

# *The Radius of A Future*

## **The Radius of A Future – the report**

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## Foreword

The Radius of A Future is the result of a field study trip to Dresden. It took place on the first week of October 2008. The report is based on an intense excursion planned and conducted by the Architect Mr Nilsson Samuelsson of Geh8, who had invited me to participate. As my companion I asked the artist Mr Jan Hietala, PhD Candidate Goldsmiths University of London, to join me. Other participants in the excursion were representatives from local institutions such as Stadtplanungsamt and Deutsches Hygiene Museum to mention a few.

My intention with inviting Hietala was to inspire him to formulate an analysis of the city, its history and present state, and suggest a possible future. The discursive method Hietala used in Dresden, has been successfully explored by him in the past, most lately in Östersund at Large. In short it relies on histories collected from the inhabitants of a city, and establishing these stories as reliable as any encyclopedic entry would be.

The result of the excursion was processed and condensed by Ms Christina Beifuss Artists, Mr Paul Elsner Director of Geh8, Hietala and myself. At the end of the project it was presented at an event at Geh8, containing excerpts from extensive video-recordings and photographs. The present report contains a slightly more elaborated history, and has been completed by Hietala.

I would like to take the opportunity to mention how interesting and intensive the days in Dresden were and on behalf of Hietala and Färgfabriken thank all the associates of Geh8 who made the visit possible, the participants of the excursion who contributed to the discourse. In particular I would like to thank Samuelsson for the arrangement of the program, Beifuss and Elsne for their extensive contribution to the collaboration, and Ms Barbara Engel of Stadtplanungsamt for her eminent introduction to the past, the present as well as the future of Dresden.

Joachim Granit Project Director Färgfabriken

## Introduction

The discourse for the Dresden field study excursion Joachim Granit and I participated in focused on three set themes: “Political power and the urban image” – Canaletto, Stadtmodell and Dresden 1756; “Entertainment and Knowledge are Business” – Opera and Cinema versus University, VW Gläserne Manufaktur and AMD; and “Destruction, Reconstruction and Modernity” – Altmarkt, Neumarkt and the Prager Straße.

As often happens a part of the excursion was not executed. It regards the second passage. Therefore it was not represented at the presentation in Dresden, and cannot be mentioned in the present report. This was a change of importance. More contemporary issues, and important parts in understanding modern city planning and architecture, were not discussed. I am thinking of IT technology, information and entertainment industry, energy supply, infrastructure, communication and globalisation.

The program’s timeline was extremely intense. It gave little room for reflection, and I believe that I can say for all of us involved in the processing and the after-production, that we were slightly surprised over how far we actually reached. Furthermore I am of the opinion that we as artists did something unconventional. At 2055hr the same day as we – Christina Beifuss, Paul Elsner, Granit and I – begun the condensation of the material, Granit laid the last touch on the digital editing. 2100hr at a public event organised by Geh8 it was *rock’n’roll*.



Image 1 Presentation at Geh8 Saturday 4 October 2008

## Segment One – Reversed Canaletto



Image 2 Reversed Canaletto with excursion participants



Image 3 Canaletto view of Augustusbrücke Dresden 1748

A starting point of the discourse was the series paintings by Bernardo Bellotto (1720 – 1780) in Germany sometimes knows as Canaletto depicting Dresden in the mid seventeen hundreds. Dresden then was in a particular sense theatrical. Its buildings and streets represented a stage on which its inhabitants acted. Hippolyte Taine (1828-

93) states (*Essais de critique et d'histoire* 1857) that when looking back at the seventeen hundreds it may seem as if people acted as on a stage in an almost operatic way, unnatural and surreal to us. Taine's concludes that in the seventeen hundreds a seemingly operatic social behaviour was the norm.

