



Franziska Puhan-Schulz. *Museen und Stadtimagebildung: Amsterdam - Frankfurt/Main - Prag - Ein Vergleich*. Bielefeld: Transcript - Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis, 2005. 340 pp. ISBN 978-3-89942-360-0.

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Museums as Urban Image-Builders - Building the Future by Exhibiting the Past

In the foreword to *Museen und Stadtimagebildung: Amsterdam-Frankfurt/Main-Prag - Ein Vergleich*, Franziska Puhan-Schulz claims that her book can serve the function of a handbook or manual directed at decision-makers in urban planning. Her study is meant as a tool to help avoid mistakes during the process of planning new museums. In order to accomplish this aim, Puhan presents a comparative study of larger museum projects, mainly from the 1990s, in three European cities: Amsterdam, Frankfurt am Main, and Prague. The study is preceded by a succinct overview of the relation between urban and cultural politics in Europe in the post-World-War II period. The book is clearly structured and well written in a straightforward German, which makes it easy to read also for non-native speakers. The lack of any information in English, such as a summary, however, does obstruct the possibility that a cross-European study such as this one can be absorbed by the pan-European audience it seeks to address. Nevertheless, the book's topic is well framed and relevant. Puhan-Schulz touches on themes that are debated in several academic disciplines, including cultural studies and architecture, as well as relevant to a circle of decision-makers concerned with the building of new museums in cities. All in all, this makes for a stimulating read.

The book opens with a discussion of the boom in museum-building, which has been witnessed in many European cities since the 1980s. This building boom is tied to a desire to put art and culture high on the agenda of urban developers, who believe that by establishing

a strong cultural profile, a city can “get on the map” and create a more potent urban image, which politicians, planners, and even interest organizations often agree will give rise to better life quality and, most importantly, economic growth. Focus in the study is on the way in which cities have, particularly in the last decades, begun to use the building of spectacular museums or museum districts as part of a strategy of urban revitalization. While Bilbao is mentioned, the rather colloquial term “Bilbao effect” is not explicitly discussed. This term was coined to refer to the building of a museum by “starchitect” Frank Gehry in the industrial Spanish city of Bilbao in 1997, an undertaking that has brought with it a heightened influx of, for example, tourist capital. The construction of this museum has completely changed the general perception of this city, its image, and given it a positive direction.

This may not always be the case, however. That the attempt at image-building using cultural institutions may go terribly wrong was recently witnessed in the German city of Duisburg. Here, the organization of a mass cultural event, a festival for electronic music, the Loveparade, which has drawn over one million visitors in the past, was seen as part of the greater urban cultural revitalization strategy of the former coal-mining region. The mass stampede that occurred at this event in July 2010 turned the festive image into one of tragedy, greed, and mayhem. As these two recent examples suggest, Puhan-Schulz is analyzing instances of an important contemporary trend that is highly significant for the ways European cities have changed and been understood over the

last decades and for the ways in which cultural events and institutions are playing an ever greater role in the deep-reaching processes of transformation that cities are still undergoing.

In an introductory chapter, Puhan-Schulz discusses the building of new museums from an economic perspective. She captures this potential on four levels. Firstly, she focuses on the tourist sector. Tourists may in very direct ways—by visiting the museums and paying entrance fees—fuel a museum economy. Considering the many free museums in London, for example, this is only part of the economic capacity of tourists, of course, since tourists often come to a place with a significant willingness to spend money. Secondly, museums are an economic factor in their own right, for example when it comes to the people they employ. Thirdly, museums offer a possible economic benefit in more indirect terms in that they can fuel a kind of prestige economy. This not only has to do with the spending power of the aforementioned tourists; a strong cultural scene supposedly also adds to the capacity of a place to attract well-educated people and strong, innovative companies, new industries, etc. Finally, Puhan-Schulz touches on how museums tie into contemporary lifestyles and have become a means for cities to take part in and compete within a globalized economy. What we are dealing with is thus the question of how one cultural institution has, at least since the 1980s, become a means for urban planners to incorporate elements of a kind of “image planning” of a city on a global scale.

