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PUBLIC TOWNSCAPE

THE QUEST FOR A PUBLIC SPACE

IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF SECOND LIFE

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Landscape Architecture and Landscape Planning

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1 INTRODUCTION

The following thesis explores the meaning, the genesis and development of public spaces in the world of media. It deals with subjects as cyberspace, the relation of cyberspace to spatial and public issues, as well as the overlay of real and virtual worlds.

In order to get a detailed and in-depth study, it is necessary to analyze the apparently independent topics “cyberspace” and “public space” first. Thereafter the results will be recapitulated and their togetherness and meaning for the field of landscape architecture will be described.

However the objective of this thesis is not to claim a complete discourse about cyberspace and virtual worlds. The focus of this thesis rather concerns the relationship between public space in the real and in the virtual world. Therefore, in the context of this thesis numerous interesting aspects and phenomena about cyberspace and virtual worlds will not be treated entirely. But at least some aspects should be introduced and outlined briefly.

This thesis consists of two major parts. The first part reviews and discusses definitions and theories of public space, cyberspace etc. The second part describes an experiment regarding public space in the virtual world “Second Life”. Thus the thesis attempts to match theoretical definitions and cognitions with the practical knowledge of the experiment.



2 PUBLICITY AND PUBLIC SPACE IN CYBERSPACE

For a general understanding of this subject some essential terms will be defined and described in the following chapter. After that the importance of these terms for the occupational field of landscape architects will be explained more closely.

2.1 ABOUT CYBERSPACE

„All I knew about the word 'cyberspace' when I coined it, was that it seemed like an effective buzz-word. It seemed evocative and essentially meaningless. It was suggestive of something, but had no real semantic meaning, even for me, as I saw it emerge on the page.“ – William Gibson¹

The term “cyberspace” was generated by the science fiction novelist William Gibson in the year 1982 in his story “Burn- ing Chrome”. It became popular two years later with his well-known novel “Neuromancer”. Since the 1990s “cyberspace” is generally used as an equal expression for internet or global

networks, especially in the context of online-communities. Martina Löw distinguishes in her book “Einführung in die Stadt- und Raumsoziologie” three different levels of cyberspace: the „Barlovian cyberspace“, „Virtual Reality” and the “Gibsonian cyberspace”.²

The “Barlovian cyberspace” corresponds to the linkage of data base systems and computers, the internet and comparable structures of networks. The term “Barlovian cyberspace” refers to John Perry Barlow, the author of the paper “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace (1996)”³ and covers the graphic of computer games, links, homepages, web-blogs, chats and forums.⁴

“Virtual Reality” describes an artificial visualization, which gives an artificial world a stereoscopic and interactive appearance. The technical applications of the visualization are up to the present day exorbitant while the computing power and the data throughput are still very limited.

1 Wikipedia: Cyberspace (2007)

2 Löw (2007), p. 80

3 Barlow (1996)

4 Löw (2007), p. 80



4 THE EXPERIMENT IN SECOND LIFE

4.1 BASIC AIM

The experiment aimed to observe and document the development of a public space in the virtual world of Second Life. The public space was provided to the residents of this world in the shape of an empty island called “public townscape”.

It was not intended to develop a public space that is orientated on its counterpart from the real world, like a place or piazza. The research objective was rather to study the emerging of a free sphere for action, interaction and communication. This goal was to be achieved by the absence of predefined defaults, regulations and standards.



fig. 23 - (July 22nd): The plan of the empty island “public townscape”

4.2 THE METHODOLOGY

During the experiment basic statistic data were recorded. These included the number of observed avatars on the sim, the number of used and unused prims, the members of the group “public townscape” and the general traffic on the island. The traffic is a measurement of how many people are spending their time in a place calculated by a non-accessible mathematical formula of Linden Labs. The data was recorded during different times of the day in order to receive intraday-gradients and to register residents that live in other time-zones.

As an additional method of gathering data the residents received a questionnaire concerning the development of the island during the experiment.



