



# You promised me a city. A conversation about assuming responsibilities

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in conversation with

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## **Abstract**

You Promised Me a City—speaking with Lefebvre, it is simultaneously a cry and demand. But what city? Who made the promise? And to whom? This paper was inspired by two thought-provoking days spent in Hannover, Germany at You Promised Me a City, a conference for experimental urban development. Firstly, the conference wanted to produce tensions by bringing people from different fields, academics, practitioners, and artists together from various countries and diverse backgrounds. The goal was to turn confrontation and disagreements into a productive tension that is necessary in developing and reimagining our cities. Secondly, the conference moved away from traditional venues and embraced the cityscape of Hannover. Events such as a critical mass and public art exhibits were meant to engage the public but also have the various urbanists experience the reality of the city around them. Authors Anne and Judith participated in You Promised Me a City and want to share some of their personal experiences and insights. Their views are expanded by an interview with lead curators Ivana and Robin, which is at the heart of this article, and in which participants and organizers alike critically reflect on You Promised Me a City.

## **Keywords**

Experimental urban studies, interventions, local initiative, creativity, bottom-up

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On a sunny June day in 2022, we authors, Judith Keller and Anne Morlock, set out for Hannover, Germany, knowing little about what we would encounter there. The title *You Promised Me a City* and the short abstract online was intriguing enough to sign up (we would learn later that giving away as little information as possible was totally intentional). First of all, Hannover was new to us. Being one of the most mediocre cities in Germany, it had been a mere flyover-city on the way to seemingly more exciting places like Berlin or Hamburg. If this would have been any other conference, our prior image of Hannover would probably have changed very little. But this was *You Promised Me a City*—a conference designed to take place outside the standard convention centers—and so we got to know Hannover in its full complexity, from the traditional central opera square to brutalist buildings from the 1970s, the industrial harbor, and even a garden allotment at the fringes of the city. The event was not hidden away in a conference hotel, but rather took on the idea of a conference by and for urbanists by using the city as its stage.

In line with this radical approach, *You Promised Me a City* also did not use any of the traditional conference formats like paper presentations, panels, or keynotes. This opened up space for many creative interventions throughout the city. There was, for instance, an art exhibit in an empty shopping center, a “fight club”—meaning a debate staged like a boxing match—, or a “shit show” in which representatives of different development projects could talk about all the things that do not go according to plan. Other formats involved the participants. We became part of a critical mass, moving from one conference location to the next, and also exploring our own creative approaches to the city in various workshops.

It was refreshing to work and think alongside artists and urbanists from all over the world, and to get some hands-on experience in the process. While many academics and planning professionals certainly have the aspiration to bring positive change to our cities, a lot of time is spent thinking and writing about urban development without working on actual implementation. *You Promised Me a City* acknowledged this gap between theory and practice and aimed to show that there are many ways to shape our urban environments. The various venues across Hannover helped to show that developments in each city are as particular as they are generalizable. Many of the issues we discussed during the event are not specific to Hannover and neither are their solutions. Rather, they translate well to other urban contexts, which helped participants see that there is much potential to develop similar spaces in our own home towns.

Additionally, *You Promised Me a City* played with some of the uncertainties and the dissonance that shape our current times. It was intentional that there was little information beforehand, that there were open arguments, and opposing opinions. Participants were supposed to learn to deal with uncertainty, to accept that the city is always in flux and that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to our multiple urban crises. *You Promised Me a City* was most of all a reminder that we have to tolerate dissent, that dissent in fact can be a catalyst for innovative urban development.

The follow-up interviews with lead curators Ivana Rohr (IR) and Robin Höning (RH)<sup>1</sup> helped to gain additional insights from the point of view of two very different urbanists, one being an artist and writer, the other being an architect. In their bureau *endboss*, founded by Robin Höning, they work together with an interdisciplinary team on spatial questions at various scales, both in rural and urban environments.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** Could you briefly outline how *You Promised Me a City* was born? What motivated you to organize a conference for experimental urban development?

**Ivana Rohr:** Well, actually it was because we were at another very boring conference. (...) These professional conferences are just so dull every single time. I've been to so many conferences professionally, because of my prior job, and I've also organized some myself, but I can't stand them anymore. (...) It was on the fringes of this particularly boring conference that we said: "We think we could do better". That's how *You Promised Me a City* came about.

