

Speech for the Publix Opening

Maria Exner, Publix director

September 13th, 2024

Good evening to you all, to my colleagues and friends, to the Publix Network, to everyone from the neighbourhood, to the Spore Initiative, the Schöpflin Foundation, the Pantha Rhea Foundation, to our international guests, and to the Publix Team.

I'm thrilled you could all be here this evening.

Two years ago, I started working on the idea for Publix and, by the same token, started preparing for the event here tonight. There's no way I could have imagined just how much enthusiasm I would manage to raise for this project in the last 24 months, nor how easy it has been at times.

A place where we can develop ideas on how to get reliable information to everyone in this country.

Strengthening journalism and democracy?

In a building that was tailor-made for exactly this purpose, designed by outstanding architects working with editorial offices and NGOs.

Independently funded by a foundation?

With events for those in the neighbourhood: in Berlin Neukölln?

A lot of the people I talked to said yes right away, before I even had a chance to explain all of the projects involved.

I'm really delighted with the enthusiasm, the openness, and the curiosity that so many of you have brought to this project.

You've moved in here as "residents" and put together the program for the opening week with us. You've been helping us with the technical side of things, with security, and communication. You've developed the content of our ideas with us, supported our programs, recommended us to other people.

I've been a journalist for a long time now but this is my first time as a director. And what excites me most about this role is that I get to be part of a network of people working courageously and enthusiastically on the same things, to be part of this open-ended process.

Thanks to all of you for being here tonight, for celebrating this moment when we move from the training and preparation phase to take to the field.

I really couldn't be happier that the opening week has finally come, after 7 years planning and building, with construction finishing in April, and the various organisations moving in at the end of May, the canteen opening in June, yesterday's Publix Conference, the opening party today, and the Open House this coming Sunday.

On behalf of all those who need some cause for optimism in these times, I'd like to give a heartfelt thanks to you, Mr Schöpflin, to you, Tim and, indeed, to the whole Schöpflin Foundation, for showing the courage to have this place built.

Anyone expecting me to go over in detail, once again, the crisis that journalism and the public sphere are currently traversing is in for a disappointment, unfortunately, because:

For me, Publix is a "Centre for Optimism"

Why?

Why not: a centre for truth? At the end of the day, journalism is bound to truth. As political scientist, Jan Werner Müller, puts it: journalism is part of the critical infrastructure of democracy. We need a functioning and well-informed public, just as urgently as we need functioning schools, electricity grids, motorways, and hospitals.

For this reason, and from this moment on, it is our mission in this building to strengthen this critical infrastructure.

And yet, Publix remains, above all else, a centre for optimism.

Of all today's challenges, the biggest is probably the fact that we can barely find the courage and the optimism to tackle them.

We're paralysed by the feeling that there isn't really anything we can do to tackle today's crises. We blame one another or deny there are any crises at all.

In an essay for *der Spiegel*, Andreas Reckwitz poignantly describes how the logic of winners and losers has become ever more prevalent in our society. It's the logic of a zero-sum game, whereby I can only be right, if somebody else is wrong. Negativity, anger, and jealousy are the prevailing feelings, and they leave us pessimistic.

But democracy needs optimism.

The same holds for the economy, you need only look at longer time periods. Booms and busts have always corresponded with periods of curiosity or inertia. Ultimately, investment goes hand in hand with optimism and courage.

As for curiosity, it's the fundamental feeling of journalism.

Personally, I decided to become a journalist 20 years ago, because I had passionate interests in a lot of different things. And you can only really make that curiosity into a profession as a journalist.

Journalism must and can – of that I'm certain – make people genuinely excited about the future.

Unless we manage to convince people, to make them really feel we can do something about the current crisis, we won't be able to escape the negativity.

We can't go on with a system where no-one will invest a cent in the media unless they're guaranteed two back.

We need to support journalism where the fundamental work of gathering quality information is done: in research; in critical coverage of business and politics; in good local journalism; in good academic and educational reporting.

We also need to invest wherever the rights of journalists are defended and wherever we can win people over for the relevance and principles of our work. That's the only way we can establish a promising future for journalism and the public sphere.

This place was built to do exactly this work for a promising future.

Among the 30 organisations that have been working under this roof, not a single one is resigned to bemoaning the status quo the way – if I may say so – many journalists frequently do.

As part of an ever-growing Publix network, a lot of very insightful criticism is produced. Above all else, however, I see a lot of ideas as to how things can be done better.

