

about the city

Project. **Symposium in Tilburg / NL**

Theme. **architecture as a driving force of urban modernisation**

Meeting. **22nd of September, 2006**

opening of the “kunst-cluster” with concert hall, conservatorium, rock academy, dance academy, academy of drama, academy of visual arts and academy of architecture and urban planning

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues, Mr. Vreeman,

I want to thank you for inviting me to Tilburg in beautiful Brabant. I always enjoy coming to the Netherlands and to have a look at its interesting architectural scene. I am very happy to have the opportunity to speak before you about architecture and the city, a passion of my life.

Let me briefly introduce myself:

Not only have I studied architecture in Graz, I was also born and bred there. Since my years at the university starting from 1987 I worked continually in various offices in Graz. From this I have known the building scene of my town for the last 20 years. But when I speak about Graz, I also speak about my hometown as a child, a youngster, a young student and a professional. From this point of view I am more interested in processes of change than in projects in the sense of a product.

I founded my own office for Architecture, Urbanisme and Cultural Affairs in 1999. We mostly work in the area of Graz and, and also in Vienna, therefore almost exclusively in urban environments. In our practice we do not want to see the architect as the creator or artist, although this has quite a tradition in Graz. Our approach is rather to steer processes which integrate all aspects of society.

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Let me illustrate with some examples, beginning at the end of the small scale:

A extension of an existing family home. Here we realised double density on the same plot for three generations. For me this is also a statement to an important urbanistic topic of the future, namely how to deal with suburbanisation. On the other side of the scale let me show you a project in the heart of Graz, the world heritage of the historic center: It was our contribution to an international competition for the extension of a big warehouse. We reached the final round just like Wiel Arets and the winners, Nieto/Sobejano from Spain.

Besides: This project has now become controversial in the sense of how to integrate new Programmes in the old city.

Coming to urbanism let me first make clear, that the situation in Austria differs greatly from the Netherlands when it comes to masterplans and city planning. This kind of planning is unfortunately not considered to be so important in Austria. Continuous urban developments are rather exceptional. We were lucky to deal with some of these rare projects:

In a private-public-partnership with the municipality we led a process to restructure a part of Graz in the former industrial area behind the central station. This is neighbourhood for more than 30.000 inhabitants. Development had been blocked for nearly 10 years because of diverging interests of private investors and the public. Instead of answering with planning concepts like an urbanistic competition we suggested a process of communication between all interested parties. It took three years and resulted not only in a master plan but also in a very accepted idea. This is shown by the fact that since the end of this process in 2002 many successful programs, buildings and other developments could be realised based on the results of our work.

And, last but not least, in the area of culture:

Here here e.g. a temporary exhibition in public space for the a big festival of architecture - Or on the big scale, I take part in the cultural development process for Graz after 2003 as a member of the "Kulturbeirat" which is a body consulting the authorities concerning the general direction of cultural affairs of Graz.

With this background of my relationship to city and society let me now come to our issue of architecture as a driving force of urban modernisation:

city of architecture – architecture for the City.

Talking about a city always implies talking about architecture. For it is the sum of architectures which makes a city easily recognizable for everyone.

Even to a person without any particular interest or education in architecture a simple postcard is enough to distinguish Venice from Paris, to point an anonymous city rather to the south than to the north or to identify it as a historical or a modernistic city. The styles of architecture talk to us, they tell us about climate and geography, about wealth and poverty, about the embedding into the landscape, about size and density. They inform about what was there before to let a city come into being in a specific form. But the image of the city also allows us to guess what lies behind: What is its actual reality, who lives there now, are its inhabitants still wealthy or have the good times passed? The image of the city tells us about life, about the processes which I would like to call the "invisible city".

From our experience that architecture follows the requirements and demands of life we can “read” the city from its image. We know best our “european city” which is organised around a square, market or church where society meets. Fortifications were built, torn down and replaced by parks. Industrialization demanded mass squatters. Modernism answered with the concept of light, air and space and the separation of work, housing and transportation. Art moved from churches and Palaces into urban space with the construction of representative theaters and opera houses. And nowadays: “kunsthouses”.

