



HIC - Struggle to defend and renew a public swimming hall

Struggle to defend and renew a public swimming hall

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1.- General identification

Location: Witten, Germany

Dates of the experience phase you report about: 2002-2004

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2.a- General context and historical background:

For a long time now, public finances of cities are getting worse and worse, especially in the regions suffering from the job crisis. The main reasons are loss of local tax income because of the economic crisis, higher social welfare costs for the unemployed, and the reduction of taxes for the rich and companies by neo-liberal state policies. One of the results of this financial crisis of local authorities is the privatization and/or closure of public buildings and services.

Public swimming halls in all German towns and cities are an essential part of the urban infrastructure. While they even had sanitary functions in the period in which they were built (before nearly all people had bathrooms or showers in their houses), today they are used for sports, education and health care. Besides the public swimming halls, commercial baths developed some time ago less orientated to swimming and sports than luxury relaxing. Entrance fees are more expensive, but these commercial options took many of the customers of the public halls, which nevertheless are needed for sport and education.

After decades of insufficient investments, many of the swimming halls need renovation and modernization to maintain the facilities, improve services according to today's needs, and reduce energy and facility costs. In most cases the swimming halls were or are owned by the local authorities, sometimes by companies which are owned by the local authorities. The public owners in many cases did not invest in the maintenance of the halls over decades. The results are the poor conditions. There is a very similar situation regarding schools and other public buildings.

The Stadtbad Witten (city swimming hall) is situated near a little old park in the city center, close to other public infrastructures and within a typical neighborhood from the late 19th century. The first swimming hall at this place was constructed before World War I after many people died swimming in the nearby Ruhr river. In World War II the hall together with most of the city was totally bombed. In the 1950s a group of residents started to work for a new swimming hall. They used a lottery to raise money and the city council finally decided to build it in 1956.

The construction, design and technology is typical for representative modernism of the time. The building expresses the hope for renewal in peace and the pride of the local residents. It is one of the most important buildings of this city. It included a 25 meter swimming pool with a 5 meter jumping tower, a wing with cleaning and health baths, showers, and other visitors facilities, a milk bar at the entrance, a sun platform, the technical facilities for water cleaning and heating, and its own energy station which is ecologically producing heat and electricity.

Until its closure, the hall was used by all schools in the city center (including three high schools; the swimming pool used by the grammar school was closed within the same period). It was the only place in Witten where the swimming clubs could practice contests up to some official degree. It was used by many pensioners on a daily basis. It provided some sort of activity center for the 50,000 people living in the center district of Witten (there are two much smaller halls in other districts). Nearly all people born in Witten after the war learned to swim at this place (including myself).

In the 1980s it became obvious that the swimming hall needed renovation and modernization, mainly of the technical facilities and space organization. While employees working at the hall did care for it very well, the local authorities never invested in upkeep other than some provisional repair. Because the local authorities wanted to save money, they transferred all swimming halls to the local service company Stadtwerke Witten. The shares of this company which provides city energy and water services were directly held by the local authorities of the time. The reason to transfer the swimming pools was that the company was able to sponsor the deficits from the energy profits which also reduced their taxes. They took over control of the baths with the clear task to renew and maintain them. This of course was written in contracts.



The Stadtwerke continued the unprofessional maintenance. They closed the single baths wing and did not use the space for other needs. They started work they did not finish. They closed the Sauna and failed to build a new one, etc. The halls situation continued to deteriorate.

During the 1990s internal discussion began about the complete modernization of the swimming hall. In the late 1990s the Stadtwerke presented a plan which much improved the bath by adding modern elements. The city agreed that about 6 million Euro should be invested.

After this decision, the Stadtwerke ordered a more detailed cost analysis. The result was an estimation of costs at about 8 million Euro. After long closed-door negotiations, the Stadtwerke decided not to invest that money in 2001.

Nobody became aware of this decision because it was not publicly discussed and not introduced to the city council. Thus many people were surprised when a document was presented to the city council in early 2002, declaring that the hall must be closed, demolished, and sold. A jury was elected for the decision on a new building on the site. The contest for the investors took place in October 2002. The jury considered the plan of the largest local developer as the best. He wanted to demolish the construction and build a new complex for doctors, commercial outlets, and senior housing. But to date his plans have not been implemented.

2.b- The story of the experience:

In April 2002 the Witten Tenants Association and the Witten Habitat Forum organized a public workshop on empty spaces and buildings in the city. A very small working group discussed the swimming hall issue together with officials from the Stadtwerke. One person in the plenary said that he did not believe that the swimming hall must be closed. Together with this person the Witten Tenants Associations studied the plans and arguments and came to the conclusion that there really are many open questions and that such an important decision should not be made without public participation. We wrote a petition to the city council to postpone the closure and search for alternatives. A temporary colleague of the office had the task to bring the letter to the city hall. On the way she collected some hundred signatures and 2 days later at a discussion of a city plebiscite they were 1000. It was obvious that we had found a concern shared by the whole population.

