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Designing the Experience City

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Excite City – Designing the Experience City

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Abstract

This paper takes its point of departure in the pressure of the experience economy on European cities – a pressure which in recent years has found its expression in a number of comprehensive transformations of the physical and architectural environments. It can also be observed that new eventscapes related to fun and cultural experience are emerging. The physical, cultural and democratic consequences of this development are discussed in the paper, which concludes with a presentation of a new field of research that highlights the problems and the new opportunities with which “the experience city” is faced. Special attention is put on a new research project called “Experience City – hybrid cultural projects and performative urban spaces”. The thesis and research themes are presented and related to the general framework of present cultural planning and post industrial urban transformation.

The paper frames the new research agenda facing the ‘Experience City’ through three themes. First we take aim at understanding the discourse of the experience city as it is anchored in policy makers, developers and citizens’ vocabularies and planning practices. Second the theme of urban everyday life and practices within different cultural domains is pivotal. Thirdly the experience city as scene, space and architectural context for new experience design is framed. By looking through these three analytical ‘lenses’ we argue for an emergence of a new type of city and urban life which surfaces in policies, practices and architectures of ‘ExCite City’.

The Experience City

Many cities are currently supplementing the central shopping areas with new event spaces, main pedestrian streets and café environments. Experience and entertainment have become main priorities. But it is not only the pedestrian streets and the classic locations in the old city centres that are affected by the modern city-dwellers’ demand for experiences. The transformation of the old industrial areas, the water fronts and the recreational facilities in the vicinity of the cities are also a part of this demand.

The buzzword in this context is the development of an “experience economy” as the driving force behind these transformations. In the present situation strategic planning are focused on the experience economy as an essential factor in the development of the physical and cultural image of the city as well as of its economic basis. (*Hall 2000, Metz 2002, Boer and Dijkstra 2003, Kuntzmann 2004*).

But what does the concept of “experience city” cover? In the paper “experience” covers many analogous concepts such as discovery, practice, to live through something. And as a consequence of the experience, one will be “skilled”, “experienced”, “competent” and “tested”. Our reason for bringing this to attentions is that we hold the opinion that there is an element of learning, refinement and culture that is often ignored in the more marketing and market oriented discourse of the experience economy and experience city.

In this sense, “experience cities” places heavy demands on the quality of the experience and its framework. If our cities wish to adopt this conception, this will place new demands on the urban political strategy, on the cities’ cultural networks, on local artistic competences, and on the spatial and architectural frames.

There are numerous examples of how the experience economy, sustainable development and urban transformation/urban design have gone hand in hand. In this paper we will initially present three European cases: Barcelona, Emscher Park and Graz- the cultural capital of 2003.

Barcelona – Public Domain Strategy

Barcelona is noteworthy due to its conscious effort during the last 15 – 20 years to use urban design and urban spaces as the driving force in transformation strategies from industrial city to culture and experience city. The city has had to face huge demands in terms of accessibility planning; but the demands for aesthetic and architectural quality have also been considerable. The city's planners and decision-makers have realised that in order to make an event attractive or invite people to stay in the urban spaces, it is necessary to create welcoming surroundings that appeal to different social groups and are functionally suited to a variety of applications.

Throughout the entire period, in Barcelona they have worked with an urban space strategy that has transformed the massive building structure of the city into a web of spaces, small and large, that sets the stage for a public and democratic urban life, which was unheard of during General Franco's regime.

This has been achieved by transforming local industrial areas into new parks and squares, or by demolishing selected housing blocks in order to let in light and air and create urban breathing holes. For example, the large industrial facilities at the harbour have been torn down and replaced by a public beach park, which is easily accessible by public transportation and a new network of bicycle lanes and footpaths.

Located in the area surrounding the new beach promenade you find restaurants, musical venues, exhibition facilities, theatres in addition to other spaces for leisure activities and culture for free.



The Barcelona Beach Park 2005: experience design and new gathering points. Photo Gitte Marling

Barcelona has been aiming high. The visions were given full scope in connection with the grandiose plans to organise the 1992 Olympics where traffic installations and the Olympic village at the new waterfront have contributed to the establishment of the new structural transformation of the city.