We have learned that our lives and actions in the courses of time – our history – have realised themselves in architecture – the image of the city. Architecture is the consequence of urban modernisation happening out of the changing of society. It therefore Expresses and depicts the social and cultural, economic and political condition of society: tradition and innovation, function and representation, identities and integration, pluralism and density.

A new City?

Nowadays the 1000-year old history of the european city seems to enter a new era. At least many signs of insecurity in our society announce such a change: Are the big areas of suburbanisation and sprawls still part of the city? What is the image of a city? where it can be generated artificially in videoclips, in shopping-malls? Do we have to accustom ourselves to a reality where “city” as a built town and “urbaneness” as the urban lifestyle do not coincide necessarily any more?

It is not a result of continuous growth that already more than 70% of Europeans live in cities or urban agglomerations. On the contrary, there is a phenomenon of shrinking cities which is part of the general urbanisation. It is obvious that the political and social revolutions of our time – from the enlargement of the EU and the aging of its population to globalization etc. – are driving these changes. As a consequence for the cities, town planning and urban development is becoming more and more a matter of competition among regions and cities. This phenomenon becomes visible for everybody when urban development is practised by forcing culture and cultural buildings. Even before the “Bilbao-effect” this strategy has been well-known and much discussed. Also in Graz spectacular architecture has been built in an attempt to reach international attention. Architecture, which is charged with global hyperculture such as the european event of the “Cultural Capital 2003”.

If architecture and the image of a city shall be a motor rather than a result of urban life, its driving forces have to differ from the past. Invisible qualities such as identity and the influence on inhabitants and structure shall be invented and are promised. They are traded as an Investment into the future.

We will have to find out which qualities spectacular architecture has to offer, not only to stand by itself but also to meet the diversity of urban life and its future changes.

The question is: How can we fill the built space with sense and meaning?

The embedding of a city: history

Architecture and city as a result of history are – logically - unthinkable without history. My personal view is that the history of a region is more important for everyday life than we want to believe and sometimes more than we like. When a society like the Dutch has been surviving by a permanent battle against the sea for land it is no surprise, that the same society will stress the importance of the planning of space. When in south-eastern Europe there is plenty of land, when land is cheap and easily available for everybody, we should not be surprised that society has no tradition in regional and town planning. We should never forget this when talking about urbanism, society and architecture. Let me therefore briefly outline the history of my hometown.

Graz is situated in the geographical middle of Europe. The continuous history as a town started around the year 1000 a.d. The name comes from the slavic word Gradec, meaning little Castle. Historians still argue, whether Gradec was part of a slavic dukedom Carantania or whether it was an outpost of the allied empire of the francs at the south-eastern verge of middle-european christianity. This duality is perhaps a matter of identity until today. In the following centuries Gradec grew around the central hill with its castle as a “suburbium”, which means that Graz was never a founded city, but that from the beginning it grew. Its development started at the time when the european city, as we call it today, came into being, which makes Graz even more a typical european city.

In 1180 Graz became residence and law-court of the dukedom of Styria. It kept these functions until today. Once, starting from 1440, Graz was even the residence of the holy roman empire. More important was the era after 1564, when the Habsburgs split the lands of their crown and Graz was the capital of so-called Inner-Austria. It united countries of Styria and Carinthia, today in Austria, of Triest and Gorizia, now in Italy, and of Krain, today the area of Slovenia and the today kroatian Istria and Dalmatia. This flourishing time of Renaissance brought famous italian architects to Graz. This was also the times of protestantic reform and catholic counterreform and of the founding of the university. Starting from the 17th century until world war I Graz and Styria was part of the growing Habsburg Austrian Empire. It had a strategic position at the south-east of this empire. This meant that already then Graz was a popular university town for students coming from Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia. This position also brought the realisation of essential urban infrastructure, such as a representative university campus, an opera house, a central park... Last but not least Graz was situated along one of the first big railway projects of Europe, connecting Vienna, then one of the world's biggest cities with Triest, the main harbour of the Austrian empire.

You can trace these 900 years by looking at the city map. The hill, the first suburbium, topographic marks like streams, the abrupt changes during history, all part of this continuous development. The typical characteristics of the city have been changing and sometimes moving but they remain inscribed into Graz just like its genetic Code.

