Lille Métropole: City under Influence - Built Signs between Decline and Utopia

„ ... *the buildings speak and act no less than the people who live in them.*“ (Lewis Mumford: The City)

In the last few years of my freelance photographic work, one motif has recurred again and again: buildings as signs of the condition humaine. For me, buildings reflect man's attempts and difficulties to react in an appropriate way to his possibilities and desires, his surroundings and fellow human beings. One may have the impression that this requirement was easier to fulfil in earlier times. But perhaps the relatively small number of testimonies or our transfigured view is deceptive here. Today, however, permanent and unmistakable gestures of self-interest, self-importance, distrust, exploitation and oppression, at best of plain helplessness, dominate the image of cities. Man's Promethean struggle against finitude and chaos is clearly evident in them; here it can be metaphorically depicted with the static means of photography.

This is especially the case at the transitions between different epochs of art and economic history: at sites of a rich historical past or/and at sites of mostly economically induced crises. The attempt to continuously adapt to changing circumstances, the integration of past and present, rarely succeeds. Once flourishing cities fall into oblivion, old maps record in such cases a present-day village larger than a present-day city of millions. Under the dictum of increasing the growth of the gross national product, this is the worst; stagnation, even insufficient growth, means decline. Aggressiveness, productivity and effectiveness have thus become, and perhaps always were, the defining cultural achievements of Western civilisation, and aesthetics and art have been degraded to their decoration.

Ecclesiastical and secular princes have been replaced by the rule of brands and corporations. Democratic ideals are counteracted by these economically strongest groups, while at the same time apparent social concessions promote uniformity and surface aesthetics. Architects find themselves caught between the fronts of representational demands and safety concerns, of profitability demands and efficiency requirements of „clients“, who are now investment companies, on the one hand, and the chorus of moral and aesthetic objectors of every hue on the other. In the breathless acceleration of economic processes, the growth of structures has long since ceased to be the principle, but the speculative and spectacular individual solution in the sea of banalities has become the rule.

And the duration of architecture has long since been limited not by the materials used, but by legal depreciation periods. Thus, fashionable architectural tourism owes less to a boom than to the lack of authoritative current architecture in its classical sense. Planners such as Frank O. Gehry, Santiago Calatrava, Daniel Libeskind or Rem Koolhaas try to counter this vacuum with an architecture of signs and are implored by desperate city fathers to stop the pull of marginalisation with the dwindling resources of their withering communities.

„What is decisive for this place is not where it is, but where it is going and at what speed.“
(Rem Koolhaas: Urban Operations)

An exemplary case of a city at the transition from the industrial to the informatic, from the mobile to the virtual age is Lille in northern France, very close to the Belgian border. Since its foundation, this city has had the character of a crossroads between English, Germanic, Flemish and French influences and movements. Close to the large coal deposits and the iron, steel and textile industries that followed them, it experienced its economic boom in the 18th century without being directly affected by the devastating attacks on them in the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries. But the end of the industrial era also pushed Lille into the sidelines, the city and region with 1.2 million inhabitants, the third largest agglomeration in France, threatened to sink into insignificance.

In this situation, the hub function began to be extended to the more distant cities of Paris, Brussels, London and the Rhine/Ruhr area. With the mayor of the city as acting prime minister of the state, not only was the old dream of tunnelling under the English Channel realised, but moreover Lille was linked to the routes of the high-speed train TGV. One speculates on the increasing mobility and speed of the masses: Brussels in 39, Paris in 60, London in less than 120 minutes, seventy million people within a radius of two hours by train. The visionaries and projectors are turning Lille into Euralille and calling the new relay of the TGV between the European metropolises Lille-Europe.

The transitory character of the overall planning is matched by the architecture of its parts, which is still not obsolete. Anything that does not seem comme il faut to the lofty plans of the designer jetset and could possibly bring to mind a past that has become inglorious, even disreputable, is bulldozed or, in the best case, rendered harmless in vitrine-like reserves. Only in „urbanistic product placement“ (Wolfgang Pehnt) do those responsible for advertising see a chance in the „monopoly of the cities“ (ibid.). And so gigantic shopping centres, office towers and event halls lie in wait for the eagerly awaited trans-European traveller, no matter why he should be forced to get off. These lie strangely opposite the old core of the city, shaped by the

fin-de-siècle, as if dropped from a pitiless sky. In Lille, the periphery begins here, right in the centre. Lille is the periphery.

This sense of being on or in the periphery has always accompanied me in my work in Lille. I saw myself in changing stagings and now answer them with my own. I add my pictorial statements to the plastic, built statements. The resulting abstraction of the functional buildings takes away some of their power to overwhelm. It makes their reality more tangible and palpable.

My photographs of a city in transition to another age make use of the vocabulary of the theatre. There are stages and sets and prospectuses here as well as there. The performance space is either classically frontal or one looks into a peep-box stage. There are occasionally, as a nostalgic reminiscence, historicising backdrops, some modernist or existentialist ones, even these from a time already past, and there are futuristic ones that stand for the present. There is a variety of scenic lighting, but, in keeping with the unromantic theme, it is mostly sober in effect: daylight is diffuse, artificial light is provided by fluorescent tubes. Only sometimes are clouds or a blue sky used to create a special artificiality.

One could suspect the influence of Brecht. Stages are shown that do not hide their functions, that are under reconstruction, as if unfinished. Or the actual stage is hidden behind partially transparent blinds, made inaccessible. Slogans of political theatre appear („TOYS'R'US"), or billboards shout their message into the stage landscape, indecipherable to the viewer. In aseptic rooms, the observer himself is followed by surveillance cameras, and catacombs that make Piranesi's nightmares a reality put the acting enthusiast in claustrophobic conditions. Nevertheless, all does not seem hopeless: my theatre has not yet left ethics behind. It invokes the clarifying power of spiritually inspired art. The stage of the classical Museum of Fine Arts and the backdrop of a painting that overcomes materialism are representative of this. The performers, on the other hand, are not the subject of my work. Instead, their overriding importance is made clear indirectly, through their unreal absence. As if they had disliked the play and gone on strike, fled. Or they simply could not or did not want to remember the text written for these superstructures. Or they realised that the text they knew did not fit at all with the decoration that suddenly surrounded them. So an eerie silence fills the scenery and one feels the instinctive inclination to run for safety. But to where? It is nothing but reality that I show in my pictures. Reality? What reality? Where am I? What am I doing here?