

Building Culture- the Manifestation of Power Structures?

Along with the process of constituting the National Foundation of Building Culture in Germany (Nationale Stiftung Baukultur) there is a lively debate going on about the content and meaning of the expression „Building Culture“. Beside the difficulties of agreeing upon a common language and fixing down obliging criteria for architectural qualities, there is the dilemma of integrating everyone concerned with the matter, experts and laymen alike, into the discussion. The high claim for a broad and nationwide discussion about the aims and tools of the foundation obviously starts questioning existing cultural and professional territories. Besides social, technical, economical and ecological implications the question of who is controlling cultural territory is crucial for the structure, layout and quality of the built environment.

The following paper examines how Building Culture essentially is a product of interest groups competing to have their ways.

In regard of the present debate it seems necessary first of all to define the understanding of the expression „Building Culture“ in this text. It is referring to the general definition that evolved during the past two years (Statusbericht Baukultur 1, Berichte BBR, Band 11), according to which Building Culture is „the production and the use of the built environment“. This means we are talking about the environment as a whole, including the architectural banalities of suburbia as much as media- hyped star- architecture. Furthermore it implies that filling the debate with any meaning is a matter concerning the society as a whole and cannot remain restricted to an exclusive circle of professional stakeholders.

It is within the nature of power structures to be multidimensional and to influence human relations in a complex way. The actual manifestations of power may differ according to circumstances and context. For the sake of clarity I will discuss in the following the different „territories of power“ one by one, separated from their mutual interdependence.

1. Power of Property

The possession of space

The possession of space definitely is the most direct way to influence its design and layout.

Investigating the question of influence therefore means investigating the ownership of real estate or of capital. The structural order of our environment is the mark of the historical struggle for land, today every bit of our country is measured out, mapped and designated for specific uses. For the winners of this struggle, the economically powerful, the ownership of land does not only express their power, but also serves as an instrument of power: it allows them to control the usage and design of the environment. Our perception of „Building Culture“ or „Urban Culture“ is to a large degree predefined by

the owners' decision on structures, surfaces and imagery. Much has been already complained about the privatisation of public space. It seems though that we shouldn't worry so much about the disappearance of citizens from formerly public space (or their mutation into „customers“), than about the authorship of its design by the interests of a mighty few instead of a democratic plurality. The result of this is a phenomenon which again is the object of criticism: the strong desire of individuals to live on a piece of land of their own, be it as small as it may. How else should the ecologically disastrous but nevertheless highly popular single-family housing estates be judged than as the desire of people to ensure a small proportion of power over their personal environment?

The possession of capital

As – besides a revolution- only the possession of capital allows the individual to alter the existing apportionment of space, it'll be interesting to have a look at the height and apportionment of wealth and income in this country. There are two trends that seem of concern: the growing imbalance of the wealth and the incomes between East and West, between urban and rural areas and between the centers and fringes of cities. Due to this, communities, cities and regions are developing themselves very differently despite massive measures of economic balancing by the state. The inevitable social segregation becomes most obvious in areas that transform into social focuspoints. Run down public space and the visibility of poverty, the deterioration of infrastructure are the drawbacks of our economic system but as such also an aspect of our Building Culture. Yet our selective perception is remarkable: social segregation is being regarded problematic only in the case of poverty, no one ever criticises a bourgeois settlement for its social homogenousness. The second trend of interest is the „popularisation“ of capital and it's effects on Building Culture: capital, once together with the land owned exclusively by a few influential families, now is in the hands of the lot as an „asset“. Once wealthy families were building with the approach to keep their wealth over generations, and to increase their prestige by the erection of magnificent buildings. Today most of the capital is held in the hands of a large, anonymous mass. Capital is being managed by institutional investment corporations, who are in charge of multiplying it. Hence the result: unspecific, banal and anonymous architecture. Building Culture on the smallest common ground, for which nobody personally bears responsibility cannot but come out as a mass product.

The power of the poor

The claim of cultural spheres is tied very strongly but not exclusively to the property of space. Despite privatisation of space there are still crevices in the solid structures of property which offer the unpropertied the possibility to occupy space for themselves. This subculture traditionally is acting as the counterpart to the established culture. It is questioning the elites by alternative lifestyles, experimental artistic expression or simple vandalism as a desperate manifestation of powerlessness. These activities may turn out to be the ground for the cultural renewal of the established classes and the various examples of economical successful developments in former territories of the creative underground prove its potential⁽¹⁾.

