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On Direct Urbanism and
the Art of Parallel Strategies

Apple Garamond

Urban designers, developers, city authorities and other experts charged with the development of cities and sites understand very well how to use art projects to their own advantage. These are primarily art projects in public space that are intended to guide the development of new urban areas that are 'without pre-identity' or whose pre-identity is undesirable for the image and the future programming of the area. Many artistic practices have addressed this and therefore have developed a critical contribution to the discussion on urban development. This, however, does not absolve urban designers and city authorities of their responsibilities in this regard.

Direct urbanism expresses the need to adopt a position, even over the medium and the long term.

Direct urbanism employs tactical interventions and strategic thinking. It also considers planning as a participatory principle and places the emphasis on the complexity of the situation and the responsibility of all involved, including residents. The urban design intervention encompasses a wide range of possibilities – both long- and short-term. It is therefore necessary to develop specific instruments, along with new conditions for a continual review of methodologies and approaches that create a network of parallel strategies. The methodology of *direct urbanism* is applied in situations in which the goal is not immediately clear and in which the work of the architect/urban designer dovetails with open-ended processes inherent to artistic practices that deal with the public domain.

Direct urbanism promotes a macro-utopia: it operates by employing an 'anticipatory fiction' that allows for latent, hidden visions we usually ignore due to self-censorship. The conflicting interests of the various groups involved are used to develop a design practice geared to conflicts, whose first mission is to produce a psycho-cartography of divergent ideals and role models.

Direct urbanism could also be considered a third layer between urban planning and urban design.

The Necessity and Redundancy of Intervention

The publication of the exhibition 'The Interventionists' at MASS MoCa (2004) is subtitled *User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, aptly characterizing one aspect of artistic practices that work outside institutions.

The necessity of intervention applies in a range of different situations, from 'urgent cases', in which immediate action must be taken (sometimes by invitation, sometimes self-initiated), to self-selected issues or objectives that result in self-initiated long-term projects. Sometimes it is even better to 'do nothing' except explicitly make room (in a spatial and programmatic sense) for future developments that cannot be anticipated or mapped out in full at the time.

Transparadiso's practice navigates between architecture, art and urban design. It has endeavoured to develop new approaches and instruments to bridge the gap between artistic intervention (with its often limited visibility as a result of the context of a temporary venue and/or a temporary or specific audience) and the urban design strategies that have been controlled by financial interests for quite some time. This is what we call *direct urbanism*, an elaboration of Guy Debord's 'unitarian urbanism'.

Instruments

Indikatormobil

Transparadiso began developing the 'Indikatormobil' in 2002. A prototype has been in use as an 'urban emergency vehicle' since 2004. Taking into account the reality of privatized urban design, it could be considered a post-urban 'real-space survival instrument', negotiating an uncertain terrain, challenging it without losing sight of its plan. It is driven through badly designed areas or through areas saddled solely with obvious (market-oriented) solutions, shows up in unexpected contexts where it develops survival strategies and poetic moments and disrupts rigid structures in order to create new space for action and appropriation. It offers relief in situations of perceived 'unfriendly planning' that ignore the social production of space and serves as a vehicle for research through action. It is a flexible instrument of *direct urbanism* and makes use of 'direct communication' resources, including a collapsible bar, video camera and a screen for real-time projection.¹

1. 'Seine Evidenz' (Wiener Linien, Vienna Museum, Vienna, 2004); *I-Scene-Shifter* (One in a Million, Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, 2004); *Impeccable* (Radical Positionings, Pavelhaus/Laafeld, Austria, 2004); *Wunschfreistellung schlüsselfertig* (Trichtlinnburg, Salzburg 2005; EU project with Salzburger Kunstverein/Initiative Architektur, Centre for Contemporary Art, Tallin, Jan van Eyck Academic, Maastricht).

Soothing Table

One or more geometrically modified wall-papering tables (Soothing Tables) are set up in the relevant area in order to display a future structure that, at that moment, still resembles a fiction. However, the Soothing Table is also a table that invites conversations and negotiations. The Soother is a supervisor, and everyone who has experienced a conflict or fiery discussion in the course of an urban design project can turn to her/him. The Soothing Table promotes offensive relief: the moment exciting strategies are in danger of stagnation because the need to survive drives them to it, it provides an alert detachment in its place, which helps uncover new possibilities.²

2. 'plan b' (Köflach/Voitsberg, Austria); *young blood* (Centre for Central European Architecture, Prague; Stadtmuseum Graz); *Het Blauwe Huis* (IJburg/Amsterdam).

