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Architecture Doesn't Exist! A plea for a political architecture

Stefan Kurath, Ivano Iseppi

Spatial reality is the result of social negotiation processes. It reflects the coexistence of diverse, also controversial sets of interests. Within the framework of these negotiation processes, architects are only one group of actors among many. We architects differ from the other actors by the level of knowledge we have achieved and the professional language we have developed during centuries of discussing our own technical and professional activities. Finally the ultimate postulation of an autonomy of architecture, removed from its context of origination located in the 1960's, brought us to the point where we burned down the bridges that connected us with the rest of the world. In this sphere (or inner world), created in the collective mind of architects, we are the unchallenged rulers. Here we can practice architecture without interference, here everything becomes architecture.

To our surprise, our disciplinary interests controversially confront other demands.

Moving through our urban landscapes today we become aware of that fact that, against our beliefs, it is hardly possible to realise our disciplinary targets and ideal visions to any mentionable degree of regional significance. Thus the reveries of architecture and urbanism we indulge in at our academies are disrupted by a rude awakening. To our surprise our disciplinary interests are controversially counteracted by other interests. We are confronted with (exterior) worlds, where the language of architecture is simply not understood. They are ruled by the language of economy, ecology, law, family, self-fulfilment. It is not difficult to understand that this diversification massively impedes communication. In addition alliances are forged that precisely exclude the concerns and interests of other actors in order to enhance the options for the realisation of a particular coalition's proper goals. To our dismay everything but architecture rules this congregation of heterogenous paradigms. The maxim that applies outside our world is „Architecture? Architecture doesn't exist!“

The times are over when it sufficed to wag an admonishing index finger – stable alliances must be forged with relevant actors.

This is the beginning of the crux of architectural production. In order to translate the disciplinary targets into spatial reality it is no longer sufficient to wag an admonishing index finger. Moreover it is necessary to form

stable alliances with relevant actors such as customers, investors, politicians, neighbours, land owners, authorities, administrations, planners, specialists, employees and craftsmen. After all, empirical evidence proves that only alliance partnerships that are more stable than others at the decisive moment in time can enforce their demands and desires. In this process, forces are accumulated and leverage is enhanced, as no actor acts independently. Here, forging alliances does not mean making compromises, it means permanently convincing the other actors entailed. As the actors involved in such an alliance partnership are hoping for benefits, an architectural practice will be successful when it reveals its financial, ecological, social or cultural added values to the respective partners involved without deserting the proper disciplinary targets, thus convincing them. This does not only enable the creation of a more beautiful, but also a prospering architecture.

Architecture doesn't exist! It must be improvised on a daily basis.

In this sense the autonomy of architecture is not defined by the rejection of other influential factors, but by the freedom of design, which we architects must avail ourselves of in order to take part in the decision making process regarding the manner and quality, with which the different spheres of interest are interconnected and translated into spatial structures. Architecture doesn't exist! It cannot be presupposed. It must be recreated and with this improvised on a daily basis! This requires a proactive, relational and diplomatic approach!

In our own practical discussion of architecture we are conscious of risky entanglements with customers, investors, politicians, neighbours, land owners, authorities, administrations, planners, specialists, employees or craftsmen on one hand, as well as with context, materials, substances and construction principle on the other. We regard the „hybrid“, „impure“, „imprecise“ and hence „hairy“ aspects arising from these entanglements as challenges to an architectural practice, from which eventually figurations of „dishevelled objects“ result. In this sense we understand our activity as the cultural extension of the status quo that is to be constructed neither „right“ nor „wrong“ but „better“ from a disciplinary point of view. Whilst the requirement of an autonomy of architecture formerly was connected to the aim of gaining sovereign control (which appreciably failed to be realised due to a lack of connections with the outside world) we are now ending this autism and reverting to (again) intervening EVERYWHERE. We exercise a political architecture. It pursues the goal of calling together a united collective in order to design the future.

To our understanding our actions are successful when culturally anchored knowledge and thus explicitly our urbanistic and architectural subjects are translated into spacial concepts, construction principles, materiality and eventually spatial reality. This is only feasible if we can act out our technical autonomy during the translation process of designing. To the other

actors architecture must not be at the centre of focus. Architecture must not be understood. As a demand it must be the only certainty of the negotiation process and thus commonplace.

To us our craftsmanship of designing is a cultural technology capable of uniting even alleged contradictions.

Thus we perceive our actions less as an end in itself aiming at the production of seemingly risk-free, sterile objects depending on patronising principals (which mostly disappear in the architect's drawers as dead letters due to the non-existence of alliance partnerships). Moreover we perceive our craft – design – as a cultural technology capable of uniting alleged contradictions such as architecture and economy, architecture and ecology, architecture and self-fulfilment, architecture and culture. As such, form, style, structure or geometry are never the aim of the design process, but the mindset of doing a job well for its own sake. Such an attitude yields everyday architecture; not monumental, not extravagant, not heroic, not reduced and not pretentious, but an architecture seeking to connect everyday needs on different scales.

Subsequently the constructed environment remains the result of social negotiation processes. By intervening EVERYWHERE, i. e. consciously participating in the social negotiation process, we seek to participate in determining the figurations of a political architecture with its own means. As built architecture materialises towards the end of social processes, though, it is important to find means to introduce architectural requirements already at the beginning of social negotiation processes.

We assume the mission to initiate a social discourse regarding space and spatial development.

We therefore consider it our additional task to incite a social discourse regarding space and spatial development by means of utopian and dystopian projection.

When creating utopian or dystopian relations and different possible development scenarios we are only to a lesser degree seeking answers, we are actually seeking the right questions. It is important to pose these in order to make decisions (that remain risky) for tomorrow. We strive to make the seemingly impossible possible in the future. The aim is to overcome the handicaps that today (still) prevent a more sustainable spatial development in the mid-term.

If we as architects succeed in increasing the effectiveness of our activity within the framework of a political architecture, we can also turn to the next project: To (re-)connect our architecture to the spatial and thus cultural frame of reference. Over the recent decades, we architects have hastily set our focus on the architectural object, surrendering a mode of architectural and cultural production that in the planning stage takes into account structural elements and principles reaching far beyond the individual object. Such a morphological-

conceptual view of architecture and urban planning will lend our architects a new foothold within a context characterised by permanent change – and our landscapes a new appearance.

www.urbanplus.ch / www.iseppi-kurath.ch / kurath@urbanplus.ch

Exhibition concept:



The exhibition-concept of our 400 unique postcards shows our daily practice dealing with details, materials, building sites, context and theory. It shows the daily need for improvisation and together gives a deep understanding of our way of producing architectures through improvisation.

Stefan Kurath and Ivano Iseppi are architects collaborating partly together. Located in Zürich and Thusis

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