2. The power of history

Whether shown as conscious approval or disapproval of the past, the historic heritage of any society is the precondition for its presence. „History“ is to be looked at under two perspectives:

The struggle for power in history

The structures we live in are the result of the historic struggles for control over space, be they executed as wars, revolutions, migration or simply trade. Usually these struggles weren't all about prestige but about the evolutionary fight for survival, i.e. the claim of space for the own species as the natural way of its upkeep. The fight for living space, the „Kampf um Lebensraum“ in Germany of course is a contaminated phrase, but disregarding the national-socialistic connotation it is merely describing a permanent condition of our every day life.

War, expulsion, occupation and relocation is the violent and most primitive form of struggle for ground and its resources. The consequences for the building culture are destruction, vandalism, demontage and plundering. Today the aftereffects of conflicts in other parts of the world are reaching also seemingly peaceful countries. Yet the aim of terroristic attacks on frequented and culturally important buildings is usually not to occupy the attacked ground itself but to conquer psychological ground. The destruction of the WTC in New York for example does not only have immediate impact on the urban structure of New York City, but also on *our* urban culture: since 9/11 we find ourselves confronted with a new kind of phobia, the enemy's claim of territory has been a mental one. Result of this are the recently put up concrete barriers to protect endangered buildings, fences, barbed wire, video cameras and heavily armed personnel in our cityscape. In Germany as well as in the US a series of alterations of the civic law has been brought on to gradually reduce the freedom of the individual.

However, the daily battle for controlling space is being also fought with less dramatic means: public demonstrations, the occupation of houses by squatters as well as the more subtle replacing the rival's postcard collection from his working place with the own ficus benjaminii are ways to execute personal power.

The struggle for power over history

History is more than just a sequence of events that shows results of varying longevity. As a cultural resource it offers a reservoir of imagery, about whose interpretation and usage we readily disagree. With the competition for investments among cities becoming harder, the scenic background of history turns to be a welcome mean to construct urban identity. The temptation has always been great to differentiate between pleasant and unpleasant history, between history whose aura supports a city's selfconfidence and history which does not. Traditionally the right for interpretation is with the economically and/ or politically dominant. Even if scientifically questioned, the version of history that justifies the demands of the powerful usually is being tolerated by the majority. Value and meaning of buildings therefore are by no means measurable qualities, but are subject of the present balance of power. One utopia needs the negation of it's counterpart as *raison d'être*.

The prevailing standards of the dominant social groups decide whether to refurbish and keep a building or whether to tear it down. The example of the Berlin Wall shows in how short a time the

perception of the environment can alter: 14 years ago taken by the crowd in a peaceful act demonstrating the „power of the people“, the wall’s substance got taken down and removed rather quickly. Today the few remnants of sometimes questionable origin are object of scientific reconstruction, there is a lobby which aspires its admission into the Unesco World Heritage. This and many other examples show that the tradition of demolishing buildings driven by motives of self-reinstatement is a great loss to the monument list of a nation. Today it should be common sense to regard history neither merely as a touristic scenery nor as a subjective selection of pleasant stories, but as a guiding system in the collective memory of a city, worth to be kept as a patchwork with incongruities. However, despite better knowledge, even today marketdriven „improvements“ of many cityplans cause severe losses of our built heritage, houses of historical value get exchanged for the economically better model or given to dilapidation. According to the capitalistic rules of the game the defenders of historic heritage usually succumb to the forces of the economically desirable, the keeping a building very often is possible only by the collaboration of experts in finance, real estate, law and conservation. This teamwork may more often than not result in a superimposition of historical truth and economic scheming, in a mixup of public and commercial messages.

3. The power of the market

The market, - in its present appearance as „neoliberal turbocapitalism“, today rather obviously is the most powerful argument for or against a project. In fact, the rentability of a building almost always defines its size and shape, space gets „optimized“ to meet the demands of the market, often with a deterioration in architectural quality.

The general wish for sustainability of a building becomes subject to the timeframe of the investment. We silently ignore the problem that this timeframe is following the sideeffects of globalisation and therefore becoming continually shorter. But not only tectonic qualities have to obey the market, also the quest for certain styles and surfaces leave their trace in our environment. Besides the powerful players in the real estate business there are the stakeholders of the retail market whose activities are of vast influence. With their enormous marketing machinery they generate emotions and imagery that are difficult to remain unimpressed by. The attacks on our apparatus of perception become elaborated to such a degree that makes viewing a cityscape in a neutral way literally impossible. The big brands and chains occupy our environment with their visual weapons, even without owning the space itself. The much complained about increase of suburban shopping centers is merely another effect of the commercial competition. It is reflecting the power of the customer, his motto to seek the lowest price possible becomes visible in a banal architecture for which no additional cent gets spent except the bare necessities of safeguarding cheap products from wind and weather. Discount mentality is ruling, and of course the market is satisfying the demand, last but not least with discount houses.

