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TALKING CITIES EXHIBITION IN ESSEN, GERMANY

In Talking Cities the micropolitics of contemporary urban space is investigated through a series of dialogues. Using a transdisciplinary approach that brings together architecture and urban design strategies, as well as artistic responses, this is an event with more grit than gloss.

Text by Anneke Bokern, all photos by Allard van der Hoek except where mentioned otherwise

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This page, top left:
**Entrance to Entry 2006:
 new escalator by OMA**

Top right:
**Before Taiwan's Interbreeding Field
 started building its installation, its
 members built a workshop using
 the collective's own lamps and
 tables in the exhibition space**

Opposite page, top:
**'Reinforcing each other's qualities':
 Interbreeding Fields organic
 Gordian architecture gives the
 visitor the unique possibility to get
 an intense physical experience of
 the coal washery's chutes, which
 dominate the exhibition space at
 level 17**

Opposite page, below:
**Karsten Konrad's fictional scale
 model Stadtplaners Workshop
 shows the Prager Straße in Dresden**
Photograph by Günter Lintl

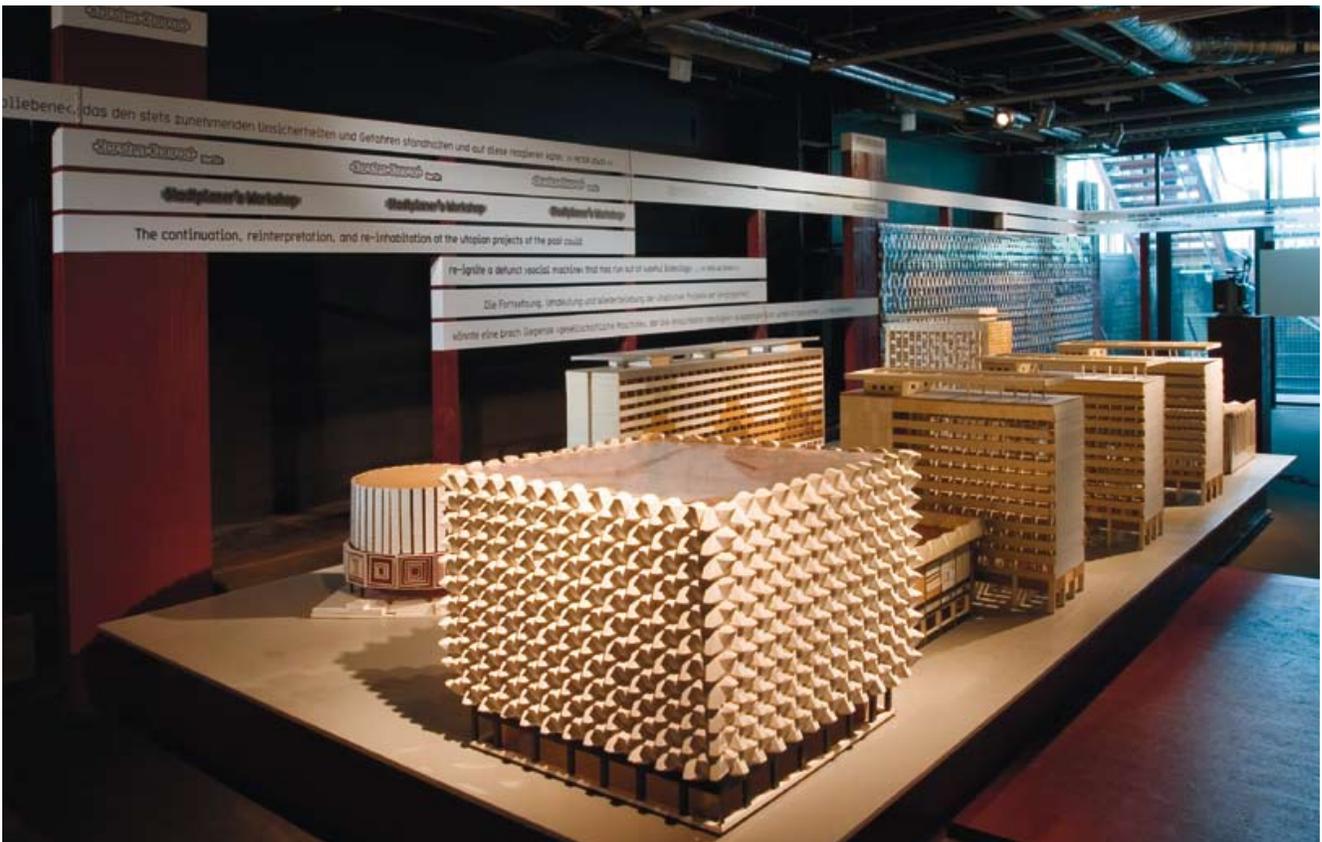
'They work at night, when nobody else is here. That's why they've even brought their own lamps, made from plastic canisters. Every morning, it's a surprise to see what they've come up with overnight.' During the installation of the exhibition Talking Cities, the members of Taiwanese artist collective Interbreeding Field clearly were the curators' darlings. 'Their contribution, a wooden bridge structure, is growing rampantly,' Julia Albani of urban drift says, smiling. 'We've even had to tell them to dismantle parts of it again, because they went beyond their assigned space. 'And it doesn't stop there. One night, the Taiwanese brownies simply produced thirty cute little benches from leftover wood - leaving the curators to wonder what to do with them. Two weeks before the opening, they're still stacked in a corner of the exhibition space.

