

Architecture in Time of Crisis

Conference 'the State as our Home'
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First of all, let me thank the Union of Estonian Architects (in collaboration with the Estonian Academy of Arts, the Estonian Centre of Architecture and the Ministry of Culture) for this opportunity to present the European Forum for Architectural Policies, and share some thoughts with you on the state of architecture, the state of our home.

The theme of this conference, 'the state as our home' in first instance gave me the idea to twist it into 'real estate is our home'. After all, can the state be a home, a place to live, to feel safe, or can the state never be more than the keeper of our home, only being a provider of conditions for people to create their own home? Isn't home the place we create for ourselves and can others, like the state, be a substitute at all? This could easily lead to a political philosophical debate and, although I would like to speak about policy with you, that is not my intention. So let us look into the specific roles of the private and the public spheres with regard to creating a living environment, a home, and how these two sectors can join forces in policies towards good architectural and spatial design.

The ways this is put into practice in many European countries is shared, discussed and further developed in the European Forum for Architectural Policies.

The European Forum for Architectural Policies (that I will refer to as EFAP from now on), approaching its tenth anniversary already, is a network that brings together three groups of interest in the built environment from all European member states: the governments that create conditions for architecture, the policy makers, the political decision makers, the chief government architects and planning officers. Then there are the architects organizations, representing the profession: the regional or national unions, architects chambers etc. The third interest group are the cultural institutions that together form the platform of debate and feed the discourse on architectural quality - and how to promote it. Soon also representatives of architectural educations and local or regional governments will join the EFAP family.

Bringing together these three interests, that of the government, the profession and the cultural field, is quite unique. It distinguishes EFAP from many lobbying organizations that are usually stressing one issue, such as the interest of the profession, the industry or the conservation of heritage. EFAP tries to address the combination of conditions that allow the market, the construction industry, property development, to produce better products. After all, we must treat our living environment as if it were our own home. With general quality awareness, with quality conscious clients, with transparent democratic decision making procedures, and with a government that will only facilitate quality development with a given public commitment. These conditions are vital for architectural and spatial quality.

It has become a tradition that EFAP conferences are organized by each EU Presidency. Sometimes as an expert meeting, sometimes as part of the official program. In that way EFAP occasionally has the opportunity to play an advising role in the drafting of important policy documents, such as the Leipzig Charter.

In the past ten years EFAP has become the voice of the cultural mission of architecture in Europe, able to confront the hard core economic interest of the building sector with social and cultural arguments. The construction industry is still one of the largest motors of economy in Europe. It has a fundamental impact on the everyday living environment, without any cultural agenda. Objectives of property development and profit are not often combined with cultural ambitions. EFAP is one of the few European umbrella organizations that is not lobbying for one specific

issue, but trying to bridge the economic and cultural aspects of the built environment. It is therefore a great opportunity for EFAP to have been invited to participate in the European Commission cultural sector platform 'Access to Culture' and even chair the platform on 'Potentials of Cultural and Creative Industries'.

Last year was an important year for EFAP. The French EU Presidency involved EFAP in the drafting of the French Presidency's 'Conclusions on architecture, culture's contribution to sustainable development' that were adopted by the Council of the European Union in November.

But let us first have a look at the state of our home. How cultural and sustainable is it in fact?

It was two-and-a-half years ago at the Venice Architecture Biennale that curator Ricky Burdett showed us impressive figures with regard to the world's urban growth, the environmental impact and the ecological footprint of the explosively growing urban populations. Issues as mobility, social and spatial justice were addressed in a probing way.

One year later it was the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, under curatorship of the Berlage Institute, that tried to find answers to the issues Burdett had raised by unraveling the powers that influence the making (and the deconstruction) of the city.

All cities in the world, every country, has to some extent to do with issues as social segregation and pollution. In many parts of Europe streams of immigrants cause social imbalance and sometimes even conflict. Social justice, with gated communities and on the other hand a new generation of ghetto's are a phenomena of major concern everywhere. The daily infarct of the vital connections in urban agglomerations only strengthens this segregation effect.

It also seems as if the market has lost connection to the people's need for homes, with thousands having homes they don't want, and others wanting homes they can't have.

Also the world wide financial crisis has a growing impact on the real estate market and property development as we all experience in our daily practice.

