

Towards a constructivist perspective in Urban Planning

Constructivism gives us a frame for the understanding of the assignment of meaning as a creative act beyond all systems. Reality as an objective and unambiguous base cannot be experienced directly; it is rather a model that has to be continually constructed by filtering messages that our senses transmit to our brain in order to find meaning. Reality is a sculpturing process where meaning can shift. The human species can be defined by being aware of its own reality-building and assignment of meaning. Art can be defined as a consciously created work, the creation of which has no other objective than the work itself.ⁱ

The technique of both planning and artistic work, as I want to define it in social sculpture, is to empower the visitor/inhabitant to assign meaning to a place/object/activity. The visitor/inhabitant has to be considered as the one who will “construct” the place by assigning meaning to it. Thus, the visitor/inhabitant becomes the artist.

By taking the example of an urban waste-land in the centre of the city of Bern, I will demonstrate the steps and processes to be taken up in order to implement an urban planning concept. A first analysis of the area in question was done in 2005. It has shown that throughout a long period of time a “guiding theme”, a leitmotiv of meaning and use has existed beyond all intentions imposed by planners and investors. The challenge is to tune the planning process to this “theme” by reconciling the area, the public and the investors.

Name of the author: Martin Beutler,

Affiliation: Firma für soziale PLASTIK

Keywords: constructivism; assignment of meanings; urban planning, artistic work

ⁱ (Fabro 2004)

A crash introduction to constructivism

“Welcome to the desert of reality”

Constructivism teaches us that we do not have direct, immediate access to the world of objects and phenomena. Our sensory organs transform stimuli into impulses that our nerves transmit to the brain. Our brain filters these stimuli and interprets themⁱⁱ. This filtering and interpreting happens mostly unconsciously and is the result of our personal previous experiences. It separates for instance “normal” from “exceptional”, “dangerous” from “friendly”, “pleasant” from “unpleasant” and so on. The sum of these stimuli and interpretations are builds up our own reality. In most cases this construction is meaningful and allows its constructor to move safely in it. This construction is the reality we have access to - the only one. There are no instruments that give us a more immediate and unfiltered access to the “real world” outside us. Understanding the brain better could give us keys to the real exterior world. However: “If the brain was so simple that we could understand it, we would be so stupid that we couldn’t”.

However, there is the knowledge of the constructed character of realityⁱⁱⁱ. This knowledge implies that reality turns out to be a doubtful place. It also implies that reality is a sculptural process: In my work of social sculpture I consider the impulses as the raw material of the sculpture, reflection as the work and reality as the result of this work, l’oeuvre. The human species is the one able to be aware of its freedom of building its reality and also to be responsible for the reality he builds and lives in. « La différence entre le désert et le jardin, ce n’est pas l’eau, c’est l’homme!^{iv} »

Example of assignment of meaning

The following example means to show how our brain is able to search a meaning in a situation that seems at the first view meaningless. The fact, that I am now speaking of this picture makes it an extraordinary event; it will be treated on the conscious level of your mind. But these processes also take place in much the same way on the unconscious level of our mind.

Definition of social sculpture

In my understanding social sculpture places the work in art on the side of the visitor/observer. He constructs and reconstructs its reality in a new order, will assign new meaning to a place, object or person. This process is comparable to an appropriation of what he or she is observing. The role of the social sculptor is putting in place the elements necessary for this appropriation, shift of meaning or adaptation of reality. These elements need not be visual or constructive, but they have to allow a change in the way one identifies his or her role in a situation. This approach allows working on situations normally lying outside the system of Arts. Needless to say that my gallery wasn’t particularly fond of this new development. In the meantime, this drawback has turned into an advantage: for outside the Art system, people approach reality in a freer and less prejudiced way; they are more easily ready to assign meaning to a situation offering different possibilities. Art becomes more interesting if it happens outside of the Art system. This is potentially liberating for both the social sculptor and the artists (i.e. the assigners of meaning).

ⁱⁱ (Roth 1997)

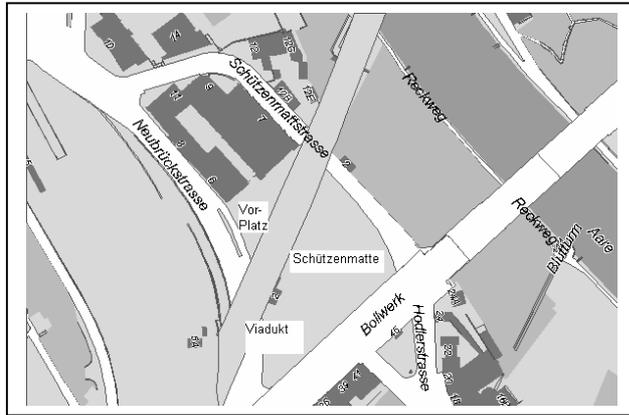
ⁱⁱⁱ (Maturana and Varela, 1987)

^{iv} Citation de „Candide“, Voltaire

Example of an urban planning process

Introduction

Downtown Bern, the capital of Switzerland, at 200 meters from the main railway-station,



there is a large space of urban wasteland.

