

THE DIGNITY OF THE PROFANE



The Dignity of the Profane

- an Inquiry into the Everyday Aspect of the Urban, by Klaus Schäfer

[Profane; perception of the everyday; essence of the urban versus conurbation; interspace: niche, gap, availability, wasteland, vacancy; reception (and production) of the everyday in art and architecture; sincerity and irony in architecture; dignity – an environment's right to exist]

In 2004, Kunsthaus Bethanien arts centre in Kreuzberg, Berlin, staged an exhibition of work by several photographers with the title *Zwischen-Städte* (meaning 'intermediate cities', but also 'between cities'). This article grew out of a lecture that I gave as part of the programme of events accompanying the exhibition.

Juliette Gréco, I Hate Sundays

All the days of the week / Sound hollow and empty / But even more bleak / Is pretentious Sunday / Which tries to seem rosy / And play at being generous / Sunday, which imposes / Like a day of blessedness

I hate Sundays! / I hate Sundays!

In the street there's the crowd / Of millions of passers-by / This crowd that pours out / With an air of apathy / This crowd that marches / Like a funeral cortege / To the funeral of a Sunday / That has been dead for ages

I hate Sundays! / I hate Sundays!

You work all the week and also on Sunday / Maybe that is why I am prejudiced / Darling, if only you were close to me / I'd be ready to love all I detest

The Sundays of spring / All lined with sunlight / That sparkle erasing / Yesterday's worries / Sunday full of blue sky / And children's laughter / Of lovers strolling by / Shy oaths of ever after

And of blossom on twigs / And of blossom on twigs

In the midst of the throng / That flows without haste / We'll be carried along through the streets with the rest / Hand in hand, me and you / Without trying to know / What tomorrow will bring / Not hoping for anything

But other Sundays / But other Sundays

And all the upright people / Who are said to be respectable / And those who are not / And who want to be thought so / And who go to church / Because it's the custom / Who change their shirt / And put a nice suit on / Those who sleep twenty hours / Because nothing can shift them / And the early risers / Who go off fishing / Those whose day is reserved / For a walk in the graveyard / And those who make love / Because they are bored / Will envy our bliss / Just as I envy theirs / For having Sunday / Believing in Sunday / Loving Sunday / As much as I hate it.

(*Je Hais Les Dimanches*, C. Aznavour / F. Veran; freely translated by R. Toovey)

The Profane

The following reflections are concerned with the everyday part of life, the bridge that spans the intervals of the year, the month and the week, between their regular turning points and those that occur unasked. They address the *interspace* of our (urban) life, something that I would like to call *profane*: in order to differentiate it, for one thing, from that which is special – or, as the song puts it, the Sunday of the week, the special component of the routine of existence – and for

another, to distinguish it from terms that express the ordinary, as opposed to the extraordinary, such as banality, triviality, or plain boredom, the absence of tension.

However, since a much broader scope than that is envisaged here, the term 'profane' needs to be extended, refined. The specific meaning of the phrase 'the dignity of the profane' quickly becomes clear if we try using the qualifying term with other words. Combinations such as 'the dignity of the banal', 'the dignity of the commonplace' and so on do not carry the same conviction. It seems reasonable to suppose that the term 'profane' is coloured by associations with its

antonym. As the opposite of the sacred or the exalted, the profane apparently contains a shade more dignity from the outset, without being labelled by it.

We find the profane everywhere in our environment. If considered in relation to a landscape, then every trace, every change, speaks of types of vegetation that are profane, yet are characteristics of a texture, and which constitute a kind of 'culture of place' for the inhabitants.

In the following pages, I would like to demonstrate that this definition, the 'dignity of the profane', is a necessary trait of everyday existence in the city.



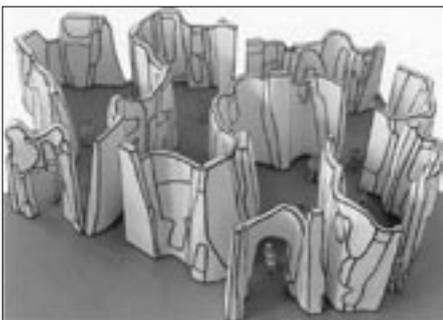
From the Philips phonogram booklet: Juliette Gréco, *Je Suis Comme Je Suis*, 1951. 1955, Graphisme Antoine Leroux-Dbuys¹

The Song about Sunday

(J. Gréco, *Je Hais Les Dimanches*¹)

The subject of Juliette Gréco's song is the tension between the everyday and the special – a conflict in which Sunday comes out the worst off, either because the 'day of rest' fails to compensate for commonplace tribulations in the overall balance of the week, or (more likely) because the singer rejects the programme imposed upon Sunday by a prescribed way of life. The song criticises the rituals that rob even a free space of the freedom that it should offer. Apart from this, it addresses a rhythm of life that can be rejected and which is nonetheless extant, the rhythm between the rule and the exception, in which simplicity is put in opposition to boredom.

