Trojan Horses and other social animals

Michael Obrist — feld72

In 2007 Gilberto Kassab with one law changed the perception of the public space and the possibilities of architecture in a city of 11 million people (20 millions in the greater metropolitan area). The Mayor of São Paulo with the "Lei Cidade Limpa" (The law for the clean city) re-defined the rule of advertisement in public space, and in fact he banned it. Empty billboards have become the fragile remains of a formerly overexposed city, but it is in the night, when the main difference between the present and the past is evident:

No memories of Time-Square, no global competition against Tokyo's Ginza, no evocation of Bladerunner. A city where light has just been reduced again to illuminate, and not to communicate. A city full of beauty farms and cosmetic surgery, but no billboard with seduction through advertisement of the perfect female body in public space anymore. As director (and educated architect) Fernando Meirelles („City of God") stated, for the first time he can „see" the city without having to „read" it continuously.

As our perception is focused on recognising those things that are new and "added" to our visual field faster than those that are removed, it becomes a surreal experience going through São Paulo at night. A city-walk with phantom pains. The biggest urban agglomeration of South-America has become one of Italo Calvinos "Invisible Cities", where one defining and exaggerated element creates a specific city. São Paulo's naked architecture.

Architettura é (soltanto) architettura, Aldo Rossi?
It were billboards and sign system that created a new impulse to architectural theory, when Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour in 1979 "learned from Las Vegas", and it was just a little law in 2007, that made the "decorated shed" impossible in the most prestigious Brazilian urban area of 1500 km².

Space matters.
But some parts of the advertisement industry tried to find alternative ways: An informal system has emerged, people hired for "carrying" advertisement on movable signboards and even on their clothes are popping out on different part of the streets, flexible enough to react on police presence and on customer's behaviour. The informal and the illegal formed a strong alliance. It's the body that now becomes the last frontier, the remaining moving spatial element for advertisement free of restrictions.

When feld72 was invited by curator Lilli Hollein as the Austrian contribution to the Sao Paulo Biennal in 2007, it were exactly those mechanism that intrigued us and that we reflected with our installation and intervention on site. It is the relation of space and our contemporary society and those shifting borders between architecture, urbanism, art and other disciplines that interest us and define our practice. To react on the complexity of our world, we have to redefine the "arsenal of architecture" and to enrich it with new tools, strategies and tactics.

The "urban agglomeration" that could once been easily called the "city" still is the most complex social, cultural and technological artefact mankind has invented. Today the dynamics of the development of our build environment and the new technologies of zenithal perception like satellites has brought us an epistemological dilemma. The more we see from above, the less we seem to understand. In the manifestation of the chaos of late 20th century urbanism like in the Rorschach inkblot test we think to recognize forms, but they tell us more about ourselves and our starting points of perception than about the object of our perception. Territories of amnesia, schizophrenic landscapes, hysteric cities. All in search for a definition of their new identity. In this past century of fastest acceleration of mankind, the world has changed, even there where its form seems to have remained.

To understand the transformation of software in our build hardware, we have to go deeper, amplifying our methods, trying to understand "context" in the broadest of its sense. We have to immerge in the labyrinth of the daily (urban) life, without being deluded by the tricks of Daedalus, as Michel de Certeau reminds us in "The Practice of Everyday Life".

Space is not a neutral box. Space is the result of social relations and cultural techniques. Without knowing the different codes and rituals of the different societies we are operating with, we will be always "lost in translation".

If modernism called for a design from "the spoon to the city", we now might ask ourselves, if we don't need to expand this line on both ends to respond in an appropriate way to the complexity of contemporary social space.

"The study of the established body of knowledge of various disciplines is paired up with a "theory through praxis", whereby the experiment seems to be the only

possible way to respond to the new conditions of contemporary space, because there are no "users' manuals" around to follow. A new discourse is formed on the edges of the disciplines, the emergence of a new practice, which is grounded not only in the broad tradition of knowledge of classical architecture schools, but is amplified with the experience of different cultural strategies and tactics of our urban culture (from Dadaism to Situationism, from Punk, DIY and Hacking to participation methods and Cultural Jamming, just to name one line of thought) as well as with the experiments of the "prophets in the desert", the thinkers and protagonists of the Californian counterculture, and their focus on tools." [1]

In the foreword of Steward Brand for the Whole Earth Catalogue in 1969, which he founded inspired by the ideas of Buckminster Fuller, lies a whole program of what design could be about: His intent was to provide "access to tools" so that every reader could "find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested".