In a way, Interbreeding Field is the epitome of what Talking Cities is all about: enthusiasts who take possession of a space and transform it with minimal means, but a lot of diligence. The exhibition, organised by Berlin-based platform for architecture and urbanism urban drift, takes place in the coal washing plant at Zeche Zollverein, a huge industrial heritage site in Germany's coal mining district, and is part of design manifestation Entry 2006. It brings together 35 international artist and design teams who deliver statements on marginal and residual areas within contemporary urban fabrics. Zeche Zollverein itself, of course, is one of these wastelands, so exhibition and venue form a perfect partnership, reinforcing each other's qualities.

BACKSIDES AND FRINGES

Talking Cities was initiated by Francesca Ferguson, founder and artistic director of urban drift and director designate of the Swiss architecture museum in Basel. One and a half years ago, she successfully proposed the exhibition concept to the organisers of Entry 2006. Instead of presenting another glossy design show, the forceful British curator wants to direct attention to the backsides and fringes of our cities - forgotten non-places, just like Zeche Zollverein was before it was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001. 'First of all, we launched a call for contributions, she recounts. 'Some teams applied with an idea, others with a realised project. But I also invited a part of the participants directly. What really mattered to me was to create a mix of generations. I didn't want the exhibition to become an exclusive platform for the young and hip.' Accordingly, established grandmasters like Belgian architect Luc Deleu find themselves next to young, far less-known practices and even a student team.

The location of the exhibition couldn't be more appropriate. While most of the Zollverein-buildings, designed by Fritz Schupp and Martin Kremmer at the end of the 1920s, look as neat as a pin again, thanks to UNESCO money, the coal washing plant is still a building site. It is currently undergoing a renovation and transformation designed by OMA, who also created the masterplan for the entire colliery. Half-way



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From left to right:
Baukasten.berlin presents its products – ranging from happy families to pillow slips that show demolished facades of modern buildings – inside a kiosk that was once widespread in countries of Eastern Europe, but is now disappearing: the ‘K67’

Luc Deleu's utopian, 20m-long model of the ‘Unadapted City’

Rome-based architects IaN+ has analysed the areas along the huge ring-road GRA and claim that empty areas should be preserved to form a future city

Berlin designer Andreas Bergmann transformed a building fence, one of the most common objects in contemporary cities, into a place to dwell

The softly pulsating sculptures of the Audio Lounge, built by students of the KHM Köln. In the background: Interbreeding Field's ‘Open Reality’

El ultimo grito, Spanish designers based in London, turned their space in ‘Talking Cities’ into something totally alien: with 20,000 green stickers they created ‘tagged environment #8’

All photographs on this spread by Günter Lintl

through the building activities, the five exhibitions constituting Entry 2006 have taken over the still very rough plant, which is supposed to house a regional historical museum from 2008. As it stands there are not many visible changes - apart from a new concrete layer on the façade and a beautiful, bright orange escalator, docked to the plant at a slanting angle, mimicking the old conveyor belts connecting the colliery buildings.