Young people are turning their backs on traditional media. They get their news from social media and can't really tell how accurate the information is. Between Journalismus Macht Schule, Reporterfabrik, and Lie Detectors, Publix is home to the most important organisations in Germany in terms of media literacy. They reach hundreds of thousands of school children every year, and that figure still needs to increase a lot!

Are people losing sight of the big picture? Is a sense of exhaustion with the news spreading? Well, there's an editorial office here in the building that does reliable fact checking: Correctiv! They're not the only ones but they do an excellent job. For their part, the team at Good News publish very encouraging stories. Berlin Healthmedia provides people with excellent information on healthcare right at their desks, while two

organisations in our network, Tactical Tech and Forensic Architecture, take their research findings into galleries and museums, where people can examine their research in much greater detail.

Local editorials are disappearing, and with them an important part of local community identity. We have also been very lucky to have Media Forward Fund on this journey with us, as well as an initiative, which for the first time this autumn will give out a few hundred thousand – perhaps even a million – euros to various causes, among which quality and forward-looking local journalism.

Polarisation? Yes. That's why the Think Tank More in Common gives advice to members of civil society, to editorials, and to politicians in terms of how their work can cause less division in society.

There is a striking lack of (linguistic) diversity in German media coverage in a society that is increasingly diverse.

But this too can be tackled.

One editorial in our network, Amal, works here in Germany providing coverage in Arabic, Ukrainian, and Dari/Farsi to native-language speakers up and down the country. As of 2015, the project "Weiter Schreiben" ("Write on") has been helping people with refugee backgrounds to do just that, namely, to write again. We're working together to create a Word Workshop, based here in the building, that would work with school kids in Neukölln to encourage them to take an interest in media work.

It's experiments and prototypes like this one – along with more than a hundred others – that will help us overcome the crisis of public information.

I do want to highlight that Publix is not solely interested in supported those who use the offices here.

We want to gather relevant knowledge from everywhere, including abroad, to make it accessible. We want to propose prototypes that will necessarily be diverse.

There's a term used in the start-up world – a copycat – when one company copies an effective business idea from another market.

In civil society and at a lot of editorials, new ideas are constantly tried out that could make the future of the public sphere that little better.

The copycat effect often fails to manifest, however. These projects aren't brought forward or scaled up. Good and functional ideas fail to become the standard.

We aim to change that here, for this centre to provide a stage, to showcase the most effective ideas for the future, to make sure they spread.

To this end, Publix provides events rooms and different formats for events, as well as a co-working area with the most beautiful view in Berlin ,and extremely well-equipped podcast and video studios.

Come along and make yourself at home!

At Publix, we want our infrastructure to support the work of as many initiatives, individuals, and editorials as possible.

And I would like to make very clear: we're not here to compete with anyone.

We have a lot of organisations here who are already working with well-established editorials and media companies. Correctiv Recherchen has made appearances in local media; Tactical Tech have provided education on election-related misrepresentations; the production company, Tell Me Why, has produced successful investigative documentaries for state television; and Media Forward will soon be funding an innovation project with an established media company.

Clearly, the organisations here in the building are providing support where a lack of skills and resources are having a negative impact on public opinion making.

This is our vision.

And we're working toward it, as of today.

I spoke earlier about the importance of curiosity, as a driver for progress. Here at Hermannstraße 90, the Publix team and the Publix network are equally tasked with rousing curiosity in the neighbourhood as to who we are and what we do.

I'm not going to lie; it'll be a hard nut to crack. After all, this building is the first of its kind. At the moment, people don't really know what to make of a Centre for Journalism and Public Debate, and understandably so.

We recently asked some of our neighbours what they've heard about Publix and what sort of quality journalism they'd like to see.

The response was that they want independent, well-researched journalism that speaks to the conditions we're living in, that doesn't sit on the fence, and that takes a hard look at local politics here in Neukölln. They want journalism that counters the widespread racist narratives about this district.

Essentially, Neuköllners want the same thing from Journalism as most of the journalists I know.

And what do they think of the building here? It's just a pity, I was told, that it isn't providing social housing or a public library. It *does* have the air of something built with investors in mind. That said, it also has – and I quote – “the nicest toilets in Neukölln”.

One of our jobs is to do what we need to, so that five years from now, people in Neukölln can say: “it’s a good thing Publix here”... and not just because of the toilets.

We can do it! Thank you so much for listening.