**Robin Höning:** We looked at how urban development is talked about on the big stage, on the national stage, and we were honestly shocked. It was so boring and poorly curated. (...) There was nothing to eat, it was at the outskirts of the city, and most importantly, everyone had the same opinion. Everyone had the same narrative in their head and also the same concept of the enemy. Everybody agreed on what the problem was: the investors – but they weren't there, of course, nobody invited them. And that's why there was so much consensus, but it didn't really do anyone any good. (...) We then agreed that this wasn't fun and that there was really no point in talking about urban development in this way. Urban development was always something exciting to us, because we came from the DIY culture, and we somehow felt like getting involved and taking on more responsibility. (...) Actually we had a pretty big mouth. (...) Then we had the problem that we really had to do better, and then we actually worked on it for three years, on our prototype of a conference that could be a little bit more fun.

**Ivana Rohr:** Our basic idea was that the conversations you have with people who have a similar opinion to yours are usually the most boring conversations you can have. It gets interesting when there is friction. That's why we wanted to create dissonance instead of consensus. Of course, we were aware that it's not that easy to create productive dissonance and to argue well, because we as a society have actually forgotten how to have good arguments, how to actually move forward by arguing with each other and to accept opposing viewpoints. *You Promised Me a City* was created precisely because this all comes down to the city. (...) The city lives on simultaneity and polyphony. In fact, often the group of people that decides and shapes the city in the end does not represent this

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<sup>1</sup> Ivana Rohr and Robin Höning were interviewed on July 21, 2022 and August 11, 2022 respectively. The interviews conducted by authors Judith Keller and Anne Morlock were recorded via MS Teams, transcribed and translated from German to English with the consent of the interviewees.

polyphony and simultaneity. (...) That's why we said, if it's about the city, we want to do it embedded in urban space, and there should at least be the possibility for people, for passers-by, to join.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** It may sound banal, but urban conferences are about urban space. Often conferences of this kind seem to be detached from any spatial reference and setting. Experienced and lived space are often divorced from theory. We as participants had no connection to Hannover before the conference, both as a venue and a sight of interesting urban projects. In our conversations we ignore these developments in favor of prominent flagship projects in Berlin or Hamburg. Why did you choose Hannover as the "stage" for *You Promised Me a City*? Were you in any way inspired by Hannover's urban history?

**Ivana Rohr:** Actually, it was for a very banal reason, which is that our office is in Hannover, and we live here and just know this city well. I think when you do something of this caliber for the first time, it's an advantage to know the city. You're not just visiting, so you're not trying to organize something from the outside in another city.

**Robin Höning:** Hannover is the most mediocre city in Germany (...) no one really knows it, because Hannover is not really known for anything, it doesn't have a special imprint. Hannover was a good platform to meet and discuss on neutral ground.

**Ivana Rohr:** The reputation of Hannover worked to our advantage because it really just doesn't have a reputation, except that people say it's the most mediocre city in Germany. That's exactly the case, and it's actually a good blueprint. (...) So, ideas can travel well to other places. We tried to set the topics in such a way that they were not specific to Hannover.

**Robin Höning:** The places we chose [as conference venues] were each representative of a conflict in urban space. And there are conflicts everywhere, in every city.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** Let's circle back a bit. You head the collective *endboss*, a design and development studio for spatial questions, but you originally studied and worked in different professions. How did you get involved in urban development? What best describes your approach to urban development?

**Ivana Rohr:** This studio of ours was born out of the idea that you can design your own built environment (...) and then the same is true for your profession, that you can also design your profession accordingly. (...) We're about designing responsibility. I think that's the key, that actually, if you want to develop a city, you have to design responsibilities. You also have to take on responsibility yourself. That's what we learned our professions for. If you want this city to somehow function as a living cosmos, then you have to create access points to responsibility and make responsibility self-manageable.

