The Effects of the Firm’s Structure and Style of Work on the Development of Urban Landscape Ideas

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Abstract
An insight into a specific style of work and an individual company shows how teamwork, internal communication and an open atmosphere achieve optimum results in complex urban landscape projects. Three projects demonstrate how specific plants placed in urban surroundings change our perception and are indispensable for identification: An artificial image of a natural landscape transforms an inner courtyard of a commercial building into an urban reed landscape. A single tree species becomes an “image carrier” during the process of planning of a large industrial estate. Three carefully chosen, different trees turn a garage forecourt into a multifunctional and attractive garden courtyard.

INTRODUCTION
planetage GmbH is a small, clearly structured landscape architecture office made up of seven women. Work is carried out in two teams, each headed by one of the directors. The directors and founders Marceline Hauri and Marie-Noëlle Adolph have run the landscape architecture office on the premises of the former Maag cogwheel factory in Zurich since 1998.

The office structure and the space have been chosen in a way that allows internal communication - an essential aspect of their business philosophy - in day-to-day work. Communication serves as a driving force and guarantees high quality output. This form of a communicative and creative design process presupposes a flat hierarchy. Convinced that good ideas and outstanding results are only possible in a pleasant working environment, the owners seek to achieve an open, transparent and warm atmosphere.

For organisational reasons and in order to achieve the greatest possible degree of efficiency, each project is carried out by one project leader and her team. The other team is, if necessary, brought in for critical inputs and ideas during the design process as well as to provide support in finding solutions to specific technical problems. Experience shows that an objective view from ‘outside’ has a positive effect on contents and provides valuable ideas in the process towards a good solution.

The planners’ job is to increase the quality of urban life. This is done for the benefit of other people, but the ideas are derived from the personal collection of images that has developed over the years. The communicative approach is of crucial importance in this process beginning with the initial idea, essentially shaped by the personality of its creator, through to the finished product, which must be pleasing to the eye as well as satisfy functional needs from various points of view. Images and ideas for new urban landscapes mature in discussion and in the exchange of views.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIRM’S ACTIVITIES IN URBAN SURROUNDINGS

Significance and Use of Plants in Urban Surroundings
planetage plans and builds almost entirely in urban surroundings. In several projects it has examined the use of plants in an urban environment. It endeavours to show the special significance and fascination of plants in urban areas. For example, three small trees, placed in the right place, evoke emotions and memories, satisfy the desire of the
city dweller for nature, transport him to a supposedly idyllic world or help him believe in an illusion. Plants in the city convey atmosphere. The strong contrast between the natural environment, where plants are an emotionally charged element, and the urban environment, where they are actually experienced in daily life, provides a fascinating dichotomy that is part of day-to-day design work.

The desire to improve the quality of urban life by using plants is a driving force both in the case of urban design definitions as well as when it comes to the small urban oases. The following examples show what is meant by urban landscapes and, depending on the situation, what role plants can play in an urban context.

**Opus Inner Courtyard, Zug, 2002 – an Outline of the Process-Oriented Work of planetage**

Development and realisation of a project is a process which is accompanied by evolution of points of view, by changes and reconsiderations. As new ideas are developed through the interaction with the project, the working theses and focuses shift.

1. **The Opus Inner Courtyard – an Artificial Image of a Natural Landscape.** The artificial landscape is to be understood as an intervention in urban space (Fig. 1). The courtyard – as the core of a babushka of office buildings consisting of two inside building levels – is designed as a soft counterpart to the hard surfaces and the dry-hot passage-like areas with their industrial characteristics. The landscape image, characterised by water and vegetation, is made up of different archetypal landscape elements such as reeds bounding the lakeshores and swamps of the Florida Everglades, whereby the aspect of an exotic context is a deliberate one.

2. **The Opus Inner Courtyard – a Walk-In Aquarium.** The reflections on the water and on the façades break up the dimensions (Fig. 2.) The landscape image is reproduced and merges with the ‘vessel’ of the façades. The dimensions of the inner courtyard can be taken in from the office areas overlooking them. As well as making a pleasant change for the computer-tired eye, the courtyard provides images and places to enjoy a moment of tranquillity.

   At ground-floor level, the reed landscape protrudes like a filling of the gaps between the buildings as far as the streets and pavements. It entices passers-by to discover something new and linger for a while (Fig. 3).

   Vegetation and water can be experienced more directly from the metal footbridges lying just above the water surfaces. This is where the flow of water and play of light truly become visible. The whisper of reeds in the wind provides a background for the attractive and varied images of this reed landscape (Fig. 4).