A Band between Things



Jean Dubuffet, *Rue et immeubles de la ville*, 1969²

The everyday is that which is not really named, which needs no mention as long as it functions; it is the framework, the basic structure, unheeded in obscurity; it is a level at which things get done as a matter of course. At most, it becomes evident when it produces something deviant, when malfunctions occur.

Broadly speaking, widely differing frames of reference can be identified at the level of the everyday, both dynamic and static ones, which we have at our disposal as a matter of course: the

frameworks of society form a multi-dimensional space that extends as far as the foundations of time. The public sphere is one of these frameworks and it is one whose commonality can – indeed must – express itself spatially. The culturally anticipated model for this is urban space and its constituent components.



"The strong urban gesture of the four towers of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in the new Seine Rive Gauche district of Paris, is lost among the neighbourhood's other forms, all competing for attention"
BNF, PARIS, 1996, arch.: Dominique Perrault

In urban space, the special confronts the profane. The monument in all its symbolism (inherent and superficial) forms a counterweight to the accumulation of many profane components: a square, or a garden, confronts the street network. The counterpart of the exception materialises as a continuous sequence of façades, bounding space. Here we encounter the classical distinction between figure and background, between special and commonplace functions in the city.

The band between things, the multitude of buildings, also acquires symbolic meaning here, a meaning that we interpret spatially too. The band is the sign and the physical reality of a sense of belonging together in the city as a *form of life*. The dissolution, the loss of spatial cohesion, even a break in the band, heralds not only the surrender of that cultural hierarchy, the division of roles between figure and background, but also the loss of the 'dignity of the profane': the everyday becomes trivial.

The value of an urban community finds expression in a specific form and its continuation. The absence of communal elements in the city leads to the loss of those that are special, for identity and individuality can only arise from a unifying template. The elevated status of the extraordinary dissipates when it lacks a fixed frame – without the rule, there can be no exceptions!

If, on the other hand, the exception becomes the rule, as 'free Sundays' have shown, that which is commonplace reasserts itself in the 'free space'. Those images of suburbs that seem so interchangeable to us actually bear witness to an individual freedom of movement: in private, so to speak, at a do-it-yourself level.

Dignity and the Profane

When the profane rises above banality, what is it that lends it dignity? – It is the collective (self-) perception of an everyday world, which acquires symbolic character. Dignity expresses itself through self-confidence. Self-confidence, collective symbols and the everyday world are terms that can also be displayed and interpreted architecturally.

And how does something gain in dignity? What is dignity in relation to the city and profanity?

- A cohesion through which the feeling of a *whole* arises and the parts of the whole speak for everyone and everything, since many identify with the image of the whole.

The 'dignity of the profane' is distinct from 'pride in the special'. Inherent in the latter is a collective, mostly conscious and demonstrative interpretation. Dignity, on the other hand, is rather an attribute of the profane; things are permeated by it.

The Dignity of the Imperfect

To bear something with dignity means to suffer something with dignity – something that might possibly be considered a deficiency.

The Spanish Quarter of Naples is characterised by small *bassi* flats on the ground floor. Opening onto the narrow alleyways, as the basis of the small blocks and their regular layout, these one-room apartments directly adjoin the lively topography of the city, consisting of flights of steps and more or less busy roads. Their often sunless situation and the poor living conditions in them were among the reasons why the entire quarter was, at one time, scheduled for demolition. The fierce resistance that its inhabitants put up against this plan was due to the threat of being relocated to the fringes of the city, with the concomitant loss of confidence in the identity of the quarter and the loss of the traditional participation in public life that these apartments permitted, thanks to their odd situation.

- In this we find an expression of a way of life coping with failings and restrictions, which are considered to be its strengths or peculiarities.



“Way of life with failings”, *Bassi* flats in Naples

The Interspace of Dignity

The role of space among buildings, the space in between, assumes crucial importance for the characteristic of urbanity.

Dignity arises in urban space where Bahrtdt’s formula³ of the distinction between public and private applies. Space that cannot be assigned to either the public or the private sphere falls below the threshold of our perception.

Our everyday perception of our environment takes place superficially; we do not consciously assemble things into a whole. The separation of public and private is continually creating questions of sovereignty over the terrain concerned. Externally, this obviously means being able to distinguish well between them (‘Where are we?’), which gives

us security. Intermediate areas (‘Are we allowed to be here?’) are put out of our minds and leave a sense of insecurity. Dignity (our own) arises in places where we are allowed to be and where others – in the form of a building – constitute a counterpart.

The whole appears spatially via a step-by-step awareness of a connection. In the same way that cross-hatching gradually becomes denser, coherence establishes itself over the sum of the parts and transitions.

When does the (communal) band tear?

- In the architecture of an individual (city) building, for example, when the connection between its power of expression and its confirmation of spatially or typologically unifying elements is abandoned. The desire for individual display always exists in relation to the construction of the whole. If being different is a purely formal goal of the design, then the unifying elements are debased.

Variety in interspace!

