

THE CIRCLE OF ART

– AN IMAGE FACTOR AND A TOPIC OF CONFLICTING DISCOURSES

My home town Kankaanpää is a small town with 13 000 inhabitants in Western Finland. I work there as the town architect. Through my work projects I have been very interested in combining public art and town planning. I have emphasized the importance of good town environment with plenty of public art works as a strategic factor in regional development. After all that has happened during the last five years, I have developed a strong desire to more deeply understand what are the cultural phenomena I am dealing with. Therefore I've started my postgraduate studies at the architectural department of the Helsinki University of Technology, where I'm working with my licentiate examination. The working title of my study has been "Art and urban environment as an image factor – Three Finnish examples", but it's still changing. My aim is to describe, where I'm going today with my study.

Background

The effects of globalisation are seen everywhere and they affect everyday life. Not only the countryside but also small

towns in Finland have to fight for their future. Every village or town searches its own identity and image and tries to be more attractive. In larger or smaller scale it's a question of war between regions, cities and places; for example in competition of becoming The Cultural Capital of Europe or getting development support from the European Union. The Image and identity of cities lays more often on cultural basis, which has also more and more economical and social importance. "Cultural Industry" is growing up in larger scale.

However, we have to remember, that these kinds of features are not new. A classical example of using only the best architects and artists to build the city is Florence. The states and courts (nowadays business life!) have always competed, who has the best image. Using Art in this purpose has proved to be a very strong "language". From modern examples I will mention Glasgow, the city who "refused to die" and went through a big change as the 1990 Cultural Capital of Europe. Before and also after The 1992 Olympic Games, Barcelona has shown enormous will in developing the city environment with building the sea front, opening new parks and



placing environmental artworks all over the city. Helsinki with nine other capitals did it's best during the year 2000.

Cultural phenomena are flowing to smaller cities. Or what is happening? With urbanization it is not a question of where you live, it is rather a question of cultural change. The same phenomena are taking place all over the globalized world. Actual urban research is however concentrating on the issues of larger cities. There is a lack of theoretical and empirical knowledge of small towns.

The story of Kankaanpää

Kankaanpää is rather a young town. From the 1960's to the 1980's it has grown from a countryside village to a "real small town". Characteristic for the town are the rough heath nature, a tradition of building in red brick and ambition to good planning, both in public buildings and town planning. In addition Kankaanpää has already long traditions as a town of arts. Our Art Institute was founded in 1965 as the first art school outside the capital. The school's status became more stable, when the new, high quality school building was finished in 1995 and when the school joined Satakunta Polytechnic.

It's natural, that one of the main themes in town centre development project in the years 1995–99 was "art centre in the heath", when the other key themes were "common living room" and "regional market place". The project was financed by the European Regional Development fund, the Ministry of Education and the municipality of Kankaanpää. The aim of the project was to make our town centre more attractive by using culture and art, by happenings and by

better environment. In collaboration with town planners and artists the idea of "The Circle of Art" was founded. The Circle of Art surrounds the town Centre and The Path of Art runs through the Centre. They are walking routes, which offer the physical surroundings for the works of art and also more qualified public spaces.

Here, you don't need to dress up to take part in cultural events, you can step into culture when you walk around the Circle of Art which surrounds the Centre. You don't have to search for aesthetic experiences, they can be achieved simply while carrying out your everyday chores.

Minister of Culture Suvi-Anne Siimes in Kankaanpää

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There are now circa 80 permanent art works in our town environment – after having eg. two Stone Sculpture Symposiums, the first in 1995 with Baltic countries and the second with Nordic countries. In addition there has been many Temporary Exhibitions at the Circle of Art.

Because of the traditions of good town planning and public architecture and many succesful projects in the last years, the Association of Finnish Architects awarded the municipality of Kankaanpää with the SAFA prize of the year 2000.

