



subvision. kunst. festival. off. 26/08-06/09/2009 Interview Architecture

'An architecture with a high degree of free improvisation for the the off initiatives'

Simon Putz, Prof. Michael Staffa and a number of other architects of Architekturwerkstatt Hamburg e.V. were faced with the challenge of designing an exhibition architecture for a 10,000-square-metre festival area – with a budget that they would normally calculate for half a single-family home. Olaf Bargheer spoke on behalf of subvision with Simon Putz on the functionality of the planned exhibition architecture and its direct proximity to the large-scale urban development project HafenCity.

subvision In late summer 2008, the Architekturwerkstatt was asked to develop a temporary exhibition architecture on festival grounds with sandy subsoil, strong winds and the danger of flooding – and with a relatively low budget for the architecture. Were you at first intimidated by such a briefing?

Putz Not at all. To conceive a structure for difficult properties is a challenge we frequently confronted with – although the financial means for the subvision architecture are less than what we usually have at our disposal.

subvision The reason being that the architecture is conceived for ten exhibition days and that as much funding as possible is to be given to the realization of artworks and the artists' initiatives.

Putz The task is indeed a special one: We are not requested to perform urban development in the classical sense, but we do fall back on certain principles.

At any rate, the dimensions of the surroundings, the new buildings of the HafenCity, do not serve as a model.

subvision Does such an environment impose restrictions, or do you delimit your designs from this overdetermined context of the HafenCity?

Putz We found it to be part of the task to distance ourselves from the thoroughly planned atmosphere of the HafenCity and to implant a foreign body, as it were, with the subvision site. This is an automatic effect, because the structures are temporary, limited to ten days and basically meet other demands than the office and residential buildings of the HafenCity. To us, the location appears predestined for this type of event.

subvision How do you start planning, as an architect's office? Do you meet and do brainstorming and start to draw, or does it all start with research on image worlds and themes on the Internet?

Putz The start is always made by examining the demanded use of the architecture. This generates initial drafts. We initially dealt with the invited artists' initiatives: How do they work? What do the visitors expect, and what the architecture? So our first step was to assess the different modes of work and expression. What all initiatives obviously have in common is that they work in metropolises, in urban space, and tend to use found material. Based on such basic principles, discussions gradually leads to a draft on which we then work in a classical manner, with sketch-books and models. For our team, that is the most congenial working method in view of a task in such a format.

subvision Do you deem the exhibition site feasible for the endeavour in regard to the shape and the overall size?

Putz The Strandkai is a rewarding area, for there is indeed the risk that an site can be too large, too spacious for being used for a festival. That is not the case here. The weighting in regard to dividing the grounds is coherent. What makes this property ideal is that it is surrounded by water on three sides. The tapered shape is also very urban, characterized by distinct edges. A form that is more attractive for planners than a green field.

subvision When you presented your results, it was quickly clear that the orientation to the water defines the grids and paths of your design.

Putz The term grid is a decisive component of our design: We wanted to give the artists' initiatives a frame in which to present themselves. We spread fields measuring 12 x 12 metres over the grounds. The grid is initially also an urban motif of town planning. Our lines of reference are the banks of the Elbe River. The terrain is most conspicuously traversed by a broad diagonal path leading from the access ramp to the water. This obviously corresponds with the natural walking path that is already used today, although the entire grounds are undeveloped. One automatically walks straight to the quay wall and from there along the edge of the water to the tip of the promontory. By the way, one thing should be made clear: When we speak of grid, axis, hall, or plaza in this context, they are all concepts derived from urban planning. This is one approach we took in planning, although it does not fully apply in practice, because the scale is much smaller and the materials are different, making the festival architecture a bit strange.

subvision So the subvision area is a persiflage-like reproduction of a miniature city?

Putz That's how it must be seen. On the one hand, we have allotments for the exhibiting artists' initiatives, on the other, a number of genuine urban themes: cafés, bars, event areas, and also very mundane zones that belong to urban life: areas for waste, for supplies, storages for material, workshops, and office buildings. These functional structures are distributed across the allotments. We thus create an infrastructure necessary for operating any festival.

subvision When looking at your model, what is striking is a series of loosely arranged towers.

