# Beauty and the Sublime

*by Joost Meuwissen*

There is a lot of general property and protection laws and planning regulations which are involved in urbanism – it is a real practice – but its authors remain practically anonymous after the schemes have been implemented. Urbanism organises but usually does not show the organisation it organises. Rather than on beauty, it is relying upon an incomprehensive Sublime of the cities as ununderstandable, since mankindly so-improved, landscapes. The diagrams which are put forward in order to communicate the organisational aspects are either too numerous or too complicated to be able to communicate with clients, other collaborating parties and, most importantly, the public and my mother. On a small scale, simple organisational objects such as benches in the park or traffic lights, which can be easily designed, do not demonstrate their organisational aspects in the open. Apart from their functions, all kinds of urban or rural elements are shaken out over the available space in certain densities through either geometrical or non-geometrical, picturesque aesthetic patterns – the kind of picturesque that still relies upon a rigidly geometrical perspectivism, which in itself remains invisible, thus stays: Sublime. Thus a well-designed bench does not get the intensity or arouse the amount of anxiety, indignation or the kind of total lack of interest an artwork or a wolf in the park might do. Hence the ongoing criticism of urbanism – or architecture, for that matter – saying that urbanism demonstrates either a minimalistic regularity, a simulation of an order which is disciplining without being the underlying one (1); or beautiful, incomprehensible shapes which somehow look like sculptures or animals but which are not as intensively experienced as pieces of art or frogs can be.

Yet, if it is not through an explanation of diagrams, what might prompt the intensity of an urbanism that represents the way it functions as an organisational device? Where does the communicability of its logic lie? As for traffic lights today, an understanding of where they are and where they are not may be derived from their positioning at intersections and at pedestrian crossings but thirty years ago, when speed ramps were not yet invented, they were in use to reduce traffic speed on the streets at spots where there were no crossings or zebra lines at all. The irritation they caused came from their being displaced signs without representing the comprehensible speed reduction system they were signs of. That is the difference from the later speed ramps and roundabouts, which were no longer signs. But what would be more beautiful than a city with traffic lights everywhere? Next to the bench in the landscape? At the doorstep of each shop? For your dog at your fence?

If architects do not like signs or try to avoid them, it is because they want to master the safety, security, transport and property webs through their spatial designs solely,

as the latters' kept secret raisons d'êtres, as if any other reason for making beautiful streets would make no sense. I once discussed this with a student who tried to improve a heavy traffic artery with housings at either side of the street. She found it difficult to come up with a rationale. But we already have got this idea, I said to her, from history; it is beautiful; Platonic; it consists of a perfect red circle which is placed vertically at the beginning of a street. Within the circle there is a white background on which a very big number 5 is inscribed; that will do. If this is not convincing enough to the car drivers, just add the notice "to save our dogs and cats". The student was not amused because it meant that she had to find another rationale for her design.

**It is already there**
During the last few years, my urbanistic department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria, has elaborated on finding methods to visualise, and therefore represent, the rather simple and comprehensive logic, so to say the obsession, which must precede or has preceded the necessary organisational diagrammatical presentations. It means a new approach towards existing situations, which are considered to be already complete within themselves. This is not about complexity but about a certain simplicity – Immanuel Kant would have called it the "simple Sublime" – of real daily life. I call these methods "it is already there". The solution is always "already there". Since the thing which "is already there" can be presented through simple images – because "it is already there" – there is no need for the usual analysis of existing situations (Bestandsanalyse) that put each situation under the regime of harsh analytic decompositions which are the same everywhere. Instead, one should search for the empirical, and how to represent it. In fact, our discovery was that every step in the planning processes might be handled this way. At our Institute of Art and Architecture, from Heidi Pretterhofer's Isotype Urbanism seminar (2), through the Lagerhaus research project at the studio of former Prof. Rudiger Lainer, the beautiful book of which is unfortunately not yet published officially, we are trying to develop over a number of projects the polite and gentle empirism the public has the right to be encountered with.

**Shrinking Cities**
Our prize winning Shrinking Cities open competition was done with students from my Theory of Urbanism lecture course, together with Eva Grubbauer and biologist Pia Grubbauer. We thought that the shrinking phenomenon at the Halle-Leipzig area in Germany would be relative, since not everything was shrinking over there. If the official statistics would maintain an overall shrinking, they were to be false, and should be replaced by a better statistics, for which we developed the simple images from the data of everyday life, such as wolves, reindeer, and Polish taxi drivers' densities. If national politics would remain stuck into negative policies which are derived from false statistics, they should be replaced by what "is already there": the large amount of mostly already existing citizens' initiatives (Burgerinitiativen) and associations (Vereine). That way, some kind of restoration of the German Democratic Republic's social policies might be done through such an association from the social middle-field even.

