

12 DOSSIERS

DOSSIER:
ARCHDIPLOMAS
THAT
TRANSFORM
THE EXISTING

THE CITY DOESN'T NEED TO BE INVENTED

Hermann Czech
in conversation with Tina Gegoric,
Wilfried Kuehn and Michael Obrist

WK: You completed your diploma with Ernst Plischke at the Academy of Fine Arts after a period studying at the TU Wien.

HC: My studies with Plischke were already dealing with the existing city. My diploma project was also set in the inner city: an entertainment palace as a phased replacement of three or four blocks of the Bayerischer Hof near Augarten. Cedric Price's Fun Palace certainly played a role there. But my project was a bit more concrete, the structure more conventional, though two halls and a swimming pool between the blocks were covered with retractable membrane roofs. The idea was that each of these four blocks could either be replaced in turn or left as they were.

MO: Were you able to freely choose the theme, or was it a topic that was discussed in the various groups in the academy around this time?

HC: Other students in Plischke's class dealt with the areas of urban expansion on the opposite side of the Danube, but I chose the site and the task

myself. My case may have been an exception, but the topic wasn't seen as surprising or out of step. 'How do we deal with the existing city?' was the polemical thread that ran through other projects of mine at the time. The city doesn't need to be invented; on the contrary, it already exists. You can't do so much, but perhaps you can question or control certain things. In reality, urban planning is not about creating something new, it comes down to reinterpreting or modifying existing things.

MO: Back then, Vienna was slowly shrinking. Your fellow students were looking at an urban expansion beyond the Danube that only really happened on a large scale some 50 years later. But you were more focused on finding new uses for, reinterpreting, what was already there. How would you compare what you were doing then to the later discourse, when the existing fabric became a mainstream concern?

HC: Clearly I can't just talk about myself here. It was Arbeitsgruppe 4 – and above all Kurrent and Spalt – who connected these two terms, urban renewal and urban expansion, giving them currency and then also making them a political issue. They were the ones who started this, for example with the *Flaktürme* project (1964), which I greatly appreciated. They analysed the military geometry of the tall flak towers – their triangular placement around the inner districts – and incorporated this into a restructuring of the urban space. The word 'urban space' didn't really exist back then,

either. They turned this military geometry into an urban one, because these were locations where high-rises made sense; they were relatively densely built-up, but also a reasonable distance from the centre. The project was also entirely in keeping with the development of the Ringstrasse. There, too, a military geometry was reinterpreted as urban geometry.

MO: You made a conscious choice to transfer to the Academy of Fine Arts from what was then the Technische Hochschule. How did the ambience in the two places compare?

HC: I wrote about this in an article from 1965 (collected in *Zur Abwechslung*, 1996). There was a historic argument, that 'academicism had become so entrenched at the technical universities that it was harder to eradicate there than at the academies themselves', but also a contemporary one, which was that 'technical knowledge could only truly be absorbed through its application in design, whereas at the Technische Hochschule ... most of the technical subjects either preceded or ran in parallel to the design.' I'd toyed earlier with the idea of going to the academy. But what decided me was the appointment of Plischke in 1963. The alternative would have been to go with Roland Rainer, but he was too linear for my taste. Despite Plischke's limitations, including his historical blind spots – he had little regard for Loos, for example – he was a well-rounded, ambivalent and multi-layered figure.

MO: What form did the social upheavals of the 1960s take in Vienna? Even if the revolts played out differently than in other cities, they would still have had an impact on the student body. How did they affect you?

HC: Of course there was unrest at the academy. Students threw paint bombs, ruining the paintings that lined its corridors. My take was that we should perhaps first ‘nose humbly’ around that decorative painting (as the Viennese expression goes). Curiously enough, the architecture students’ protests were directed solely against Rainer. With Plischke, there was nothing to revolt against. I once put up a poster in the Plischke class that took aim at Rainer: ‘Architecture is at least two-storey’.

WK: If we then move ahead a few years, to the 1970s, Vienna had a very active architecture scene that was associated with the term *Umbau* in a double sense. On the one hand it was literally about rebuilding, modifying the existing situation, but UM BAU was also the name of a magazine founded around that time. What was the story there?

HC: Again Fritz Kurrent comes to mind. He was the one who set up the Österreichische Gesellschaft für Architektur (Austrian Society for Architecture) in 1965, not as an association of architects, but as a forum that was also open to lay people. I’m only referring to Kurrent here, because Spalt was rather sceptical about the initiative. He didn’t join at first and only later somehow acquired honorary

member status. There were definite differences of emphasis between the two, but I didn’t particularly get involved in that. As a student back then, you generally kept your mouth shut. Unless you were one of the ones protesting, of course. But that was more about politics, less about content.