The chosen method of surveillance was a “participating observation”, which was initially introduced as method of monitoring foreign cultures by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1918. Nowadays this method is often used for researching urban subcultures or fringe groups. The basic idea of this method is to integrate oneself into the group or society that is to be observed. Participating is more than attending, which means being there, taking part, being involved and partake in the everyday life of the studied ones. The participant observer watches and talks to the people and integrates himself into their community, while collecting data, taking pictures and videos.⁵²

“Particularly in new research fields it can be recommended to start with the most open of all methods and that is the method of participant observation”.⁵³

This specific method was chosen due to several reasons. The users of Second Life are representing their own subculture. Many of them were expected to have populated the world of Second Life already for many years. Therefore, it seemed

important to get acquainted with them first and understand their point of view concerning this virtual world. Secondly, this method allows for reacting and observing more flexibly. The development of the island could not have been foreseen, and thus it is easier to react to actions and incidents with this adjustable method. The residents have been informed that they were observed by me in form of my avatar “Floriano Flossberg”. It was an open form of observation, in which the residents also knew the objective of the research, but were not limited in their actions.



fig. 24: The observing avatar
“Floriano Flossberg”

52 Cf. Reuber, Pfaffenbach (2005), p.123
53 Translated, Reuber, Pfaffenbach (2005)



4.3 BASIC SETTINGS AND PARAMETERS

As already mentioned the objective of the experiment is the observing and documentation of a free and expanded form of public space. Therefore, the basic setting for the island “public townscape” is an extensive lack of settings. The residents are empowered to generate their own public space.

Nevertheless, the experiment had to take place within several parameters and the development was certainly influenced by some basic decisions and actions taken by me.

- “public townscape” as separated island

The public space was offered in the form of a separated island. This decision was based upon two issues. The experiment could also have been settled on the “main land” of Second Life. Additional influences of adjoining sims are not complicating the observation of the public place “public townscape” being a separated place. Secondly, it was a financial issue. Islands are offered at a cut-rated “educators”-tarif.

- Introduction of “public townscape”

The island “public townscape” was introduced to the residents of Second Life in several ways. “Public townscape” was promoted in the biggest German offworld-forum,⁵⁴ the project was presented to the Second Life’s educators-list and got indexed in the public search function of Second Life. Additionally it was advertised inworld by contacting several exiting groups that either had many members and/or were interested in free offers in Second Life. Additionally, several placards were placed on popular sims. The inworld advertisements put emphasis on words like “free”, “no rules” and “do whatever you want” in order to attract people.

54 Internetforum concerning Second Life, <http://slinside.com/>



- Form of observation

The residents knew from the beginning that the island is being studied through the selected Method of an open “participating observation”. They were aware that pictures and videos of their creations could be taken and chat-logs could get recorded since they do not concern private matters of the residents. Residents were also informed about the length of the experiment and that the settings of the island could be changed in the case of stagnation or problems. The chosen avatar “Floriano Flossberg” for observing the development was shaped like a little penguin with a black cowboy hat. The intention of using such an avatar was to look unthreatening and reliable.



4.4 THE STORY OF THE ISLAND "PUBLIC TOWNSCAPE"

People from all over SL were invited with the following words:

*"public townscape is a place in Second Life where you are allowed to **create and build whatever you want** to (feel yourself invited). public townscape is an island **open to everyone**. There are no parcels you can buy or build on. You just have to pick yourself a place you like. Your buildings are permanent, public townscape is not a sandbox. That means there is no autoreturn, and if you create prims on the island, they will stay there. There are **no rules, no obligations and no costs** for you. If the island is stuck with too many unused prims, or disturbed by nasty contemporaries it might become inevitable to set up some rules. But that's for the future".⁵⁵*

⁵⁵ Advertising text and invitation placed in several sims, on the homepage of publictownscape.net and in a forum.