Putz We mainly work with two elements, one being ship containers. In the current state of planning, we are using around 100 containers set up along the allotments and providing different paths with different lines of sight. The other element is scaffolding. On the main plaza, a large event hall will be built as a structure made of scaffolding. The façade will be covered with white, semitransparent nets. In addition, we will erect a number of towers, just as high as the hall and also covered in white. The towers mark the locations of the infrastructural fields, meaning that, when looking around, one can see where the café, where the festival office is located. In an overall view, the towers at first appear as if they were arbitrarily dispersed across the area, because they are not set up along a grid. This offers an interesting picture from a distance that makes one curious.

subvision In your planning, you placed great importance on a cost-efficient and not very time-consuming technical implementation and, for example, contacted scaffolding firms highly experienced in their sector.

Putz We chose scaffolding in addition to containers as an element because it appears ideal and well calculable in view of the short lifespan of the exhibition architecture. The entire hall can be erected by one trade. But the scaffolding façades are also convincing in aesthetic terms: By using white covers and light installations, we create cubes and steles that are illuminated from the inside at night. The type of scaffolding we use consists of 2.50 x 2.50-metre cubes covered on the inside and outside with nets and illuminated by simple construction spotlights. The façades can additionally be used as projection screens for slide or video installations.

subvision During the course of your preparations, you attended a site visit at the HHLA at the Burchard Terminal to gain an impression of the logistics of ship containers.

Putz That was indeed our second step, to check the technical feasibility. During the ten days of technical set-up, the ship containers must be distributed across the area and in some cases be stacked. At the Burchard Terminal, we were able to see how this is done. As interesting as the procedures in the container terminal were, we had to realize on site that we

will not have the possibility at the Strandkai to make the sandy subsoil firm and plane enough to make use of special-purpose vehicles. Depending on the requirements, the terminal possesses the oddest industrial trucks, of which some remind you of insects. But we will most likely use lorry mounted

cranes to distribute the containers across the area, something which, however, will take more time. A third element of the exhibition architecture that seems to fit to the port and that is available at an affordable price are Europallets. We will stack them to form benches and lounge suites, thus enclosing the allotments. On the plaza, one can also imagine a grandstand situation made of pallets. The material suggests itself because we can purchase it at a reasonable price and fit it together in a modular way.

subvision Altogether, we thus have a distinct architecture in regard to the material on an exposed terrain that reveals a structure that is not necessarily conspicuous, but that can be experienced when walking through it. Path alignments, unusual perspectives and lines of sight through the exhibition areas open up exciting views for the visitors on their itinerary through the show.

Putz The decisive point is that the grid does not have an obtrusive effect. The first impression is even that of a somewhat unordered terrain. The elements and structures appear as if they were dispersed by chance. But as soon as I take a look at the two-metre-wide paths, I gain clearly limited relations of sight, one line of vision directed to the Elbe and the port silhouette, the other to the urban context of the HafenCity. Within the paths, the visitor experiences a narrow, directed perception; as soon as he or she leaves one of these paths and enters into an exhibition field, this impression

is gone and the view is opened. So what we do, is to create an alternation that attracts people's interest between a straight direction and an open ensemble.

subvision An atmosphere created by the fact that more than thirty artists' initiatives will embrace the terrain: and after an eventful festival will say: This used to be my playground...

Putz That is precisely the course of events that no-one can even roughly predict one year ahead of time. With the architecture, we set the frame; what the artists' initiatives make out of it will ultimately result from the atmosphere of the festival. None of us – and I also believe none of the visitors – would like to have a complete view of this beforehand.

subvision In this respect, you had to find a balance between the architecture itself, complying with functional demands, and the need to present a powerful image – and to create a space that must not be allowed to visually outdo the displayed art.

Putz One must know precisely when to remain reticent as an architect and exhibition designer, how much can be prescribed architecturally without being felt as restricting art. Above all, we would like to deliver the basic preconditions and create a certain system of order – which should indeed be broken by the artists' initiatives during the course of the festival.

subvision All parties participating in planning the festival basically take this approach. Subvision – although initiated by the corresponding

institutions – is indeed a somewhat chaotic intervention in the clearly ordered urban space of the HafenCity.

Putz It is most apt that the festival organization and the festival architecture are conceived as enablers: Within a stable framework, we allow the off initiatives a high degree of free improvisation. And because the used materials are in no way related to the building materials and surfaces of the HafenCity, a streamlined character does not arise at all. The festival architecture keeps its rough charm.

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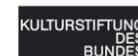
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