While we argued for postponing and new discussions and plans, all parties in the council said that the decision had to be made by the board of the Stadtwerke, that nobody had the money to pay the costs, etc..

Many people became aware of the issue and we started regular meetings which became the basis for an initiative called Save the Swimming Hall. Together with architects, we had the opportunity to take an intensive look at the condition of the building including the technologies. But while company experts tried to convince us that the whole complex is run down and that it makes no sense to invest in it, we got the impression that the basic structures especially the concrete and the static but even the pool were quite okay and only needed some standard repair. We agreed that the old technologies should be modernized to save costs.

After this experience we started to work out an alternative plan for renewal of the hall. The main difference to official plans was that we reduced investments to real repair and economic renewal and did not plan to enlarge the building. Furthermore we worked out proposals for use of parts of the complex that were empty. And finally we considered alternative technologies. Our estimation was that repair would be possible with 6 million Euros, which was the sum the city council had agreed to some years before. We also considered alternative models of financing: collections, cheap loans, peoples shares, and even new management forms.

But while behind the curtain we got support from specialists from other swimming halls and even planning experts from the municipality, the local authorities and especially the ruling Social Democrats showed no will to discuss a new plan, even after we announced the beginning of organization of large protests.

Meanwhile we had already thought about the possibility of a local plebiscite. The juridical situation was very complicated. Plebiscites are only allowed in cases on which the city council is responsible. But in this case the official owner was though owned by the city a private company. We had no money to pay the lawyers who were willing to defend this case, but ordinary people called more and more for action, wanting to do something regardless of the legal obstacles. Thus we started a plebiscite which on one hand called for the maintenance and renewal of the swimming hall, but combined this orientation with a focus on participative planning, because we had been unable to work out complete construction plans.

The success was overwhelming. To apply for the plebiscite we needed a little more than 4,000 signatures. The day we started to collect the signatures dozens of new people appeared who wanted to help. Within three weeks we had 10,000 signatures.



In December 2002 the city council nevertheless decided not to allow the plebiscite and not to discuss the issue again. They even voted against our applications to consider the building as urban heritage.

We continued the struggle with demonstrations, but it was obvious we could not win if nearly no member of the council was willing to support us. In January 2003 the swimming hall was closed. We started legal proceedings which lasted until summer 2004 but even at this level we had no success. We lost the case. The jury decided that the application for the plebiscite had been too vague, but it had been impossible to be more specific without access to the resources of the city and the company.

Parallel to these struggles we also discovered that all decisions had been made by very few persons. One was the speaker of the Social Democrats who was an employee of the city service company at the same time. We even discovered that the board of that company never had the right to decide about the swimming hall because the company in unpublished contracts was obliged to keep the hall and the city council never decided to change this obligation. When some members of the council tried to put the related questions on the agenda, the majority voted against the discussion.

From the first moment until the end, the powers in the council did nothing but exclude the inhabitants with no respect for any argument or protest.

3.a Objectives and goals of the main actor you report about:

Maintenance and renovation of the public swimming hall

3.b. Strategies

- Negotiations with the responsible persons
- Memorandums
- Collecting signatures
- Mobilizing public opinion and networking
- Alternative planning
- Plebiscite
- Legal proceedings

3.c. Reaches

At least 50,000 inhabitants in the center districts of Witten

Innovative aspects

- o alternative plans for renovation and financing
- o the idea to make a plebiscite although the owner was a company

4.- Actors involved and their roles

Strugglers: Witten Tenants Association, Habitat Forum Witten, Peoples Initiative Save the Swimming Hall

Supporters: Some architects and planners, one or two council members from the left, the huge majority of the population, Sports Clubs

Against us: The Social Democratic Party, the Green Party, the Liberal Party, the Christian Union, the Far Right in the city council, the management of the local service company

Neutral: A small conservative group in the council

5.- Components (brief description of how they link)

See above

Habitat elements, the experience relates to, e.g.:

Public social infrastructure

Privatization and demolishing of urban heritage

Public space, green spaces

Participation, democracy, local governance, transparency

strengthening local economy

climate protection, energy

health care

urban planning and organization



neighborhood improvement
urban image improvement
patrimonial or environmental recovery
improvement of public areas

6.- Primary tools used

See above

Socio-organizational tools

o Initiatives, meetings, plebiscite

7.- Achievements and main lessons learned

See above

8.- Key words

social infrastructure, sell out, protest, advocacy, plebiscite

9.- Sources

Leading participation in the case

Newspapers, flyers, petitions, memorandums, scripts for legal proceedings

10.- Contacts

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