

Architectural Culture in the European Union

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Combining economic and cultural goals, the European Union (EU) has set out to become a multinational, global, political, and economic system. With multiple governing bodies and systems of communication, the EU is noticeably impacting the global market. The European Union began this journey with the highly publicized and economic transition to the Euro.

Within the past few years, the European Union has strategically created multiple programs to promote and revitalize its 25 Member States. One of the more recent programs is titled the 2000 Cultural Programme, and it has set basic standards and ideals to promote culture across Europe.

"Culture has an important intrinsic value to all people in Europe, is an essential element of European integration and contributes to the affirmation and vitality of the European model of society and to the Community's influence on the international scene."¹

The program revolves around the arts, and in particular, architecture, which has the unique ability to create an identity for the European Union in the future.

ARCHITECTURAL GOALS

The European Union's Council Resolution on Architectural Quality in Urban and Rural Environments lays out the ideals of the EU in regards to architecture. The EU Council lists:

(a) architecture is a fundamental feature of the history, culture and fabric of life of each of our countries; that it represents an essential means of artistic expression in

the daily life of citizens and that it constitutes the heritage of tomorrow;

(b) architectural quality is a constituent part of both the rural and urban environment;

(c) the cultural dimension and the quality of the physical treatment of space should be taken into account in Community regional and cohesion policies;

(d) architecture is an intellectual, cultural, artistic and professional activity. Architectural service therefore is a professional service which is both cultural and economic.²

These four statements create a basis for the EU's 2000 Cultural Programme which stresses the need to establish a cultural image. In focusing on architecture, the EU hopes to fix internal social and economic problems. In fact, the EU states

"...that good quality architecture, by improving the living context and the relationship between citizens and their environment, whether rural or urban, can contribute effectively towards social cohesion and job creation, the promotion of cultural tourism and regional economic development."²

The EU Council Resolution, in order to turn its ideals into reality, includes three actions for its Member States. Member States are requested to:

(a) intensify their efforts to improve the knowledge and promotion of architecture and urban design, and to make contracting authorities and the general public more

aware of and better trained in appreciation of architectural, urban and landscape culture;

(b) take into account the specific nature of architectural service in the decisions and measures which require it;

(c) promote architectural quality by means of exemplary public building policies.²

The countries of the European Union have a difficult task in fulfilling these duties. Options for addressing the issue of making citizens more aware of architecture may include festivals or other programs revolving around architecture, but the EU does not necessarily assist in the promotion of State specific events nor do they provide examples of successful applications.

Besides these issues, the European Union does strive for progress in the architectural field by creating benefits for Architects, and using economic powers to focus on specific areas that either need the EU's help, or are simply benefiting from cultural programs specific to their area. The three main benefits for Architects are in the form of awards, higher education, and the ability to practice across borders, all the while calling upon architecture to aid desolate urban environments, chosen Capital(s) of Culture, and the EU's three capitals.

Awarding European Architecture

In regards to awarding architects for their positive contribution to the European Union, there is one special prize given every two years to a contemporary architecture project, the Mies van der Rohe Award. The EU generates the award to promote a unique European identity as well as encourage the younger generation of Architects.

Specifically, this award addresses the European Union's desire to create modern works that express the ideals of the architect while combining the past with the present. The architecture should become a part of the city and a noticeable landmark to educate the people of Europe about architecture and culture.

Besides awards, the European Union also hosts a number of design competitions such as the Competition for Bioclimatic Urban Redevelopment (2004/2005). This competition encourages architects to practice sustainable design, and to find new ways of creating clean energy. Currently, a project has not been chosen yet as the winner.

