

**A+ Architecture urbanisme design arts plastiques
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(English translation)**

“Berlin-Babylon”, About the XX1st World Congress of Architecture, BERLIN, 22-26 July 2002

1. A PROFESSION QUESTIONING ITSELF

What will perhaps be best remembered from the XX1st Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA), elegantly chaired by Andreas Hempel, is the architectural profession’s questioning of itself – the same being said of the other building professions, all widely represented among the six thousand or so participants. This questioning is taking place at a time when globalisation of property markets, projects and tenders has become fully effective.

AIA Chairman Gordon Chang presented the results of a nation wide survey of its members. This survey showed that the non-directly architectural services (“expanded services”) that clients are expecting of architects are growing five times faster than the traditional services. Other professions provide these services, a situation that constitutes a major challenge to the architects.

The new client expectations relate in particular to the period of commitment by the architect. The focus on life cycle (which differs from one project component to the next) is particularly important in public-private partnerships. This is the exact opposite of the “turnkey project”: Clients are demanding from the professionals a joint commitment with the contractors involved, for a period of 15 to 30 years. This joint commitment includes an availability of the architect to provide advice at all ages of a construction, whether simple or complex. In this kind of “life cycle contract” the architect uncomfortably finds himself being a long-term player in an economic and legal structure where he is a minority partner.

The responses to these new challenges are to be found in additional training.

Initial training should prepare architects, not only to the *ars aedificandi*, but also:

- to inter disciplinary dialogues with urban design professions
- to client relations,
- to the skilful contractual arrangements that are needed to guarantee architectural quality, energy consumption, easy maintenance and environmental impact of materials and techniques.

All this should not make them forget the specific input of the architect, i.e. architectural / aesthetic judgement as to the quality of the building and its insertion into the surrounding space. Examples cited at the congress included teaching and training programmes that incorporate architecture and civil engineering. Others include the capacity to assess legal experts’ reports (taking into account the growing number of lawsuits).

Refresher training, sometimes required for the renewal of architects’ licences, is supposed to concentrate on the teaching of current technical and institutional developments. Very often this training takes place within the profession itself or within multidisciplinary associations specifically set up to this end.

The prevailing uncertainty as to future demand for new buildings can explain the increased attention paid to the architect’s training in adaptive reuse of existing buildings and in urban rehabilitation, and to the flexible insertion of new architecture into the existing local context, what contradicts the natural penchant of star architects for solipsist affirmation. Numerous Congress sessions and events were devoted to this topic. This concern was already very much present at the previous UIA Congress, held in Beijing. Chinese participants at the Beijing Congress did not hesitate to criticise the *tabula rasa* policy of their official authorities. Its exhibition included a large model of the city as it was in 1949, before the destruction of the city walls, and many traditional districts.

Berlin papers included a presentation of “New Urbanism” by Harald Bodenschatz. New urbanism projects included the Miami Beach “Aqua” project (Allan Shulman). The “critical reconstruction” in Berlin was presented by Hans Stimmann. The Urban “Requalification” in Munich was presented by Christiane Thalgott. Energy thrifty buildings and urban shapes were presented by Thomas Herzog. The input of landscape architects was presented by Donata Valentien and the handling of citizen groups’ participation by Christian Lasserre.

The indispensable *Weltanschauung* was provided by Werner Durth’s presentation “Globalisierung und Regionalität”. Regionalism was seen as the “compensations” granted by the “dominant modernity” to a - largely

symbolic - regional identity. This included reconstitutions of traditional town districts and streets (“Disneylands in situ”). The reconstruction of the ancient city of Warsaw, authorised by Stalin, was seen as exemplary in this respect, as would be the reconstruction of the Berlin Schloss, the Baroque Royal Castle epitomising historic Prussia.

The exhibition and catalogue entitled “A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture”, drawn up by Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman, at the request of the Israeli Architects’ Association, showed maps, detailed plans and architectural photos illustrating the participation of architects and urban planners in the development and implementation of the “Sharon Plan”. This plan defined the Palestinian occupied territories to be colonised by Israeli settlers, and the detailed land occupation plans. The authors were proposing a critical reflection on their profession’s role in the controversial policy of Israel since 1967 in the occupied territories.

This was probably a step too far in self questioning. The Association had second thoughts and decided to cancel its own exhibition. The catalogue was hidden away. It reappeared however as a book (ISBN 965 90460 0 6), available from the authors (eyal.weizman@yahoo.com). It raises key questions about the political and economic agenda of urbanisation, in Israel and elsewhere.

