

Udo Weilacher: Landscape architecture in an age of urban transformation

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“Life. They say that life is full of contradictions, full of desires and decisions, full of eithers, full of ors. But wouldn’t it be much nicer not to have to decide, but to bring together opposites, to fulfil more than one dream and simply to enjoy more? Wouldn’t that be a better life? Why do they say EITHER OR and not simply AND? Wouldn’t that make things much easier, make life more fulfilling? Not EITHER career OR family, but career + family. Not EITHER work OR pleasure but work + pleasure. Not EITHER city OR countryside but city + countryside. Is that really so hard? And is it too much to want more? In any case, we want one thing: a good life! A life in which there is room for many different things. And a place in which we can find one thing: a full life!”¹

Yearning for the green plus

The depiction of people’s general expectations of modern city life in our climes doesn’t get much more superficial than that portrayed in the professional advert for Aspern, the “Seestadt Wien” currently being built in Vienna. The new 240 hectare satellite city built on a greenfield site promises to reconcile the age-old opposition of city and countryside that generations of planners have strived for ever since Ebenezer Howard published “Garden Cities of To-Morrow” in 1898². Whether the “green plus” that Aspern promises its 20,000 future inhabitants will actually represent the long sought-after breakthrough is questionable for a number of reasons. One reason: according to a representative Infratest study³ commissioned by FOCUS magazine and the Commerzbank in August 2010, 71 percent of 1000 prospective home owners in Germany dream of living in a single-family house on the out- skirts of a city or in the countryside, without any tiresome either or. That such ideals prevail not only in Germany should be as apparent as the global consequences for the environment that already result from each new scheme built to fulfil this ideal, from the unrestricted consumption of land – a non-renewable resource that in Germany is currently being consumed at a rate of 100 hectares per day – to the grave consequences for the climate caused by spiralling energy consumption for mobility and air conditioning.

Inconvenient ecological truths

Depending on the viewpoint – and that is nothing new – the expectations placed in the role of landscape architecture for future urban development vary considerably or are even entirely divergent. While most prospective home owners in the industrialised nations do not expect anyone to stand in the way of their private dream of a home in the countryside, the global community, and in particular those already directly affected by the consequences of climate change, is calling for immediate recognition of the “inconvenient ecological truths”⁴, the protection of valuable, common global resources and a correspondingly responsible approach to planning and building. Landscape architecture in Germany must likewise adopt a clear position with regard to conserving land resources and responsibly contribute to designing a living environment that is continually changing in complex ways. The driving forces behind these dynamic changes can be attributed for the most part to changing societal norms and values in light of the growing global population – which is increasing at a rate of about

230,000 new inhabitants per day⁵ – and continually rising everyday demands in general. From a global perspective, these demands are by no means solely about consumption and added “green plus” but increasingly about securing basic livelihoods. To discuss the future of urban green solely from within our own sphere of activity, without regard for the wider global implications, is not only short-sighted but downright negligent. Contemporary landscape architecture should exhibit a fundamental awareness of this problem along with the courage to tackle inconvenient truths.

Green is cool – Norman Foster’s vision of the ideal city

The renowned architect Lord Norman Foster, who has tackled key issues of urban development for many years, identified two main questions for the future as part of a think tank entitled “Foresight”⁶: 1. Will mankind be able to develop environmentally-friendly transport concepts that consume very little energy? 2. Will society accept technological advances – with all its Orwellian consequences – in which computer technology will permeate all aspects of everyday life? The largest current urban development area in Europe, which is being developed according to a masterplan drawn up by Foster + Partners, lies on the southeast perimeter of Milan on a 1.2 square kilometre large former industrial site. Here the London-based architecture office is planning “Milano Santa Giulia”, its vision of an ideal city of the future for 50–60,000 inhabitants. The ambitious inner urban development project, which has been in planning since 2003, aims to set new standards, particularly with regard to sustainability. High-density building and energy-efficient mobility concepts are, of course, core aspects of the scheme as well as the creation of an extensive urban green space, a 30 hectare large Central Park that Foster terms the city’s “green lung”. All of the architects’ urban design visions for the future, among them the plans for Masdar City, an ecologically sustainable city in the United Arab Emirates, are characterised not only by issues such as energy efficiency, protection of the environment and mobility but also a high proportion of green space. The qualities of such public and private green spaces in the city, and not just their aesthetic appearance, will be crucial for the future of the built urban environment.

