The post-socialist city and the revaluation of public space. Case study Velenje

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Abstract

This paper discusses how public space is revaluated under the premise of changed political and civic structures by the example of the city of Velenje in Slovenia. Being an important industrial hub, the site was turned into a modern city in the 1950s and 60s by the post-war communist leadership. Planned and built according to principles of modernist town planning and the garden city model, Velenje became a showpiece-city of socialist Yugoslavia. The town center was constituted as a built arrangement of administrative, educational, cultural and recreational facilities, supposedly representing the ideals of socialist-collectivism. The value of the built environment was considered in relation to its expression of a universal order that regulates the lives of the workers and creates a backdrop for mass gatherings and political rallies.

How did the meaning of Velenje's public space transform after Slovenia's independence and in consequence of democratization processes? Currently, dichotomous acts of revaluation occur, which result in diverse ways of aestheticization and revitalization: On the one hand, the architectural heritage of the socialist city is now foregrounded, made visible by stripping it from its political burden, and marketed as tourist experience. This is supported by EU programs like ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the XX Century in Urban Management), which asks for new values of the built environment of former totalitarian regimes in democratic cities. On the other hand, Velenje successively reorganizes its public space. The effective redesign and reprogramming of a vast pedestrian zone serve the production of a different form of publicness in contradiction to socialist planning. Following these phenomena, the question remains how aestheticization and individualization contribute to a continuation of politicization of public space after democratization; and how does its meaning transform under the impact of market mechanisms and economic-liberal tendencies?

The political capability of architecture

To approach the question concerning the meaning of urban form and public space under changed political circumstances through the notion of "revaluation" implies specific reasons. Doubting undifferentiated beliefs in the political potential of architecture is thereby critical. Even if we experience power and authority through architectural settings, architecture does not simply carry political meanings be it communist, democratic or fascist for example.

Firstly, politics in the sense of governmental actions is not the concern of architecture and its task as distinct system. Architecture as discipline is occupied with the formation of forms, syntax, and the realization of spatial orders. The reality of architecture as built environment is the conditioning of space. It is true that architecture *is* politics, but its politics differ from the actions of administrative and legislative political systems. Architecture is articulation of organization. It is a regulatory regime that creates spatial hierarchies through inclusion and separation. It may provide the space for mass gatherings for instance. The *Heldenplatz*, a large square in the center of Vienna, is part of the former emperor's forum and an architectural heritage of the city. In its history, the same architectural and urban setting was used under the premises of different political orders. It contributed to the representational needs of a monocratic political system until the end of the Austrian monarchy in 1918, in 1938 it was the scene of frenetic cheers for dictator Adolf Hitler, which were synonymous with a farewell to Austria's sovereignty, and in 2015 it served the civil protest of 100.000 people demanding the human treatment of refugees coming to Austria and the EU. Is the spatial condition of the *Heldenplatz* now monarchistic, fascistic or democratic?

Secondly, the political symbolic content of architecture itself seems illusive or is simulated at the best. Historian Barbara Miller Lane argued that architects are mistaken about the character "of their expression of specific political programs" while rather responding "to underlying political and social realities."[1] Lane enforced her arguments with a view to 19th and 20th century nationalism that occurred in totalitarian as well as democratic ruled nations. A comparison of public buildings located in different countries revealed there as here the increased demands for historical references in national monuments, which should "suggest their tie to a continuous national identity by massive masonry alone."[2] These buildings, similar in style, were for instance praised by officials of the one side as truly democratic and by officials of the other side as truly national socialist.[3] The recourse to historical references is often connected to political claims to power, but its meaning for certain political systems is associative and constructed.

Another demonstrative example for the autonomous status of architecture is the functionalist architecture of the two German states after World War Two. In the interwar period, modernist architecture frequently experienced setbacks regarding its role in the buildup of nations after 1918. As mentioned above, the creation of national identities

demanded historical references, intelligible to a broad local audience, which modernist architecture was not able and not willing to provide. But after the Second World War, functionalist architecture and urban planning became likewise in West Germany and in East Germany the choice for the rebuilding of war-damaged cities and lost built substance. But how does functionalist architecture express democratic processes and economic miracle on the one side and totalitarian state control and command economy on the other side?