TG: Did you also work with the theme of the existing fabric when you were teaching at the ETH in Switzerland?

HC: Sure. At the ETH I once assigned an entire studio the theme of rebuilding. Each student had to bring in a project they’d done earlier, which was then given to the person next in line, who was tasked with converting it into something else. We found a suitable program for every project. In this way everyone had the experience, not only of their own work being altered, but of having to engage with someone else’s project.

WK: That touches on the fundamental question of authorship or authority over the design and the building and, with it, the question of what you do when the rebuilding doesn’t just involve altering the existing structure, but you’re having to operate in very complex conditions where, as the architect, you don’t have full control, leading to what you’ve called ‘conceptual mannerism’.

HC: Konrad Wachsmann already planned for the design to be viewed as a temporal process where earlier decisions were binding on later ones. In

this sense, one could say that the individual design process has some of the characteristics of a rebuilding project, because you either have to live with earlier decisions, or else discard them. It makes no difference, then, whether those decisions were made by you or by someone else – except that it’s even harder to discard them if they’re yours.

MO: You translated Christopher Alexander’s monumental *A Pattern Language*. What are your reflections on this translation – also in relation to your own thinking? It was one of the most influential books ever, not just because the idea of design patterns became so important in software engineering, but also on account of the incredible theory of complexity that underpins it. How do you see the work today? Times have changed. We’re having to deal more and more with structural complexity.

HC: Well, when Rem Koolhaas reflected on the ‘fundamentals’ of architecture at the 2014 Biennale, he clearly did so without any real knowledge of Alexander. The epilogue to the German edition, *Eine Muster-Sprache* (which I edited, but did not translate on my own), refers to the Stephen Grabow book with Alexander (1983), which says that he also began with elements (‘parts’) and the relations between them. But he found this pair of terms unpleasing, aesthetically. (Even physicists speak of the ‘beauty’ of a theory.) The relationships had a clear logic, but the elements just ‘came from somewhere’: street, door, window. For him, the

theory only became conclusive and satisfactory from an aesthetic point of view when he realised that the elements in turn formed patterns – that is, relations with other parts. While I really respect Koolhaas, his listing of all possible windows etc was not on the same level as Alexander’s theory. In this sense, I think *A Pattern Language* is still underrated.

TG: Since you mention elements and windows, we have to ask you about the glassed in loggia of the Vienna State Opera. How would you describe this intervention?

HC: I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known it was going to be a long-term intervention, as unfortunately it is now. On top of that, the windows are currently overlaid with another system – an LED text installation by Alexander Kada – that’s not coordinated with my intervention. It makes it look like scaffolding.

WK: A rebuilding of your system.

HC: You could even say that I was complicit in breaking the ice, so to speak, by installing something in the loggia in the first place. Back then I asked myself: how would Sicardsburg or van der Nüll have done it? They chose not to have any glazing. But the question is not pointless. There’s exactly the same topographical problem at the Musikverein. There they have glazing, and sculptures too. At the Opera it was about preventing further damage to the

frescoes from damp and frost in winter. The loggia was spared the bombing; the frescoes are still Schwind's originals. That's why the loggia was glassed in. There was existing glazing, which skimmed the back of the sculptures, meeting the painted ornament fields side on. This glazing is what I replaced. My structure left space behind the sculptures, ended with the arches, and no longer intruded on the ornament fields. But now Ernst Julius Hähnel's great allegorical figures have the LED profiles for the text installation centimetres behind their heads – they carry the electronics like rucksacks. As with my intervention, the Monuments Office granted permission for the Alexander Kada installation provided it was dismantled in April and not put back till November. But now they've left everything in place.

WK: But wouldn't it also be acceptable, in principle, for the intervention to remain there through the summer? Why is it so important for it to be dismantled? Rebuilding, modifying, means that things can also change.

HC: Christian Kühn once compared it to orthodontic treatment. I like that analogy very much; even getting braces can be an appealing prospect when you know they're going to be removed. I'm all for the temporary here. There's also the aspect of collective memory. The five axes, these five arches that you find everywhere, right up to the Lincoln Center in New York, originated

in Palladio's Basilica, naturally. Five is the highest number you can immediately grasp visually, without counting. This loggia is essentially an open element. You can't go and close it up forever.