Until now everything sounds fine. We have our own image complete. Lets start marketing and lets continue working together. Easier said than done. After the party comes hang-over. It is not a self-evident fact that the projects develop to processes. It is more than natural, that in a small town like Kankaanpää, whose inhabitants' education level and social-economic situation is below the country average, it is not easy to speak of the importance of modern art.

The questions of my interest

Cities of culture try to profile and differentiate themselves mostly by music, opera, theater festivals and all kinds of happenings. The aim of my research is to study if also the permanent physical environment could be an important part of Urban Policy in this postmodern world. The townscape is always there, it doesn't cost you anything, its very democratic culture.

The townscape, as I see it, should be a wholeness where you could also find quiet things and get experiences from something else than commercialism that is spreading every-



where. How works of art change the character of their situation places? Are the art works connected with environment design together more than both separately. Is it possible to make the townscape more intensive? What is the value of a characteristic and well planned townscape in the context of small town marketing. And what is its value to the ordinary people or decision-makers of the town, when the ways of thinking are more like in the countryside? Are the attitudes changing with the media's growing interest?

Last but not least is the question of co-operation with representatives of different professions. Artists, town gardener, town planner, consulting architects, engineers have their own views of a good townscape. Each profession has its own important "signs" to add to the environment. Working together is important but difficult. Sometimes you have the feeling of very fruitful co-operation and sometimes you wonder, if it is even possible to understand each other. Then the communicative planning changes to a question of power. Is it possible to reach inter-organizational learning and continue in such a way, that all participants can survive.

In the beginning of my research I thought there might

also be other target towns besides my home town. Another small town of my great interest is Huittinen and its Street Gallery and other cultural projects. In a different category is the city of Turku whose aim is to become The European Sculpture City.

In the field of cultural studies there are however so many points of view to approach my problems of interest. Therefore I've decided to focus my concentration on my home town, which I know best, although I know it might be too near me.

Research methods

In my research I'm using different qualitative methods: literature studies, half structured and theme interviews with key persons of the projects, people of the street, tourists or other outsiders. Newspapers and other media will also be studied.

The most interesting way to collect material could be "the circle of art walks" followed by questionings, which I have until now done with two different groups for experimenting purposes. Those groups were chosen to consider our projects



from the standpoint of visitors. The first group was 45 persons, who were trying to enter the Satakunta Polytechnic Fine Arts in Kankaanpää. My interest to this kind of group could be explained by thinking, that their connection to art and environment is more sensitive than people in common. Totally different were two groups of workers of the



Maija Anttila
maija.anttila@kankaanpaa.fi

city of Tampere, who were staying one week at the Rehabilitation Centre of Kankaanpää. I'm using the discourse analysis to interpret the answers. The themes which grow from the answers may direct my studies in the future.

I have also made questionings among ordinary people, who were visiting our exhibition about townscape, architecture and art projects at the regional fair. I've got 300 answers. I have the feeling, that the opinions of ordinary people have changed more positive and understanding of art in the last few years.

Difficult but necessary would be to interview the actors of projects and local politicians in the end of collecting material. Local and visiting artists should be interviewed too. It would also be interesting to know the opinions of the business life. How do they see culture as an image factor?

Urban research is nowadays very interdisciplinary. It has to do with sociology, cultural geography, art history, social sciences, architecture, environment psychology and aesthetics. In this complicated but interesting field of cultural studies I'm charting my own way to approach the problems at hand.

Information about the pictures:

Picture 1: Art work at The Circle of Art in Kankaanpää:

Einar Mar Gudvardarson: *Family*

Picture 2: The new building of The Satakunta Polytechnic Fine Arts of Kankaanpää; architects Sinikka Kouvo & Erkki Partanen

Picture 3: Art work at The Circle of Art in Kankaanpää:

Simon Häggblom: *Delet*

Picture 4: Art work at The Circle of Art in Kankaanpää:

Mindaugas Navakas: *This Place*