On the photograph 'Reversed Canaletto' here above we can see some of the participants of the excursion. The photo is shot through the supposed Canaletto easel, from a reversed point of view. We as viewers were meant to see the scenery of *Augustusbrücke* and *Altstadt* (Old Dresden) from the opposite side. In a somewhat bizarre sense it is as if the future – represented by the view of Augustusbrücke and Altstadt depicted 1748 and sent to us in the future by Canaletto – is given a chance to frame the present and thereby an imminent past. The gaze's direction is reversed and alluding to the problem connected with streams of energies between the past and future. It is my understanding that it is possible to argue that the future sometimes looks back on its past and changes it, if not facts as such then in each case our perception of them. Thus the reversed Canaletto view raises questions rather than answering them.

## Segment Two – The Ruin and the Sublime

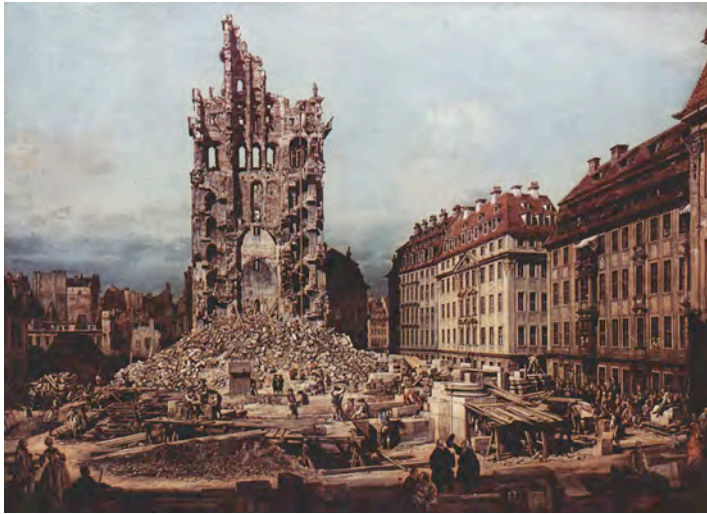


Image 4 Canaletto Kreuzkirche as a ruin 1765



Image 5 Frauenkirche as a ruin 1970s

Historically wars have had a certain impact on the architectural development of Dresden. The two images here above depict the result after two wars: the war of 1765 with Prussian and World War Two 1938-45. Disregarding the devastating effect war has on the civil life, concentrating on its aesthetics, we may see a certain development of Romanticism in regards of the Ruin and consequently a relation to the Sublime and the Picturesque.

It is possible to say that Canaletto is in parity with his time, its craze for ruins and images depicting them. Ruins were constructed as new intermediate garden structures in parks and gardens arranged to give a Picturesque impression. Country houses were erected in the proximities of already existing such, preferably gothic. As a commercial artist Canaletto knew what his customers wanted.

1757 Edmund Burke (1729-1797) published 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful'. He established an entirely new branch of aesthetics independent of Beauty. He named it "Sublime". The Sublime according to Burke was something frightening, terrifying or awful seen from a safe position. Canaletto's painting is almost an illustration of the ideas of the Sublime as seen by Burke. Once the Sublime was established it gave the philosophical grounds to the entire Romantic era, and by the end of the seventeen hundreds the ideas of the Sublime were widely spread.

I think the second image from the 1970s must be seen in perspective of the Sublime. For more than half a century the ruins of Frauenkirche was intact. Only after the new Millennium the ruins were replaced with a copy of the eighteen-century church.