PUBLIC TOWNSCAPE
IT'S FREE
take a mouthful of freedom!
do whatever you want
script whatever you want
build whatever you want

THE SETTINGS!

- * **ENABLED TERRAFORMING** FOR EVERYONE
- * **NO LIMIT ON PRIMS** 16000 MAX ON COMPLETE SIM
- * **OUTSIDE SCRIPTS ALLOWED** ALL YOUR SCRIPTS WILL WORK
- * **DIRECT TELEPORT** NO TELEHUB
- * **NO PARCELS** BUILD ON THE PLACE YOU WISH TO
- * **NO COSTS** NOT ONE SINGLE LINDEN DOLLAR
- * **NO RULES** BECAUSE THERE ARE ALREADY ENOUGH IN SL

* please find more Details on the IS and "public townscape (128,128,C)" and at <http://island.publictownscape.net>

fig. 25: The advertising placard for the island "public townscape" during the "phase of anarchy"



4.5 THE "PHASE OF ANARCHY"

The first period in the development of "public townscape" has earned itself the name "phase of anarchy" due to the actions and events that took place on this sim. The period lasted from July 22nd, the date when "public townscape" became available to all residents of Second Life until August 18th 2007. Because of several critical incidents on the island, that will be reported in chapter 4.5.4 - The actions in the "phase of anarchy", the period has found its end in the middle of August.

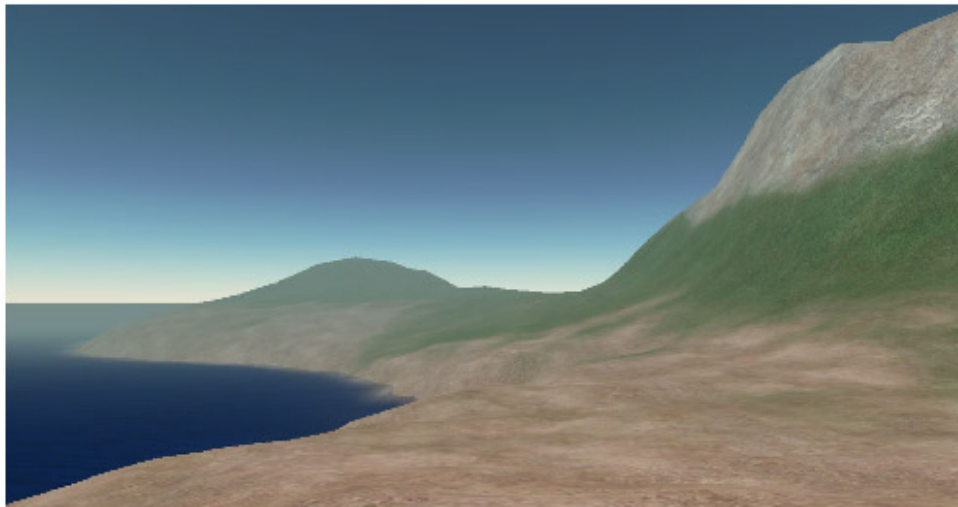


fig. 26 - (July 20th): The virgin island "public townscape" on its very first day of existence. It is a standard sim and standard shaped island from the Linden Lab catalogue.

4.5.1 THE INTENTIONS AND SETTINGS FOR THIS PERIOD

The initial setting of the project "public townscape" was to give space for an open und free development of the island. This should be achieved by the absence of several defaults and presets. The actions on the island were completely up to its visitors and residents. Avatars were invited to create their own public space, find their own way to coexist and to develop it.

"There are experiences for a built city, about what makes it pleasant and worth living: a certain percentage of private and public spaces, a certain measure between standardization and variation, a ratio between free space and buildings (...) and the mixture of social stratus and activities in it. Comparable criteria for a virtual town ecology are still pending. Since there are still no experts for it, we are all in demand equally. First of all an environment has to be made available that promotes processes of self organization".⁵⁶

According to this quotation the island "public townscape" doesn't offer a predefined structure, buildings or reglementations, just a completely free island. The experiment "pub-



lic townscape” doesn’t aim to realize an aesthetical designed space or to copy a classical public place like a park or a piazza. The goal is rather to observe the emergence of a new public space, designed and ruled by its residents, basically without interfering with the actions of the users at the very beginning.