Together with the impact of climate change on our living environment possibly the most urgent issue to deal with for the state and our home.

The current worldwide economic crisis may have forced the second and greater crisis of climate change further down the news agenda but the stimulus measures being proposed by governments across the world, but lead by President Obama in the US, are focused on how to spend money for environmental gains. The challenge to the international architecture community is how to answer this challenge and turn our practice from one of cultural frivolity and excess, associated with the boom years of capitalism's growth, into an effective means of both mitigating and adapting to now inevitable global warming.

As my EFAP colleague Simon Foxell argued: "many are already calling for a return to an architecture of austerity; architecture that does you good both morally and financially, an architecture that somehow shows a recognition of new realities and takes responsibility for past misdemeanors in a chastened and shamefaced way. This will do us no good at all in a period, although perhaps a short one, when it is vitally necessary to dig deep into society's pockets to invest for a very tough future. For, even if we can't afford it in monetary terms, the last of our available fossil fuel-derived energy needs to be expended immediately to prepare our societies for the future. If it we wait for the global economy to recover, the measures required to turn round impending climate change will truly be unaffordable. We need to prepare our buildings now for a world of very limited carbon expenditure, for increasingly extreme weather conditions, rising sea levels and, even, greater insect infestation. We need to invest in new low-carbon infrastructure, future-proofing our homes and buildings, developing community facilities and the large scale operations that will provide the necessary economies of scale to be affordable.

Certainly the focus of much architectural endeavor in recent years; new high-rise cities in desert regions, huge office and shopping complexes and particularly airports, are unlikely to continue for long.

The need to create and maintain contained, satisfying and resilient forms of urban living, largely using local resources and capable of remaining livable and functioning

in a warmer and less predictable climate is the predominant challenge to architecture. Many existing European cities provide excellent models for the self-reliant (but highly interconnected) urban qualities required, but with their sprawling and ugly fringes, extreme inequalities and social dislocations they are, as frequently, warnings of urban failure.

If there is less obvious capital for construction in a time of economic crisis it should in no way be allowed to diminish the ambitions of architecture, even if the fundamental goals need to be re-established. The environmental imperative means that architecture must achieve extraordinary things; zero carbon buildings barely exist at the moment but they must become the norm within a decade. It will be the role of architecture to provide places that answer the challenges set out in global summits; whether the G20, or more importantly, Copenhagen in November 2009; and it needs to be done in a way that will lift the spirits during troubled times.

The state and our home.

What can the government do to promote good architecture? Basically two things: to create a favorable climate for architecture in general, and to give a good example to the 'market' as a client.

Value for money.

Every year many billions of the taxpayers money are invested in building and other construction, like roads, bridges and other infrastructural works, that together are of great influence on the quality of our living environment. Why not try to spend all that money in the best way possible? At the moment the largest part of that money is spent without any cultural intention or ambition. Design standards are usually not included in the contracts between the financing authorities and the executing development and building companies. Why not include design quality specifications if government funding is involved? I don't mean dictating a style or designer of course, but just to create the organizational conditions needed to ensure good architectural quality. After all, the balance sheet should not only show the financial capital, but could also account for the cultural value of the built environment. Investing in good architecture pays off in the end.

A good example.

The Chief Government Architect advises the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment on the preparation and implementation of architectural policy. In that capacity, he provides the involved ministries with solicited and unsolicited advice on matters of policy and strategic developments, on architecture, urban and rural planning, infrastructure, landscape development and guaranteeing quality in legislation and regulations and in education. The Chief Government Architect makes specific recommendations and proposes architects upon requests for other ministries involved in accommodations, construction or construction financing, such as Foreign Affairs, Defense and Traffic and Water management, providing advice on design and recommending architects.

Besides arranging accommodations for government agencies, the Government Building Agency also has the core task of maintaining the historic buildings entrusted to its care. The Chief Government Architect bears particular responsibility for the quality of the maintenance on these historical buildings and monuments.

The majority are situated in a historical urban setting, which is part of an urban conservation area. Most of the monuments are also buildings that determine the image of an area, located in strategic locations in the historic cities. Some historic buildings are icons of our state establishment or our cultural identity. [examples] They are part of the collective Dutch memory, for which the government bears a particular responsibility.