WK: The Kleines Café as well as the Gasthaus Pöschl and Salzamt restaurant remain in their original state. By contrast, the MAK Café and the Theatercafé, which wasn't that old at all, have already been remodelled several times. Does that make you unhappy?

HC: I always answer: at least they saw the light of day. As an architect, you're continually designing things that are never built, and that's even more frustrating.

WK: But when you go to the MAK Café today, you want to see a reconstruction, even if you don't always find reconstruction a good thing.

HC: Prompted by the reconstruction of Loos's Café Museum, which quickly gave way to the reconstruction of its subsequent alteration by another architect, I ironically proposed as an urban concept that reconstruction should always revert to the last but one state. The issue of reconstruction is something that's widely discussed in the German architectural press, as we've seen with the case of the Berlin Palace. Like most people, I'm sure, I was against its reconstruction. But what would we have done in Vienna if St Stephen's Cathedral had been destroyed?

MO: The term ‘dandy’ pops up in one of your articles, along with the idea of a new intervention that is so complex it seems as if it has always been there.

HC: The Wunder-Bar, for instance, is an intervention that simulates a Gothic vault. There were cross vaults in the Kleines Café, and it would have been stupid to glue ribs on their edges. But there were no cross vaults in the Wunder-Bar, only barrel vaults, with a coved vault in one room. So there was the geometric location of these vault edges and I was able to add the ribs onto them. I doubt, however, whether you’d read this as Gothic ribbed vaulting. When the well-known art historian, Walther Brauneis, saw photos of the café, he asked ‘Where is that? I’m not familiar with that kind of Gothic vault.’ I had to tell him it wasn’t authentic. But he said: ‘How do you know?’ So, even though it’s only fragments, it worked. Another example is the front step of the Galerie Hummel, which looks as if it has been worn down by a century of footsteps. It’s the kind of inconsequential fun you can indulge in – or not. Irony doesn’t always make sense. When it comes to rebuilding, there’s also the strategy of saying right out: something has changed now, there’s a difference. Or else you can fabricate continuity: it can be easier and cheaper to continue using the same means as before, leaving the viewer to wonder: Was that already there? Or what’s new, and what’s not? Those are the two strategies. Looking at the Berlin Palace now, I don’t know whether it’s a credible approach to make a concrete frame and then hang everything else on it.

WK: I don’t think so either. We’d suggested something else – that the castle should be rebuilt as a solid masonry structure, of brick, rather than concrete, replicating one-to-one the original core of the building.

HC: In the baroque building the original brick core also formed the cornices.

WK: We proposed just that. There are some very beautiful examples of this in churches in Italy, for example Alberti’s Sant’Andrea in Mantua. You can see the form of the cornice, but no ornament, because it was never applied, they never finished building the church. In any case, everything you need is already there, so any ornament would be superfluous.

HC: You’re right; this intention was not clear to me.

WK: Of course, with the Berlin Palace, that route would have involved a lot more work than cladding a concrete structure. But to go back to the MAK Café: if you were asked to reconstruct it now, would you rebuild it exactly as it was before, or would you modify the design?

HC: That would depend on who was running the café and what they wanted. If the same kind of flexibility was required, then I’d set it up as it was before. The bar is still in the flak tower depot, as are the armchairs. The first batch of

Dossier

armchairs at the MAK had a fault. The back legs were two centimetres too narrow, meaning you couldn't lean too far to the side. They're sometimes used as an attendant's chair at exhibitions, and I like that. There's a photo of the 2014 Hollein exhibition that shows the tiled chair from his 1972 Biennale installation. And in front of it – unlit – is my chair as the attendant's seat.

MO: We spoke of your generation, who wanted either to go to the Moon or to deal with the concrete matters in hand. What would you say to young architects making their way today?

HC: I always say that a student has to begin somewhere. You have no repertoire. You need something to refer to, some models to inspire you. What these are, is not important – you can start with quite unrefined things. All that matters is that you can see when something isn't working, that something more is required. Where you then say: that can't be everything. And whoever is teaching you must be attuned to this moment and point it out. You can't sweep the difficulties under the carpet. You have to face up to the questions, a process that often brings with it despair.

Transcript of a conversation with Hermann Czech, 5.10 2021

Hermann Czech is a Viennese architect, author and former Visiting Professor at Harvard University, ETH Zürich and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

ARCHDIPLOMA
2021
A REPOSITORY
OF IDEAS
SELECTED
DIPLOMA
PROJECTS
TU WIEN