Additionally, this open setting should ensure an observation of the usage of a public space that is not “over” predefined by its real counterpart or by typical methods of planning. The only fixed guideline for the visitors and residents of “public townscape” is a very basic main issue of a material public space: It has to stay free of charge and accessible to everyone.

The development of a public space like “public townscape” is an experimental challenge, since there is a general lack of experts or existing empirical values how to develop such a place as already mentioned. Therefore, the following technical settings were chosen, where residents could exercise control over the offered space and most of the available tools Second Life provides usually for the private land-owner or sim-owner only.

An administrative sl-group called “public townscape” was set up a few days before the island became available to public. The avatars can voluntarily join this group for information and for communication among the visitors of the island. All features of the sim “public townscape” are available without being in the group “public townscape”, to keep the public space open to all people, which do not want to join an organization to participate.

Everyone was allowed to access the island, to build and to script on it for free and without having to join the administrative sl-group “public townscape”. There was no prim-limit for a person, except the technical limit of 15000 prims for the complete sim. The terraforming function (soil modelling) was enabled for everyone. The island was set up as one huge plot, called “parcel” in Second Life, in order to avoid a predefined structure for the development.

The common procedure all over Second Life is to split the ground into numerous parcels, for each resident one. In those parcels the resident has full control and rights, but the parcel of his neighbour he may not build or run scripts, sometimes he may not even enter.

