

# The Experience City and challenges for Architects and Urban Designers

This themed issue of Nordic Journal of Architectural Research focuses on the pressure that the experience economy puts on urban transformation, architecture and culture.

Nordic cities are undergoing an image change. The massive industrial buildings are more and more frequently transformed into educational and cultural palaces. The smoking chimneys are replaced by dynamic elements such as spectacular lighting installations and performative urban spaces. The marketplace must compete for attention with skating rinks, street basket, music scenes and a number of events. Similarly, the classical billiard saloon must make way for transparent cafés and restaurants where the food is an artistic orchestration of visual as well as taste experiences.

Modern city life is more than the simple reproduction of the workforce, about light, health and welfare. As mentioned, city life also increasingly has to do with procuring experiences and entertainment. The cities are therefore in the process of establishing themselves as stages for culture and city life that call for new architectural typologies, new types of urban spaces, and an urban planning that supports the novelties that are afoot.

Designers and architects are working with experience design and are currently testing the possibilities of the profession.

From a Nordic welfare perspective, these challenges must be combined with the ambition that our cities are not reduced to entertainment engines. The urban life in the Nordic "welfare cities" must emphasise experiences that challenge, that urge reflection and that contain elements of learning just as the Nordic welfare city must strive for a socially and culturally inclusive urban life which includes offers for many different lifestyles and cultures in its diversity.

Consequently, it is not simply a matter of creating a framework for entertainment and "Fun" or of creating architectural icon buildings that can bring fame to the city. The question is whether or not the experience economy can provide for a more versatile urban development in which architectural innovation goes hand in hand with social and cultural urban policy ventures.

Paradoxically, the rapidly growing Chinese megapolis of Shenzhen, where the Chinese drawing office Urbanus has designed several remarkable projects, serves as an interesting example hereof. When I use the term "paradoxically", it is due to the fact that Shenzhen by no means is among the old and well-known culture cities, but rather what Rem Koolhaas would refer to as a generic size XL city. (Koolhaas, 1996) It is the city without particular characteristics apart from its incredible growth rate and its seeming restructuring and transformation in 20 year cycles. In 20 years, the industrial areas have been worn out and transformed for new purposes. This city, in which the "copy & paste architecture" is so predominant, is probably one of the last places one would expect to find thought-provoking cultural and architectural projects. (Chang, 1996 & Chung, 1996)

In the West, we usually do not expect very much of Chinese drawing offices. Therefore, it is surprising to see several innovative and aesthetically beautiful projects carried out by the architects Xiaodu Liu, Yan Meng and Hui Wang, proprietors of the Urbanus drawing office which has branches in Beijing and Shenzhen.

From a number of projects, I have chosen briefly to describe Urbanus' hybrid Art Museum in Dafen Village, Shenzhen.

Dafen Village is a composite district with a variety of building typologies: various new and tall buildings in dense residential areas and the remains of an old village with shop-houses. The rolling terrain and infrastructure divides the city and complicates its accessibility.

The district subsists on producing copies of famous works of art. In the numerous small workshops and in the stores next door, the barely dry canvasses are stacked along the walls. Picasso, Magritte, Monet and Van Gogh are copied with varying degrees of success and are then sold in Asia, Europe and America.

*Dafen Arts museum in Shenzhen, China where exhibition, trade, painting and residence can happen simultaneously, and can be interwoven into a whole new urban mechanism.  
Photo: Urbanus*

With its hybrid art museum, Urbanus wished to create a new public domain with a diversity of programmes and functions relating to the role of Dafen as Arts Village.

"Our concept focuses on reinterpreting the urban and cultural implications of Dafen Village, which has long been considered a strange mix of pop art, bad taste and commercialism." (Urbanus, 2007) The aim is that the large, spacious base room of the ground floor will be used as an art market; a vernacular place where the city's workshops can sell their products. On the first floor, there is an





art museum that exhibits modern Chinese art. Children's workshops and teaching are planned for this floor as well. The third floor consists of an open roof storey with a variety of galleries and workshops, and modern art is also on display here. With its combination of programmes, the house, which is currently being put into use, will provide the local area with a new gathering place, and at the same time it will create an opportunity for Dafen to evolve from being a place that solely copies other people's art into an educational and experimental Art Village that also creates original art. "The question is whether or not it can be a breeding ground for contemporary art and take on the more challenging role of blending with the surrounding urban fabric in terms of spatial connections, art activities and everyday life. Therefore our strategy is to create a hybridized mix of different programs, like art museum, oil painting galleries and shops, commercial spaces, rental workshops, studios and residence under one roof..." (Urbanus, 2007) All activities can take place simultaneously, and the goal is to develop them into a whole new urban mechanism.

*Dafen Arts Museum:  
the museum square provide the  
villages with a new public square.  
Photo: Urbanus*

The building moulds into the hill, and the roof is utilised as an urban space for the part of the district that is built at the highest altitudes. Paths connect to the building and through its public space of the building. The ground floor opens into a small square and creates a new central urban space in Dafen. The facades are divided into areas that can be used for changing outdoor exhibitions.



*The facades provide possibilities for changing decorations or exhibitions.  
Photo: Urbanus*

It is a beautiful and harmonious architectural structure that connects the district. It is also an ambitious and interesting cultural project with a mixture of ingredients; e.g. a bazaar, a place of production, a local cultural centre and gathering place, a space for teaching and learning, and an exhibition site aimed at the cultural elite.

With this project, Urbanus has not only given Dafen an icon building, but also one that might function as a social and cultural dynamo for the future development of Dafen towards being an Experience City that wants more than simply to entertain.

The narrative bears witness to an understanding of the experience economy as something with great potential when coupled with strategic thinking and cooperation between public and private sector agencies. Secondly, the architectural icon, urban renewal and performative urban space are used as a tool for city renewal and branding. Finally, the example uses a variety of combinations of different cultural programmes.



*The Arts Museum provides several pathways through the building's public places.  
Photo: Urbanus*



*The public place at the roof.  
Photo: Urbanus*

The example from China raises questions concerning the development of the Nordic welfare cities. If we seek strategies for the urban development of our Nordic cities that include elements of learning, refinement and culture, which are often ignored in the more market oriented discourses of the experience economy and experience city, we have to have a broader approach and understanding of the concept of experience. In this case "experience" will cover many analogous concepts such as discovery, practice and to live through something. And as a consequence of the experience, one will be skilled, experienced and tested. An approach like this will place new demands on urban design strategies and on the development of architecture. Research relating to the possibilities created for and challenges issued to architecture and urban development by the experience economy is as of yet sparse. The articles in this themed issue thus represent pioneer projects in a new field of research which is still somewhat fragmented. They treat themes like new hybrid cultural projects and their role in the experience city as well as their role in city and regional development. A couple of articles focus on performative experiments and on new experience and interactive urban spaces. An article treats food and urban spaces and another cultural heritage communication. The last article encircles the city as stage for cultural development, and asked the question for whom this stage is set?



*Urban life at the roof  
Illustration: Urbanus*

It is my hope that the articles will shed light on many aspects of the theme and serve as sources of inspiration for development and research in the field, and for discussion of the challenges for our profession.

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