

### Episode 3: Painting a Sustainable City with Felix Ringel

Lucie McNeil:

We all love stories; stories about ourselves, about how we live, and what the future might hold. We know that's why lots of people, myself included, just love being part of book festivals, to explore the story behind that individual's unbelievable way of thinking up a book right there up close, to try to understand a different way of looking, of being, from a different seat. This is what anthropologists do too; listening, learning, and holding a multiverse of other people's stories so that we can question often entrenched perspectives and think again. Because we're still very new here on the planet, anthropologists help us understand where our present day conditioning comes from to loosen its grip a little bit. So we took a tea break or two over summer in Durham University, one of the largest anthropology departments in the UK, with six of their researchers, researchers who are on vastly different journeys to understand many different groups and individuals' ways of being. Their stories can help us think about how we live now and next.

Felix Ringel:

I'm from Eastern Germany, so that means the former socialist part of Germany after Germany was divided after the Second World War, and I was eight or nine when the wall came down and reunification happened. And so to experience the wholesale transformation of everything that you're used to does probably shape people, me as well. Yeah, so from that moment on, I think I was quite interested in how to think about everything that's going on in the world and all the challenges that we are facing. But academically speaking, you obviously need a position from which to do so, and anthropology gave me that position. It gave me a home to then think about the world in particularly complex and detailed ways, but in a way that felt very much like how my brain worked either way.

Lucie McNeil:

Felix Ringel's work focuses on time, sustainability and urban development in post-industrial Europe. He talked to us about shrinking cities and what they can tell us.

So what are you studying now?

Felix Ringel:

So I study everything relating to time. So time is a complex issue in many ways and the future in particular poses its challenges, but I try to look at how people relate to the future. I used to do that and I still do that in post-industrial settings, so in mostly urban settings in Europe and Africa, where people arguably have lost at least one future or a particular take on the future. So they have lost the stability and securities that they were used to due to another set of dramatic more or less changes, and they now try to get a new grip on a future, the future in particular.

So for that matter, I like places that are of no future, so to speak, that have lost the future, for whom, if you wish, the future is not what it used to be. And that obviously brings us right back here to Durham as well, another post-industrial region. But my field sites are in Germany, in both East and West Germany. So both East and West Germany's fastest shrinking cities is what I looked at, and also I was recently doing work in the post-industrial city of Blantyre in Malawi.

Lucie McNeil:

So talk to us about the German cities and the work that you've done there and the range and scope of what you've found, and then we'll move into other areas.

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Felix Ringel:

Well, let me address a problem that comes with looking at the future for any social science, or maybe all the sciences after all. So the field site that I went to is a former socialist model city. It's called Hoyerswerda, and it was the DDR's second socialist model city, a huge new city built from scratch with prefabricated concrete units. You kind get the image there. And it was built for the lignite industry that was crucial for the DDR's development. However, that city was, when I did research there in 2008, 2009, Germany's fastest shrinking city. The industries have been closed down or modernized and not as many workers as before were needed for them.

And there was one way of looking at Hoyerswerda, namely through the past. And the past for a post socialist city is socialism. Now, that would allow you certain kinds of analysis that are important. You could look at the infrastructure that's still in place and the effects it has on the present, et cetera, et cetera. However, at the same time, it also restricts your analysis because everything you see in that particular site would be related back to the socialist era, and nowadays, it's more than 30 years after the wall has come down, so even when that particular historical period is long over. Now, when I went there, I was half expecting that everybody was still concerned about the socialist past, but they weren't. Literally, they weren't. I mean, yes, there was some kind of nostalgia here and there for better or worse. That's probably part of human life in general. However, what they were really, really concerned about was their future. The future that, as I said before, had been lost.

So the city kept on shrinking. People were migrating out of the city. There was high unemployment. And all these other problems forced people, everyone, even those who were well off, to consider again what this particular city's future would look like. So my first field site then allowed me to look at how a certain urban community gets a grip again on the future that they had lost. And that was not a mean feat. It really involves everybody in this particular society or urban community.