Puhan-Schulz studies three instances of large constructions of museums or museum districts as part of a general plan concerning urban revitalization. In particular, she focuses on the decision-making process and addresses questions such as who initiated the projects? Were opinions raised against them? What were the guiding principles in terms of how the projects were meant to tie into the urban metabolism? And, finally, which ideas were put into practice and with what results? In Amsterdam, Puhan-Schulz investigates the process leading up to the establishment of the Museumsplein, the museum plaza or square—a decision to revamp an area in close proximity to the medieval center of the city which already housed the city’s main art museums. The area contains a mixture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural institutions situated around a small public park—the Rijksmuseum (1885), the Concertgebouw (1888), the Stedelijk Museum (1895), and the Van Gogh Museum (1973). The idea was to bring in a landscape architect to create a more coherent public

space linking together these institutions, but also to make possible architectural extensions of some of the existing buildings. In 1992, the landscape architect Sven-Ingvar Andersson, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, was given the task of making a new master plan for the area. The main idea was to keep the area as a green space that would allow outdoor public activities and events to take place, while minimizing traffic to pedestrians and cyclists. Cars and buses would be then be served by the construction of an underground car park. This area was supposed to be attractive to tourists, maintain its high-cultural flair, and develop into a place where, regardless of the time of year, local citizens would meet, hang out, and engage in activities. That is, the Museumsplein was conceptualized as a public space par excellence.

According to Puhan-Schulz this latter aim was only achieved in part. While she regards the accommodation of public opinion in the decision-making process as adding to it a positive element, particular issues remain unresolved. An example is the way in which the intended mixed-use of the area—which, on occasions, would be used for larger public events—would destroy the grass and make the place a lot less accommodating, particularly in the summer. She further situates the green character of the plan as part of a more widespread discourse in the 1990s in which gardens were used to create public spaces in urban areas. But, as she concludes, this green aestheticization of the area, which is of course largely directed at tourists who are supposed to be confronted with a clean, leisurely image of Amsterdam, in fact contributes to a reduction of the possibilities for a varied and rich public life.

In Frankfurt am Main, the Museumsufer (museum quay), was an idea that developed in the late 1970s. It originated in the city administration and was seen as a way of aesthetically tying together already existing museums along the quay in the city center and accommodating the building of new ones. In contrast to the predominantly historicist backdrop of the Museumsplein, however, in Frankfurt existing museums were extended and several new museums were built in the period between 1980 and 1990 by architects embracing the postmodernist architectural style. While, in the years to come, important architects would be given the task of designing new museums for the area, the master plan from 1981 included new regulation of automobile traffic away from the quays, the construction of a pedestrian bridge crossing the river, and the development of a promenade area complete with new street lighting and a park-like am-

bience. As in Amsterdam, the plan rested on a dual argument. On the one hand, the area was established as a cultural center for the inhabitants of Frankfurt, who were suffering from the lack of urban spaces due to the high public building activity in the city around this time. On the other hand, however, the project was conceptualized as a way of rescuing Frankfurt's high-cultural identity from the profit-oriented image hovering above the city, an image that was, in those very years, being fueled by the expansion of the banking sector and corporate undertakings. The establishment of the Museumsufer was thus meant both as an urban revitalization project locally and as an image-building endeavor externally.

Puhan-Schulz concludes that while public opinion did not necessarily embrace the plans, at the end criticism was silenced. She believes this is tied to the fact that the project may in part be seen as salvaging historic building structures in the inner city from the fast-paced development of Frankfurt's high-rise skyline. As a consequence of the postmodernist credo and the rather scattered architectural development, at least the façades of several older buildings were left intact. Nevertheless, Puhan-Schulz finds that the planning of walkways and promenades rather moves the area in the direction of a cool and controlled institutionalization of public space.