Education and Architecture

Another way to ensure a better architecture for the future is the promotion of education. In the Culture 2000 Programme, the European Union dictates the need to, "Improve the possibilities of training and further training, in particular when combined with the improved mobility of those working in the cultural field (including teachers and students)"³. The EU enforces its ideals through the Socrates II program, which promotes studying abroad to encourage a culture encompassing all Member States. The main aims of the program are to lead students in the pursuit of European languages, cooperation, innovation, mobility, and equal opportunities.⁴

More importantly to architecture, perhaps, is the Erasmus program. Erasmus has the same ideals, but focuses on higher education. With Erasmus, various European colleges encourage student and teacher exchanges, international programs, and thematic networks across Europe, language courses, and the European credit transfer system.³ Many colleges have joined the program in the past few years, and so far the results have been successful. The basic promotion of a globalized economy will teach students the importance of the EU as a transnational organization for Europe.

IMPROVING THE EUROPEAN UNION'S IMAGE

Currently, there are 25 countries which are Member States of the European Union, with five countries looking to join in the near future. All of the Member States are not given equal distribution of money from the EU. The focus for spending in regards to architecture is mainly for needy urban areas, the EU's annual Capital(s) of Culture, and the EU's capital cities.

The Urban II Project

Through the Urban II project, the European Union promotes sustainability and the use of innovative design strategies for rehabilitation and regeneration for urban areas in need. The EU calls for a "recovery of neighborhoods, repairs of heritage buildings, paths in green areas, [and] new cultural spaces, etc."⁵ In order to achieve the goals of the Urban II projects, the EU issues Structural Funds that transfer to those areas which need development the most.

The European Union also wishes to promote economic and social cohesion in these cities. In revitalizing the urban spaces, the possibility arises for the new urban environment to support tourism since, for Europe, tourism provides such a great amount of jobs.

It would be difficult to say whether the Urban II project has been successful thus far. It is currently in the second phase, as the last phase was from 1994-1999, and was declared a success by the EU. As of right now, there are many additional cities that requested assistance for the Urban II project, and it could take more years to be completed than expected. The Urban II project may also be re-phased in 2006 at the end of its session.

Cities and Capital(s) of Culture

The Cities of Culture are almost an inverse to the Urban II project, but are equally as pivotal to the city's tourism industry. Through a 1 million dollar subsidy, the European Union selects specific cities every year to promote their individual cultures and represent Europe as a whole. "The aspiration to a cultured city is the core of a utopian way of thinking that proposes a better social life."⁶ A very high honor, these cities prepare for many years prior to becoming the Cities of Culture. Generally, these cities promote themselves and their own unique culture through the use of festivals and strong advertising campaigns; utilizing the ideal expression of the arts. Architectural objects may also be built to promote the city's culture and the EU as a whole.

Beginning in the year 1985, the first city was chosen under the title Cultural Capital of Europe, but in the year 2000, the program began to be seen in conjunction with the 2000

Cultural Programme. In the beginning as well, many of these cities did not focus on the improvement of architecture, but instead chose to promote their own cultures through the fine arts, performances, theatre, and the use of new technologies.

It was in 2002 that the cities Bruges, Belgium, and Salamanca, Spain began to promote themselves specifically through the use of architecture. In Bruges, the inauguration of the Concertgebouw, a red brick building with a concert hall and other functions, by architects Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem, began the festivities. Other architectural projects included a villa designed by the architect Toyo Ito which is in sync with the history of Bruges and its surroundings, and a bridge by Jürg Conzett, which connects the city for cyclists and pedestrians over a canal. Both projects connect a modern/contemporary project to ancient surroundings in the spirit of the European Union architectural agenda.

In Salamanca, Spain, the city focused its attention on renovating buildings to express their rich history and art. Renovations included the Liceo theatre and former prisons. The Centre of Scenic Arts and Music and a multipurpose hall were also completed in early 2005 as their newest contemporary projects.