- Conversely, an interspace in the city can become a niche that produces *diversity* (Jane Jacobs⁴). The interspace, the joint, as an anarchic element of the urban identity. The interstices of dignity, which can be seen as an internal phenomenon of growth, like the cambium beneath the bark of a tree, is also the space of the Other, the element of tolerance belonging to an ‘invisible city’. This interspace means permitting something, putting up with niches in one’s own fabric, even making them possible, as long as the communal band does not tear. The ‘dignity of the profane’ is therefore inherent in the ability to balance things out.

Finally, within this view of things, the romantic – artificial – image of the imperfect is filled with life; the unfinished is a reservoir, the dignified opening for possibilities in the profane. The freedom of the spaces in-between is an indicator of an element of tolerance, of a *dignity in the comprehension of the profane*.

New Urbanism

- the Transfiguration of the Perfect

Ranged against this are the built clichés of the urban in the housing developments of New Urbanism. Openness and places that are not specified down to the last detail are the enemy of these

planned and packaged idylls. Postulates of density with simultaneous restriction of the number of inhabitants, of mixed use with the exception of manufacturing, or of social diversity with the aim of attracting the middle class: these all lead in the direction of the *eternal Sunday*. The detached house, mutated into a terrace of semis, does not produce a sustainable city.

Zwischenstadt

– the Transfiguration of the Imperfect

(Zwischenstadt: the ‘City Inbetween’)

With his book *Zwischenstadt* [Cities Without Cities]⁵, the well-known German town planner Thomas Sieverts coined a term that was readily adopted by planners and architects (of the cityscape). In it, Sieverts not only describes the spatial and functional state of European suburbs as dispersed, but also puts them on the path to acceptance. A paradigm shift was intended to bring about a new, constructive approach to planning the areas destined for suburbanisation.

Yesterday’s terms for the classical suburb, the *faubourg*, were followed in the twentieth century by others: commuter belt, satellite town, dormitory town, suburbia. The Ruhr Valley conurbation (Germany), Randstad (Netherlands), Bodenseestadt (Germany) and Regionalstadt (Switzerland) denote future agglomerations, which can no

³ Hans-Paul Bahrtdt, *Die moderne Großstadt* [The modern city], p. 83: The formation of a public and a private sphere as a criterion for being urban. “Our hypothesis is: a city is a settlement in which the whole of life, meaning everyday life, shows a tendency to polarise, i.e. to take place either in the social aggregate state of the public, or in that of the private. A private and a public sphere develop, which are closely correlated without sacrificing the polarisation. Conversely, areas of life that cannot be defined either as ‘public’ or ‘private’ lose importance. The more marked that polarity and correlation between the public and private spheres becomes, the more urban the character of life in such a settlement becomes, from a sociological point of view. The less that this is the case, the less pronounced the urban character of a settlement is.”

⁴ For Jane Jacobs (author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*), diversity means, among other things, the extent to which the old fabric continues to exist, such that its niches offer sufficient space for the new without straining the social structure of a city district.

⁵ Thomas Sieverts, *Zwischenstadt* – [Between place and world, space and time, city and countryside]; *Bauwelt Fundament*

longer be related by name to a single city of origin and which are “seen as part of an urban organism that is subjected to constant change, which no longer projects any ‘image’” (Sieverts⁶). The term ‘image of the city’ is taken here to mean a legible, self-contained form, being the classical mark of a ‘European city’.

The Phenomena of Interspace (Spaces of Memory)

The spaces of collective memory are eradicated when the city’s population is displaced into suburbs; they become places of individual memory, because every field and every path is remembered and constitutes home. However, when what is one’s own becomes aesthetically and culturally privatised, that which is communal remains an unshared and thus a transient experience. The nomadising, rootless aspect of the structure of the suburbs determines the way in which they are perceived. The economic and rational nature of the *Zwischenstadt* depends on mobility. A small measure of persistence earns it the advantages of interchangeability and dynamism. The central places that once constituted the city and indeed its name turn into leisure attractions and are divested of everyday life, of the profane, bit by bit.

The term *Zwischenstadt* in itself negates a bipolarity. It raises the indifferent to the status of an essential characteristic of a world in which differences have been ironed out.

Zwischenstadt in Countryside and City

The loss of cohesion may well be regrettable in the city, whereas the countryside is perceived as spoiled in proportion to the degree of continuity (even a loose one) between is built there. This means that the ‘solitary’ monument certainly meets with acceptance and can even be seen as a counterpoint to the landscape.



“A building highlights the character of the landscape”

Villa Malaparte on Capri, arch.: Adalberto Libera, 1938

Running counter to this, however, is our confirmed tendency to differentiate between urban and non-urban as well as between rural and non-rural.

In the indifferent interspace, a deficit of the *Zwischenstadt* becomes apparent: one which could at first be considered an advantage. If its open spaces acquire aesthetic aspects, a kind of ‘cultivated emptiness’ as it were, then the arbitrary self-generation that constitutes the potential of the inner-city niche is lost; the ‘thoughtless emptiness’ that is the main characteristic of the *Zwischenstadt* repels us. An initially desirable amount of design reduces the degree of freedom inherent in the *Zwischenstadt*, whereas the plea for the temporary possibilities can just as well be addressed to a city that is capable of redevelopment at its heart.