   Growth and development are therefore characteristic features of the Opus inner courtyard. Plants, in their function as part of an ecological system, are not only used as a design element, they can also be experienced as a living and developing element. At present, the inner courtyard is characterised by water, gravel and the metal footbridge in front of the glass façade; plants do not yet feature in the design. However, there is an interplay of light and reflections, the irresistible feeling of being close to water, the sense of expanse and the wideness of the sky. With the changing seasons, the appearance of the proliferating reeds will change and with it the atmosphere.

3. **Sulzer Centre, Oberwinterthur, 1999 – The Tulip Tree as a Transmitter of Images and Ideas.** The Sulzer Centre in Oberwinterthur, an industrial estate extending over 100 ha, is important to the town of Winterthur in terms of its location and development potential. For many years, the town has made unsuccessful attempts along with the owners of the property to market the disused areas. In 1999, three planning teams were commissioned to provide urban planning designs as part of a study; these designs were intended to provide the district with an individual image and attract investors. The planning team made up of planetage GmbH/Guagliardi Ruoss architects, Zurich
submitted a proposal (Fig. 5) to divide the site up into two clearly distinct areas: namely a part along the River Eulach ‘divested’ of building structures and to be planted with a grove of scattered tulip tree. The southern part following the railway line is, in contrast, to form a counterpart as a new, dense urban district of mixed uses. Open space and development are considered to be a single entity on the clearly defined site, during the planning process also designated as an island. The park, its use and density, as well as the urban life that is to unfold on the site are mutually dependent.

The only plant that formed part of this planning process was the tulip tree (*Liriodendron* sp.). In the course of the planning process the tulip tree, as the symbol for park and renewal, developed into an actual image for the entire site. The tulip tree, initially the expression of a design idea, has made its mark and has become the symbol for a vision in the ongoing development process. The poetic name of the tree has played an undeniable role. The tulip tree evokes leisure and the freshness of a garden and brings to mind pleasant associations. These associations are so strong that the tulip tree is always mentioned in any discussion on the proposed park. Rather than the park on the Eulach, it is the park with the tulip trees. However, it is quite improbable that a tulip tree will ever be planted here, as the planning process is still very much in its beginnings, namely at the preliminary urban planning stage. A large number of design ideas from various quarters will still be needed until the park project takes final shape.

4. Scheideggstrasse Forecourt, Zurich, 2000 – From Garage Forecourt to Garden Courtyard. A garage forecourt designed as a courtyard and entrance area can serve as an example for the importance of quality required of apparently insignificant places in urban, i.e. densely built-up areas. The area is clearly defined by walls and relates to the base of the building (Fig. 6). The courtyard is enhanced and structured by the simple use of plants, namely three umbrella-shaped “Amur Maples” in circular tree sites. The fiery-red foliage harmonizes perfectly with the aubergine-coloured façade in the autumn months. The tree sites in the concrete surface are planted with ornamental grasses. Their delicacy distracts from the hardness of the concrete. A protected, clearly structured piece of garden has been created, a focal point, a meeting place, and a place of prestige, a place for playing, a place where bicycles can be repaired and cars parked.

This project clarifies two aspects: Firstly, it is not only the highlights that constitute the quality of urban landscape. The quality of an urban landscape is also manifested in the approach to insignificant commercial space such as garage forecourts, leftover areas and access areas. Secondly, it becomes clear that the use of a few, carefully chosen plants makes the garage forecourt a special place. In day-to-day use the forecourt as the most frequently used core of the garden has proved itself.

CONCLUSION

Looking at work strategies, there are three main reasons why communication is a crucial means to success in a creative design process: Large projects must often satisfy a number of needs and therefore it is important to obtain, as much as possible, an objective point of view. The larger the project, the more complex are the technical problems waiting to be solved. Solutions are more efficiently found by communicating and discussing problems in teams. And last but not least, creative ideas and satisfying results can only be achieved in an atmosphere determined by openness, trust and communication. Looking at work tools, vegetation is a main element in every project. Not only important for aesthetic and ecological reasons, plants can figure as conveyors of image and atmosphere, they can bring back memories and they can answer to certain longings.
Figures

Fig. 1. Opus site plan.

Fig. 2. Opus section.
Fig. 3. Opus after realisation: reflections of facades on the water surface.

Fig. 4. Opus after realisation: the metal footbridge with lighting elements.
Fig. 5. Sulzer center, Oberwinterthur: urban planning in a former industrial estate.

Fig. 6. Scheideggstrasse: a garage forecourt can be more than just a space in which to park a car.