

# Monu

*magazine on urbanism*

Planning and activism

“You shall be urban”

Flevoland: From State Planning  
to Planning the Stateless

The Pharmacy

and more...

# POLITICAL URBANISM

The relations of urban form and typology  
to ideology, power and politics

**#03** July 2005

clear-cut manifestation - socio-economics, politics and planning - expression of new social, cultural  
and political tensions - piecemeal aesthetic - two poles which neutralize - fear of  
depletion - links between economic prosperity - different types of bombs ...

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Exploring the relationship between power, politics and cities, urban territories is like looking at the chicken and egg question. What grows out of what? In **Hoyerswerda**, a middle sized east-German city where we spoke to *Margitta Fassl*, the Managing Director of the largest housing authority (that manages about 60x% of the cities housing units), the situation seems clear. The city over the last 50 years has been a ball on the waves of larger economic and political developments. From a small town of about 7,000 people, Hoyerswerda was built up into a model city the socialist era with about 70,000 people, now to its status is being a model amongst the shrinking cities in Eastern Germany that wither in the new market economics. Like clockwork is house after house demolished. There remain approximately 40,000 residents and the city is expected to lose at least another 10,000 in the coming years. Hoyerswerda came to tragic fame in the early 90's when a racist, xenophobic mob and dozens of neo-nazis repeatedly attacked immigrants and engaged in violent street fights with the police.

In her report from **Malaysia** *Maggie Peng* describes a very different relationship of urban development and politics. Far from being a passive reaction to political and economic circumstances, urban planning and design are part of a strategy to find and establish an identity for this young nation.

And there are many examples where local political decisions – democratic or not – drive development and shape cities. Some mix of popular opinion and political mechanics decide if a city should allow high-rises or not (Munich), or build an Olympic stadium for games it might or might not get (New York City) etc. And while urban politics and development is a difficult and foggy subject in itself, it becomes even more complex and harder to trace what is the relation between the two when we expand the scope or scale of the analysis of either aspect: the level of what defines politics or the scale of territory we are looking at. “War is the continuation of politics by different means” as the Prussian general and war theorist v. Clausewitz (1780 –1831) said. In that sense *Lola Meyer* extended the scale of the of the political dimension in her analysis of the reconstruction of the city of **Kassel** after WWII (the city center was destroyed to more than 90%!) and how military considerations significantly shaped the rebuilding efforts. The team ‘*bad-architects*’ *Ursula Faix, Paul Burgstaller, Nanne de Ru* on the other hand expanded the territorial aspect of their analysis of politics and urbanism in their research on **Austria and Switzerland**. Their project ‘nEUtral’ speculates how these two Alpine countries

in the middle of Europe could develop an own brand of neutral and inclusive politics and symbolism. This new alpine politics would complement alpine tourism and alpine architecture and (re-) brand them as the neutral core of Europe.

But sometimes examining a small detail of a city can reveal just as much and be as revolutionary as a new national policy. *Joost Meuwissen* does just that in his project on the **Berlin Schloss**, which was probably one of the most intensely debated urban reconstruction projects in Germany in the last years. His very modest and detailed proposal not only is politically very diplomatic, but more importantly reintroduces the beauty of everyday life into a high flying debate about architectural honesty, historicism, democracy, and the whole history of Germany, that has at times occupied even the ‘architecture critics’ in the German Bundestag.

Ultimately the discussion about the relation between urban form and urban development, to politics and power, has a large impact on the self-understanding of the professions that deal with these topics. Are we as architects, planners, social scientists etc. mere ‘hostages’, as Rem Koolhaas expressed it at one point, of larger economic and political contexts, or can planning, research and building actually be activism, a contribution to a struggle to change things?

*Malkit Shoshan* in her truly extraordinary project in a village in **Israel** in a way answers this question. Her account of the project in “Planning and Activism” shows how research in urban planning combined with an effort to engage stakeholders and powerbrokers can actually be a powerful political act.

Other excellent thought-pieces, essays and research-projects by *Fabian Faltin*, *CASE* and *Theo Deutinger* shine spotlights on other parts of the intricate web of relationships between politics and urban form.

We wish to thank all the authors that contributed for their efforts. Special thanks to William Alatraste, Beatriz Ramo and Yvonne Hung for helping out with translations and proofreading.

The Editors

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### **Call for submissions for Monu 04 Denied urbanism – forgotten, excluded and repressed forms of urban life**

Whenever a city's elite dreams up an image or a vision for the city, alarm bells should ring. All too commonly those images – the supposed character of urban life are so narrowly conceived by that they don't have any relation to reality. The consequences of this myopia are fatal. Instead of strengthening and developing the urban life that daily surrounds them they chase mirages – the culture capital, a baroque city, the European city, the growing city, the high-tech region... the stock of urban brand clichés seems unlimited.

The urban development strategies spawned by these mirages tend to enhance an image and a set of values that a city represents for a small but powerful minority. Grotesquely the majority of urban life is defined as the fringe – excluded as the other – the diversity and richness of a city is denied in order to create an easily understandable representational image.

Similar dynamics play out around the globe in different forms and shapes; perpetuated by different elites within different political contexts; in cities big, small, grand and pathetic. With always-similar results: a very narrow definition of city is embraced while the rest of urban life – the other – is dismissed, neglected or actively discriminated against.

*For the next issue of Monu we invite observations, thoughts, speculations, manifestoes, projects and essays to issues around this topic. The fourth issue will be published by the end of 2005. Contributions should be sent to editors@monu.org by late November.*

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