Tucked in between a four lane city road with heavy traffic and a railway viaduct, it is used as a parking lot and, for a few weeks every year, it turns into a temporary fairground.

Behind the railway viaduct and enclosed on three sides by roads the cultural centre “Reithalle” is located in the buildings of the former city riding school.

Despite big efforts of a group of non-conformist, autonomist youth to restore the old building and launch a cultural program that is respectable and respected, the centre remains a thorn in the flesh of conservative

Plan of discussed area

inhabitants of the city. The centre is confronted with accusations of giving shelter to violent groups of youngsters defining themselves as revolutionary leftist. In front of the building, between the main entrance and the railway-viaduct, a mix of drug dealers, alcoholics, bums and punks has established their head-quarters. This “Vorplatz” (areaway, forecourt) is the stage of occasionally violent clashes between its “inhabitants” and the police, passers-by or members of the audience of the cultural events taking place within the “Reithalle”. Political and media attention that these “events” receive are usually high and controversial. Various attempts of the city-administration to influence the scene with constructive elements (i.e. installation of lights or planting of trees have failed; both trees and lights were vandalized few days later. At a loss with further ideas, the city council asked me to analyze the situation and propose remedial measures^v.

The situation in front of the youth-centre “Reitschule”

I saw myself confronted with a multitude of phenomena, a modern piece of music; at first sight meaningless and without reason. The research was defined as the identification of the “theme” of the play which we just knew through its “variations”. The task consisted in examining the history of these variations and to deduce the “theme”.

1. Having a closer look at the “inhabitants”

My first approach was trying to get a grasp on the mentality of the people, a sort of psychoanalytic look on the trouble and violence around. It appeared that inside the centre, a lot of the once chronic problems such as drug-abuse, violence and appropriation of public space for private use had been banned. This step towards responsibility within the walls of the centre represents a big effort. The compliance to the rules, however, did not extend these walls; what happened in front of the door was judged being “outside”.

The “inhabitants” relationship with the city authorities oscillates between dependence and rebellion. The people of the “Reitschule” knew that the use of the building depends on the

^v (Beutler, 2005)

goodwill of the city. On the other side, one of the leitmotifs is the categorical refuse of authority imposed by the “bourgeois system”. The most flagrant example is the refuse of police forces solving the problems in front of their entrance (in some cases they even granted “asylum” to aggressive punks after these had attacked police). The relationship reminds of the one between rebellious youngsters and their parents.

The people of the “Reitschule” are apparently living a continuous manifestation of their opposition against the rules “society” tries to inflict on them. Thus, negotiating, adopting and enforcing any kind of rules is a very difficult task.

2. Having a closer look at the environment /historical research

The predominant factor in front of the youth centre is the railway-viaduct. It is one of the most frequented sections of Switzerland’s



railway system. Countless trains pass the building on its north side at a distance of 2 meters. The building and the viaduct form a triangle of 70 by 30 meters, called “Vorplatz”, the trouble zone. The traffic on the viaduct develops a volume that makes normal conversation within the sector difficult. I experienced myself this startling feeling of violence when trying to speak with people. The location of the viaduct itself can also be considered as an act of (structural) violence: Its construction was enforced under the “railway law” which empowered the national railway company to dispossess local real estate owners. The other side of the viaduct, the so-called “Schützenmatte” confirms this impression: a waste

parking lot, where drug delivery by car is frequent. An improvised tourist bus station in one corner is the only element that seems to have a function with some meaning. A short look in old city maps helps to understand that the building of the “Reitschule” and the “Schützenmatte” had formed a spatial unit before the viaduct was built: Riding school and stables in the building, riding garden in front of it. If you prefer dramatic metaphors: the viaduct has cut the head from the body and left two dead parts.

3. Conclusion

“Reading” the place and the people as elements of a system that has its own very particular logic or “theme”, slowly blends into the identification of the meaning that people assign to the place. The lecture shows that the key of the situation in front of the youth centre (and on its other side, on the “Schützenmatte”) lies in the viaduct; the viaduct as an object and the viaduct as a historical event. It has destroyed the previous meaning of the whole sector and left behind two parts, unable to redefine a new meaning out of them. This act of violence is omnipresent, but remains unsaid. The latent violence on the perimeter, the futility of measures trying to fight it, they both give rise to the assumption that we basically look at a suffered, but not identified violence. The fact that the city abandons the ancient riding garden on the other side to become a waste land parking lot aggravates and confirms the general desolate situation. For the occasional or regular visitor, it is also a very sad access to the concerts, theatre and film events taking place within the building of the “Reitschule”.