The city goes on branding itself as one of the new strong European cultural cities. This is achieved with the aid of a variety of tools, such as the urban space strategy including a variety of public domains, constructing new museums, exhibition facilities and forums for architecture and art. Additionally, this is followed up by a number of innovative cultural programmes and events. (Gehl & Gemzøe 2000, Marling & Kiib 2007)

Emscher Park – Heritages Landscape Strategy

Emscher Park is an area near the Emscher River in the German Ruhr District. For decades the area has been one of Europe's largest industrial regions with mining operations and heavy industry. It has been notorious for its severe environmental problems due to fumes, noise and air pollution – and it has been infamous for its miserable social conditions. During the last 20 years,

one company closure after the other has marked the area, which has resulted in high unemployment rates and disillusion.

What could be done with the heavily polluted area with the gigantic works that are difficult and expensive to tear down? Instead of demolishing everything, Ruhr decided to preserve the industrial facilities. At the same time, they have chosen to define entirely new programmes, functions and urban life for this previously so sad and grey reality.

The area has commenced a long process of transformation in which the old industrial architecture is preserved and plays a decisive part as a framework for new experiences and new forms of cultural tourism.

Presently, these industrial plants emerge as rusty dinosaurs in the middle of green recreational facilities. Some appear only as landmarks for the area, as sculptures you can enter and walk inside, or you can admire as lightshows accentuate their spectacular appearance during the night.

Other buildings have been converted into exhibition facilities, show rooms, workshops for artistic production, casinos, theatres and facilities for sports and education. (Marling & Kiib, 2007)



Emscher Park 2005: A new, green culture area with both defunct and working industries, new and old housing areas. Photo Gitte Marling

A part of the combined project is formed by ecological projects related to purification of the polluted rivers and soil, new recreational facilities located around and within old plants in the vicinity of urban areas, and also new bicycle lanes and footpaths connecting the large area. New residential areas have emerged and entertainments and new cultural venues are lodged up against the amazingly beautiful shapes of the old industrial works.

It is a process that is far from complete. In spite of an intense effort, it will take a long and hard pull to create a new growth area based on the experience economy. One of the problems lies in the creation of new artistic competences and new cultural elite – or, in the words of Richard Florida, the new “creative class”, which meets the challenge and continues the work that began with the creation of the physical structures at Emscher Park (Florida 2002).

Graz – Cultural City Strategy

“European Capital of Culture” is a new designation for those European cities that have won the competition for economic support from the EU for a host of cultural events in the space of one year. Locally, the hope is that through an intensive cultural programme, this nomination will put the city on the “European map” or the list of culturally significant cities, which attract cultural tourists and new investments.

From a long list of applicants Graz was elected as Cultural Capital of 2003. During the year the city hosted large and small cultural events ranging from local events based on local labour and the evolution of local capabilities to one-off events featuring internationally acclaimed artists.

The vision of the cultural capitals is that the experience economy will take root in the region and become a driving force in the cities' economic development in the future through a culture-laden year.

The cultural capitals usually also focus on new architecturally ground-breaking buildings, as for example in Graz where the new experience bridge offers the citizens a space to stay, play, perform and have a cup of coffee in the middle of the city's flowing river; or architect Peter Cook's Kunsthalle, which is wedged in like a foreign element with interactive facades connecting the existing building typology. The building has become a new symbol of the city as it couples experience with the physical urban environment in a new and interesting manner – a form of interaction that is bound to become a much more familiar sight.



Kunsthalle and "experience bridge" in Cultural Capital of Graz, 2006. Photo Gitte Marling.

Experiences from the culture capitals of previous years show that the results of a city's year as capital of culture should be assessed through new buildings and urban transformation as well as the establishment of a local cultural network and competences.

Focusing on experience design, a number of new venues offering the opportunity to experience the city and the culture from new angles have been created in Graz. However, the new buildings have left the city with a large economic burden in the form of operating expenses that drain the municipal coffers and will prevent the city from funding other types of cultural initiatives for many years to come.

What can we learn from these three cases?

Whether or not the focus on what might be termed single super projects is blocking the development of a broader, more pluralistic culture is an open question. The Graz case also shows that it is relevant to ask what will become of the social and cultural network that has been established during the culture capital year after the said year. Is it possible to maintain and expand it? Or has it all ended in conflicts? And has a learning environment been established as a basis for competence development and planning?

Barcelona and Emscher Park are two large-scale, internationally renowned projects, which, grounded in conceptions of the experience city, work from an overall and combined strategy for transforming the physical structures.