The Typologies of Interspace

Beside the (classical) *Zwischenstadt* as a term for the texture of urban sprawl, other such ‘distance-forming elements’ can be subsumed in an otherwise self-contained city fabric, which give rise to breaks, counteract a continuum and thus insert a piece of *Zwischenstadt* into the city. Transit spaces, for example, which offer local traffic little in the way of space for exchange and communication, and which predominantly serve national or regional transport needs. They form an inner periphery.

However, architecture itself often adopts the aim of interrupting an urban continuum or hindering it from

coming into existence.⁷

First of all, interspace contains the phenomenon of a tension between objects, which can be moderate, scarcely perceptible, and which constitutes the physical attraction of a space. In relation to urban environments, interspace is also synonymous with appropriated space, the (life) game of modesty and distance in the vicinity of buildings.

Rudolf Arnheim⁸ compares the relationship between objects in space with the interval of time between two notes in music, a void that is simultaneously filled with tension. For August Endell⁹ too, “...the emptiness that spreads out rhythmically between the walls” (of the city) is the music of space.

Eugène Atget, Picturesque Corner in Sceaux, 1922¹⁰



⁷“To soften a hard space. – What was conceived as a point of attraction becomes a separator”
Sports hall, Schöneberg, Berlin, arch.: Hinrich Baller, 2003

⁶ Excerpt from cover text, *Zwischenstadt* [Cities without cities: an interpretation of the *Zwischenstadt*], T. Sieverts

⁸ Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, Ch. 1. Elements of Space

⁹ August Endell, *Die Schönheit der großen Stadt*, [The beauty of the big city. Chap. ‘The life of space’] p.72

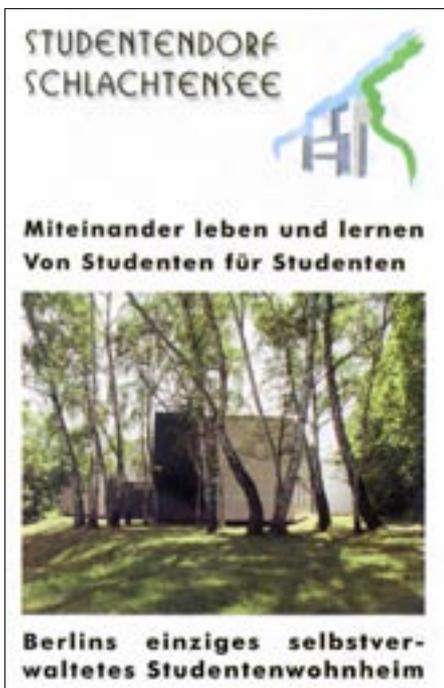
The *Zwischenstadt* in Us

The causal interconnection, of open spaces for example, as the symbol of an open society has penetrated very deeply into every cultural perception (and, possibly, rejection) of urban ways of life. The superimposition of titles on the following images is intended to illustrate the extent to which associations are credible for the reader and how far we are willing to go along the intended stereotypes.



“We see what we believe.” Robert McNamara, former Minister of Defense of the U.S.A., on war reporting during the Vietnam war¹¹.

Advertising often implies an association between communal living, as a social category, and communing with nature.



Schlachtensee Student Village
Living and learning with one another / by students for students / Berlin's only self-managed student hall of residence
(Cover of a leaflet advertising a student hall of residence in Zehlendorf, Berlin, 2003)

Moreover, terms such as ‘concrete jungle’ play with the inequality of the urban and the natural. It is worth emphasising how fundamentally our preconceptions are determined by the

cultural connotations of city and landscape. As times change, the positive or negative connotations of these terms are often completely reversed.

The media often treat close proximity to other people as a drawback of urban life, while propagating the ideal of – unspoilt – nature as a possible place to live - the latter in connection with the familiar and the former as a confrontation with the unfamiliar.



Joel Sternfeld, *Rush Hour*, 1976 ¹²



All text superimposed on images on this page is by the author

Conversely, the ideal of baroque garden design in the seventeenth century was the city of perfectly organised spaces. In the early twentieth century, the artists of the Futurist movement in Italy hailed the ‘noise of the street’¹³ as the dawn of a new age.

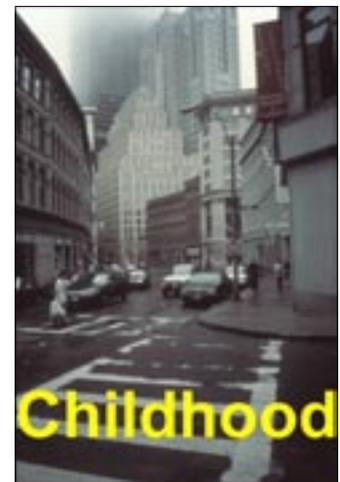


Although these bricks might seem hard and impervious, they nonetheless represent a roof over our heads,



whereas the flowers of a lush meadow cannot hide the fact that we could also get wet there. In turn, the comparison of images below reveals (our?) current prejudice against urban life:

Downtown Boston



Concerning our ability to interpret artworks, Arthur C. Danto¹⁴ argues that “...in fact, our aesthetic reactions are often a function of the convictions that we have about an object.”