Graz, Austria became the City of Culture in 2003, and was represented architecturally through two projects. The first, a smaller project of the two, aptly named the Shadow Clock Tower, was created by Marcus Wilfing. The form is an abstract interpretation of the old clock tower in the city square, and placed strategically nearby, it appears as a shadow. "The artist's attempt to materialise the non-material impressively displayed the complex function of human perception in which both movement and surroundings play a role."⁶ By moving around the square, the appearance of both forms changes. Although a minor project, the form balances the old tower with the new. The second project, Mur Island (Fig. 1) by the Acconci Studio, was a complete island built from scratch. An egg shaped object, the building literally floats atop the water and is used as a café, a theatre, and a children's playground. As said in a press release,

"Up until recently, the River had been rather a fence in a steeplechase than a

place of relaxation. It divided the city into two parts. This division is now a thing of the past, and the two parts of the city are growing together again. The Island is also a symbol of the River as a treasure. A new district is born, on and in the water, as Graz keeps on growing inwards."⁷

Similar to the bridge project in Spain, the structure connects two parts of the city, creating not only a landmark, but a successful space in which to socialize.

In 2004, the capitol cities were Geno(v)a, Italy and Lille, France. Genoa's goal was to create and restore their historic areas in order to promote their unique Italian art and culture. Two projects on Genoa's Porto Antico showcase the Sea; the Aquarium, designed by Renzo Piano's Building Workshop, and the Padiglione del Mare by Consuegra. The third project includes the restoration of the Castello D'Alberis as a new Museum of World Cultures, and a fourth includes the Stazione Metropolitana

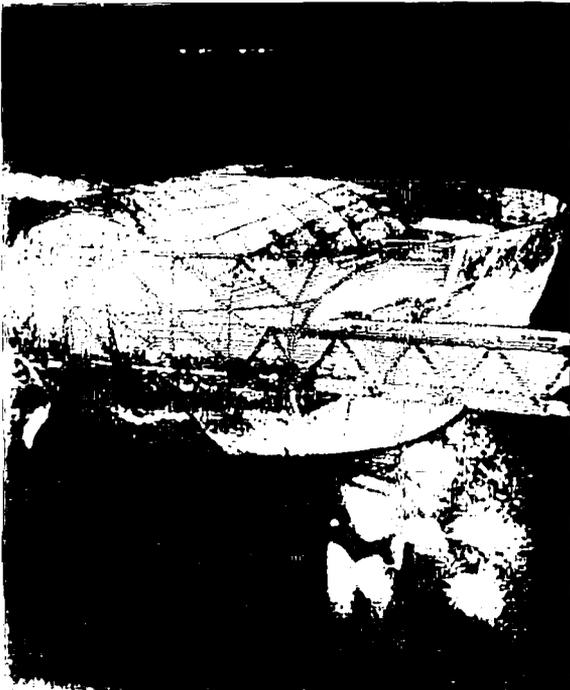


Figure 1. Mur Island⁸

Piazza Sarzano by Penaranda. Most importantly perhaps, is the contemporary design for the new Ponte Parodi (Fig. 2), created "in the conviction that they can help to make Genoa a truly unique city and one

that is fully worthy of a place among the capitols of Italian art."⁹ The UN Studio van Berkel & Bos whose design won the competition, seeks to define a significant new harbor in the port city of Genoa. By demolishing the previous industrial buildings and creating contemporary structures and façades, the project serves to draw tourists and residents alike into the city from their journeys at sea.

The city of Lille, France chose a different route. They decided to renovate and redesign old city buildings into a series of galleries, or *Maisons Folie*, as a reference to extravagant boating houses of the past. Six of these *Maisons Folie* are on the outskirts of the city of Lille, and two are directly in the city, designed by the architecture group NOX. The latter were built on the former site of the Leclercq

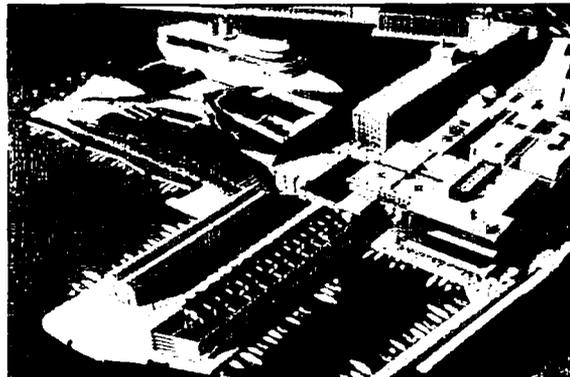


Figure 2. Ponte Parodi Project, UN Studio van Berkel & Bos.¹⁰

Factory and contain contemporary art projects, performances, etc. from all around the world. Another *Maison Folie* by a separate architect is the enormous *Condition Publique* which contains market halls and indoor gardens. These contemporary spaces then serve to create landmarks, art venues, and social places for the local community and tourists.