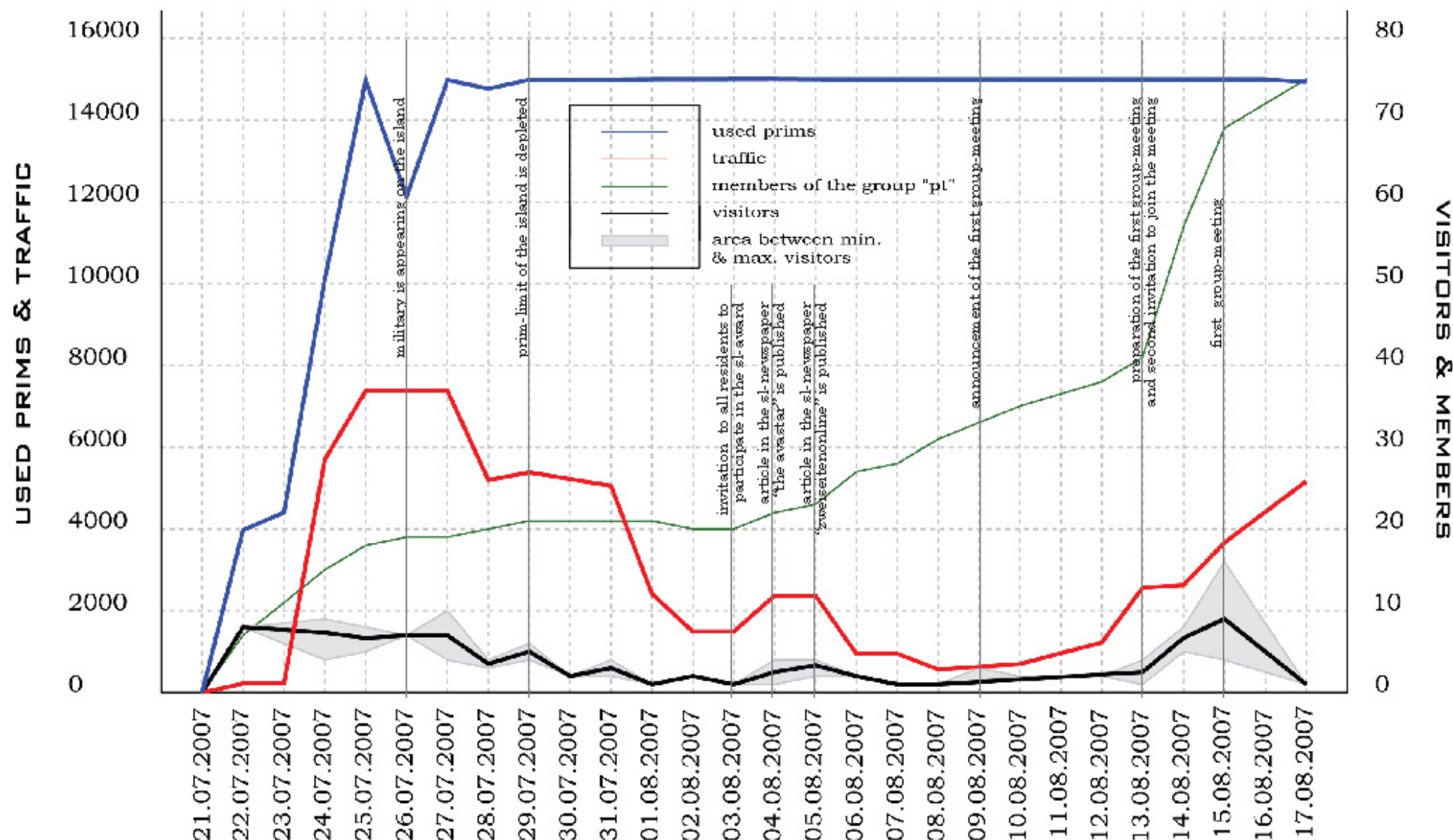


fig. 57: Statistics of the island during the "phase of anarchy"



4.6 THE "PHASE OF PUBLIC SELF-CONTROL"

The second period in the development of "public townscape" was embossed by many activities and discussions among the residents. Guidelines and settings of self-regulation were developed and many people took part in several worksopes like taking care of raw materials, organizing events or controlling and developing the guidelines.

Several meetings and workgroups converted "public townscape" to a more peaceful place and expanded its diversity.

The new period was introduced with the first two group-meetings in the middle of August, between August 15th and August 18th. It started with the return of all built objects on the island to their owners in order to prevent the prevailing of relics and unused prims of the "phase of anarchy". The island was still accessible for everyone, but some features like building objects were adhering to group-membership now. All visitors and residents had to accept the guidelines, which were agreed upon by the residents in their meetings and votes.

PUBLIC TOWNSCAPE
IT'S FREE

take a mouthful of freedom!

build whatever you want
script whatever you want
do whatever you want
+ you just have to accept the community standards

THE PUBLIC SPACE IN SECOND LIFE:

- * **125 FREE PRIMS** FOR YOU IN THE RESIDENTIAL AREA
- * **NO COSTS** NOT ONE SINGLE LINDEN-DOLLAR
- * **NO PARCELS** BUILD ON THE PLACE YOU WISH TO
- * **OUTSIDE SCRIPTS ALLOWED** ALL YOUR SCRIPTS WILL WORK
- * **ENABLED TERRAFORMING** FOR EVERYONE
- * **RESIDENT-GUIDELINES** THE RULES ARE VOTED AMONG THE RESIDENTS

please find more Details on the is and "public townscape (126,128,0)" and at <http://forum.publictownscape.net>

fig. 58: The advertising placard for the island "public townscape" during the "phase of public self-control"



4.6.1 THE INTENTIONS AND SETTINGS FOR THIS PERIOD

The role of the observing avatar Floriano Flossberg was modified in this period. The focus of the chosen method “participating observation” was now put on participation and interaction with the residents that are actively taking part in the development of the rules, guidelines and design of the island.

The “phase of public self-control” tried to examine and achieve three objectives.