After WWI Graz found itself in small Austria, not any more in the center of south-eastern Europe, but cut from it and facing its new borders, the iron curtain and communist Yugoslavia. So the 20th century until 1989 did not bring any big impulses and challenges to Graz. The development only followed the growth of economy and the wealth of western society, with its well-known signs such as suburbanisation. This non-development means a certain lack of modernity in Graz, both urbanistic and architectonic. Of course there are some interesting fragments like exemplaric buildings, but we do not find any big concepts and realisations comparable to what you can see in the Netherlands. This has Advantages and disadvantages: some developments, which since have proved undesirable, such as the car-oriented city or the demolition of historic objects, were simply missed.

I am firmly convinced that not only is the city the result of history, but that our history determines to a large extent our acting. If we look at Graz its situation as a center of or as a city at edge to south-eastern Europe has been recurrent for the last 1000 years. And the city grew continuously according to this history starting from the small castle on the central hill. Radical changes resulting from representative metropolitan needs like in Paris or Vienna, from enormous economic health like in Venice or from catastrophies, such as big fires like in Barcelona or bombardments like in Rotterdam, never happened to Graz. So we didn't learn how to think about, invent and realize big strategic solutions. What we learned is how to deal with the existing, which does not necessarily mean that everything was always kept like it had been found.

If we believe in continuity of history in the above mentioned sense, the present of Graz will be no surprise to you. I can be brief: Styria is one of Austria's 9 federal states and Graz is still the capital. Federalism in Austria means: There are 9 states with 9 state parliaments and for example 9 different legal frameworks for regional planning. This may be fair for Vienna, the biggest state, with its 1.6 mio inhabitants, but probably not for the state Burgenland with its only 270.000 inhabitants. Styria has 1.2 mil inhabitants and its capital Graz has around 230.000 inhabitants. It is situated at the intersection of several countries as new old neighbours. Today it takes 2 Hours by car to Vienna just like to the new capitals Ljubljana and Zagreb. To the seaside it is a 2,5 hours drive to Piran or a 3,5 hours drive to Venice, to visit the Biennale for example. So how is Graz at present? I want to explain this with a very personal term, namely "Lokalität" or "locality".

The embedding of a city: “Lokalität”

By locality I do not mean the surroundings in a local sense. But I mean the surrounding socio-economic conditions and socio-cultural relations, the traditions and decision patterns, which all determine social processes. If history is the background of urban development then locality is its precondition. Urban developments may be to a certain extent influenced by global mechanisms but results are ultimately produced under local conditions.

So what does locality mean for Graz?

For example the role as a regional capital:

Being a regional capital does not only mean that there are 1000s of civil servants living and working in the city. The function as a capital brings persons, ideas, know-how and information to the town.

The role of economy

Graz is the urban center of Styria and leading when it comes to income and standard of living but it is still not as wealthy as western Austria and Vienna. The economy of Graz can be described as a balanced mix of services, trade and industries. This situation has the well-known advantages and drawbacks: the economy does neither profit heavily nor is it highly dependent from the ups and downs of any specific business. So we find very few global players with a headquarters in Graz. Most enterprises are regionally rooted even if they do business on an international level. Many of them are family businesses.

For the city this means e.g., that a sort of what I call local heroes can emerge. People with an international horizon feeling responsible for the local situation. They can act as art sponsors, opinion leaders for innovation etc.

The role of universities.

The tradition of Graz as a university site is still very relevant. Universities not only offer their know-how. About 40.000 students or 20% of the population represent a huge life-style-group interested in culture, public life and sports. In a Europe of mobility we can expect many former students to remember their university town when they are doing business 10 years later.

The role of culture and architecture

What is specific about the cultural situation in Graz is that its former regional importance moved to an international scale in the last decades. The 1968 movement, the position close to countries of both western and eastern Europe and a fortunate constellation of courageous politicians broke up the provincial narrowness. Since then the avantgarde of art has been present in Styria. The renowned annual international art festival called “Steirischer Herbst” has taken place in Graz for almost 40 years, the idea of a kunsthau exists since then. When we discuss the existing kunsthau now we should be aware that it has a long history including two unrealised projects in the 80ties and 90ties. In a way the

same goes for the event of the cultural capital which was conceived as a stage for the manifold local cultural activities. Local architecture in Graz developed in parallel with the art scene.

