“Shaping European Cities: How can policy-makers and architects make cities more attractive?”

Opening Event for the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award 2015 Exhibition

15 September 2015 (18:30-20:30)
Palais Des Beaux-Arts, Bruxelles

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The Opening Event “Shaping European Cities”

What is resilience in urbanism? Can architecture work as an economic catalyst for change and help solve contemporary problems of our cities? Are European cities democracies satisfying the need of city dwellers? Why cross-sectorial cooperation matters? In which ways the EU contributes to urban development? “Shaping European Cities”, the opening event of the exhibition on the EU Prize for contemporary architecture-Mies van der Rohe Award, engaged a dialogue on these topics between architects, politicians, policy makers, urban planners and a large audience.

“Shaping European Cities” focused on “City Economy and Energy Resilience”, “Social Balance and Living Together” and “Democratic Change for the Cities of Tomorrow”. Speakers across Europe presented the challenges and opportunities of contemporary European cities in areas like jobs and growth, social inclusion, renewable energy, sustainability, integrated strategies and participative decision-making. The debate aimed to project Europe into the future and reflect on the ways in which architecture can make a difference by turning these challenges into opportunity, improving cities and ultimately, putting people at the centre of all decisions.

The event started with “Made in Europe” trailer of a video project, which gave the opportunity to interview 16 of the most dynamic and thought-provoking architecture offices in 16 European cities. Architects reveal that architecture is a bridge between the past and the future, a relationship with our historical heritage, but also something that relates to and provides a vision of “where and how we want to live, and how the architecture in the place we want to live should look like.” One of the basic highlights of the event was the need to strengthen dialogue between architects, urban planners, expert, policymakers and politicians from all over Europe in the field of architecture, urban agenda and on future resilient cities.

“Why, what, how and who” asked Martine Reicherts, Director-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) at the European Commission in her opening speech, where she underlined that citizens, the people are at the centre of shaping the cities. Besides the importance of architecture sector in the EU economy for jobs and growth, she drew the attention to the fact that most of the Europeans today live in cities, and the way in which these cities are designed has a considerable influence on how we live, work and interact with one another. She underlined the EU’s support for sustainable urban development and regeneration, including through culture, such as through the EU Prize for contemporary architecture-Mies van der Rohe Award, the European Capitals of Culture and the EU Prize for cultural heritage/ Europa Nostra awards.

Anna Lisa Boni, Secretary General of Eurocities, pointed out to 5 main strategic challenges associated with the role of cities as driver of quality jobs, growth, creativity and innovation, inclusion, energy efficiency and innovative urban governance, which are shared
by the vast majority of big cities, as well as smaller ones. It is in cities that challenges and
opportunities come together, especially when architects and policy-makers work hand in
hand. She underlined that the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture shows the added
value of culture and how quality architecture can contribute effectively to more inclusive,
greener and economically sustainable cities.

The primary focus of the first panel was on urban resilience defined as the capacity of
cities to survive, adapt, and grow no matter what kinds of changes they are experiencing.
Some of the most relevant challenges that Europe has faced in the last decades are related
with the impact of global economic transformations compounded with increasing energy
demand. According to statistics, more than half of the EU-28’s gross inland energy con-
sumption in 2013 came from imported sources; at the same time, the dramatic unemplo-
yment rate especially in southern European countries rises up to 25% in Greece and 23%
in Spain.

The panellists discussed the ways in which resilience can be improved in European cities
through urban strategies involving architects, planners and the local government.

Kristian Villadsen, Architect, Partner and Director at Gehl Architects based in Co-
penhagen, underlined that since architects were shaping cities for the people, they need
to involve people in the design phase and to evaluate constantly the consequences of city
planning. Accordingly, these consequences shall be measured through scientific research
and statistics aimed at reaching sustainable solutions. The Danish architect presented
best practices from Copenhagen, where there is a considerable increase in the number
of pedestrian streets and bike riders on the streets that reaches more than 70% in winter
times. And, according to statistics this change contributed to environment as well as both
to economic and social welfare of the city because they were making money every time a
person was biking a kilometre whereas it cost money when a person was driving a km in
their cars. The main point made was that measuring the impact of shaping cities enabled
architects and city planners to put forward strategies based on political science documents
of these transformations; which occurred as a result of local people needs and were not
imposed form above. Although he also argued that in order to have a sustainable city it is
important to make people believe that they can have a life where “it’s easy to do good.”