In 2005, the new Capital of Culture is Cork, Ireland. As part of their program for the year they have borrowed an architectural sculpture, the *Eighteen Turns*, by Daniel Libeskind. The city intends for this piece of architecture to inspire its own style in the future. The city has launched other architectural lectures and discussions as well

throughout their year, but they do not have any buildings planned to demonstrate their own cultural identity.

For the year 2006, the capitol is Patras, Greece. Architects are strongly encouraged to submit designs for public buildings. Since Greece is a further distance than many of the previous cities, it will be interesting to note whether projects will provide the anticipated impact for the city.

European Union Capital City Projects

The European Union currently has three capitals from which they govern; Brussels, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg. All three, in order to promote the strength and identity of the European Union, prompt the creation of new architecture.

Beginning with Brussels, the local government wishes for a new architecture and planning for the city, but they have not been able to implement a program to express the strength of the European Union within the city. Architects such as Rem Koolhaas have been brought in to discuss the issue of a European style for architecture in the region, but nothing tangible has transpired from these sessions.

Quite the opposite, Luxembourg has been implementing many building projects in the last few years. These include the Place de l'Europe, the Berlaymont renovation into the New Museum of Modern Art on Fort Thungen by I.M. Pei, and the Philharmonic Hall by Christian de Portzamparc. In addition to these projects are the Cultural Meeting Place of Neumunster, the Museum of the Fortress, and the Modernization of the Municipal Theatre. All of the Luxembourg projects were presented after the year 2000, and are intended to represent Luxembourg as a thriving city and a promising Capital of Culture for the year 2007.

For Strasbourg, there is a set plan for a high-speed rail from Strasbourg to Paris and a forth addition to the European Court of Justice by Dominique Parrault.¹¹

THE FUTURE OF A CULTURAL STYLE

What the European Union has not done for its Member States is to set a specific style for its overall cultural program. Although the EU selects a contemporary style of architecture for their awards, and sets Mies van der Rohe as a standard, they do not describe an ideal form of architecture.

"There are undoubtedly signs of a distinctively European architecture around the new glassy postmodernist monumentality that characterizes recent EU building projects where visibility and functionality find a unity of purpose in a certain accommodation of the Union's commitment to the idea of 'unity in diversity'. But these buildings are clearly more concerned with public displays of visibility than of reflexivity."¹²

As evident in the Urban II and Capital(s) of Culture, The EU also appears to lean towards regionalism. In order to maintain the individual culture for each Member State, the EU promotes the revitalization of urban centers, but does not spell out how each country should view itself. The EU also recommends that the Member States encourage the study of architecture and an understanding of the value of architecture, but it does not describe how. It may be either a positive or a negative to lack a specific style across boundaries, but it will effect the impression the EU has on the world as a whole.

The European Union has also come upon a stumbling block in regards to complete globalization of the Architecture profession. The United States is one of the few nations that refuse to allow European Architects to practice without specific licenses from individual states or regions. American Architects, on the other hand, are accepted as licensed Architects in Europe without having to take extra exams and gaining specific licensure. Although this does not prohibit European influence on the United States, the European Architects may not obtain the benefits of the US market.

Also, the question remains as to how this European architectural culture may influence America. Since Americans look towards Europe for trends and styles, there remains a

unique opportunity to affect how Americans view their own future with architecture.

The goals of the European Union are progressing, but it is a slow process. Buildings take many years to produce, and the 2000 Cultural Programme and Urban II project have only been active for five years now. With the possible addition of new Member States in the future, and the revision of cultural documents, the European Union has the opportunity to create a unique, solidified entity both politically and economically. Time will tell whether the European Union programs will fulfill the needs of the European Community and the architectural profession.

END NOTES

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