Conditions

Anticipatory Fiction

As a new conceptual and action instrument, *direct urbanism* is developing the model of a 'macro-Utopia', using the tactical resources of 'anticipatory fiction'. Where self-censorship would otherwise impose pre-set limits on potential new programming, 'anticipatory fiction' makes room for the hidden and latent visions of different groups of actors. The conflicting interests are seen here as the actual potential of a practice that is geared to conflict, the first building mission of which is a psycho-cartography of various role models.³

3. 'a little too far ahead of its time' (Media Workshop Vienna, 2006; okto tv, 2007).

Retrofiction

Retrofiction does not mean wallowing in nostalgic remembrances, but developing visions for the future based on visions from the past. It means avoiding purely material fetishism, as employed both in art in recent years and in the inexhaustible discussions of utopias from the past, because a fiction of a new premise is available. Retrofiction describes a situation as it might have been. This is an aesthetic scenario of the past that can be used as material for a vision of the future.

Reappreciation

The production of a new 'raw material' out of something that already exists, which offers a new point of departure of increased quality.

Macro-Utopia

Today, a utopia – as a comprehensive vision – can only be conceived in light of the machinations of its authors. The term 'macro-utopia', however, describes the modest initial stages of latent 'utopias' (the nuclei of utopias). These only become relevant through collective actions and desires, and so become the impetus for transformation in their own right. Unlike 'micro', 'macro' involves an inductive movement that may even extend a concrete situation to regional planning, for example, or a situation like that in Köflach.⁴

4. 'plan b' (Köflach/Voitsberg, Austria, year ? 2006?).

– The Want is the desire or yearning for a thing or a competence, the striving or at least the hope for a transformation of reality or the attainment of an objective for oneself or for others. (Wikipedia)

– A Utopia might be an unreal, virtual space as a want for perfect societal relations in reality.

– A Concrete Utopia (after Ernst Bloch) might be the process of realizing a utopia, in which future objectives would be presented as experimental. This demands a radical optimism that vanished in 1989.

– A Dystopia might be a history of a fictional society that has evolved negatively without any hope of breaking free of its totalitarian power relations. It is the antithesis of a utopia.

– Heterotopias, according to Foucault, are 'other places' or 'counter-places', actually realized utopias in which the actual places within culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. They are marginal places, but they can nevertheless be defined with precision.

Actions

Room for Wants – Ready for Occupancy

Along with the 'Initiative Architektur', several owners of vacant shops in the left half of the old town of Salzburg, in cooperation with the municipal marketing department, were persuaded to reach a turning point in their thinking. They began to see non-occupancy as potential instead of as a stigma. Temporarily, therefore, the shops were no longer considered as economic consumer items. For a time, posters transformed the properties into the 'façades' of a future with 'vision'. Non-occupancy was thus identified as a reserve for the city and thus became a projection screen for the wants of the participants in the project. The 'Indikatormobil' was on site to distribute keys to the vacant shops (without the corresponding addresses). If the key did not fit, 'spies' stationed by the buildings to provide assistance smuggled the participants into the shop for a short time. The non-occupancy was presented in a video. Voices whispered wants, so that the listeners – assisted by specialists – could develop their personal as well as their collective wants.⁵

5. 'Trichtlinnburg', Salzburg, 2005.

plan b

'If Plan A fails, Plan B comes into effect.'

'plan b' began with an invitation to 'Talking Cities' in the Kokerei in Essen. We chose an Austrian model for comparison, the deserted industrial area of Köflach/Voitsberg. What is taking place here is symptomatic of the situation in many former industrial areas throughout Europe, from Birmingham to the Ruhr to Steiermark. They are all undergoing far-reaching structural transformations. The search for solutions to the loss of employment and identity in these areas leads to concepts that mainly attempt to develop a new future through tourism, culture and the leisure industry.

The starting point for 'plan b' is marked by a traumatic, but highly inspiring, crucial question: How do we resolve the paradox between the current booming demand for utopias and the great economic pressure? How do we develop new forms of collective action?

Plan b, panorama Köflach/Voitsberg



Indikator, concept



a little too far ahead of its time

For the Media Workshop Vienna we set up a retrofictional studio (equipped with two analogue editing stations) intended to transpose the formulation of 'plan b' to the media discourse. For this we resurrected the potential of *Max Headroom*, which had sunk into oblivion (and even in 1986, when it was broadcast as a TV series, was only seen by a tiny niche audience). *Max Headroom* anticipated the societal developments as well as the production and reception conditions of 2006 in detail, something that inspired us to plumb these situations of urban dystopia, which have long since become reality, for new visions.⁶

6. 'Das Alte, das Neue'
(Media Workshop Vienna,
2006; okto tv, 2007).

For more information, see
www.transparadiso.com