¹⁴ Arthur C. Danto (philosopher and art critic), *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace - a Philosophy of Art*, Ch. 4. Aesthetics and the Work of Art

Art and the *Zwischenstadt*

– Observing the Everyday

One of the ways in which we observe everyday life is unquestionably art, in all its manifestations. In this respect, it functions as a medium, which like a mirror of society highlights the culture of the *Zwischenstadt*, analyses it and paraphrases it. The question of how the planning of suburbanisation is influenced by the reception of the culture of the *Zwischenstadt* will be examined here taking as an example the fine arts and a specific group of planners and architects.



¹⁵ Exhibition view, 1996: **Gabriele Basilico, Stefano Boeri**, Italy – Cross Sections of a Country

Gabriele Basilico and Stefano Boeri walked through Italian suburbs following six notional cross-sections, recording their impressions in text and pictures, which they then exhibited.¹⁵ – A world unfolds beyond the clichés of the classical self-contained Italian city that we know from guidebooks: one gets the impression of watching the country submerge in European suburban monotony.

– When art becomes an observer of daily life in the suburbs, the question arises of what it wants to do, what it can do and whether it wants to achieve something. Is it functioning on the level of photojournalism, by making public what lay hidden until then? Here is one instance of many in which the *Zwischenstadt* is presented as a mirror of our present age. Perhaps the received image of Italy referred to above is called into question as a result.

This kind of portrayal of the *Zwischenstadt* puts a particular state of affairs within a (picture) frame, which the mediator sees beyond. It shows phenomena of disjunction and emptiness, for which scenes representing them have been selected. What is put in the frame and what is left outside it need to be connected; the essential thing, in this case, is what remains outside the field of view.

Art and the *Zwischenstadt*

– Instinct and Irritation

What is it in our generally casual observation of strangers that enables us to recognise whether a movement is natural or contrived, to tell when something appears artificial or handicapped, that is to say, has an irritating aspect to its character?

– We have a sense for the profane rhythm of a human movement and for deviations from it, for the choreography of a simple action and its synchronicity.¹⁶ Our contextual sense of the *genius*



Cottbus, Spremberger Vorstadt 2004

loci functions in a similar way, as a yardstick among a multiplicity of external relationships – such as that of old next to new. We involuntarily seek to order things and to put their relationships into a historical sequence, according to which the old and traditional form the background for the new, while the modern is embedded in the traditional.

In the above example, we see

creates distance in the *Zwischenstadt*, one whose inverse energy cannot be large enough for a shared space. As in an exploded view drawing, it pulls things apart although they have to stay firmly in place.

Art and the *Zwischenstadt*

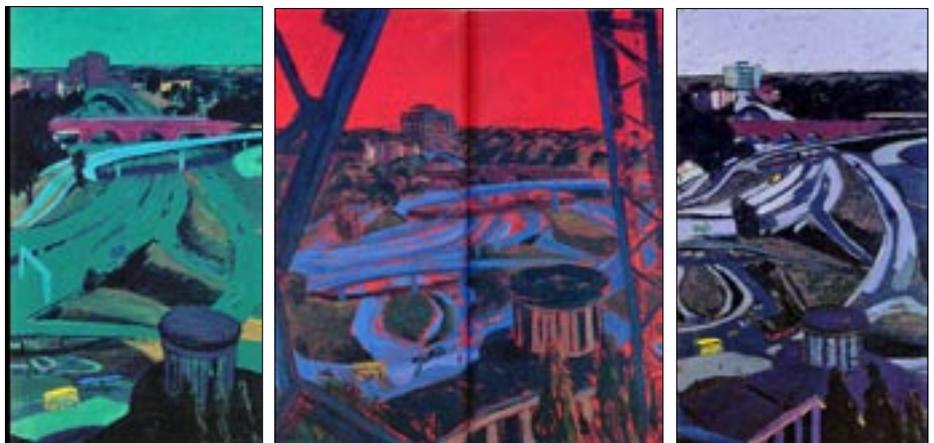
– Aesthetic and Physical Distance

We can judge images which have the *Zwischenstadt* as their subject by their aesthetic qualities, whereby a distance between the viewer and the place becomes apparent. Does this distance have an influence upon our practical behaviour? Or does it bring about acceptance? What are the moral implications?¹⁷ Is the observation of suburbanisation, suburbs and urban sprawl by art connected with a didactic, educational or cathartic intention?

– Art does not want to be received with indifference. At best, it wants to change things - and the planner is reminded of the specific nature of his viewpoint. Although every depiction is based on a convention (below we see an oil painting with glowing colours in the style of realism), the viewer’s interaction with it may be that of an inhabitant, or an architect.