Responsible management of open spaces

In Milano Santa Giulia, the planners wish on the one hand to conserve land resources and on the other to provide extensive green areas for a better quality of life in the new residential quarter. In plans and models, one can see quite clearly that the aesthetic qualities of the planned outdoor areas bear a strong resemblance to the urban green spaces of yesteryear. Today, however, one is very much aware that undeveloped, unparcelled and unsettled land is a scarce and precious commodity. Among the most important challenges facing landscape architecture in such projects is the need to work with other disciplines such as architects, town planners, traffic engineers and other specialists to keep an eye on the “ecological footprint” of the overall urban development project. In the interests of facilitating a sensible degree of inner urban development, some open space must be relinquished for building on in the necessary density. At the same time, landscape architecture must ensure that economic constraints do not cause important elements of the network of open spaces in the city, surrounding areas and region to be sacrificed for building on. The long-term benefit of such open spaces as “common green space” can only be guaranteed through a strategic and sensible approach to embedding them in multi-social and multi-ethnic urban systems. However important the attractive design qualities of new gardens, parks and squares may be in future, without including all stakeholders in planning decisions and without the intelligent embedding of landscape architecture in complex urban development processes – for example as part of inner urban development, upgrading, conversion or interim use measures – the danger is that green areas will be regarded solely as pretty but ultimately expendable decoration in the city.

Science Fiction – an urban future in the year 2054

The urban future of humanity holds a whole series of other challenges in store for landscape architecture aside from those that are presently already being tackled in urban development projects in industrialised nations, and in emerging and developing countries around the world. The American director Steven Spielberg offers a revealing view of the future of the American metropolis in his film “Minority Report” from 2002. The science fiction thriller is set in Washington D.C. in the year 2054, while the script was based on a short story of the same name by the American author Philip K. Dick, written in 1956. By way of preparation, Spielberg invited renowned American experts from the fields of technology, the environment, crime prevention, medicine, health, social services, transport, information technology and urban planning to a three-day think tank, in order to explore how the world of tomorrow could look. Rather than postulating scenarios for the distant future, the think tank focused on a foreseeable future half a century later – a time frame of 50 years in which, with all probability, a new form of society would not have developed in the USA. With the help of interdisciplinary expert workshops, they came to the conclusion that certain trends that are already beginning to become apparent in the present day will in future become more pronounced.

Surveillance and safety in the public realm

“George Orwell's prophecy really comes true, not in the twentieth century but in the twenty-first,”⁷ says Steven Spielberg and predicts that in future the city dwellers’ need for public safety will become so great that by 2054, urban space will be bristling with retinal scanners that can identify them wherever they go, at any time of day or night, whether they are entering a generally accessible building or using public transport. Even before the 11th September 2011, the average city dweller was caught on film by a CCTV camera more than 20 times a day. The vision of total surveillance and safeguarding of space portrayed in the film does not seem exaggerated, and the accompanying risk of use restrictions and increasing privatisation of the public realm are already becoming apparent today. In 2054, interactive advertising screens in shopping centres and public spaces will identify people from afar through rapid retinal scanning so that they can show advertising targeted specifically to the passing consumers. Where once the nature of public space served the chance meeting of people in person, it is now augmented by perfectly orchestrated simulations. According to this vision, public space will be secure, largely privatised, commercialised and perfectly tailored to our personal needs – is this a dream or a nightmare?