It is only able to do so by the implementation of symbolism. Eagles, swastikas, stars, hammer and sickle are interchangeable political symbols; they are charged with meaning, which is not the meaning of architecture. This ideological ornamentation is in large part purely applied. In most examples it does not even serve architectural purposes like the structural accentuation of architectural forms, which makes it even easier to remove or exchange it without affecting the architecture itself. Symbols, icons, and art pieces co-constitute a representational system that visually maintains the ideals of a society, which again rest on political beliefs and conceptions of the world. It is through iconography that "stable identities" are created and maintained; that "groups share the same representation, the same visions of the world and values, uniting them within the common space of belief."[4]

Values

As architecture itself does not and cannot simply express political programs, it yet receives demands by systems of value that are realized by political systems. This is also what "politicization" truly means. The term refers first and foremost to actions and to a result of doing something; it denotes the forces of socio-political worlds in their attempt to make architecture a part of their systems of value. As it seems impossible to establish stabile associations between certain architectural styles and certain political programs, values are identified as powerful means of groups, institutions and organizations to coopt architecture in their respective programs.

It is for these reasons for instance that the Italian rationalists had difficulties to convince the fascist government of their modernist approach to become the official state architecture. The crisis of the rationalist architecture in the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, in the sense that just a view projects were realized, was also inflicted politically. Even though the rationalists argued that the fascist political revolution and the rationalist architectural revolution were the most significant events of their time, there was never a stable closing of ranks. It was rather two different events happening in the same period of time. The architectural spirit hardly met the political ideals and the rationalist architecture never became a fascist architecture of revolution.

Furthermore, same architectural schemes are valuated differently by diverging socio-political worlds. The modernist architecture of East and West Germany was treated differently after the reunification of the nation by the end of the 20th century. While western modernism was perceived as internalized architectural program, socialist modernist architecture – even presenting similar schemes than its western counterpart – was at many occasions devaluated by the prevailing democratic and capitalist system. A significant portion of the substance became effectively derelict, disappeared and was lost to living architectural history. Consequently, it needed political will to integrate socialist modernist architecture into a different community of interests and values. In this sense, the term "revaluation" seems just to deal with the transformation of architectural and urban legacies of former socialist countries under the aspect of changed political situations and ideals.

Case example

As a case example for this process of revaluation we turn to the city of Velenje in the northern part of Slovenia. In the 20th century, Velenje continuously developed into a major industrial town. Originally, its prosperity was based on the exploitation of lignite deposits. Today, the whiteware-producer *Gorenje* is the biggest employer in the region. In the 1950s and 60s, emphasized by the management of the mine and governed by the post-war communist leadership, the miner's colony was turned into a modern city. Based on the plans for the future coal extraction, "it was calculated [that] the town would have a population of 14000."[5] The new Velenje was planned and built according to principles of modernist town planning and of the garden city model.

On the one hand, the functions of the city were divided into detached areas and connected through traffic arteries. Individual buildings, on the other hand, were again placed into green areas generating the impression of "a city in a park". The planning doctrine followed the modern emphasize on light, air and greenery to enhance the health and well-being of residents generating qualitative and "comfortable housing […] as a contrast to the dark stuffy pits worked by the miners."[6] The modern and sophisticated idea of educating residents towards a better life was integrated into the socialist canon of values and the conception of man, eventually transforming the city's residents "into exemplary members of the socialist community who would take responsible care of their environment, be socially active and regularly participate in cultural and sporting events."[7] Urbanization became an end in itself in terms of ideology and political profiling. The function of urbanization was to create an educational condition from which locals but also students and people from all over the Yugoslavian federative should receive some sort of ideological experience. The new Velenje grew at the same time into a showpiece-project of socialist Yugoslavia and into a propaganda success.