It was a search for new strategies and urban tools for specific contexts that was at the beginning of some of our projects:

The FILEkit©, a survivalkit for traffic jams, which should enable the traffic jam victims to understand and use the possibilities of that specific temporary public space, by giving them small tools which could make the distinction between indifference or acting and communicating. The PublicTrailers©, an armada of specific bicycle trailers developed for the public space of such diverse cities as Shenzhen, London and Milan, are based on the idea of offering mobile units with different functions for public space, which alone or in combination could form new situations and possibilities within a city. Tools, flexible enough to be used in different ways, creating an informal system able to react on the temporary needs of some areas. Toronto

Barbecue, a 2-week-Intervention based on a temporary "Schrebergarten" (allotment garden) at the forecourt of the Museums Area of Vienna, was offering a variety of tools to create settings and situations free for everybody to join us. A informal happening based on the idea of increasing possibilities in public space and exploring a unused area in the middle of a city by offering new ways of using and sharing space.

All of this projects were based on the idea of community building, of shifting perception, recreating communication and experience in areas where this elements have gone lost or new potentials were yet undiscovered.

It was the search for conceptual "platforms" and open structures on which the users could build up and find their own way of interpretation – not a linear time setting for a performance, but the construction of a common ground based on increasing possibilities and an ontology of coincidences. Opening up choices. Creating responsibility.

"Only those questions that are in principle undecidable, we can decide."
—Heinz von Foerster

These urban strategies are based on the idea, that in most complex systems there is a specific spot where with a minimum of amount of forces and material you can convert the whole system or change its direction. Bucky's Trimtab.

As the architectural theoretician Kari Jormakka stated, "the architects of feld72 do not approach architecture in terms of established categories of function, form or kind, but rather ask what the city is capable of.(...) while it is certainly possible to appreciate architecture as one of the visual arts, or even study buildings semiotically as systems of signs, the interest in the work of feld72 lies elsewhere. In their performative design the focus is on how the build environment contributes to the construction of a life-world, i.e. how architecture partakes in the constitution and perpetuation of quotidian social relations through the interaction of the body with a structured environment." [2]

Buildings as performative instruments and generators of social space. Trojan Horses with inherent additional programs and platforms for possibilities, that can surprise the users, let them re-discover the adventure and poetry in the everyday.

For the village square in Paasdorf, a little village in Lower Austria, feld72 developed a hybrid little building: a "pimped up" bus-stop that parallel to his function as bus-stop through his design has become a landmark, an information compass for the surrounding land art/public art projects, a stage for the "everyday" and special events with an accessible roof that can become lounge, DJ's pulpit, speaker's corner, and open-air gallery.... The transformation of the village square throughout a system of parking lots, that have an additional function, creates responsibility: every citizen decides if the space he uses becomes just a parking place or remains public in its best ways.

The idea of building as social incubator and as a stage for public life is evident also in the Festival Centre for the Art festival "Steirischer Herbst" in Graz, a temporary building just made of material which was hired for the time of the festival: 2000 recyclable Euro pallets – a cheap, standardised mass product developed for smooth movement of goods for our global economy – are masterfully stacked up to create an annex, that transforms the existing building into a hybrid with unsuspected new possibilities and works as coffee-house, club, lounge, information desk and ticket office, academy, casino, stage, concert hall, in short: as a new agora in town.

Can we build and program Heterotopias, Temporary Autonomous Zones or other specific territories, where the social space is crystallized in another way – opening up for experiences of freedom, experimentation and communication, and thus to discovery and education?

In "The Zone", the winning entry for the competition for the subsequent use of a former NATO-Areal in South-Tyrol in Northern Italy, feld72 developed the idea of an enclosed area, that paradoxically generates freedom in its inside. The former military area is transformed slowly in a field of cultural experiment and social and spatial research. A process-orientated project with no final masterplan, but with the flexibility to let things grow according to needs and feedbacks. A work in constant progress, based on the creation of desire: To enter "The Zone", to be part of this process, to become one of the pioneers changing a place.