4. Proposed measures

A list of measures was proposed to the city. Some of them regarding the “Schützenmatte”, some the viaduct, and some of organizational nature:

Youth centre

- Redefinition of the “Vorplatz” including a code of conduct to be negotiated with all involved parties;
- “deale -invitation”: the drug dealers (most of them without legal residence status in Switzerland) are invited to visit the interior of the centre and to eat at the long table. They see in which environment they work and are taken in responsibility as guests (a strong responsibility in their original countries). This idea comes from Napoli. (discussed, not implemented)
- A firmer position of the city authorities towards the management group of the youth centre: we give xxxxx, in exchange we expect: xxxxx. (not executed)
- City youth-workers take care of the very young people on the “Vorplatz”, a coping way of intervention (not implemented)

Viaduct

- The viaduct is transformed into a “gate to the Reitschule”. Thus, its central function in the history of the place materialises, comes into visible existence. By defining the gate under the viaduct, the “Vorplatz” will be included in the Reitschule. The intervention has organizational and artistic elements. (discussed, in planning)
- Regular events like a flea market or others are organised under the viaduct. This measure adds a hosting aspect to the viaduct and compensates its destructive and violent aspects (discussed, in planning)

Schützenmatte / city-centre

- Long term: An overall planning process for the whole perimeter is to be launched (becomes a project of my own)
- Short term: The bus terminal is to be moved and equipped with toilets, showers and a little bar (implemented this year)
- The parking lot is to be rearranged so as to facilitate and visualize the access to the “Reitschule” (implemented this year)

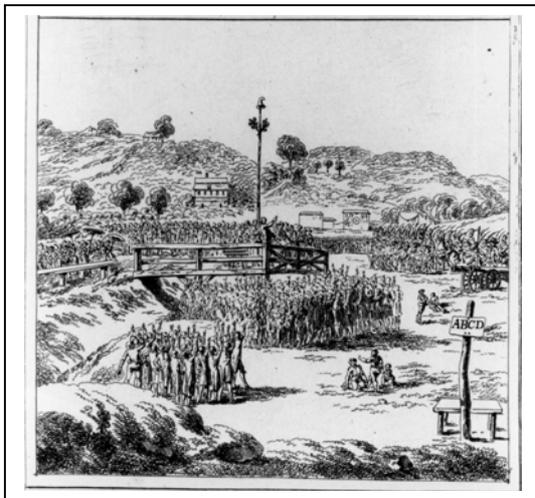
Most of my proposals that lie within the city authorities’ jurisdiction will be realized. Within the youth centre, the situation has worsened since I have made the study. (Too) much energy goes into keeping a minimum of order and maintaining the cultural activities.

Further Work

The proposal concerning “Schützenmatte” to undertake a larger planning process for an even larger perimeter including the parts of the city built at the end of the 19th century has led me to associate with a historian, an urban planner, a mobility expert and an art historian. Together, we have applied the described analysis process to a bigger perimeter, including also the part of the city built at the end of the 19th century. One can observe that this whole part of the city doesn’t

work like the rest, having a tendency to become a problem-zone. The situation on the "Schützenmatte" and "Reitschule" can be interpreted as the crystallisation of the perimeter we analyse in this new phase of our work. We propose to the mayor of Bern to pursue a project in 3 phases:

1. Historical, social and urban planning studies about the development of the perimeter, as a base for further action/measures.
2. Launching of a negotiation process including all stakeholders in view of a vision, of what the perimeter can be and how it will function and interact with its environment is elaborated.
3. Development of detailed projects for all measures developed/planned during phase 2.



Oath on the mediation-act (Dunker)

The studies have begun meanwhile and offer a discovery of a "long-term-theme" in the whole sector of the city. In the middle-ages for example, the area of the "Schützenmatte" and "Reitschule" was a shooting range for the nobles. Lying outside the defense-systems it was also a place where the young people of the city organized their big parties; out of sight and control of their parents, neighbors and city authorities but just a few steps away from the secure city.

Or, as another example, Napoleon made sign the new mediation-act he imposed to Switzerland, the "Helvetik", on a central spot in the middle of Switzerland: The shooting-range of the leading class he has chased away; the "Schützenmatte".

Reference list

- (i) Fabro, Luciano (2004); Pavel Florenskij, VchUTEMAS; Betrachtungen zu den Vorlesungen «Raum und Zeit in der bildenden Kunst»
- (ii) Roth, Gerhard (1997); Das Gehirn und seine Wirklichkeit
- (iii) Maturana, H.r. and Varela F.j. (1987); Der Baum der Erkenntnis
- (iv) Voltaire (1758); *Candid ou l'optimisme*
- (v) Beutler, Martin (2005); Verbesserung der Zugangssituation Reitschule