But the defaults of modernist urban planning – to neglect the creation of diverse and lively public space – occurred in the western democracies as well as in the totalitarian CEE-states. Moreover, applied in places like Velenje, the problem intensified. Firstly, the drafting board design led to the distribution of vast public spaces over the city fabric according to planning principles. Adding to this situation was the regimes control over land as so-called public property. Secondly, there were weaker preconditions for the use of public space because of the lack of programs like commerce and shopping, creating a vacuum by curtailing "one the most vital functions of public space – its utility as marketplace."[8] Consequently, "social interaction remained the only viable function of public space"[9] whereas often ideologically motivated and not able to backfill this vacuum.

The public space of new Velenje consists of a network of roads and paths. During the planning phase, the management of the mine insisted on the implementation of a square in the city center to contrast the uniform network of streets. The town square, which carries the name of Yugoslavian dictator Josip Broz Tito till this day, was flanked by administrative, educational, cultural, and recreational facilities formerly regulating the lives of the workers and serving as backdrop for mass gatherings and political rallies. This built arrangement constitutes today a significant part of the architectural heritage of Velenje. How was this example of socialist-modernist planning approached after Slovenia's independence in the 1990s and in the process that transformed Velenje from a socialist to a post-socialist city? Currently, we witness dichotomous acts of revaluation. On the one side, they concern the relevance of the architectural heritage, and, on the other side, the transformation of the form of public space. The consequences are diverse processes of aestheticization and revitalization under the premises of transformed political and societal value propositions.

The architectural heritage

The research on post-socialist cities identified three categories of transformation regarding the socialist landscape. *Separation* refers to the fact that parts of this landscape fall into oblivion and become meaningless in new socio-political realities. *Transition* marks the aspect of re-appreciating the socialist landscape for instance in market economy processes. And *reincorporation* finds new representational and conceptual meanings of the socialist landscape to meet the demands, needs, and values of a society.[10] Velenje's situation is primarily characterized by a transition. At first, the architectural and urban setting lost its ideological value after the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia. In return, the architectural heritage gained value as cultural and touristic asset. It contributes now to a list of local attractions and thus to the economic development of the area. The modernist und functionalist design of the town is now foregrounded, stripped from ideological burden, and marketed as tourist experience.

The revaluation is in reality a process of aestheticization. It emphasizes the qualities of architectural form, the convincing implementation of modernist principles, and the experience of a complete setting of modernist town planning while it trivializes political backgrounds. Contemporary axiology argues that something of aesthetic value appeals to us to develop a positive attitude towards it. We are called up to change our preferences in a way that does justice to the experienced value.[11] In the context of Velenje, the evidences for the aestheticization process are manifold. One aspect is for instance a recently published architectural guide titled *Velenje. A walk through a town of modernism*. It imparts its readers how to perceive and experience modernist architecture. The highlighting of architectural details and explanations about their functional meaning and true materiality reinforce the aestheticization process – eventually leading to the re-appreciation of Velenje's modernist design.

In the case of Velenje, the aestheticization approach is supported by transnational European cooperation programs like ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the XX Century in Urban Management) and co-founded by the EU. ATRIUM focuses on the management of modernist architectural heritages of totalitarian regimes in order to "give value" and "greater visibility" to it. As of November 10, 2015, ATRIUM posted among others the following program objectives:

> "identification of case-studies in areas concerned (analysis of urban & architectonical works, and hence of their underlying concept of city & power, buildings & places of particular signification under past regimes, which could have (or currently have) a new aesthetical, functional & social task in contemporary democratic city; […] preparation of a trans-national Manual of wise management, preservation re-use & economic valorisation of this 'inconvenient' heritage; […]promotion of cultural tourism for economic valorisation of heritage concerned (and training of necessary operators), capable of attracting segments of international, especially European, growing cultural tourism demand, & hence to create new services & jobs in the areas involved."

The built arrangement of Velenje's town center kept its residential, cultural or civic functions; the buildings are still inhabited and used. Already existing commercial facilities programming some parts of the public space became better integrated into the tourist industry. Reinforced was in fact their aesthetic task, which replaced the lost ideological perception. This is one aspect of Velenje's revaluation process; the other aspect is the transformation of the form of public space.