“The colours of day lie dazzling on a site of city dynamism”

Hans Stein, *Autobahn-dreieck Funkturm*, 1973 ¹⁸



the levels of different realities, which although they can be interconnected by what we know, never become aesthetically synchronous – like stage scenery in a performance of objects that do not speak to one another. Their encounter

¹⁶ cf. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace - A Philosophy of Art*. Ch. 1. Works of Art and Mere Real Things

¹⁷ *ibid.* Ch. 1. Works of Art and Mere Real Things

Art and the *Zwischenstadt* – Reality and Deception

The construction of estates in the suburbs, in a post-modern guise¹⁹ (currently that of New Urbanism) – but also in places where space is differentiated into street or courtyard and where consideration has clearly been given to a sense of scale – lives from the memory of the city. The incomplete implementation of a classical vision remains empty and becomes part of the *Zwischenstadt*. We gaze at it and recognise what it purports



Die verordnete Gemütlichkeit [Cosiness by command] Wolf Jobst Siedler¹⁹:

“Spandau. Post-modern residential square. The design of the buildings was influenced by the idea of the Dutch *gracht*, or canal, the fountain by Italian baroque” (excerpt)

to be, although it is not. To paraphrase Aristotle: “The tale of a flying aardvark works only because we know how little the aardvark is able to fly.”²⁰ Is it not an everyday experience of architecture, that we know how it wants to be understood and that we confuse its interpretation with its actual expression?

Art and the *Zwischenstadt* – Sincerity and Irony

The description of suburban spaces can be considered a subject of art in its own right. It occasionally lays bare what we are discussing here: the loss of dignity in the everyday aspects of the city. There does exist, however (so the underlying hypothesis) a close or direct relationship between the dignity of a way of life and its architecture.

Peter Fischli, David Weiss,
Siedlungen, Agglomerationen [Settlements, agglomerations], 1992 ²¹



These ways of life are often treated ironically: ironic depictions allude in their content to something with which the author of the allusion only feels connected in a rhetorical way. In other words, an open-ended question is posed more or less simultaneously. Thus the author distances himself from the content of the depiction.²²

Scepticism and irony are typical elements of modernism and, to a great degree, of postmodernism. The discrepancy between ideal and reality and a ‘melancholy suffering’²² on account of this can be overcome by this form of scepticism and irony – scepticism about one’s own feelings and irony in respect of one’s own convictions. Permanent irony, however, has to be categorised as existentially destructive. It is not located in life itself.²²

Dirk Baecker²³ introduces the term *Neue Ernst* (new sincerity) as a form of sincerity that is created by works of art in the observer or consumer. It is a small step (and a permissible one at this point) to transfer this term from art to architecture and thus to relate ‘new sincerity’ to observers and users of contemporary architecture:

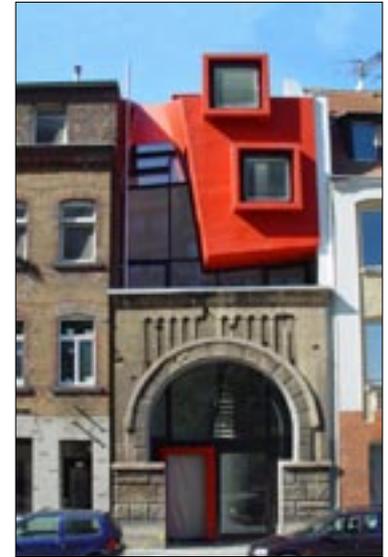
„New sincerity is the result of the game with sincerity. Being able to play around with sincerity means being able to comprehend it on one hand as the other side of the game, but on the other hand as a pre-requisite for the possibility of change from one side to another. The new sincerity [...] is the unity of the difference between sincerity and playfulness – and with that the experience of non-differentiability between sincerity and playfulness. If irony is a play upon sincerity, then the new sincerity is the experience of the sincerity of all play.“²³

Zwischenstadt, Architecture and Art

Artist Architects – the Rejection of the Profane

What relationship do art and building, artistic endeavour and craft endeavour, have to one another?

- Good architecture becomes evident in the way in which it serves its purpose. Difference as an aesthetic goal relies on contrast as the characteristic that sets it apart. The opposite of ‘not arousing attention’ becomes ‘disrespect’. Artistic independence turns into a peculiarity by which the architect seeks to distinguish himself from the building engineer.



Office and residential building, Bayenthal, Cologne, arch.: Manuel Herz, 2003

Arthur C. Danto¹⁴: “What purpose does it serve in art to have something that so closely resembles life that no difference can be named between art and life in the categories of inner content?”... (-answer,) “...only to the extent to which art is not a continuation of life, is it art.”²⁴

- It is in this that art and architecture are distinct from one another. The way to architecture is through skilled craftsmanship, but the result is primarily a social one.