4. The power of the mass

Looking at the masses of private investors, the masses of owners of single family houses, the masses of customers, of car owners, and so on, has made clear that the individual, organised in a group to articulate his interest, is capable to put quite some pressure onto market and politics. Of course any lobby can be manipulated or simply overpowered by another group, and rather often a group will push

its interests against better knowledge. As a good example serves the power of the automobile lobby which succeeds in demanding more traffic infrastructure despite the better judgement that only the reduction of infrastructure will be able to fight the traffic collapse in Germany. The ones who hold institutional power, i.e. the politicians, afraid to loose it, are following this request with the result of a still insensibly high ratio of newly sealed land per day in this country. Motorways gradually become an environment that we have to live with, yet the challenge for designers is being discovered only reluctantly.

Masses are being formed not only by commonly shared interests, but also by demographic or other factors. The transformation of our society today is questioning the majorities of tomorrow, actual trends give way to speculations on the impact to our building culture: how will the prospected mass of the elderly or very old people change our environment? If Germany ever succeeded in becoming a immigrant society in the true sense of the word, how will this influence our cityscapes?

A majority voting over the destiny of a building is being practised these days in England where people are asked to decide upon which building to keep in a sort of „England-looks –for-the-Superhouse“-TV-Show⁽²⁾.

5. The power of status

In most western countries the institutional power to influence our building culture is legitimized by democratic elections, i.e. the power of the majority. The legislative power is independently defining the legal framework and instruments to direct building activities. The executive power looks after their application and realization, besides this it is acting as commissioner of buildings -for the benefit of the whole society. So far the theory. In practice obviously politicians are driven by a multitude of different stakeholders which try to force their particular interests upon decisions. The already described influence of lobbies and other interest groups onto politics is great and far from being congruent with the „will of the voters“.

6. The power of „Zeitgeist“

The power of a common spirit, shared by a majority of society, something like a „Zeitgeist“ is probably the power that is most difficult to pin down. If one defines „Zeitgeist“ with Bazon Brock⁽³⁾ as the expectation of an age for the future, the invisible but nevertheless intrinsic creative power of a society, the contemporary lack of vision must make us feel at loss: we are profoundly sceptical towards the new, „Future“ for most of us mainly consists of frightening statistical calculations. This spirit is expressed in the esthetical repertoire of our design where one retro-trend is following the next, and the demand for „atmosphere“ in buildings that formerly were seen as dull, is remarkably high.

Commercials as seismographic device for communicative and esthetic content are proving that the desire for ostentatiousness makes our building culture hover between trash and grand emotional scenes.

7. The power of nature –„Höhere Macht“

As the question of style becomes more and more meaningless and our striving for power a vain enterprise, we have to ask ourselves if the power of nature has not the final say in the struggle for

Building Culture. The production and use of our built environment has evolved from climatic, geological and geographical conditions. The increasing effects of climatic changes such as the flood in Saxony in 2002 show to what extent these conditions – and of course time- determine perception and value of our Building Culture.

Resumée

The debate on building culture shows that only a very narrow consent on how to build can be achieved. Experts readily agree that buildings are supposed to be ecologically sustainable, innovating, referring to the local identity and strengthening social cohesion. It is not very difficult to find a majority for such guidelines, as they can be interpreted in any direction. However, they do not offer clear orientation for building practice. To articulate building guidelines successfully, a specification of this broad framework will be necessary. The principle of sustainability is an open formula which will produce very different solutions whether applied to ecology, economy, the social structure or the protection of monuments.

The want for identity, i.e. for something exceptional and characteristic asks for the courage to leave beaten tracks and go for a risk. Today we accept how deeply conventional our desire for housing is after all: futuristic visions of space, the abundant blobs and burps, are neither very courageous nor very innovating. Nevertheless there is a real need for innovation in building culture, in particular when it comes to intelligent and resource-efficient use of material and energy. The fact that buildings still consume more energy and produce more waste than any other product cannot be understood but a clear challenge to politics and science. To foster a wide public engagement for Building Culture it will be inevitable to open the debate to a broader basis than before and to start a fair and intense discussion on „How Do We Want to Live?“ beyond the spheres of personal ego. Everyone, from the cradle to the grave, has demands on his surroundings, why should they be denied the ability to express them? Counties like Bavaria with their architecture price voted for by the public (which unfortunately remained without results due to an attack of hackers), or North Rhine Westphalia with their architectural programme for pupils show how non-experts can be included into the debate. There are more than enough ideas. The constitution of a National Foundation for Building Culture would offer a nice opportunity to realize some of them. So far however the discussion remains exclusive to a happy few clinging to power.

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(1) for example the redevelopment of the former artists' center „Tacheles“ in Berlin- Mitte by the Fundus-Group

(2) „England sucht das Superhaus“, article in: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24. July 03

(3) Bazon Brock, geb. 1936, professor of esthetics, University of Wuppertal