Now, when I was done with my field work there, when I had provided some kind of understanding of what is necessary to get a grip on the future, I was then trying to do actually my own kind of time traveling, if you wish. So I then went to what was West Germany's fastest shrinking city, Bremerhaven, because Bremerhaven had been allowed to do what Hoyerswerda always wanted to do. It had been given a large grant to redevelop itself. And the two futures that were envisioned in Hoyerswerda were renewable energy and tourism, and that's exactly the two economic domains, if you wish, which Bremerhaven had put a lot of investment in in the past. So when I went to Bremerhaven in 2014, '15, '16, I was able to, if you wish, study the future of what my friends in Hoyerswerda always wanted, but that was the past of my new friends in Bremerhaven who had already initiated a change, implemented a change, and then had to deal with the aftermath of that.

Lucie McNeil:

Yes. Because where are those people's feelings at that point? When you talk about loss of relationship with time and with hope, I guess for both of them, and then you're walking back in yourself as a German citizen, what does that feel like for you, starting that again as a scientist and as a human?

Felix Ringel:

Yeah. Well, that's a good question. And for an anthropologist, that's always something that we have to negotiate.

Lucie McNeil:

And how do you do that? Yeah.

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Felix Ringel:

Well, let me give you an example that might be a bit surprising at this point, but back then I was a temporarily employed academic. So my own futures were at stake all the while. So my own professional futures, my own personal futures, and they obviously go hand in hand. So looking at how people fight with the future or try to come up with ideas that in this particular setting were also supposed to be sustainable, it always links back to your own individual concerns, hopes, fears that are pressing in one way or another, either way. And that obviously also tells you something about how we are individually all entangled in these concerns. We might be all differently positioned, so we might have more abilities, capacities, resources to deal with a lack of a future than others, but we are in many ways all in it together.

But yes, but coming back to Bremerhaven, if I can just add that, what was so exciting to look at there is that the way that they tried to step out of these continuous circles of growth and decline that we are all so familiar with is by transforming their city in a sustainable way. So sustainability for them was this promise that, "Okay, once we are sustainable, we won't have to be affected by all of these doom and boom bust-

Lucie McNeil:

Malaise.

Felix Ringel:

Everything happening, as in moments of growth when hope is up and everybody's thinking, "Oh yes, now we are returning to a past that once felt so good and felt so secure and stable," and then just being disappointed again. So there was a constant negotiation, but this promise of sustainability for them was also something they had to negotiate. It was not an easy future to materialize. How does actual sustainability look like? When is the moment in time that we can think, "Oh yeah, now we can lean back and relax."? Well, that moment I presume never came, so the mood that you were after, that I encountered in Bremerhaven was one of a very careful waiting. "Are we doing okay now?" But also, nobody had ever defined what the moment would be that everything would be better again.

Lucie McNeil:

And it sounds very external, that people were waiting to be either validated or approved of, rather than people having actualization, like knowing, right? So how did you look at what was external and what people were self-leading on?

Felix Ringel:

Yeah. I guess two answers to that question. I'll try both. First one is the way I looked at it is thinking in more detail about what sustainability actually means. And we already have a vocabulary for that and also a way of measuring it to a certain extent. So there's ecological sustainability and this is measured in carbon dioxide emissions. If you reduce them, yay. If you're not, not so good. There's economic indicators for economic sustainability. So if the urban economy is doing well, you will be able to measure that with regards to employment, investment, and other kinds of measures. Interestingly, social sustainability, which I think you're also a little bit after, there's also a feeling of, "Is it nice to live here? Do you have nice neighbors? Is your community good, healthy, happy?" All of these things, actually that was really hard to measure. People didn't have, as if we as the social scientists haven't actually provided them with, a good measurement for when it feels good in a city or in any particular region.

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Now, the second answer to your question is one about affect, really. Theresa Brennan, not an anthropologist, but I think a literature scholar, she described this situation that I think we all know, which is when you enter a room, you don't know what has happened in the room, you probably might not know all of the people there. You might not know anyone in the room. But you enter and you think, "Oh, something is wrong. Something isn't right. Something has happened." That's affect. So it's not an emotion. You can't really put a word to it, but you feel something isn't quite right. And that's the feeling you can have in a city, by walking through it, by seeing broken windows, another shop closed on the high street. It does something to you. You might not put it into words, but it tells you something about the city at large, but also its future.

And most of these affects, if not all of them, have an implicit relationship to the future. So hope always envisions a future that is better than the present, for instance. Whereas fear would be the opposite. You fear something worse will happen in the future. So there's a temporal logic to these effects that we study and that are again very fashionable.