### Segment Three – Baroque Redoux

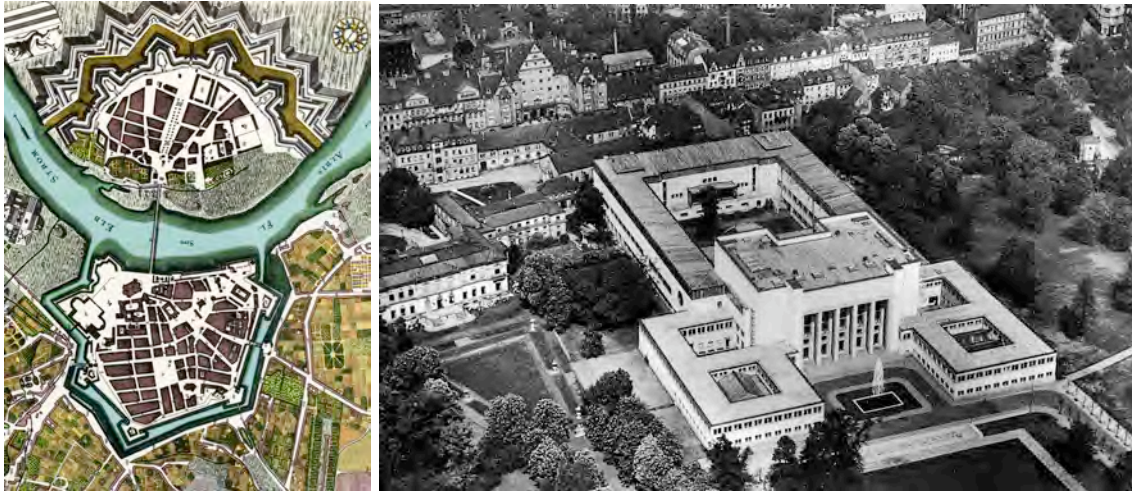


Image 6 Map of Dresden 1756 Old Map; Image 7 Deutsches Hygiene-Museum 1922 Old Photograph

The introduction of the baroque city plan is one of the two most important changes of Dresden's townscape. The second one is the six decades of non-planning or half-hearted planning commencing in 1945 and still is haunting the city. These two *ruptures* – i.e. one era's break with another, to use a term introduced by Michel Foucault (1926–1984) – are connected.

In the sixteen hundreds, the organically developed medieval town vanished. The medieval town representing an era of the carnival became a city of the theatrical. An axis *Grosse Straße* in *Neustadt* (New Town) even had a theatre perspective. When the new DDR after the second world war began to redevelop Dresden it of some peculiar reason insisted in keeping new developments within the boundaries of the baroque city plan with a theatrical aspect intact. True, it has been said that architecture of the Socialist era was theatrical too.

If you grew up during the Social Democratic Sweden you could have reflected over the theatrical aspects of the politics of the day and accordingly its architecture and city-planning. The centre of Stockholm was redeveloped from a blend of aristocratic city palaces, Jewish banker and tradesmen's mansions and less favourable dwellings of the lower classes, to a shiny administrative dream of chrome and glass, steel and brass, illustrating a new political class' wish to show off wealth, as any new arrival would have done. Having seen an aristocratic prime minister regularly as a clockwork appearing on television singing the Internationale holding hands with seemingly just anyone and ever so happily too, knowing perfectly well that the abolishment of the Monarchy and introduction of omnipotent state-owned economy was off the agenda, I early understood that politics was a show of its own sort, with its particular performers not unlikely participants in the entertainments industry.

This is not anything new to Dresden. In the 1920s the *Deutsches Hygiene-Museum* was erected in *Großer Garten*, a building that in some sense may be regarded preceding

Modernism. What is remarkable and unexpected is that the building is absolutely symmetrical and incorporated in the central axis of the baroque Großer Garten, laid out two hundred years earlier. That a building from the democratic and republican Weimar era was kept within the boundaries of the sign of a long time left autocratic society is slightly bizarre. When entire blocks of flats from the dictatorial Socialist era repeat an old street-pattern as in Neustadt it is perhaps only logical. However, in each case it seems to me that no matter how radical these developments were intended to be, they were not separated from the past. The baroque seems to be reinvented in Dresden over and over again.

## Segment Four – Destruction, Reconstruction and Modernity



Image 8 Aerial archive image of Dresden taken days before February 13 1945 Old photograph

The inferno of February 13-14 1945 has been written about at length. It will not be of any mayor interest to this report other than out of one particular reason; an aerial photograph showing the central parts of the city days before the attack.

