

**COLOGNE 2007: QUESTIONS ABOUT A CITY**

Yvonne Hung

What do we really know about the places we inhabit daily? What is possible to know? How are places of reknown merged with our personal stories? And where are disconnects, black holes, slippages – places that we don't understand, that puzzle us because we just can't figure out how the heck they came to be that way? In the interplay between remembering and forgetting, between trying to make sense of things and the ignorance that allows us to walk down a street without being bombarded by ghosts - how do we experience the city and make ourselves at home?

With these questions in mind, our team of architects and social scientists created an interactive medium with which participants and passersby at the Plan 07 Architecture Festival shared their memories, questions and reflections about Cologne. For instance, the Cologne Cathedral is known for its imposing way its dark towers greet the visitor just walking out of the main train station. Yet by voicing questions and provoking deeper sifting of memories, we can set the stage for new associations for both strangers and born and bred citizens of Cologne. Over the 7-day course of Plan 07, newly minted observations would add to our growing patchwork of ideas, images and stories.

Just as flipping through the guestbook of a museum reveals personal shoutouts, the 'I was here' category of comments, we also received such comments as "Warum wohnt meine Perle so weit weg von mir?" (Why does my darling live so far away from me?). However the nature of our installation (specific questions, a physical space designed to encourage pausing and reflection, a map upon which places are marked), the bulk of the comments were not confined to this category. And unlike a museum exhibit where the items are protected in vitrines or by guards who quietly shoo those who get too close, the places and spaces referenced in our Urban Memory installation can be 'handled' in multiple ways: shat on by pigeons, defiled by urban pissers and yet also reified by those who have experienced powerful milestones in these settings.

Participants could enter into the architect-inhabited former Sparkasse by a structure of wooden slats that extended to the street and invited people to step up inside. The building space provided a typical stepwise progression of support columns- to which the architects installed a wooden grove that carried light and texture. There was a large inset map of Cologne upon which commenters indicated where they were commenting on and cards upon which they wrote their observations and questions. These stories, questions and assertions were affixed to the borders of the large map and then fashioned into a web with thread and pins showing where they are and where they are located in relation to other areas. Our participants shared: age, occupation and answered and posed three questions: What did you always want to know about a certain place in Cologne? What place in Cologne has a special meaning for you and why? What personal memories do you connect to the Dom (the Cologne Cathedral and central landmark of the city)? Our own maverick photographer ventured into the city to photograph par-

v



08  
07



ticular sites and elicit commentary from people along the way.

For several, the Dom symbolizes Heimat (home or a feeling of being at home) or the city of Cologne and for nearly as many, it holds no special meaning or even childhood terror for the gloomy exterior. For a few homesick Chinese, it's the authentic renditions of home-cooked meals at a restaurant near the Dom that they rhapsodically connect to the cathedral's image. Other comments included: Touristen Angst (fear of tourists), memories of being inside the Dom (e.g., sweaty climbs to the top, the vista from the uphigh, a memorable light installation). Others shared memories of being treated unkindly by a choir director, undesired attendance at the organ concerts as a young teen or using the Dom steps as a fitting place for weeping at the end of a romance. For the students of a grade school teacher, the Dom is not a real church because real churches have clocks.

Outside of the Dom, other locations also provide space for powerful memories to form. The banks of the Rhein as well as the Aachener Weiher (a small lake connected to the greenbelt around the city) figured strongly because they were places of childhood importance that continue to be important settings for adult milestones. For instance, the 40-year old designer who recalls fondly playing by the lake as a child and now revisits those memories as he watches his own children play there. Other places that rate highly offer for spaces of tranquility and replenishment for those alone or in the company of friends and family. The banks of the Rhein provide the scenery and setting for contemplation as the ships float by or serve as the backdrop to the first fledgling steps of a child.

Some questions could be more easily answered while others were more opinions and values in the form of a question. One 11-year old boy wanted to know when Legoland was first opened. A 38 year-old building engineer wanted to know the exact number of steps in the Dom. Interestingly, the types of open and unanswered questions indicated that even for those in the business of architecture and design, that the growth, stagnation and wreckage processes that shape a city are still mysterious. Value and aesthetic assertions were prominent, for instance, what logic is behind the misanthropic architecture around Ebertplatz. Why is the Lufthansa building so ugly? What does the Belgian Quarter have to do with Belgium? The more technical/administrative questions were about who the responsible parties are who decide why empty buildings aren't transformed into cultural spaces, marked the greenbelt so that it doesn't connect, created too many one-way streets and didn't bother to burrow a tunnel underneath the Rhein.

As the threads swooped against the map, it created its own topography - a grid of elevation and density with dense lines from the oft-named places (Aachener Weiher, banks of the Rhein, the Belgian quarter, Severinstrasse) and thin strings of the one-timers (Heckpfad, Legoland or St Elizabeth's Hospital). Our inquiry into the places elicited commonly held opinions (Dom as a key part of the Cologne's city image) as well as unexpected reactions and dialogue. The cards provoked side conversations about who indeed were the Edelweiss Pirates\*, is there

really a sofa on the South Bridge, and what is so terribly amiss at Barbarossaplatz that it earns the ire of several respondents. Our project gave us a small window in this ongoing communication that is at the heart of remembering and forgetting. By sharing reflections and stoking the flames of curiosity about the city, we move towards a perception and a relationship with the city that is dynamic and renewed. ➔

*\*A quick google search revealed that the Edelweiss Pirates were involved in a conspiracy to sabotage the Third Reich. Its members were rooted out and sentenced to death.*

*The plan07 project ran from the 21st to the 28th of September in Cologne. Our installation was a collaboration of LHVH architects, Kai Dolata, Lola Meyer and mudot. Fotos ©by Wolfgang Burat*