A symbiosis of natural and artificial systems

According to the experts, the appearance of Washington D.C. will hardly change because building regulations will also prevent the construction of skyscrapers and the building over of still existent public parks and gardens in the city centre. In the new, densely-built districts on the other side of the Potomac River, the viewer sees numerous, elaborately planted public green spaces that differ very little from those in the metropolis as we know it today. The challenge for landscape architects and architects will be to connect artificial and natural systems in such a way that a liveable, nature-suffused dense urban structure results. The old gardens and parks will in future also be places where people can make sensory contact with the *terroir*, with the landscape on which the city is built. Such green spaces will only be saved from disappearing from the face of the city if landscape architecture is able to keep alive public appreciation of the value and history of these places and to continually ensure their care and upkeep. Many existing parks and gardens in our own country could likewise benefit from more consistent care and cultivation, in order to improve the wider perception and

experience of public green spaces instead of resorting to marketing-driven, elaborate green events designed to draw the public into parks. Although gardens and parks will in future change little in their design, public life in these urban spaces will probably change significantly as a result of technological progress.

Urban mobility – a key issue

Transport routes in the city will play a very special role in future, including former, now obsolete traffic arteries. While in 2054 in “Minority Report”, the film’s hero travels around outside the city limits in his own landbound electromobile, the vision presented for innercity transport is somewhat different. In the city, people travel in so-called mag lev’s, private magnetic levitation vehicles that travel almost silently at speeds of up to 160 kilometres per hour along special highways that are computer controlled. The experts were of the view that personal transport will in future be integrated into a mass transit system and synchronised with it using a control system. The private mag lev vehicles dock directly onto the owner’s residence becoming a part of its interior. When detached from the dwelling, the capsules glide through urban space horizontally along special elevated highways and travel vertically up and down the façades of skyscrapers. Rather than the city adapting to the means of travel, the mode of transport adapts to the conditions of the city. Just how much these developments will affect the design of the external realm in cities, and what scope this has for the design of landscape architecture can be guessed at when one considers the High Line project in New York. Furthermore, new transit systems can be a trigger for fascinating development processes in outdoor urban environments. In cities with steep inclines such as Medellín in Columbia or Caracas in Venezuela, cable cars – the so-called “Metrocable” – are already used as an innovative, efficient and environmentally-friendly local transport system to connect together the dense, informal urban districts that lack a suitable road network⁸. In Medellín alone more than 30,000 people use the Metrocable every day. The positive social, cultural and economic consequences of this investment in infrastructure are impressive and the quality and meaning of the public realm as a common property improves enormously.

Creating social values

“By focusing on how cities of the world are changing at global and local levels, by investigating how new forms of transport and urban design can promote social justice and equity, by exploring the links between city form and sustainability and by understanding the cohesive potential of public spaces, this exhibition provides an international perspective on the social value of architecture in the cities”, wrote the London-based architect Richard Burdett, director of the 10th International Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006 entitled “Cities, Architecture and Society”⁹. In the same vein – and always with an eye for the global consequences of its approaches –, landscape architecture will in future be expected to employ interdisciplinary collaboration and open communication with local residents to unfold its creative potential in the service of creating better social values and liveable environments in the city.

¹ Wien 3420 Aspern Development AG. aspern “Die Seestadt Wiens. Das ganze Leben.” Official image film of the aspern urban development project. Vienna 2008.

² cf. Ebenezer Howard, *Tomorrow. A Peaceful Path to Social Reform*. London 1898.

³ www.focus.de/immobilien/kaufen/immobilienstudie-immer-mehrdeutsche-wollen-ins-eigenheim_aid_543879.html (retrieved 22 August 2010).

⁴ cf. Wolfgang Haber, *Inconvenient ecological truths. A perspective on sustainability in the 21st Century*, Munich 2010. ((<http://tinyurl.com/6c6jh5h>, retrieved April 2011))

⁵ The World Bank Group (Ed.), *Beyond Economic Growth*, Washington D. C . 2004, p. 22.

⁶ cf. Norman Foster cited in Woodman, Ellis: "Norman Foster" In: Fondazione La Biennale (Ed.), *10th International Architecture Exhibition. Cities. Architecture and Society*, Venice 2006, p. 62.

⁷ Steven Spielberg cited in: *Deconstructing Minority Report*. Twentieth Century Fox 2002.

⁸ cf. "Creative Urban Projects" <http://gondolaproject.com> (retrieved 20 February 2011)

⁹ Richard Burdett/Miguel Kanai, "City-building in an age of global urban transformation", In: *Fondazione La Biennale (Ed.), 10th International Architecture Exhibition. Cities. Architecture and Society*, Venice 2006, p. 3.