„The housing estate as a formal design brief“, Housing estate, Ypenburg, Netherlands (VINEX Programme), arch.: MVRDV, 2001



²⁰ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace - A Philosophy of Art*. Ch. 5. Interpretation and Identification

²⁴ *ibid.* Ch. 1. Works of Art and Mere Real Things

²² cf. Rudolf Lütke, *Der Ernst der Ironie* [The sincerity of irony], introduction p.8

²³ Dirk Baecker derives the concepts of *Neue Ernst* from a definition by Nietzsche, in which the recipient brings it into existence.

The Transfiguration of the Commonplace

In the design of large-scale housing schemes, the collective becomes a formal subject of the architecture. Out of the ‘dilemma’ of the commonplace, the sublime is contrived by interpreting the brief in an artificial way. (Playful) wit and forced originality become



“A place for flower beds and shrubs?”

Multi-storey housing, Almere-Buiten, Netherlands, arch.: Marlies Rohmer, 2001

prerequisites of exaggeration, one that degenerates into a competition to see how far daily life can be concealed and extravagance put in the foreground. The people who live in such places become bystanders and stage extras for a pretence to (artistic) virtuosity with the goal of designing mass housing as a mirror of social conditions.

The *Zwischenstadt* as Ideology

The current VINEX projects²⁵ in the Netherlands, especially, are accompanied by a high degree of acceptance of suburbanisation on the part of planners (and indeed of the general public) as building work progresses on the *Randstad*²⁶, which will extend across a large part of the country. Furthermore, these ‘progressive’ concepts of the city serve to build up a type of town planning into an ideology of the ‘tried and tested’ *Zwischenstadt* for the whole of Europe. Technical innovation, reading and recognising social processes, and ecology (misunderstood as closeness to nature) coupled with pragmatic realism have all become ideals of town planning and architecture. In this way, an avant-garde whose progress lies in a commitment to actual fact becomes a component of a *new conservatism*.

The Culture of Doubt

As I suggested earlier, architecture has developed a relationship to its own subject whose origin is to be found in art: ironic distance has been adopted as a contemporary critical attitude. Thus it comes easily to consider oneself as an

‘abstract instrument’; one observes oneself at work. This is an attitude towards work that was of great importance to production in the Minimalist art movement of the 1960s, especially – and that with a highly theoretical framework²⁷. It made not only the result, but also the process and the abstract basis (working on a cube, e.g. the ‘Conceptual Art’ of Sol LeWitt)²⁸ part of an aesthetic quest.

“Does not irony contain a shyness of reality and does it not stand for that ‘infinitely easy game’ with nothingness?” (Kierkegaard)²⁹

The myth of rationalism is one of the intellectual pillars of modernism. In it, irony and doubt serve as a source of vitality, without which the project of enlightenment is in danger of ossifying. In deconstructivism, this ironic stance is already evident in the name; ironically inspired art, too, cultivates ambiguity in this sense.

“Whoever wants to learn the ‘art of living’ has to practise the art of doubt,” is how Michel Foucault³⁰ summarises the credo of Modernism (in art).

Dignity

Perhaps now it may no longer seem so far-fetched to put some initial thoughts about the term of dignity (in relation to human existence) in relation to architecture and its urban order.



Stuttgart inner city, 1960s

The Dignity of the City

The shape taken by the city is the result of human planning and design intentions. Uncontrolled developments are – mostly – pragmatically conditioned decisions of the moment, in succession.

Dignity implies human ability and responsibility to give expression to a design intention, to create and to imple-

ment, or to dispense with all of that.

According to Albert Camus³¹, the *absurd* only has a meaning if one does not declare oneself in agreement with it. This is the foundation of the initial certainty that leads us, via the recognition of the absurd, to an attitude towards that which is perceived. It is not until the transition from the absurd to *revolt*, according to Camus, that life becomes imbued with meaning and value.

It is our sensation of dignity on which these conditions of existence are founded, conditions that we see contravened by a lack of relationships (the absurd) and which bring revolt as a consequence.

According to Immanuel Kant³¹, the attitude appropriate to dignity is *respect*, in the sense of an aspiration that is not only personal to each one of us, but also collective. Respect as a subjective determinant of the will means the exclusion of proclivities and self-love as sensual affects of the will, or as Kant says, the ‘humbling of the sensual nature’ of the human being under the morality laws. In so far as the dignity of humanity applies to each and every individual, contempt for another person implies contempt for oneself.

Analogously to the way in which this places dignity in relation to respect within a social framework, of whatever nature, I would like to apply Kant’s formula to urban space as a posit that shows itself visually and thus as a form. The collective reveals itself as an urban form, which is composed of individual units or constituents. Respect for the whole is therefore inherent in each individual component. Deviation from it (disrespect) ultimately undermines one’s own dignity and with it meaning and value.

25 VINEX (Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra) – national house-building programme with the goal of 750,000 new dwellings between 1995 and 2015.

26 Randstad Holland – an urban belt around the Groene Hart (green heart), being formed by merging several cities into a ring.