The final case study concerns Prague. This material differs from the two other case studies insofar as the Prague case predominantly concerns one museum, the national gallery as part of a dense structure of existing museums, rather than the master planning of a larger public space. Puhan-Schulz describes the history of the collections up to their current placing in the Veletržní palác, a former fair trade palace, a functionalist building from the mid 1920s. The building was destroyed by fire in 1974, and, shortly thereafter, it was suggested as an appropriate site for the modern art collection of the city. This partly rested on the belief that, during the years of communism, it would be difficult to get funding to build a new museum. Money for reconstruction of the destroyed building might, however, be available. While the building project started during communist rule, it was not finished until 1995. The museum is thus not a purpose-built architectural structure, but uses the functionalist fair trade palace as a shell. This makes it similar to other recent prestige projects such as the Tate Modern in London. Nevertheless, larger concerns about the inclusion of public life in the project were incorporated and the building came to contain a large space for performances and part of the building serves corporate functions. The original idea was to create a zone of transition between the

public space and the museum; this plan was, however, only executed in a very reduced sense. As a consequence, the project was highly criticized for its lack of interest in serving the public, for example with cafes or other facilities. Still today, Puhan-Schulz concludes, the place is practically empty of life and contributes only little to the life of the city. This again demonstrates, perhaps more clearly than the two other analyzed examples, the lack of success in bringing new life to public areas through the building of museums.

Through the comparative study of Amsterdam, Frankfurt am Main and Prague, the book successfully brings to our attention significant moments in the relation between the possibilities and capabilities of urban planners when they turn to culture in order to develop a particular image of a city and to allow museums to become part of a larger urban revitalization scheme. This specifically has to do with the question of how art in general and modern art in particular is used in this context as a supposedly positive factor. The study is convincingly carried out mainly through a social scientific, anthropological approach, relying on qualitative interviews, as well as through analysis of the relevant official documents. At the outset of the study, a general critical point is established. Puhan-Schulz puts forward a hypothesis that indicates a certain critical distance from the very way of thinking which forms the core material of her study. In fact, she questions the very premise that the construction of new museums as part of an image-building or revitalization strategy of a given place or city actually serves the urban realm to which it relates. She suggests that through manipulation of public space and institutions, the public spaces of the city are not necessarily changed for the better. People visiting these urban sites have, in fact, witnessed a reduction in possibilities for their use of these particular spaces.

What Puhan-Schulz learns through her comparative study thus not only has to do with factual knowledge concerning different ways in which museums can become operational as part of a urban revitalization strategy. Rather, it allows her to illuminate issues of general relevance: the extent to which this so-called image-building is a useful tool and the potential negative forces it may bring along. In the analyzed material, economic benefits can be found and in this way her book may very well serve as a kind of handbook or manual for urban planners. Nevertheless, the kind of urban space that comes out of these collective efforts may, in fact, not necessarily serve the public who is represented by the administration and planners. While this thesis is empha-

sized again at the end of the study, these implications are not picked up on in any extensive way. This critical evaluation of the projects makes it difficult to see how the book could be used as a manual except by very self-conscious planners and politicians. At the same time, though, the scholarly reader craves a more nuanced interpretation of this critical point. If the analyzed cases show evidence of much larger European developments, this observation raises serious doubts with respect to the general positive evaluation of the use of museums to revitalize a place—when it comes to issues other than the aforementioned economic factors. We might have to

do with a potentially unfortunate instrumentalization of the institution of the museum, institutions that are often placed at key urban sites. The recent museum boom may therefore have counterproductive side effects that still need to be understood in depth. This opens room for questions that unfortunately remain unanswered at the end of the book. Is the idea of an “image of a place” at all useful and valid for public officials to pursue—and what alternative strategies may be developed out of the lessons learned from this study? One may therefore wish that such important questions be addressed in further research.

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