In Barcelona, the development has enabled a shift in the economic structure towards more emphasis on the experience economy. The qualitative and design-oriented boost has also prepared the ground for a massive development in city and cultural tourism. Importantly, however, the development has also sent Barcelona on its way back towards a democratic urban community with a pluralistic and public urban life and with new cultural elite.

The Emscher Park project has created a new "brand" and given rise to a new pride in the area. By fusing the logic of the experience economy with principles of environmental sustainability, a platform for the new development of the area has been successfully created. The Emscher Park project illustrates that the experience city and sustainability are not necessarily mutually exclusive strategies.

Many cities have drawn inspiration from Barcelona. Thus, city centre design, urban space strategies, waterfront transformations and other similar projects are currently part of planning policies all over Europe. Similarly, inspired by e.g. Emscher Park, the industrial cultural heritage is also a current agenda. As noted, there are many good reasons for this; but a closer assessment of the consequences of the experience economy is called for.

Our knowledge of the consequences of the experience economy for the city and for city life is very limited. We do not know very much about how the experience economy and the cultural projects affect the planning mindset and urban design in practice either. All we know is that the experience economy has consequences, positive as well as negative.

In Amsterdam, which, aside from attracting a large number of tourists, also hosts many diverse festivals – opera festivals, gay parades, marathons etc. – the inhabitants are complaining about the state of affairs. They are often forced to flee from their homes due to crowds of millions of people that flood the streets, block public transport, make noise and leave garbage everywhere. Experiences from Amsterdam illustrate that the experience economy causes problems for the daily users and inhabitants of the city. Noise, garbage and perhaps drunken festival participants disturb the everyday life, and are liable to become a nuisance if the festivities take place too often. (*Metz, 2002*)

The question is whether these conflicts can be overcome, and whether these drawbacks can be compensated by the outcome of such festivals and cultural events?

In this context, the experiences drawn from the large events and culture capital projects seem to indicate that the long term value of the network that is formed and the evolution of capabilities that takes place in connection with the planning of the various events are greater than that of the individual cultural events. But we still do not know very much about the exact nature of this effect and what it takes to create and support the build-up of competences.

After all the many cultural events that also take place free of charge in the public space lure large parts of the population out of their armchairs and into the streets. This creates a new form of urban culture, and it creates an opportunity for bringing together different cultures, which is positive in its own right. But we really do not know whether social and cultural exchange actually takes place; and, we have not developed planning strategies to enhance such an exchange in neither permanent nor more fleeting structures.

Thus there is a great need for new knowledge about the influence of the experience economy on the city's architecture, cultural life and the perception of planning.

Research - New Knowledge and Planning Tools

At the Department of Architecture & Design, Aalborg University, we have identified a new field of research, which in the coming years will pick up the challenge of generating new knowledge within the area. Here a number of projects related to cultural planning, urban branding, discourse analysis and performative urban spaces are taking place. The research is investigating the potential of consciously fusing the experience economy with other social, educational and learning related programmes. We believe that through this fusion of different types of

programmes, it will be possible to establish a dynamic development that benefits a multifarious city life, socially as well as culturally.

A specific project with the title “Experience City – hybrid cultural projects and performative urban spaces” has just been initiated at the department. The project is a study of the development in Copenhagen and in the larger provincial towns in Denmark in which cultural scenes, houses of music and performative urban spaces have been developed. Often the programme economies aimed at experience alone have not been sufficient to fund the construction. They have therefore often been merged with other dynamic local forces – e.g. education. But it is precisely this merger between education, the production of knowledge and experience that lays the foundation for what we call hybrid cultural projects and performative urban spaces.

It is our thesis that these new types of hybrid projects could become new vibratory cultural projects with a higher purpose than solely to entertain.

Research Thesis and Themes

“*Hybrid cultural projects*” are characterised by a conscious fusion between urban transformation and new knowledge centres, cultural institutions and experience environments.

Similarly, “*performative urban spaces*” are characterised by stages for performance, for learning and for experience. The performative activity can take on the guise of events – something temporary, but still recurring, which influences the shape and identity of the space.

It is a thesis that the strength of these projects is the conscious combination between learning and playing, between public and private, and between artistic quality and the popular activity. The starting point is a common willingness to include many different groups and at the centre of all a dynamic hybrid of edutainment, high culture and bodily exertion is challenging our traditional perception of urban life.