Lucie McNeil:

And I just realized, when we're talking about the people in both cities, which types of people are we talking about? Are we talking about civic leaders? Are we talking about community groups? Because I've just realized, we haven't delved down into exactly the groups that you're talking about.

Felix Ringel:

So in both cities it was different groups I was looking at, because obviously cities are too big to actually build a relationship to all of the people living in it. And in Bremerhaven, it was sustainability workers. So practitioners who really tried to implement sustainability policies in these various domains; economically, ecologically, and socially. And the people that come to mind if you ask me are, funnily enough, some of them were actually trained in biology, and biology provided them with a way of thinking about the world in equilibriums and other kinds of ways that for social scientists are foreign a little bit, but actually really stimulating at the same time. So the way that they thought about whatever was important in their work was also really in ways of, "How can we build up," for instance, "Social relations," and I'll give you an example in a moment, "That can endure in time without depending on constant further investment?" So one of the ideas they developed in the city's own climate city office, is what it was called, because the city aspired to be a climate city, was that they, I think Worldwide, might've been the first youth council for climate change, basically. So proper elections in local schools, but they assembled approximately 20 young, very passionate people in Bremerhaven to help and advise the local government on ecological-

Lucie McNeil:

Sorry, teenagers?

Felix Ringel:

Actual teenagers, yes. And again, we all know how if you create that kind of position, it comes with a new identity, but it comes also with certain social relations. But the way to make this work, to create a format and then make it endure in time with changing personnel, with changing political landscapes, with changing problems is not an easy undertaking. So it was funny because they had a lot of media attention. They all wanted to make this little snippet for whatever national news or something about these youth counselors, their dedicating their free time to thinking about the sustainability of that particular city. And the office said, "No, we want this to work first. It's not just a hype that we want to

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follow. It's something that we want to see taking effect and taking hold and being established as something in its own right."

Lucie McNeil:

That's really encouraging.

Felix Ringel:

Well, but again, also it's a very different way to think about the future. So to give it a bit of a political twist here just for the moment, but we are all very much after the new, to make a difference. And it is very important, and I sound terribly conservative just questioning that, but the people I worked with in Bremerhaven, the next question was what counted for them. It's not just to introduce and implement the change, it's how you make that change endure. So you are not asking the question about a different future, but you ask about the future of that different future, and that's what sustainability invites you to do.

Lucie McNeil:

That makes it real and not just a soundbite, if people are trying to interrogate it that way.

Felix Ringel:

Yeah, exactly.

Lucie McNeil:

Yeah.

Felix Ringel:

Yeah. But the kind of times we live in, and they're complex and multiple in many ways, but the political times that we are subject to with election cycles, et cetera, they sometimes discourage you to think about the future's future. It's the short fixes, the quick fix, short-term implementation of whatever that might as well not work out a year later. But it's this kind of thinking that we, I presume or I would argue for, have to overcome, and Bremerhaven allows me to make these kinds of points by thinking in more detail about how sustainability actually unfolds or doesn't in a particular social, political, economic context.

Lucie McNeil:

And so where, once you had gone through those cycles, did you end up in terms of what you were seeing?

Felix Ringel:

Well, what I saw, unfortunately, and it should not be discouraging at all for anyone who dreams about sustainability, is that even in a city where sustainability was such a main trope, where everybody was really passionate about it, what I unfortunately saw was, again, two things, maybe. One is this kind of hesitancy, this not knowing. "So what's the next step?" It's an experiment, right? You have to think about not just the future, but about your city in rather different terms, and also predict in different terms what your next moves would be.

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However, apart from hesitancy, the second observation is especially on the side of the local politicians, there was this urge to get back to this language of growth and progress and, "Everything's going to be great again." So if you just look demographically at the inhabitants numbers, and also the incident I'm going to refer to just happened before local elections, but so the city had managed to stabilize its population numbers at around 110,000. But just before the local election, it rose slightly, and obviously most of the candidates were heralding in a new period of growth, and, "Bremerhaven is going to be huge again," and this and that. It wasn't. However, this tempting retreat to what we know, the way that we have been taught to think about the future and development and these things, obviously it's always there. And that's the radical shift that sustainability invites you to take, to go beyond that, to leave this behind.