Having explored the embedding of the city consisting of its history and its locality, let us have a look how the city is today:

The city today: 100% city

In the last 20 years the economic and political conditions has been changing significantly especially in Europe. In parallel society has been changing. One of the effects on the cities is that they have lost the preconditions which made them irreplaceable. We know that whole industries can move away on very short notice. Vice versa there is a chance of attracting activities, people, businesses etc to a city. Another effect on the cities paradox: While global life is centralized in the cities, the cities themselves become more and more decentralized. Just think About suburbanisation und the sprawl around the city cores. Today's city is a network of uncalculable forces. And I do not speak only about economic forces: Think of our social structures which were tailored for traditional lifestyles which hardly exist anymore. Nobody can exactly predict what life in a city will be like in 10 years. It is clear that a uniform concept of city, a uniform image of the city, does not work anymore. We realize that we as city planners or city lovers cannot offer a generally accepted city model.

Neither the compact city nor the Plattenbau, not even the musealized inner city can meet all expectations of today's urban life.

For architecture this means a crisis of representation: The one accepted image of the city which we still know and love does not exist anymore. Yet people still long for the authentic, the small-scaled environment while at the same time they demand state-of-the-art technical facilities and quality. We have to admit that for example Disneyworlds like Celebration-City or Infotainmentmalls seem to fulfill many of these demands. So when we talk about architecture as a driving force of urban modernisation we have to admit that Architecture will have to serve these longings for an urban Environment.

Identity – city as a life-style

Architecture in a city is not only about functional demands. It is also about identity. There is permanent promise in cities, for the old or the new, the sensational or the event, the green or the modern. I am sure that the politicians among you know what I am talking about. Just think about all the discussions going on in a city e.g. about neighbourhoods, playgrounds, parks versus garages or the protection of monuments. The discussions however prove that

there is identification with something. Identifications constitute chances and risks in the relationship of a city with its citizens, enterprises, artists, opinion-leader etc. They build ambiance and vibes in a city, self-confidence, provinciality, rise or fall. Landmarks are a simple example for this mechanism: The Uhrturm in Graz from a rational point of view is quite a modest object. For the citizens in Graz it is as meaningful as the Eiffel-tower in Paris. Of course there are much more complex forms of identification. Why is a city cool for kids, inspiring for international artist or attractive for single parents?

For the city identification which is often linked with architecture has become an important site factor. I wonder why the Bilbao-effect or projects like the Kunsthaus in Graz are often justified as an attraction for the tourist economy. In my opinion there are more important effects: The Kunsthaus in Graz for example replaces more and more the traditional landmarks, namely the Uhrturm and the Opera house. As a symbol for a city I prefer the vitality and the contemporary radiance of a Kunsthaus to the remainders of a past long gone. I want to tell you an anecdote: When Peter Pakesch, who is the director of the Kunsthaus, travelled through China to collect objects of contemporary Chinese art, nobody he met knew Graz. But when he said that he came to collect for an exhibition in this blue bubble in Europe everybody from the upcoming Chinese art scene knew what he was talking about .

For me talking about architecture as a driving force means that architecture has the chance and the duty to offer identification for the citizens, and not only landmarks for tourists. Urban architecture should be directed towards the city itself and its users. Venice was primarily built for its citizens before it turned to a symbol of the craziness of today's tourism.

Global culture or everyday-culture of a City

Architecture and identification leads us to an important aspect of the city, namely the Programmes and the expectations linked to architecture. Let me give you an example: In Europe there is hardly a city which does not call itself a cultural city or cultural capital and which does not try to prove this with a spectacular architectural sight and an international event. This is accompanied with a promise that the city will flourish, international Business will be attracted, in a nutshell: that it will be a place on the global map. I think that this is a dangerous and besides costly game – if you lose it. But we should differentiate here: I do not suggest that cities should be inactive, that they should not realize cultural buildings. But a City can not be made more important than it is by architecture alone. Even the excitement which the media might spread will not last long enough. I don't contest that culture circulates globally, this is nothing new.

We should not try to play an existing global culture off against local culture; it does not make sense to try to find the "right" culture for a city. But when architecture and its functions, meanings and identifications should become part of a city we have to mingle this architecture with the life of the city, with its urban life. Identity is not an object and

architecture by itself is not identity. If architecture is accepted, used, loved this is a result of social, political and cultural preconditions, of what I describe as locality. Only this every-day process of appropriation in a city itself can create identification with architecture.