**Robin Höning:** I actually came from the DIY scene into architecture. After university, I was on the road a lot and I slipped into the DIY scene. We started to build the things we were missing in our city. It started with this skate park, built illegally on a wasteland. After many detours and a bit of luck, we actually became successful. We now have the largest

self-built skate park in Europe here. That gave us a lot of courage and self-confidence to keep doing projects, to keep thinking, and basically to keep holding on to this idea that you can help shape your environment. (...) In my personal environment and in this DIY scene everything is unplanned. It builds very much on personal initiative and acceptance of responsibility, and it is actually not hierarchical at all. Still, many things, also social structures come out of it, physical structures, spatial structures that are of value. (...) I have seen how this helps to make a difference, how life in a city starts to take on different forms. At the same time, in university, I learned how urban planners think. For me, that triggered the desire and the motivation to think outside the box.

**Ivana Rohr:** I studied art and writing, so I come from a completely different background. Coming back to the question of what inspires us, or what we are convinced of, is the idea that it is an interdisciplinary task to design cities, to develop cities. It should not be left to architects, urban planners and other urban professionals. Otherwise, cities will look the way they do now. (...) I find, for example, what totally escapes classical urban planning and urban development is a sense of language. Actually opening a door for people through storytelling. It is a big inspiration for us, to use and see language as a design tool in architecture as well as in urban development—to not restrict language to the caption only. (...) We believe in interdisciplinarity. I would have liked to see even more of that at the conference. We didn't really manage to bring in other disciplines, to really bring in sociology, philosophy, medicine, which I think are all important fields that we have to integrate into urban development. We have to think much more broadly, and various disciplines have to enter into dialogue and communicate with each other right from the start. This is crucial in developing sustainable cities and urban societies.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** You also played with language in your title. *You Promised Me a City* reads like a demand, possibly the demand to urban life in all of its pluralities as Lefebvre refers to in *The Right to the City*. How do you situate your own work within the right to the city narrative?

**Ivana Rohr:** You can connect it to Lefebvre, of course, but first of all it was about getting a certain poetry into this conference, into this title, into the theme, as well as a multilingualism. Then we somehow ended up with this line, and I think *You Promised Me a City* is somehow both a demand and a promise. It's not only about demanding something from someone else, but it's also about creating an awareness of what it is you want to demand. It's simultaneously a request and a task. It's all in that title for me. It's also a task for the conference participants, because it requires you to reflect and to ask, who am I talking to anyway? Who is you? Who is we? What is a city? (...) It requires you to reflect and deconstruct, which is already a form of assuming responsibility.

**Robin Höning:** The who-owns-the-city narrative—sure, that's part of it. It's a reference to it, an allusion to that history. Still, at the conference, our main point was to show that it's not just about the citizens, or those down here looking up and saying, “you guys up there, we own the city too”. Of course, the city belongs to all of us! It is a democratic space, especially with regards to public space, which is financed by tax money, mainly. But we

didn't base this conference exclusively on that. We also set out, and that was our great ambition—not easy by the way—to also consider the investors', private owners', and developers' perspectives because these people also shape the city and perhaps also have a right to do so, and don't necessarily belong to the bad guys, against whom you have to defend your right to the city. Perhaps you also have to join forces, and they might not be bad people just because they want to earn money. At the conference, we also moved to some extent on private property, in the department store, for instance. It belongs to a developer, as well as the Ihme Center which also belongs to a private investor. They were both very cooperative and devoted to the whole idea of the conference, and always said, “yes, that's a great concept, because we also want to make the city, cities better.” (...) That was the big idea, tolerance of ambiguity, or whatever you want to call it, to allow that there are different opinions, to get involved in conflicts in order to then move forward.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** You already touched upon this a couple of times now, but one of the goals of *You Promised Me a City* was to establish dissent. This is a concept that has repeatedly come into question in the past years as populist and right-wing voices make it increasingly hard to have productive arguments and have probably also made many of us weary of arguing. You, on the other hand, mentioned that you see dissent as a driving force in urban development, that we need to disagree and fight and use this tension to create alternative urban futures. Would you like to elaborate on that?