ANYTHING BUT RANDOM

Talking Cities takes place on level 17 - which, by the way, doesn't denote the 17th floor, but a floor at a height of 17 metres. ‘We chose this space ourselves,’ Ferguson explains, ‘most of the other floors are subdivided by cubicles and partitions. This one was the most industrial-looking, extending around a core of big, free-standing chutes.’ Ferguson certainly knows what she wants and how to get it. Asked whether the participants themselves could determine in which corner of the space their project would be presented, she reacts slightly irritated: ‘No, of course not. I created a concept for the exhibition. It's based on a system of juxtapositions and it's anything but random.’

In the centre of the exhibition, between the chutes, Ferguson placed the so-called Audio Lounge: a group of sculptural seating objects which also serve as broadcasting devices for the exhibition's own radio station. Designed by a group of students of the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, the white benches are illuminated from the inside, and bands of copper wire run across their surfaces. By holding a little cable spool with an integrated loudspeaker to one of the bands, visitors can listen to one of four radio channels, broadcasting discussions between the participants of the exhibition.

Around this core the projects are arranged, connected by exhibition architecture designed by German Thilo Fuchs. His rather simple and rough wooden frame structure, painted the same red lead colour as the steel window frames and girders in the Zollverein buildings, permeates the space, wrapping itself around the existing columns. ‘The building is listed as a monument,’ Albani says, ‘we weren't allowed to touch its construction, not even to bang a nail into the wall. So the whole exhibition architecture had to be built around the columns.’ And Ferguson adds: ‘It's actually an informal grid, wrapped around and plugged into the existing space.’ In a second layer of wrapping, white graphic strips with quotes by the participants span between the wooden posts, looking a bit like the never-ending paper snakes that telaxes used to disgorge.

ANTI-GLOSSY APPROACH

Although the installation looks rather makeshift, even a bit ramshackle at first sight, it fits in very well with Ferguson's anti-glossy approach. ‘I'm not interested in high-end design. It's not relevant in a context like this,’ she says confidently. Context, just like dialogue, is one of her magic words. Accordingly,



Ferguson has brought together 35 projects and artworks that deal with non-places in a very contextual way. Large-scale photos of international cityscapes provide a virtual urban backdrop, while Zeche Zollverein and the Ruhr valley conurbation form the real-life setting and anchor of the exhibition.

The projects presented range from Simon Conder's 'Black Rubber House' (a weird little building standing in the shabby landscape of Dungeness beach in England) via Austrian photographer Aglaia Konrad's pictures of new towns around Cairo, to German artist Karsten Konrad's scale models of GDR-buildings, made from materials that he finds on the sites, and Atelier Bow Wow's 'pet architecture' in Tokyo. Folke Köbberling and Martin Kaltwasser have erected one of their favela-style shanty huts, and Toh Shimazaki has constructed a spatial sculpture dedicated to imperfection. Do-it-yourself, temporality, low budget, smallness and niche are the keywords. Very often, it's about distilling something beautiful from the ugly or implanting something beautiful into the ugly - even if Ferguson claims that aesthetics don't matter.

CONCEPTUAL BAZAAR

As curator Ferguson prefers to emphasise the effect instead of the form of the projects: they all aim to trigger discussions or developments with minimal means. 'Dialogue might be the only excuse for architecture', one of the quotes on the graphic strips reads. It's by Cedric Price, whose visionary design concepts for deteriorating industrial sites from the 1960s were just as much a source of inspiration for Ferguson's exhibition as Rem Koolhaas's master plan for Zeche Zollverein. With their projects, the participants of the exhibition want to incite dialogues about the use of space, while at the same time, they're brought into dialogue with each other in the exhibition. Of course this results in cacophony, but that's the intention. Ferguson calls her show a 'conceptual bazaar', in which the exhibits aren't sanctified, but presented in 'intense juxtapositions'.

If there were anything to criticise about all this, it would be that it's not very controversial. Who doesn't like charming little interventions in big and morbid residual spaces? Aren't we all afflicted by periphery-romanticism? But while this constitutes part of the fascination of the single projects, the actual potential for controversy lies on a different scale. It's in the underlying idea that these small, cheap interventions might be more useful than big urbanistic strategies. Applied to Zeche Zollverein this means: installing a tiny swimming pool in the coking plant could be a better idea than to impose megalomaniac plans for Ruhrtrópolis on the area. That's what Ferguson calls the 'micropolitics of urban space'. And that's where the controversy, and consequently the dialogue starts. #