In maintaining the historic buildings entrusted to the Government Buildings Agency, the ambition is to set an example; the level to which the Agency aspires should always surpass the generally accepted average.

The advice and quality control provided by the Chief Government Architect includes participating in various research projects at the Government Buildings Agency and other institutes, and to acts as an intermediary between the Agency and the National Historic Buildings Service. The Chief Government Architect is responsible for the urban positioning, architectonic quality and monumental maintenance of government buildings and proposes architects for all accommodation projects realized under the auspices of the Government Buildings Agency.

The Chief Government Architect also advises on all public utility and infrastructure projects for which the State is the immediate contractor or is involved on a direct financial basis, in order to create optimal conditions for architectonic quality. From this position, the Chief Government Architect can, if requested, propose architects to other departments who require such services.

The tendering procedure is based on a non-public procedure, which is regarded as being the most suitable, both in the interests of quality and in the interests of accommodating the annual flow of projects.

Each December, the Chief Government Architect invites designers (architects, restoration architects, interior designers, urban planners and garden and landscape architects) to apply for projects that are due to commence in the coming year. The application period lasts one year.

The EU Council Conclusions, adopted in November last year, form a great challenge for EFAP and others, to strengthen the position of architecture on the political agenda, on a European level and in the member states. They point out that architecture, as a discipline involving cultural creation and innovation, including a technological component, provides a remarkable illustration of what culture can contribute to sustainable development, in view of its impact of the cultural dimension of towns and cities, as well as on the economy, social cohesion and the environment. Especially in this time of crisis it is necessary to rethink the welfare state and the conditions that the public sector should create to accommodate a new and dynamic social, economic and cultural reality.

After all, the discipline of architecture, being capable as no other to combine conflicting interests and synthesize these into a vision on the future, can play an integrating and innovative role in implementing sustainable urban development.

Strange enough it is not common practice to use this capacity of the architectural discipline in planning and decision making on sustainable development of our society. The architect comes in the picture in the stage of building, constructing. However, influencing the debate at large, giving a visionary input from the beginning

on, form a new challenge for architecture, especially young architects, in the 21st century.

There must be well over half a million architects in Europe that are facing shrinking portfolios, cancelled commissions and a collapsing building sector. It is in this period of financial crisis, economic and social instabilities and conflicts, that architecture must rethink its societal role and cultural meaning.

In stead of building, architects must use this opportunity to concentrate on their role as public intellectuals and guide a way to constructing a sustainable society, to redefine the cultural meaning of architecture in society and to create a future vision on society, inventing a new balance between the conflicting interests of populations, economic stakeholders and cultural and ecological values. Architects must make sure that sustainable development doesn't become a hollow phrase to express political correctness, but is a complex reality that requires serious strategies, designed by professionals and understood by the public and the politicians that have to make decisions. This, I would argue, is the core task for the discipline of architecture in our time.

The European Council's Conclusions call on the member states and the European Commission to take the arguments on the societal potential of architecture into account and to encourage no less than 17 actions.

I will mention a few:

- Most important is the call to make allowance for architecture in all relevant policies, especially in research, economic and social cohesion, sustainable development and educational policies.
- To encourage innovation and experimentation in sustainable development in architecture, urban planning and landscaping, in particular within the framework of European policies and programs and when commissioning public works.
- To help develop the economic growth and employment potential of architecture as a creative, cultural industry.

- And a number of more concretely defined actions, such as research, an annual European architecture event and measures to enhance better education and public awareness.

The European Forum for Architectural Policies sees it as its core task to play a stimulating and supporting role in that respect. The members of EFAP throughout Europe are activated to spread the gospel of architecture's contribution to sustainable development and to organize meetings and activities to that end.

Last week, in Prague, we made up a first balance of actions that hopefully will bring a new awareness of the power of architecture and its potential to help creating a better Europe, and to meet the European citizens' need for a comfortable, hospitable, identifiable, and above all sustainable living environment.

Tomorrow, here in Tallinn, the first regional EFAP Meeting will be held to address some of the issues I have mentioned. I hope today and tomorrow may bring new ideas, new insight and enthusiasm to work on sustainable state policies and the creation of sustainable homes.

Thank you for your attention.