At some point during the processing of our material after the excursion this images was handed to me, I cannot remember by whom. It is a strong image. Possibly one of the most chocking I ever saw. Images of crime, destruction, catastrophes and war are intimately connected with the development of the photographic medium. Why and how this particular one was released from archives may not ever be told. Perhaps it even is a falsification. It may very well be an image produced by NATO as a part of a propaganda-machinery, in order to show their ability of precision bombing to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. When studying the photograph together with Nilsson Samulesson, he pointed out that the accomplished air raids had followed the drawing in a very precise manner, that the drawing accurately shows what was also bombed.

The aerial shot in itself is fascinating enough. On top of it yet another layer of human activity has been drawn. This drawing combines two of the most brutal activities executed by human beings – war and architecture. An interesting experiment would be to draw the same radius over an aerial shot of the earlier mentioned city centre of Stockholm. Very soon we would realise that the same preciseness of destruction

actually was executed in Stockholm, only that it was based on drawings by architects rather than warlords.

Another similarity is striking. Both the warlords and the architects in their turn based their activities on statements made by politicians, statements made in the name of the future. I think it possible to argue that it was not an act of war that destroyed Altstadt in Dresden. In fact it was an act of the politics of the time, and even more so the politics following the war, when a chance to build something fresh was not taken. It is possible to compare the loss of Altstadt to an unhealed wound.

## Segment Five – The Absolute Past



Image 9 Lunch at Adam Köhler's with participants in the excursion

As a part of the program we had lunch at the artist Adam Köhler's place. The flat is a large bourgoise dwelling from the turn of the previous century. It is partly dilapidated, with segments of time clearly visible, in a state where entropy is temporarily hindered. It reminds me of flats I visited in St Petersburg, Riga and Moscow during the Soviet era. Or even London for that sake, where "the well worn interior" for some time has been fashionable. We were served pumpkin soup as a starter, cured pork and potato-salad as a main and an apple cake for pudding. In more than one sense it was little bit like entering a time warp.

What is interesting with Köhler is that he has created a house where he can live not only in solitude, but actually give room to unpredicted life by inviting guests for lunches, suppers and other events, a tradition he has kept up for many years. His choice of living represents a form of dynamic *social architecture* that is very Dresdenesque.

I asked Köhler if he could describe change that took place between the two cultural spheres DDR went through after the re-unification 1989. He told me a story about his life as a child in Dresden when he used to play a game. He used to take a map of the world and put his index finger on a place beyond the borders

of East Europe and then try to imagine how it would look like there. He grew up thinking that he would never see an orange tree in real life.

Köhler's story is not unique. It is possible to argue that anyone at some point has imagined distant places, as a child and sometimes as a grown up. It is even possible to say that the majority of the globe's population will never be able to see these remote imagined countries.

What is different with Köhler's history is that he as a child understood the conceptual difference between imagining as in daydreaming of future journeys, and imagining as the only way of travelling at all. I think it is possible to argue that no Western European can identify him/herself with the hero of Köhler's story in a true sense. Köhler tells us about another kind of hero existing in a different kind of past, an epic past.

History stepped in and changed the conceptual framework of Köhler's youth. Today the situation is reversed: Köhler will never be able to return to his childhood's places with its characters. Gradually retelling the same history over and over again he has distanced himself from its origins. These events and places only exist within the time-line of the tale. The world and the time of the pre-reunification DDR is gone forever, according to my understanding. Not as any past would be, but as something indifferent to any other *tempus*. It is encapsulated with *an epic time* in the same sense we must understand the time of classical literature, as something taking place in The Absolute Past.