1) Developing rules

First of all the apparent nuisances of the “phase of anarchy” had to be eliminated. The fight for raw materials and armed arguments went out of control and were not suitable for a public place like “public townscape” was intended to be. Fighting could be interpreted as a special way of communication and as an exchange of views among the residents, but it negated the initial setting of the experiment. The island had to be accessible and usable to all. Many avatars didn’t feel safe because of those fights and tender minds were no longer able

to use this place. Therefore, it became necessary to weaken these tensions by developing guidelines and adjusting measures. The in the first meeting initially proposed rules and guidelines were accepted by the residents.

2) Enrich the diversity of the public space by dividing the island

Secondly, it was tried to modify and enrich the basic type of the experiment from the pure “seizure of the public space” by building on it by its residents by creating a multilayered basis. The term “public space” is ambiguous, just like its usage and appropriation by the visitors. By division of the island into several administrative areas with different pre-defined functions which a public space can contain, it should make allowance to its multilayeredness. The proposed separation was universally accepted by the residents. Solely the proposed number of parcels was increased from three to four in a residents-decision.



3) Experiment with different types of control

Thirdly, different kinds of control and adjustments of the public area “public townscape” will be examined. In the plots resulting from the division of the island different owners and “government types” are intended at the beginning of the “phase of public self-control”. In order to be able to accomplish the new administrative tasks and regulations, three sl-groups were necessary. The initial sl-group “public townscape” remains the basic group for all residents. The two new groups “public townscape-events” and “public townscape-sandbox” are for administrative purposes only and thus not open for everyone to join. Some in a public vote elected residents of “public townscape” got chosen as group-officers for “public townscape”. They were invited to join the two new groups and had the rights and duties to watch over the prims and over the actions on “public townscape” according to the “resident-guidelines” and the “officer-guidelines” which had been defined in the first meetings and have been developed during the phase of “public self control”.

As a conclusion to these objectives the division into the following four areas arose, which are analyzed and described in chapter 5.1.4 - The analysis and classification of the developed public areas - more exactly. According to the results of the residential votes each of the four parts had different intentions and different technical settings:

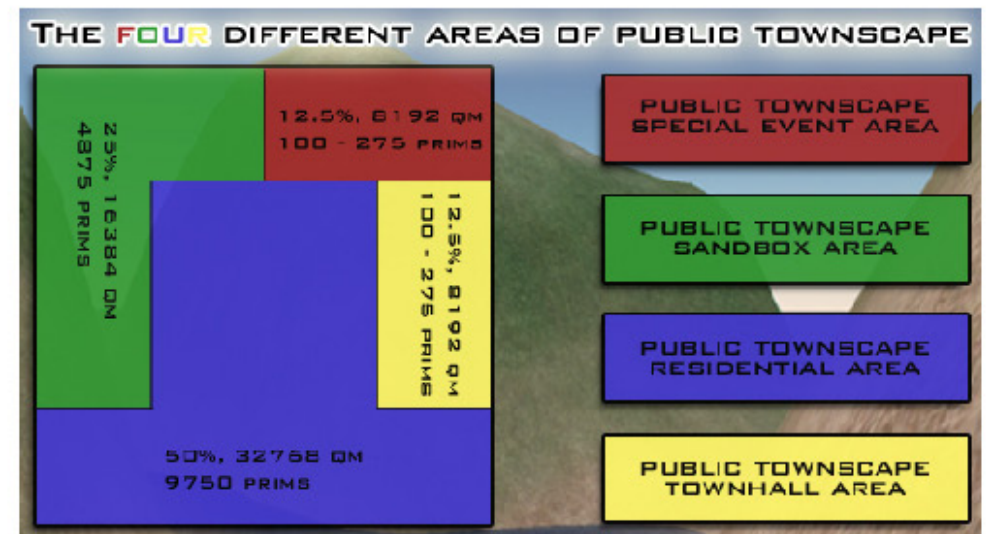


fig. 59: Scheme of the future division of the island “public townscape”. The exact size and the numbers of supported prims have changed after the group-meeting on August 23rd.