What you have in mind is also the question, what kind of communication is possible across cultural differences, for that matter? As a social anthropologist, I am somewhat less interested in that, because we have deconstructed the notion of culture a lot, for better or worse. The way that we have been trained to talk about the future is rather simplistic. We often don't take much effort to really think in detail through what we mean when we say a better future, prosperity, happiness, or any of these things. So one of the things that I have learned is to actually develop a more detailed vocabulary for that particular temporal dimension. And that was crucial in so many ways in both of these field sites that I've talked about before, because if you don't have a future or if you have just a vague idea of a future, it is this kind of work, this epistemic work, coming up with a new language, with a detailed language, that is so, so crucial in order to again make that kind of future then a reality in the future.

Lucie McNeil:

Yes.

Felix Ringel:

So we might as well use the same language and be of the same or similar cultural background, but that doesn't mean that the ideas we have and we say, a city worth living in, for instance, we might have very different ideas of what that actually entails. But the crucial point would be to have these conversations.

Now, there's a backdrop here before I come to my second set of replies, which is that as Jane Guyer, a cultural anthropologist, by the way, from the United States, as she so beautifully shows us, there's a broader, if you wish, cultural for that matter, or political and economic context in which we have arguably lost our language for the future. And so if I could lay this out just quickly?

Lucie McNeil:

Please.

Felix Ringel:

So what she says is after World War II, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, we actually have been really good with coming up with plans, proper modernity, five-year plans on one side, but similarly if differently named plans on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Everything was about, "We know where we are going and we will do this in the next one, two, three, four, five or 10 years." These plans were all there. However, with the oil crisis in the 1970s and the introduction of what we still refer to as neoliberalism or neoliberal policies, she argues we have lost that detailed take on the future. On the near future, to be more precise. She has a really interesting analytical toolkit that she provides. And what she says has happened since the 1970s and '80s is that we live in a moment of enforced

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presentism. So we are constantly fighting with yet another crisis and we can only react in the instant, basically. And that's paired with a fantasy futurism. So an idea of salvation, and she looks at both religious and economic practices, an idea of salvation or prosperity that is however constantly deferred. So we have evacuated this moment between the present and the distant future. So we have evacuated the near future. We have lost the language to look at this.

Now, if I could bring this back to Hoyerswerda, that's exactly what I wanted to look at, or was looking at. Because in Hoyerswerda, the urban governance discourse was exactly that. "We live in a crisis. There's nothing we can do. But obviously in the future we will ..." But then there were other people, the local socio-cultural elite as I call them, but people who were really invested in their city, local architects, local cultural workers, who then always said, "No, no, we need to get back to this near future bit here. So what are we actually doing in the next three, four, five years? What can we do in this dramatic context of urban decline that would help us live a good life here?" It's again a very general question and they had much more detailed answers, but that shift back to developing a language about the near future was crucial for them to overcome their 'no future' state, the 'no future' present that they found themselves in.

Lucie McNeil:

And where did they end up in terms of developing language?

Felix Ringel:

Well, the interesting bit, and again define language here, I could tell you about a certain art project. It was called Paint Block, a two-week project. So what we had done, and I was part of the organizing team, that's what anthropologists also do, we were given I think 64 flats, a whole block of apartments in the new city's youngest district, district number 10. This whole block, the whole district for that matter, was ready for demolition. It had only been finished in 1989, 1990. It's ridiculous if you think about how short-lived these houses were. But it was readied, and what we did is we got sponsors in and they provided us with everything you wanted to do with regards to painting, drawing, spraying. Everybody was welcome. You could get a room, you could get a whole flat, for that matter, and you could just go wild. So more than 2000 people visited this site, came for a day or two, some stayed for the whole two weeks, and did art. And that might not sound very dramatic. It might not sound like we've come up with the big thing, but it was so funny, to bid this particular block farewell, to have a ritual, if you wish, for something that otherwise just happened randomly in the city, decline, demolition-

Lucie McNeil:

Yeah. But it was purposeful.

Felix Ringel:

It allowed people to not necessarily come up with a new idea of the future, but actually to create a present in which they felt good about themselves, in which they could relax for a moment with all this 'no future' talk and, "Where's Hoyerswerda going?" They were actually like, "Oh, that was cool."

Lucie McNeil:

It's so direct, and it's artistic as opposed to just cerebral words. It's really of the person.

Felix Ringel:

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And in some of these artworks, obviously the city and its future were the main topic. It's what affected people a lot. But even an eight-year-old school kid coming in and painting some random stuff somewhere, it's also appropriation of the city and its materiality and its future, for that matter.

