



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report September 2010 (Germany) – Model Project to de-clutter streets in North-Rhine Westphalia

In recent years, not only professionals such as town planners and traffic specialists, but also citizens themselves have realised that streets are becoming increasingly cluttered, and further increasing traffic directions in the form of signage is not leading to more safety or the ease of using different modes of transport. Germany is not alone in trying to find a different approach, many other countries are conducting experiments too – here however the focus is on a model project undertaken in two cities in North-Rhine Westphalia.

The Ministry for Economy, Energy, Construction, Housing and Transport of NRW initiated a competition between 25 cities which had applied to participate, and awarded the project to Mühlheim an der Ruhr (in the centre of the Ruhrgebiet), and Arnsberg (in the less industrialised area of the Sauerland) in March 2009. The jury comprised members not only from the Ministry, but also from the German Association of Cities and the German Association of Municipalities and ADAC, the organisation representing drivers, which symbolises the co-operative approach to the projects. The model projects in their first stage will run until December 2010.

The project 'SimplyCity' aims to achieve a new concept of the city and mobility within the city, which has at its heart the motto 'less is more', which aims for simplification and ease of participation in city life and mobility for all citizens. In concrete terms, all unnecessary and potentially dangerous elements such as traffic signs, benches, waste containers or info signs which make driving or walking more complicated or hinder clear sight lines, or have a negative impact on the city-scape, should be removed. Ultimately the project aims to improve the traffic environment for all forms of mobility and make the city more attractive for all citizens, so there might be further large-scale changes later on.

Increasingly people complain about the 'over-complexity' of daily life:

- Painted road signs can be very confusing
- Parking spaces and restrictions are often difficult to understand
- Traffic lights and other traffic signage can often be complex and hinder mobility for traffic participants
- Overabundance of tariff zones, exemption rules and increasingly difficult-to-use ticket machines for public transport are a problem

Furthermore, general traffic rules and city ordinances also complicate the picture. All these factors together have led to a decline in the quality of transport participation for all groups, despite technological advances. Instead of improvement, many people

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feel that the quality of their transport experiences has become worse and thus affecting their overall quality of life.

In the long run, the SimplyCity project does not only aim to reduce complexity, but return to making people the measure of things. Ultimately this means responding to the different needs of residents, visitors and transport users, but also making appropriate use of resources: natural resources (i.e. the environment) as well as the fiscal resources of the municipalities. An important aspect of SimplyCity is the emphasis on responding to the changing needs of an aging society. The ultimate aim must be to enable older people to be as mobile as they wish to be as long as possible. The same goes for improving transport conditions for children, which is closely linked to traffic safety. Research has shown that 'overregulation' which aims to take account of every eventuality and preclude claims is having the opposite outcome as intended, and employing fewer technical solutions can result in better traffic safety.

By reducing traffic lights and signage and in general simplifying things, cost reductions can also be achieved which in the long run may benefit not only local government, but also the *Land* and the federal level, and naturally the citizen as well. By taking this strategic approach, the final outcome will be the maintenance of transport infrastructure at lower cost.

Demographic change, climate change and the financial crisis are the background against which discussion of mobility take place. Through the model project SimplyCity, cities can achieve simplification, better efficiency, increase value for money and improve the urban space for residents and all groups of transport users. The formula for tomorrow's city could be: compact, urban, mobile, green and simple.

The official start was given on 18 November 2009 in Mühlheim through the temporary wrapping of a traffic sign. In three different areas of the city, groups consulted about signs, street furniture but also larger-scale issues of road layout and public transport questions. The project provided ca. 150 000 Euro each to both cities, of which much was used for communication and activities involving citizens.

The project in total will have four stages, which are not envisaged to be completed within the two years the model project is planned to run:

- Stage one will be concerned with the removal of superfluous traffic signs and the simplification of traffic and/or route direction
- Stage two is concerned with the removal of unnecessary or distracting street furniture and improving parking
- Stage three will deal with the replacement of traffic lights by alternative means and be concerned with traffic safety and mobility management
- Phase four will take in the bigger picture – issues of urban design use of spaces, and will continue beyond the scope of the model project

A report from the completion of stage one in Mühlheim details that in those three areas chosen for an experimental reduction of street signs (they were wrapped in *Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLG or CLAIR.*

yellow plastic bags between December 2009 and end of January 2010) removal of many signs did go ahead – between 41% and 51%. For example in one area with 204 different signs, 105 were deemed to be superfluous.

The SimplyCity projects combine planning, communication and participation processes. Not only experts from the ministry, the municipality and the office which has been tasked with managing the project are involved – so is the police and the ADAC, and naturally the residents of the cities. Citizens are invited to participate in various ways: the dedicated internet site has an interactive function where people can submit suggestions and comments, and a number of workshops and meetings are run in different areas of both cities. Communication is a vitally important aspect of the model project. In order for the new approach of 'less is more' to become widely accepted, not only is information about the project and its stages and outcomes necessary, but the goal is to interest the public at large in the development of the ideas behind the project.

It is therefore to be hoped that the model project overall will also lead to an increased interest and engagement of citizens with their city.

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