## Segment Six – Political Power and the Urban Image



Image 10 The Future of Dresden as seen 1972 Old drawing

Image 11 Forum Dresden Pragerplatz



Image 12 Model of future Dresden as seen 1990 & excursion participants, with Barbara Engel 4<sup>th</sup> from left Video-still 2008

Prager Straße runs south of Altstadt. Laid out in the sixties and seventies it was developed as a modern avenue with hotels, private dwellings and stores. It resembles other developments from the same years: *Sergelgatan* Stockholm, *Novy Arbat* Moscow

or *Les Halles* Paris. Influences from Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Courbusier are easily detected, almost as if copied from a book on Modernist samples, and perhaps these buildings even were.

Today the townscape is rapidly changing. At least three new shopping malls are added to an already existing miss-mash of shops and cafés, covering the city to such an extensive extent that it made Paul Elsner ask how many malls a city of Dresden's size could possibly engulf without creating large un-penetrable areas.

At the discussion led by Barbara Engel, when visiting Stadtplanungsamt (The City Planning Office) I took the opportunity to ask how relevant the model of Dresden made in 1990 and presented in the main lobby was. My intention was to commence a discourse regarding the evident danger using a perspective ruled by diagrams and models when planning the future, and the relevance or contemporarity we actually had in front of us when studying the model in question. At the end of the discussion Engel gave what I think was an accurate conclusion. She drew attention to the fact that this model could only show one aspect of many. It could not show the total complexity of city planning.

However, making a comparative study between three images of the future, as seen here above and modeled by three different economical systems – a Socialist, a Transitory and a raw Capitalistic – I cannot but wonder if anything has actually changed in regards of planning. These images seem so old-fashioned to me. Uniting them I find many repetitions of the past, some which has been mentioned earlier in this report. Furthermore, strikingly incorporated in these ambitions we find apparent an almost futuristic presentation hiding the true state of affairs with yet another glossy layer. The Forum Dresden Pragerplatz is presented as something new and visionary, when in fact it is revamped with a copy of the storehouse façade preceding it from the 1960s. The theatrical aspect inherited from the baroque is still present, in regards of façade versus contents.

## Segment Seven – Entertainment and Theatricality



Image 15 A revamped Frauenkirche 2008



Image 16 The Panometer "Dresden 1756 at night"

The last stop of the excursion was Neumarkt. Surrounding the square there are houses resembling those existing pre February 13-14 1945. However, this impression does not correspond with the truth. With an exception of *Kulturpalast* from 1969 everything seen is brand new, accomplished in the new Millennium.

The theatricality of the baroque has been reinvented in a most poignant way. What then were official facades hiding private life are now facades built to hide the traces of history. The original Frauenkirche (George Bähr 1666–1738) has been revamped in all its former splendour not far from a Disneylandish result, according to Christina Beifuss.

Arguably there is an attempt to come to terms with the past as well as a strategy to use Dresden as a form of entertainment for tourists. The entertaining intention is underlined by the Panometer, which is showing an invented panorama of Dresden as supposedly seen from the top of Frauenkirche's cupola in 1756. The revamping of Frauenkirche-area does not at any length console with the past, nor does it point out a possible future. It illustrates an absence of visions. Thus the sometimes seemingly traumatic inability of city planners and politicians of Dresden to reach beyond the past becomes omnipresent.



Image 17 Kulturpalatz 2008

## Afterword

As mentioned earlier I see two ruptures changing Dresden's development. One change of the townscape took place between the medieval and early baroque. The other rupture was a more than sixty year long period following the end of the Second World War, when not much of any significance actually was done to reinvent the city. Perhaps the tranquil period of time after the war and before the reunification did give Dresden something unique. What this uniqueness exactly consists of is something we only briefly experienced, but hopefully the segments in this report will give some idea of what we saw, Granit and I.

Jan Hietala Artist



Image 18 Front page of the 'Dresden' daily newspaper 02 October 2008

Jan Hietala and Joachim Granit regard themselves as the authors to this report in all its contents unless anything else is stated.