Transformation of the form of public space

Part of Velenje's revitalization strategy is the transformation of public space. In 2014, the city reopened a long stretched pedestrian area leading over the Paka River into the inner center of the city. The promenade received a spectacular new surface design conducted by the Slovenian architectural firm *Enota*. A continuous surface incorporates an amphitheater by the river, a bridge, as well as seating furniture and green areas arranged to the context of existing buildings and facilities. The northern end of the promenade leads to a new parking structure with an inbuilt café; the southern end is dominated by the former workers' club and workers' university.

The organic design and the individual programming produce a different form of publicness that stands in contradiction to the socialist planning. The transformation of the promenade implicates its transfiguration "into a main event axis." The event role was formerly occupied by the Tito Square. But the large square by itself is massively under-programmed. It is a stage that needs to be programed from the "outside" while its design allows for mass events and rallies, which makes it ideologically capable, but not designated. In return, the promenade is equipped with additional programs, which the city missed before. The promenade is conceived as a "sequence of micro-ambients," which shall allow for the individual occupance by the users. After the discontinuation of socialist-political influences, the use of public space became a matter of individualization.

What does the revitalization of the promenade mean in the context of Velenje's transition into a post-socialist city? Firstly, as argued before, we refuse to simply appoint attributes to the built environment like "democratic" or "socialist". But the possibilities to live lives individually within social structures and to express individuality in the public are valued by a democratic society. Design is a means and an aspect to enhance these moments. This is also true for the design of the promenade in Velenje. Secondly, to create possibilities to actively occupy public space is not necessarily a democratic reference. Qualitatively implemented and richly programmed public spaces are actually a general need of people and local residents. Furthermore, public space design also becomes more and more an asset in the global competition of cities. In this way, the promenade also creates a new identity for the city, serves as attraction, and contributes to the touristic valorization of the city's built substance. Thirdly, individualization in democratic societies is often accompanied by the aestheticization and idealization of life itself. In this situation, the built environment obtains value for the staging of one's everyday life. Under the aspect of its *value of staging*, architecture gets delegated to communicate with individuals and groups as consumers.[12] The consumption can thereby concern culture, leisure time, or goods. In Velenje, both, the inclusion of the architectural and programmatic heritage as well as the redesign of the public space with the implementation of new facilities, contribute to the aestheticization process.

Conclusion

The politicization of a system like architecture does not mean that architecture suddenly accomplishes actions of governmental politics. The ideological capabilities of architecture itself are also quite limited and vulnerable to projection. Instead, systems of value are the mediator between socio-political realities and the built environment. The political dimension does not simply establish "totalitarian" architecture and later exchange it with "democratic" architecture. It rather allows for values to be recognized, uttered and realized by different actors and parties. Architecture is not ideological meaning, but might be of political, cultural, and economic value. The exemplary case of Velenje conveys a process of (re-)evaluation *after* the democratization of Slovenia. The politicization of public space continues through aestheticization and individualization. These phenomena are nothing else but the impact forces of values realized by the diverse systems of society.

Bio-note

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Notes

[1] Barbara Miller Lane, "Architects in Power: Politics and Ideology in the Work of Ernst May and Albert Speer," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* vol. 17, no.1 (1986), 308.

[2] Lane, "Architects in Power," 308.

[3] Lane, "Architects in Power," 305-306.

[4] Mariusz Czepczyński, "Representations and Images of 'Recent History'," in *The Post-Socialist City*, ed. Alfrun Kliems et al. (Berlin: Jovis, 2010), 17.

[5] Rok Poles, *Velenje: a walk through a town of modernism: architectural guide* (Velenje: Municipality, 2013), 13.

[6] Poles, Velenje, 11.

[7] Poles, Velenje, 14.

[8] Kiril Stanilov, "The Post-Socialist City. Urban Form and Space Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe after Socialism," (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 270.

[9] Stanilov, "Post-Socialist City," 271.

[10] Czepczyński, "Images of 'Recent History'," 20.

[11] Franz von Kutschera, "Wert und Wirklichkeit," (Paderborn: Mentis, 2010), 22.

[12] Gernot Böhme, "Zur Kritik der ästhetischen Ökonomie," in *Die Schönheit des Populären. Ästhetische Erfahrung der Gegenwart*, ed. Kasper Masse (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2008).