- Residential area (colour-code: blue, owned and regulated by the group “public townscape”)

The area invites people to take possession of the public space by building on it, according to the initial setting of the “phase of anarchy”, but regulated with guidelines and limits the residents agreed upon. It is the largest one with 11760 square meters and holds 9547 prims available. Building in this area is only possible for group-members. Every person has a limit of 125 permanent owned prims. Terraforming also stays enabled in this area within the limit of 10 meters. The ground of this area will be turned into a public park and the resident buildings have to be above cloud-level in 200 meters height.

- Sandbox area (colour-code: green, owned by the group “public townscape - sandbox”)

It is intended as a mostly unregulated and temporary usable area, where as few restrictions as possible are made. Everyone independent of being a resident of “public townscape” or not is allowed to build and execute scripts in this area. Terraforming is still enabled within the limit of 10 meters. There is no

prim-limit per person. All prims that are rezzed in this place are automatically returned to their owners after one week. It is 11760 square meters in size and can contain 2691 prims.

- Townhall area (colour-code: yellow, owned by the group “public townscape - events”)

It is an administrative area for information, announcements and meetings, which is initially ruled by the landowner Florian Flossberg in its usage and its design. Only officers and people that are taking part in the construction of this parcel of “public townscape” are allowed to build in this area that is meant for administrative purposes and information at the beginning. Its size is 5408 square meters and it can hold 1237 prims. The regulation of this parcel slowly was entrusted to the most active members (mainly officers and gardeners) of “public townscape” that enriched the townhall area with many additional offers over the time.



- Special-event area (colour-code: red, owned by the group “public townscape - events”, regulated by Floriano Flossberg)

The last area is designed as a temporary area for events, exhibitions and topics of other public needs. It can contain 1523 prims in 6656 square meters. Building and scripting is not enabled for residents and terraforming is disabled. Once this parcel is booked for a public event the organizers of this event get granted full access to all features of the parcel like audio and video-stream, building and scripting right and ground modelling by being invited into the group “public townscape – events” for the duration of the event. All built objects get returned after the event.

All settings, the prim capacity and the size of all parcels have been changed and adjusted several times responding to the development of the complete island. Also the guidelines for residents and officers have developed over time.

The residents were directly involved into the development of the island. “Public townscape” is a public place for them and they can easily bring in their needs into the process of development. Other residents have expert-knowledge concerning technical and administrative matters in the world of Second Life. Another reason for the straight participation is the experimental challenge of finding an adequate method of developing and controlling such a place like “public townscape”. Therefore, all important and essential changes on the island have been decided upon in group-meetings, officer-meetings or public votes in the public townscape-forum⁵⁷ as will be described in the following chapters.

⁵⁷ Residents Forum, <http://forum.publictownscape.net>



4.6.2 GENERAL DEVELOPMENT, DECISIONS AND DECISION MAKING IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE “PERIOD OF PUBLIC SELF-CONTROL”

The beginning of this phase was accompanied by many and regular group-meetings, that were well visited by the residents even if they often took longer than three or four hours each time. All meetings were prepared by Floriano Flossberg, the participating observing avatar. Those preparations included

working on own proposals, read and edit the proposals of residents and generating posters, images and timelines for the meetings. An accurate prearrangement of the meetings was very important because a serious and conducive communication via chatline among many people can be very time-consuming and exhausting.

Nevertheless, there have been four meetings in August 2007 among the residents. During the first meeting on August 15th the general structure of “public townscape” was settled. The proposed division into three different parts was overruled by



fig. 60 - (August 15th): The first group-meeting of “public townscape”. All residents were asked to agree on a ceasefire before the meeting started at 10 pm CEST. The meeting took more than 4.5 hours.



fig. 61 - (August 15th): The first group-meeting was quiet, peaceful and productive. The residents agreed to accept the proposed division of the island into several administrative parts and general rules of behaviour were discussed and settled. Several topics that could not be decided on this date were posted in the offworld-forum of “public townscape” and were voted upon in the days after the meeting.