**Ivana Rohr:** We noticed in the time prior to the conference that we are not good at arguing. Of course, we don't just have an opinion, we also have an attitude towards our work and our profession. It's, I think, super difficult, you don't go out of your way to deal with people who see things differently. It happens automatically because time is a scarce commodity. Somehow you always find yourself with people who think similarly to you. So, for instance, in the course of preparing the conference, we got involved with these debate clubs. Robin, for example, was at the debate club beforehand and joined their debates, and we somehow started to work with this set of rules. (...) Once you internalize this set of rules—that is of course also a very rigid concept and a very white one at that—if these basic ground rules could be internalized and integrated into the conversations we have with each other and the way we evaluate things, then we would already have made a 180-degree turn in the discourse. Our idea was to become involved ourselves, to expose ourselves and our guests to it.

**Robin Höning:** Then, of course, there was the Fight Club, where we set the very difficult task for our speakers to represent different viewpoints on a stage. Of course, this is completely unusual. Normally you go on stage and you have a very safe setting and you are allowed to talk about how great you and your opinions are. And then everybody applauds. Then it's over. (...) That was a big challenge, of course. Even just to show that there are many different views on one and the same thing, and to accept this diversity. That's what we need if we want to move forward.

**Ivana Rohr:** From a curatorial point of view, on Friday the program was relatively fast-paced, and everything was very, very much geared towards confrontation and friction. We once said internally, the curatorial guideline is: on Friday there's bashing and on Saturday

there's healing. Friday, we ended up in the underground parking garage with a wrestling show, and then Saturday we met in the allotment garden and slowly all got along again before we went our separate ways.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** Some of the interventions we witnessed during the conference criticized that—although *You Promised Me a City* took place outside the traditional realm of academic conferences—it still addressed only a very particular audience, namely left-leaning, highly-educated urbanists. In short: we did not actually leave our bubble even though we left the traditional conference venues. More so, there was very little productive dissent because most participants seemed to agree on the big challenges of our times. How do you respond to that? And say this critique *is* true, in what ways did *You Promised Me a City* make a difference nonetheless? Are there specific tools you used to bring in diverse audiences?

**Ivana Rohr:** Well, I think that point came across quite well in some of the presentations. It was not enough to make an effort to address a diverse audience. In our office it is similar, we are not a particularly diverse team, actually not at all, to be honest. The architecture programs are usually not diverse either. You've just said yourself that we agree—and even if we don't agree, we speak the same language in the sense that we use the same vocabulary. One has agreed on a language, code, and code of conduct in the canon of knowledge, which one needs to know to be part of the conversations. (...) I think, if we were to do this again—a conference like this, which we won't, it was kind of a once in a lifetime thing—then I would take that much more to heart. I would try to build this team differently from the beginning. In all phases of the design, in each conversation, you have to somehow look at whether we are really speaking from different viewpoints and perspectives or whether we just have different opinions but the same positionality and prerequisites. I think that's a difficult question to answer, honestly. (...) Though I think that you can't solve all problems in one format. That's always the case, and I think trying to approach it step by step is more successful. You have to keep searching and reflecting on these issues, so if it's important to you to have simultaneity and polyphony in projects, no matter which project, then you have to internalize that and you have to critically check all of your projects for that.

**Robin Höning:** You asked how we can address this? Well, we try to encourage people to get involved in the city and make demands, so that this is not just left to the architects or urban planners. That should be clear because the city belongs to all of us, and the city concerns all of us, and it is a space about which we must all make decisions together.

**Ivana Rohr:** Urban development is insanely academic. But that's because in Germany, for example, it's not taught at all in school. We don't talk about architecture and the city in school. (...) If we want this to be discussed outside of academic contexts, then maybe it needs to move outside of universities. (...) I've always wondered why there are so few adult education classes, at least in our country there are very few adult education classes on these matters. (...) You could start at different age levels, and then you might also be able to get others, even people who don't study, to feel like these topics also concern

them. Yes, that might be an approach if you want to discuss how to turn a person into a responsible city dweller and at what point in life. Then there is the issue of arguing (...) I believe that discourse is the basis for a functioning democracy. Nobody ever promised us that discourse and democracy would not be exhausting. They are both very, very exhausting, and I think we have to learn that that's not a bad thing.

**Judith Keller & Anne Morlock:** Absolutely, it comes down to how we enter into these conversations, what expectations we bring to them. You just mentioned that you won't organize another conference. Yet, we are sure that you also won't stop now. How do you intend to continue the collaborations that started during the conference? How do you try to move forward in addressing the multiple crises of our times? How can we make lasting changes to our urban environments?