27 cf. Elke Bippus, *Serielle Verfahren* [Serial processes] – Pop Art, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art and Postminimalism

28 *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, by Sol LeWitt, 1967

29 Soeren Kierkegaard, quoted by Rudolf Lütke in *Der Ernst der Ironie*²² [The sincerity of irony, Ch. III. ‘Romanticism: from dream of unity to irony of brokenness’], p. 54

30 cf. Ulrich Beck, *Die Erfindung des Politischen* [The invention of the political] p. 256

31 cf. Metzlers Philosophie Lexikon, under the term *Würde* [dignity]

Writing about the relationship of dignity and respect³¹ in political space, Niklas Luhmann³² remarks, “dignity is the ideal of successful self-presentation and respect for dignity by the State means protecting the space in which the constitution of personality becomes possible.” Here the argument is broadened to address a social framework, and to this definition can be added the matter of a communal design intention toward that which represents a public space.

If the city embodies the artificial with dignity, how dignified is nature? - On the subject of how the natural comes about, Hans Jonas³³ writes, “everything organic, and nature as a whole, is an independent unit, which is endowed with dignity and as such may not be subjected to arbitrary treatment.”

It could be that the dignified expression of the one also contains the dignity of the other – or rather, not to mingle city and countryside would in itself constitute a more dignified approach to both: our environment.

***Zwischenstadt*, Dignity and Everyday Enchantment – Summary**

The *Zwischenstadt* is due to be liberated from the suburb’s image of a mere attachment. Following an enhanced and extended concept of the cityscape³⁴ in arranging functions as adjoining areas, an independent *Zwischenstadt* is to be created, with the edge of one marking the beginning of the next, the city without form indeed (without image⁵, see T. Sieverts). The (land)scape is again separated from the customary literal meaning of the modern term ‘cityscape’, initially in order to protect it from the city. A visually connotated term is coined for the spatially opened up (and thus per se mixed) city: *Zwischenstadt*.

It is, however, the animated monument of a programme for life that we refuse to accept, although it is functionally refined and constantly revised by planners in the direction of an urban appearance – the built logic of ‘normative’ sequentialised life.

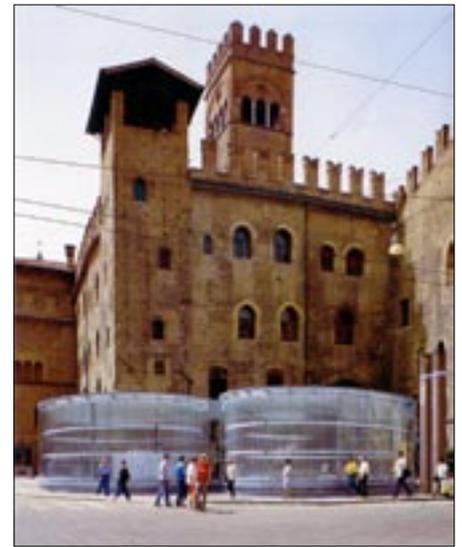
To *hate Sundays* means despising these imposed rules.
- The functional division that says sleep here, work there and relax over there

compels us to lead a life predetermined by the planners. A life that exchanges uncertainty for unambiguity, in order to avoid the inevitable. The reduction of risk is a goal; sustainability awaits the new energy balances.

The space of society, of the city, which is comprehensible to everyone (and that is what makes it representative), becomes an abstract – virtual – and yet unquestionably existing social sphere. But the nature of participation in it has changed; it has become foreign to the body – in a disconcerting sense. Of course, this does not exclude participation. But it is divested of its sensuality and does, in a certain way, radicalise things, because filters replace the density of public space: media.

Seen thus, the *Zwischenstadt* has become a ‘media space’ at the public level, and one that is worth while designing.

The amusements on offer for shoppers in the CentrO (new town centre of Oberhausen, see picture) and the history we breathe in while shopping in a



“The glazed pavilions draw their power to impress us from the contrast between their forms and those of their surroundings. This is used to build up a contrast which it would no longer be possible to create in a city such as Stuttgart or Hamburg. A piece of *Zwischenstadt* is created at an elementary level.”

e-Bo³⁵, Bologna, 2003, arch.: Mario Cucinella



CentrO - new town centre of Oberhausen, Urban Entertainment Centre, image detail³⁶

mediaeval castle or an old town centre are not a mixture, but rather the weird excesses of crude target-setting. Where the shell of the city becomes a functional shell and is thus limited to a territory of use, we are trapped in the regularity of clarity. Anything foreign (in the sense of ‘not serving a purpose’ or ‘out of place’) remains excluded.

The dignity of the profane is a component of the conventional city in many places; there, the magic of everyday life links its spaces together. These spaces are characterised by spatial and social density, disturbance and harmony, restriction and extension, irrational alternation between proximity and distance, and the polarisation of life.

Berlin, December 2008
(Translation by Richard Toovey)

31 cf. Metzlers Philosophie Lexikon, under the term *Würde* [dignity]

32 Niklas Luhmann, expert in law and social science

33 Hans Jonas, philosopher and religious expert

34 (here) cityscape: ideal of a compositional landscape of open space and buildings

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