Finally one should mention the “Neue Deutsche Architektur” Exhibition, consisting of plans, models and photos of works selected by an international board, chaired by Ullrich Schwartz. The works sought to illustrate various facets of a contemporary German architecture that was supposed to be specifically Germanic. Germanic was defined as a rigorously planned architecture, with an intentionally minimalist austerity, a concern for materials and tiny details and a large place given to symbolic contents (www.gropiusbau.de)

2. ARCHITECTURE AND SHOW

Contrasting with the somewhat gloomy general atmosphere of the Congress, a few moments of “grand spectacle” offered a welcome détente.

Such was the arrival of Lord Foster of Thames Bank (the successful rival of Lord Rogers of Riverside) in the large auditorium, in the middle of a-session, with his client Ron Dennis (McLaren Group) and the head of Schüco, his sponsor and supplier of glass facades. The trio immediately started to present its project for a high tech sports cars factory, under construction at Woking. This spectacular realisation, including its “reflecting pool”, was to impress the numerous expected visitors (250-seat auditorium, “Learning Centre”, museum, etc.).

As soon as they finished their presentation they left the session, followed by TV cameras, a swarm of autograph hunters, and most of the audience, whilst the following speaker sought to make himself heard in the brouhaha. The cult for a star architect had successfully joined forces with the cult for Formula 1, the modern day watered down equivalent of Roman chariot races. This mixture of marketing, promotion and architecture is the essence of Cannes’ MIPIM, the stage *par excellence* for visual marketing.

Another spectacular moment was Gunter Henn’s presentation of Volkswagen’s Gläserne Fabrik (“glass factory”) at Dresden. Built in the heart of the city, this assembly plant is as “urban” as any office block. Parts are brought in by “Cargo trams”, using the existing tram network. This unusual site for production - heavily subsidised – was seen as a “public relations location”, a “Kulturfabrik”, surrounded by dwellings and shops, in short, the very opposite of the superseded functionalist city planning recommended by the Athens Charter...

Spectacular too were events parallel to the congress such as:

- the presentation of projects receiving European Union awards, in an S-Bahn station mezzanine,
- special symposia in new embassies, such as the combined Embassy of the Nordic countries, and in some sumptuous German States representative offices,
- parallel conferences in the exhibition rooms of the Berlin Fair, next door to the Congress Centre and
- a mega reception in the large hall of the former Ostbahnhof and in its former postal sorting office, to be reconverted by the Deutsche Post.

The privatised Deutsche Post was an omnipresent sponsor of the Congress. It organised its own architectural contest to get ideas for making optimum use of its buildings portfolio, hosting student seminars and welcoming visits to its new automated sorting installations. It did not hesitate to hold a special conference about its plans for conquering other European countries’ postal services markets, .e.g. the Belgian postal service market.

The honour of closing the conference fell to former CDU Minister Klaus Töpfer, who was responsible for transferring the Bonn ministries to Berlin. His 1995 plan provided, in accordance with the principles of critical reconstruction, for the adaptive reuse of all buildings left by the defunct DDR ministries in the city centre. Therefore most of the traffic flows generated by the contacts between civil servants are pedestrian. The exception was the Chancellor's mansion. This building (known locally as the "washing machine" because of its big round window), is a monument isolated from the centre and which trespasses onto the Tiergarten.

Klaus Töpfer is presently Director General of the United Nations Programme for the Environment. His presentation was a denunciation of urban sprawl, of the sprawling exurban shopping centres and business parks, of excessive investment in motorways and motorised individual transport (the main cause of the glasshouse effect and climate change), of the absence of public land policy that results in privatising capital gains and socialising the costs of land acquisition, of the unregulated urbanisation of the third world and of the political indifference to the accelerating disappearance of tropical forests and their biological diversity.

This brilliant presentation was the highlight of the Congress, together with the election of Jaime Lerner, the celebrated architect-planner-mayor, who developed Curitiba as a human scale capital, a kind of counterpoint to Brasilia.

3. BERLIN BABYLON

The city of Berlin itself has pretty well regained its former place of Europe's third cultural Capital, and obviously constituted the major attraction of the Congress.

Among the many temporary exhibitions organised by the Federal Government and the City on the occasion of the congress one could point out, besides the "Neue Deutsche Architektur", mentioned above, "Die Hand des Architekten" (catalogue published by Walther König, Köln 2002). Presented in the newly restored Alten Museum, this exhibition provided a panoramic overview of its architectural and city planning drawings and plans. Extending over two centuries, these collections are classified by district, not forgetting the overall plans. Going back to the origins of the Prussian State and its Capital City, the exhibition included the plans of Friedrichstadt, the well-ordered new city planned next to the ancient city, but respecting it, as happened in Turin or Edinburgh. Its specific urban design reminding an architect's compass is similar to the Sixtus V Plan for Rome.

In Sixtus V's plan the Northern summit of the triangle is the current Piazza del Popolo; the branches are the Via di Ripetta and the Via del Babuino, the central axis being the Via del Corso. These axes are linked laterally by among others the Via dei Condotti and the Via Frattini.