The negotiation of space and the process-oriented development of an alternative to the mostly too restricted idea of the traditional masterplan are constant topics in the projects on a big urban scale, i.e. the proposals for the "Manual for Public Space" for Seestadt Aspern, a new urban area for 40.000 people in Vienna, and for the "Bildungslandschaft Altstadt Nord" in Cologne. The latter is a strategic framework plan based on the creation of a new educational landscape made of different pedagogical institutions in a park in the middle of the city. As in the educational buildings planned by feld72, space was seen as the third educator. The framework consisted of developing strategies based on sharing of space and spatial implementations for new concepts of education, transforming the park into a landscape of education and leisure, for both students and citizens.

As in most of the project by feld72 in social space, different methods of participation played a fundamental rule. Participation not as a supply of services with an already known and pre-defined output, but as a starting point for an open process and shared adventure. The expertise of the inhabitants as "connoisseur" of their own surroundings is incorporated into the body of knowledge formed by the other experts, creating a broad understanding of place and social context.

Also in those social housing projects by feld72, where the possible future inhabitants were known, the methods of participation defined an environment, where already from the beginning they have taken responsibility. Through the whole process of participation a community has evolved, supported by their broad understanding of the design and space decisions that formed the different housing complexes. Sharing experiences to become part of one story.

"A story is a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call relevance. In the 1960s, students were fighting for "relevance," and I would assume that any A is relevant to any B if both A and B are parts or components of the same "story". Again we face connectedness at more than one level: First, connection between A and B by virtue of their being components in the same story. And then, connectedness between people in that all think in terms of stories."
—Gregory Bateson in "Mind and Nature"

feld72 in 2005 was invited to Prata Sannita, a village in the Matese regional park close to Naples, by the "Paesesaggio workgroup" for the "Villaggio dell'Arte" project, to work on the questions of migration, identity and territory on site. More than 70% of the population in Italy lives already in that we define "cities", and this number is growing. This percentage not only means the constant growth of (in-between) cities but also and above all the disappearance of the cultural and natural landscapes familiar to us. In a complexity that we possibly are not aware of. The future of these zones threatened with extinction is also Italy's future.

The concept for the project and the starting point of the process was to perceive the shrinking 1500-person-village in whole as a diffuse hotel with still some rooms

available: the abandoned spaces. In just one month, with no architectural plans, but a clear concept and just based on improvisation and research on site, the project was evolved. The Million Donkey Hotel was created with the help of up to 60 volunteers of Prata Sannita, who then worked for an estimated 4300 hours on site, and with the very small materials budget of 10.000 €. With a variety of techniques and the different skills of the "local heroes" (the volunteers who helped to build the project) formerly lost spaces from the abandoned architecture of the medieval village were reactivated as "hotel rooms" with a special "bathroom". All those elements were connected to the already existing micro-economy on site. During "off-season" these spaces can be used by the Pratesi as an extension of public space.

In the following years the process continued, spaces were re-cycled, and new rooms and an amphitheatre created from the ruin of a house followed.

Work is ongoing today, and the hotel is run by an association of the "local heroes". In an area, not far away from the territories which have been precisely described by Roberto Saviano in "Gomorrha" as the "Black Hole" of Italy, in which the main paradigm of space is related to "(in)security", the population has shown resistance to depression, and we were able to start a collective adventure with an open outcome based on one of the simplest, but most important and defining elements of social space: trust.

The Million Donkey Hotel, despite defined by a budget that was ridiculously small compared to our big building projects, shows the same kind of complexity and variety of approach we searched in all our projects.

„... there is no break between the theoretical and experimental projects of feld72 and their designs for buildings: all of their work, irrespective of scale or means, investigates how the world is engaged and perceived through the lens of architecture. And there is an architectural lesson we can draw from this work, namely that the essence of architecture is nothing architectural."
—Kari Jormakka [3]

1   Michael Obrist, Von göttlichen Augen und menschlichem Irren. Raumphänomene in Zeiten von Google Earth in food&grid. raum&designstrategien, Ed. Elsa Prochazka, 2009

2,3 Kari Jormakka, Theory and design in the Fourth Machine Age. On the experimental projects by feld72, in feld72. urbanism – for sale, Ed. Lilli Hollein, Springer WienNewYork, 2007