Lucie McNeil:

And was it all different age groups? Was there 80-year-olds as well as eight-year-olds?

Felix Ringel:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. The old architects that actually had built the new city came and did some cool artwork as much as the kids from around the corner who went to the nursery there or to the primary school. So I think that's what is usually called in human geography, for instance, as prefigurative; it was already creating an urban community that is very much of the future, if you wish, in the present. So it prefigured a certain kind of urban existence with one another that was quite utopian. It was again, short-lived, two weeks only, if you wish. The damn thing was deconstructed, obviously. I could show you pictures. It was amazing how these things break off and then suddenly you have a piece of art from this guy or that falling down with this crunching concrete hitting the ground. But it still meant something now, even the absence of that particular block when you drove past it, because one of the main streets leads out of Hoyerswerda along it, even the absence is a lovely reminder of what was possible, and by definition will be possible again in the future.

Lucie McNeil:

Yes. And so, bringing it round to hope again, where do you see, with your work in both Germany and here and I know that you're working on a book right now, where do you see and how do you describe hope, both in the context of the way you view time or your research time? I know that's a big question, but I'll just let you unpack that however you need to.

Felix Ringel:

So the trope or the idea of hope has been super influential in many social sciences, and hope has come to the fore I think for many reasons. One is because we need it in our times that is so crisis-filled. And it has a rather awkward relationship to neoliberalism too, right? As we all know, this American Dream is based on hope and that things can be better. But if the way that we organize our societies does actually not allow for realistic hopes, there's a huge problem we have. Now, there are certain aspects with regards to hope that I would like to draw out. One is, if I could mention Ernst Bloch, an East German philosopher quickly, is that hope is a very human thing and transcends new liberalism obviously in many ways. Ernst Bloch in the mid-20th century has published this three-volume huge oeuvre just on the principle of hope. And as a proper Marxist, he would have a different understanding of hope than we have right now, I think. But nonetheless, he just finds hope everywhere. And again, it seems to be a very human response, especially when there are crises out there.

Now, that's great in many ways and we all like hope, arguably. Hope can be defined, if I can bring in another colleague, Hirokazu Miyazaki, who did field work in Fiji, as a redirection of knowledge. So knowledge has faced an impasse, but hope allows you actually to think differently about the future because a step wasn't taken.

Now, these are the positive aspects of hope, but as social scientists, we obviously also come up with the negative side, and Lauren Berlant has written this fantastic book on cruel optimism. And what she, I think really, really wonderfully, but also shockingly, if you wish, underlines, is that in the times we're



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living in, hope also has a cruel character, if you wish, because it keeps us going in contexts against which we actually should revolt.

So she has this scene in her book, which I find just so moving. So she talks about this single mom in the US sitting down in the McDonald's to eat her only warm meal in between the three jobs that she has in order to care for her family, basically. She sits down and she eats this to keep her going. And we might think, "Oh God, fast food." We have all our prejudices against somebody sitting in McDonald's eating this. Why would she waste the money? Shouldn't she eat something more healthy? All the rest of it. So the book also touches on issues of obesity. But the point here is that this woman just enduring in times that are exhausting, and we all have felt this exhaustion, that are overwhelming, it's this little bit of hope that keeps her going. Arguably that's great, and arguably she'll see another day and things will get better and things will pick up again. But what if not? Shouldn't she have lost her hope, for that matter, to actually change the conditions in which she finds herself?

And this also links back to what I had said before; as critical thinkers and analysts, we have to hope that we can make a difference. But can we? Is the question. And again, would it be that quick fix that we can come up with, or would it not, again, need other kinds of agencies, like the state, for instance, to oversee longterm redistribution of the wealth that we have in our society so that particular woman doesn't have to work three shifts?

Lucie McNeil:

So a shakeup of the interlopers is perhaps needed, rather than blind optimism.

Felix Ringel:

Yeah, that's a nice phrase, to go beyond blind optimism. Again, it would relate to what I said before as in, again, hope as an affect. It allows you to probably redirect your knowledge, to follow Miyazaki again, but it doesn't necessarily provide you with the detail of how to get there. So this evacuation of the near future, to use Guyer again, links up with this weird hope for some fantasy future. But maybe hope is not what is needed here. Having said that, obviously I don't want us all to live in despair, but maybe beyond the hope there's work we need to do.