**Robin Höning:** When we talk about how cities should develop, we are talking about the future. That's a fundamental parameter of our job, that we think about the future. But if we act as if we know how to deal with the future, and as if we know everything (...) we fail to recognize the factor of unpredictability. (...) I would like to see a more honest approach from the urban planner bubble. Nevertheless, dealing with unpredictability is insanely hard to sell. I would like to do projects where we say from the onset that we don't know what the outcome will be. We are also very busy with citizen activation and participation. There is still the big idea that we are commissioned and that the result must be clear from the onset. There is a plan, and if something else happens along the way, it is not included. It's not included in funding. It's not really possible to take turns along the way to reaching your goal, or to make an extra loop, or to say, "It's turned out that we should do this differently than originally planned." That's never part of the plan. I think that's a great pity. (...) So, we have to examine once again how one actually arrives at forward-thinking decisions, because that is a beautiful task for us as architects. (...) We also worked with text as part of the summer school of the conference. (...) text as a design instrument in architecture, that was the task. In each venue, the students had the task to use text to intervene in public space and to comment critically. That was a lot of fun, not only for us, but also for the students. And they said: "Finally! It's so liberating" because words are much simpler than a plan. And you can communicate and design with them, and that was really fun. (...) I also want to publish myself, so that we as *endboss* somehow write more and maybe edit a magazine. And I mean what you do, that too, that is of course a way to get involved, to move the conversation along, to create with text and language.

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The past years have unearthed multiple crises—in fact, Lancione (2019, p. 274) refers to the 'crisis as the new normal'. There is an uncertainty inherent in these crises that is overwhelming and complex in its singularity; it is increasingly hard to navigate through crises. The city unites these challenges of our times: social inequality, climate crisis, colonialism, war, polarization, food and housing insecurity. At the same time, the city is a site of progress and innovation. There is a simultaneity of power and powerlessness, luxury and precarity,



velocity and stillness. It is a product of complex negotiations between different stakeholders. Power and capital are often the winners in this process, overshadowing the responsibility and influence and of the individual, drowning out the polyphony and simultaneity inherent in the city.

*You Promised Me a City* managed to address these challenges and show their interconnectedness by playing with uncertainty and dissonance. In order to address complex urban challenges, various stakeholders and disciplines need to be involved in planning processes and fight with each other. Consequently, through the conference there was a renewed call for interdisciplinarity. Further, it was the mission of *You Promised Me a City* to encourage responsibilities. We are all part of the lived and built environment, yet we often take our surroundings for granted. Planning the future city is often limited to one-size-fits-all approaches, ignoring the multitude of voices and needs that make up the city. Cities are living organisms animated by the lived experience of their diverse users. *You Promised Me a City* made the city itself the protagonist and we became the animators. The different venues of the conference all told their own stories, showcasing various uses, users and aesthetics. Creativity became a bridge and a tool to bring different approaches, wishes and possibilities together. As participants we became part of the narratives told on-site, each of us with our own interpretation in mind. By reflecting and discussing we not only created alternative narratives, but also envisioned alternative futures.

In order to address the uncertainties of our time, flexibility and courage are required. While the conference did not manage to attract a more diverse audience nor create the levels of dissent its organizers had hoped for, it was courageous to move outside traditional conference venues and rely on a different approach. While it may be easy to criticize some of these shortcomings, in reality it is up to each and every one of us to step out of our comfort zones and listen to the diverse voices of our cities. This requires us to question our own positionality and the way we shape our cityscapes. So, instead of dwelling on the promises of a city and making demands, the conference made personal responsibility tangible. It was a call to assume our responsibilities in order to rethink the potential of the city and the places that are supposed to be ours.

Even without listening to presentations, panels, and keynotes, *You Promised Me a City* left us with much food for thought. We talked non-stop about our impressions on the train ride home. To this day, our conversations often return to the time we spent in Hannover, the links we find to other projects, and the inspiring people we were able to connect with. We keep thinking and talking about *You Promised Me a City*—which is probably the greatest achievement of all.

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As a final note, we asked Ivana and Robin if there were any urbanists/thinkers who have inspired and influenced their work. This is the bibliographical list we came up with:

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