City planning and city development as a matter of competition

At this point we can draw the conclusion that there is a new form of competition between cities. But only very few cities have the financial and organisational power to steer their development alone and in an ideal way.

City planning by public administration and politics has lost part of its influence. This is unfortunate because the power to influence city development is needed more than ever. The field is however complex and differs within Europe. The keywords are: shrinking versus densification, competition for private investments, aging populations, tourism and culture as a rescue operation.

The idea of city as the desired life-style is on the move; so important for realizing a desired life-style in a city, are the opportunities and the offers of this city. Big or small, here or there, are not so important any more.

So what should a city offer?

Firstly a basic infrastructure, this is not new. Traffic, IT-networks, public transport and supplies, and so on continue to be public tasks. This is difficult enough if you only think of the enormous task to install a public transport system between city centers and the suburbs.

Secondly a city should offer a good framework for the service industries. Commerce and trade are moving away from the cities just like traditional production industries have already. What remains are the so-called productive services or service-industries. These will probably stay in the cities.

Headquarters and research institutions stay where they find an attractive environment for their most valuable assets, namely their employees. They need all kinds of high-skilled employees plus a complex system of all kinds of urban services, down to the pizza service at midnight. For the City this means that architecture for living, education, entertainment or public spaces for sports and recreational activities have to be available to meet certain life-styles. If a city wants to attract these people it must allow them to identify with its urban environment.

We can see that also the emotional features of a city and its inhabitants, the ambiance, the vibes, have to be attractive. Something fascinating has to happen. A city is fascinating when it is Living and when its culture is lively and able to renew itself.

Those examples of cultural infrastructure I showed you was finished in the last years in Graz, like

The Literaturhaus, The Stadthalle, multifunctional hall for up to 8500 spectators tLa Strada, which is a very successful festival of European street-theaters in August Events in the river in the heart of the city, a huge potential which was not really developed yet...

Conclusio: innovative people and architecture as driving forces

If the financial and organisational capacities of cities do not allow them to direct their development effectively, what should cities do? Such a difficult situation forces to develop very exact ideas, what to do and how to do it. Locality becomes even more important. Visions must be realistic. Concepts must be understandable, they should be uncontested for a longer period of time. Public interests have to be formulated and defended against particular interests. And this code of conduct must be valid for all, investors and individuals, innovative private architectural projects or the realisation of a public garden. Furthermore a new culture of working together between the players of a city is needed. The number of pressure groups, opinion-leaders and people taking decisions in our individualized societies is such, that decision making processes hardly lead to satisfactory results. Politics which reduces itself to moderating the various argumentations can hardly accomplish the necessary developments for a changing city.

Conclusively I can see two big potentials for urban modernisation in this context:

1. Creative urban development

If creative and innovative human capital is responsible for the economic dynamics of the Service industries, the same should go for the project of developing a city. Yet open-mindedness, participation and networking will not suffice. A city should in general offer an innovative atmosphere, but this is not enough. Creative urban development means a structured and continuous process by the fittest and most innovative people of a region. And: It must be measured by reaching the formulated targets.

2. Urban architecture as a permanent rebuilding of the city

Architecture is an immanently public affair. Private or public building, it has to comply with the city, to push through, to explain itself. Urban development crystallizes in architecture, as a square, a bridge, a museum or a private home. Architecture reflects what has meaning in a city, identities, opportunities, chances, attractivity, innovation, density etc.

A city can therefore steer its development without necessarily having to pay for it. It can foster a development by allowing innovative architecture which carries potential, just as it can create problems by giving too much room to egoistic interests. And architecture

functions as a visible model. By itself it can motivate builders to go into one or the other direction. Doing so architecture allows urban development and planning without big city planning projects which can hardly be pushed through any more – f.e. in a city like Graz. With architecture as a permanent rebuilding of the city, the acting personalities can work on the development of the city at any time.

Besides they – we – are doing so in any case, consciously or not, and architecture will witness this. We will so leave to future generations our idea of the city as a living environment. It will be the cultural heritage which we contribute to the image of the city. It will be the city of tomorrow.