This competition was organised by the Arch+ magazine and Philipp Oswalt (3). In December, 2004, the results were on display in Berlin, where a workshop was held in January, 2005. A pavilion, showing our ideas, has been erected in the park of the Leipzig Gallery of Contemporary Art, where it could be visited up till January 29, 2006.

**Rurbanism**

In the framework of the Rurbanism research project at my Institute Heidi Pretter-hofer, Dieter Spath and Kai Vockler were working during two years on the development of the rural space in Austria. Which transformation and possibilities are there in this highly connected space? The last twenty years had witnessed a profound transformation of the European city. The city as we knew it seemed to be dissolving into the region and to be replaced by something for which words and images failed. The countryside offered nearly the same things as the city did. It could be consumed after a short drive by car. People from the countryside were becoming mobile, there proved to be hardly any difference between the living and consuming conditions from urban and rural areas anymore but the countryside might add something unique: nature and tradition. A lecture "Urban Theory 3: To Be in Motion" was rising the question: what are the spaces of movement? What is the "bubble of a commuter" on his daily drive from the garage through the traffic jam towards the working place? How does the backside of the highway look like? What is the potential of the garage in terms of extra usage and extra space? How can the topography of the landscape be used as sport equipment? And how would architecture and planning react, if their central point of reference, the site with a specific identity and territory, is losing its unambiguity?

**City of Movement**

The City of Movement (Bewegte Stadt) architectural project in which I collaborated with Vienna-based architect Franz Kronreif, who initiated it, was organised in the framework of Eyal Weizman's studio at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. It also involved a students'collaboration with students from the Institute of Sports Education of the Vienna University. The single aim of the sports students was to organise a Day of Play (Spieltag) in the 15th district (15. Bezirk) of Vienna, which took place at June 10, 2005, with games, performances, and sports activities all over the beautiful area. This was a big public success. That neighbourhood has a character of rather closed nineteenth century (Grunderzeit) housing blocks with a lot of schools, and narrow streets. Franz Kronreif's idea was to transform the streets, on which the children from outside the area went to school, into more of playgrounds, and enliven the streets through the presence of children playing.

The Day of Play proved to be a very good focus for my architectural students to develop a quite empirical and unbiased way of looking at the neighbourhood, the value of its continuity of streets, the possibilities of the mixture of cars, narrow pavements, and the qualities that small dwellings along narrow pavements might have in opening up inside life to outside life, and the panoptical qualities of some street corners. The Day of Play became certainly very enriched by such architec-

tural installations as Theo Strohal's smoke-filled tent or Martin Denk's and Franz Kropatschek's enheightened observation posts, designed like hunting lodges, at crossings, for mothers to watch over their children, while knitting, from a distance.

**The Pharmacy**

After the German Bundestag decided to rebuild the Berlin castle (Schloss), it forgot to decide upon rebuilding its pharmacy as well. Since there were no money to rebuild the Schloss, we thought the better implementation idea would be to first rebuild the pharmacy, because it is smaller, and more commercial than the Schloss, and then rebuild the Schloss afterwards. There is also no hurry in rebuilding the Schloss. Our proposal was that each generation would build one single storey, and that the Schloss would rise over the generations, such as a gothic cathedral. Only every thirty years there would be some building activities. Between times the agora on top of it would become an ever more splendid raised panoramic piazza, rising one storey higher only every thirty years. Thus the Schloss would be completed in the year 2200.

This commission was on invitation by the Urban Catalyst organisation in cooperation with the Volkspalast, and carried out through my Urban Strategies seminar at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The results were on display at the Palast der Republik in Berlin from July 16 till August 26, 2005, and were published as well, a.o. in Monu #03 (4).

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References

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3  archplus 173, Zeitschrift für Architektur und Stadtebau, 38. Jahrgang, May 2005 (Aachen: ARCH+ Verlag, 2005), 72-75.
4  Joost Meuwissen, „Die Apotheke", Fun Palace 200X – Der Berliner Schlossplatz. Abriss, Neubau oder grune Wiese? Edited by Philipp Misselwitz, Hans Ulrich Obrist en Philipp Oswalt, translated by Turid Weingartz and Martin Schmitz (Berlin: Martin Schmitz Verlag, 2005), 196-197, and Joost Meuwissen, „The Pharmacy", Monu magazine on urbanism #03 July 2005 (50-54).