Performative urban spaces are interesting as they, in conjunction with the hybrid cultural projects, will be able to latch on to a variety of different purposes that have to do with cultural exchange. In these projects we find a certain drive towards a public urban life that does not merely encompass the well-off and the well-educated parts of the population; the projects have the potential to include and activate newcomers to the Danish society, the young ones, the old ones, the not so well-adapted etc.

Thus, it is the overall thesis of the project that these hybrid cultural projects, stages and spaces are potential “public domains”, i.e. places for social and cultural exchange between lifestyle groups with different values and worldviews (*Haajer & Reijndorp, 2006*).

Moreover, it is the thesis of the project

- that these projects will contribute to further a *new urban political agenda* within the current debate about the future of our cities in “The Experience Economy”;
- that they can become the hotbed of a new *urban culture* that consciously fuses the traditional shopping and café life of the city with knowledge, experience and play;
- that they contribute to the development of *new architectural typologies and urban spaces* that often draw upon the scale and typological multiplicity of the industrial architecture and the harbour environments, and which, through a new orchestration, will help both enrich our architectural heritage and create new architectural projects focusing on transparency.

Taking the following research themes as its point of departure, the research project will seek new knowledge related to three themes:

- *Urban transformation and planning strategy*
- *Urban culture*
- *Architectural typologies and urban spaces*

Urban Transformation and Planning Strategy

This topic marks an attempt to map and illuminate the hybrid cultural projects and performative urban spaces in relation to objectives regarding the municipal planning strategy. In the course of making the transition to knowledge society and experience economy, planning thought has abandoned the classic master plan tradition in favour of a more pragmatic strategy of interventions in selected points of the city. The investigation aims to reveal the level of coherence between the projects and the dominant planning mindset in the municipalities, and also the significance of these projects in terms of the general policy for urban transformation.

The theme also seeks to highlight resistance to the projects and disagreements in relation to the strategic planning in the city. The connection between visions and plans or between project-driven development and planning thought is also on the agenda. Do the new projects indicate that there exists a well-established policy for municipal planning strategies, or might it rather be a case of isolated prestige-projects that fall outside the urban transformation policy and the strategic planning?

Urban Culture

This topic marks an attempt to map and illuminate the hybrid cultural projects and performative urban spaces in relation to cultural behaviour and everyday practice. The intention behind some of the new projects is to give the urban culture a qualitative lift through a combination of different programmes that are expected to further creativity and artistic exertion. They are also expected to help promote fellowship and understanding between many different cultural groups in the city. Hopefully, the cultural life in the city can be strengthened in a socially sustainable manner – but is this the case?

Urban culture is put on the agenda as many different issues at the same time: a culture of knowledge and learning, a physical culture for play and performance, a tolerant culture for the social encounter, and a participatory entertainment culture that reaches far beyond street musicians and café latte.

The research topic aims to investigate how the projects affect city-life and the citizens' use of the city's venues and available cultural offers. Will it be possible to create meeting places that not only make social and cultural exchange possible, but where such exchange actually occurs? Do the projects change the way the city is used, and the movement patterns and everyday practice of different lifestyle groups in the city? Are the new projects socially inclusive, or do they merely apply to a narrow elite?

Architectural Typologies and Urban Spaces

This topic marks an attempt to map the hybrid cultural projects and performative urban spaces in relation to architectural and spatial construction. Initially, many of the projects seem to be established at disused industrial facilities and to borrow their scale and typological multiplicity from the industrial architecture and the harbour environments whilst simultaneously adding new architectural elements of their own.

The thesis is that these projects are very attentive to architectural and spatial transparency, transition and open programming. The investigation will therefore attempt to map the structural composition and architectural expression of the projects. Does the architectural expression correspond to the programmatic intention of overlapping activities?

Similarly, the spatial gestalt of the projects will be put under the loop; both in terms of room-design in relation to the intended activities, and of passages and spatial transitions from one activity to another. Linkages and transitions between inside and outside and between quiet areas and high-speed and high-activity areas will also be highlighted.

Finally, the subject also includes a semiotic field, which consists of analysing how the projects infuse the urban context with new symbolic significances and cultural representations.

Research into the experience city will form a considerable basis for politicians, urban designers and private investors in their planning of the urban environments of tomorrow. It will, however,

also ensure that the citizens' experiences with new urban qualities and designs are considered in order to create positive city-experiences rather than merely commercial experiences. The production of new knowledge within this field of research will be important for overcoming the new urban challenges that confront the experience city in the long term.

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