The Berlin Plan is similar but oriented South-North. The summit of the triangle is the Place de la Belle Alliance, today's Mehringplatz. The branches are the Wilhelmstrasse and the Lindenstrasse. The central axis is the Friedrichstrasse. The transverse links are Unter den Linden and its parallels. The Berlin Schloss (Royal Palace) stood in-between Friedrichstadt and the old fortified city.

This plan – and the related parcelling out of the land – survived very well until the building of the 1961 Berlin wall, which cut it in two. From then on, the two parts of the city developed on their own. The Western part focused on Kurfürstendamm. The Eastern part focused on Unter den Linden and its parallels. The central axis of Friedrichstrasse was cut by the wall

The plans of the Exhibition demonstrate the extent of the destruction that was planned, and in part executed, during the 1950s and 1960s. In the Western part, the railway stations, damaged but potentially restorable, were destroyed. A network of motorways was planned instead. In the Eastern part, the 18th Century Bauakademie and the Berlin Schloss, also restorable, were destroyed, possibly as symbols of the Prussian past. Even the Cathedral figured on one of the plans in the exhibition as not necessarily needing to be saved.

The Friedrichstadt is part of the "critical reconstruction" programme of Central Berlin. This programme is being implemented since the fall of the Wall, without discontinuity and with an iron hand, by Hans Stimmann, Chief City planner – a name that just happens to rhyme with Haussmann. The latest applications of his concepts are found in the bilingual German-English publication "Vom Plan zum Bauwerk: Bauten in der Berliner Innenstadt nach 2000" (Berlin: Braun, 2002). National and international tenants of *laissez-faire* were quick to criticise his rules on density and bulk, in particular Rem Koolhaas, who is absent from the New Berlin, except for the Dutch Embassy.

The constraints of the Berlin Master plan do in no way exclude international contemporary architecture, represented by, among others, Daniel Libeskind, I.M. Pei, Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel and Dominique Perrault.

The strict rules on bulk and building height and the fact that the planning regulations include the obligation to provide some 20% housing in all office buildings had striking effects. They generated the production of high density mixed office/shop/housing projects within the authorised bulk limits. These projects often integrated the remains of buildings that escaped the war and the massacre of the 50s and 60s. In turn they generated a mix of urban activities, day and night, and appear to be much more resistant to the current overproduction crisis than projects built in the periphery.

A typical mixed use project is the “Tacheles” project (Oranienburgstrasse), aimed at filling a large site that has remained vacant since the war. Its overall design (by Andres Duany) includes offices, shops and new housing. Individual buildings are to be built by different architects in a way that allows subsequent changes in use (ceiling height 3.20 m; building depth of 13.50m, etc.). The project integrates existing listed buildings (not only their facades). But its implementation will depend from the evolution of the property market.

By contrast to the general master plan, the reconstruction of the Potsdamer Platz, which was part of the Wall, became the responsibility of the Federal Government, owner of the land. The reconstruction was entrusted to the Treuhand (a public body in charge of the privatisation of Eastern German enterprises). The Treuhand in turn sold it, *en bloc* and with no planning strings attached, to Daimler Benz and Sony. The size of the project and the high density-high rise buildings had the effect of creaming off the demand for new offices in Central Berlin, while the sites between the Potsdamer Platz and the former City centre remained largely vacant.

The city planning history of reunified Berlin was the subject of a full-length documentary film in epic style, entitled “Berlin Babylon”, and presented at a symposium organised by the Akademie der Künste during the World Congress of Architecture. This film, a sort of Fellini - Berlin consisting solely of archive documents, was put together by the young film director Hubertus Siegert (www.berlinbabylon.de). It illustrates in masterly fashion the contrast between the post-war *tabula rasa* approach and the current players in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of a capital city.

The “critical reconstruction” process is still fully under way. In spite of the economic crisis Berlin is more than ever Europe’s largest building site and hence a sparring ground for the property world: The advocates of *laissez-faire* try (without success) to circumvent the master plan, guardian of city planning order, of urban shape and of the existing parcelling out. Each camp has its own developers, investors and architects (some of whom are in fashion with the Bauamt and some hope to be so). The elected officials (both left and right wing) love to play the arbitrators...

This however applies only to the City of Berlin itself, not to the surrounding State of Brandenburg. Developers there benefit both from the Berlin urban infrastructures and the suburban motorways, without participating in their cost, and are therefore unfairly competing with those who invest in Berlin. As the Berlin and the Brandenburg property markets are intertwined, oversupply is bound to remain for an indefinite period of time.

Pierre Laconte 29/9/02

Illustrations:

- Comparison of plans showing the urban planning similarity of the centres of Berlin and Rome.
- Röhmershof, Kreuzberg

Bio:

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