially weak context of Blumenthal, a successful regeneration of Blumenthal can only work if the population is involved in the decision making process. Blumenthal shall remain a place for people from Blumenthal. Engaging with inhabitants through a bottom-up process is therefore of great importance: it allows including the society in the physical and social regeneration process.

1. http://www.statistik-bremen.de/tabellen/kleinraum/stadt_ottab/153.htm
2. http://www.statistik-bremen.de/tabellen/kleinraum/stadt_ottab/153.htm
3. <http://www.stadtentwicklung.bremen.de/sixcms/media.php/13/20101130StadteilberichtBlthalEndfassung.pdf>
4. <http://www.efre-bremen.de/detail.php?gsid=bremen59.c.8598.en>



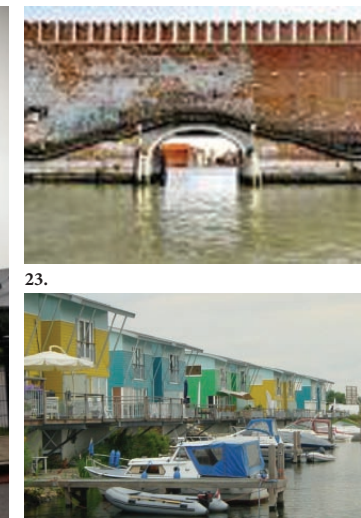
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