Jarosław Bondar, city architect of Szczecin in Poland, where the Philharmonic Hall,
winner of the EU Prize for contemporary architecture-Mies van der Rohe Award 2015,
is situated, underlined the contribution of the Prize, to the development of cities and their
image. Factors such as the location of a city, the resources it has at its disposal, its histori-
cal background are significant inputs in the process of city planning. One should question
the ‘one size fits all’ approach, since it would not work for all cities across Europe, so di-
verse. Whilst European cities are learning from each other through cooperation, it is still
primordial to give towns the capacity of independent and context-specific development in
order to achieve sustainable solutions, or resilience.
Normunds Popens, representing the European Commission as the Deputy Director-General for Implementation in the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, informed that the implementation of the new operational programmes has started in many cities, regions, countries. The key word in EU regional and urban policy area at the moment is “integrated sustainable urban strategy,” for which Member States are required to invest at least 5% of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), representing 15 bn EUR. The Commission is calling to all relevant stakeholders to participate and work together to ensure that this investment is channelled into the right measures. Although all European cities have varying needs and are at different development levels, facing diverse challenges, there are ways of finding common solutions and learning from each other’s best practices. The Commission will continue to support cooperation through urban development networks and forums such as the annual CITIES Forum. A second very important process going on at the EU level is the development of an EU urban agenda to which all levels of governance are invited to contribute and cooperate to be able to set common targets.

In the second panel, Paola Viganò, architect and professor of urbanism draw the attention to the role of space in social balance and living together. She proposed a new bio-political project that would bring back lost traditions in European urbanism and architecture that would allow a public space of permeability, porosity, connectivity and a new kind of isotropy in cities where there are immense possibility to re-imagine our future. She presented the Hostel WADI in De Hoge Rielen Youth center in Belgium, in which the space was organized in order to stimulate sharing and collective practices; the interior of the space was co-designed with young people.

Belinda Tato, architect and educator, focused on participatory urban social design to improve self-organisation of citizens, social interaction within communities, and communities’ relationship with their environment. She presented design and management tools that take into consideration the demands and needs of people through the use of conventional and digital participatory means. The project “dream your city” is already implemented in Norway in the city of Hamar; the outcome of “dream Hamar” was the design of an urban concept for a square through public participation.

Julien De Smedt, architect, emphasised his office commitment to humanly designed, politically engaged, financially viable, and structurally realistic projects. He presented several of projects focusing on creating public spaces in Copenhagen, Oslo and Lille. He concluded that the best part of these projects is that they came from the city itself, which decided to make a project to bring very different parts of people’s life into a same location.

In the final panel, participants discussed whether democratic change in the European cities of tomorrow was reachable and whether there was room for urban planning that would reconcile the different interests and actors including citizens, public administrations, architects, urban planners, private clients and all other parties and stakeholders.
involved in its governance. “Invest in culture and creativity not after, but in times of crisis” was the main message of Halldór Guðmundsson, Director of Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre in Reykjavik, which received the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2013. He underlined that Harpa is the first major investment in a public space in his country, a concert hall acting as well as a covered meeting place permanently available, where people can gather for various social activities. He mentioned that the main challenge of this project was to make the people own the place, which was achieved since last year the number of visitors reached 1.5 million visitors, which is 5 times the Icelandic population. The courageous decision to finish the project was taken in a time where Iceland had entered a period of major financial and economic crisis accompanied with high levels of unemployment and social spending cuts. Receiving the EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture meant an increase in prestige and thus in tourism, with 600,000 tourists visiting every year.

Barbara Lemke, senior urban planning and development specialist at the European Investment Bank since 2007, clarified the approach of the European Investment Bank (EIB) to urban investment and development. She mentioned that the EU Prize is very significant for urban development; iconic buildings can stimulate urban development, but should be complemented by integrated urban strategies. She highlighted the importance of long term thinking and strategic planning, yet also how important it is to really embed the projects in neighbourhood and to involve people in urban development. When cofinancing a project, the EIB evaluates the sustainability of a project, the integrated planning and design of public participation.

Jan Olbrycht, Member of the European Parliament since 2004, raised a series of questions related to the nature of European democracy, the way it is practiced in the city and ways to make people trust to decision-makers, urban planners, architects and get involved in this processes. He underlined that architecture is not only a set of design ideas, but also about influencing thinking. He compared architecture and education, and reminded that architecture, unlike politicians, is not there for 4-5 years, but for 50 years or more. He drew the attention to the fact that architecture can unite people or segregate them, thus there is a need to balance freedom of creation and acceptance of people’s needs. He concluded that the new challenge is to think about the democratic processes and how we can translate our art and even our political ideas into practice and to make people trust in what we are doing, convince them that it is for them and for the improvement of their rights to the city.

The closing speeches of the event were delivered by Tibor Navracsics, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth & Sport, and Paul Dujardin, CEO and Artistic Director of Bozar. Commissioner Navracsics underlined the central role played by cities and urbanization in European societies. Europe is one of the most urbanised continents in the world and architecture has been shaping European cities for millennia. Cities play an essential role in what makes Europe a great continent to live in: being centres
for creativity and innovation; for social progress and democracy; for diversity and living together; for green regeneration; for job and economic growth creation. At the same time, in cities we also find expressions of the economic, demographic, social and environmental challenges that the European model is facing. This is the reason why the European Commission intends to support sustainable urban development in Europe, working together with the other European institutions. He called for the recognition and stimulation of architecture’s contribution to European policy-making. He announced the launch of the Young Talent Architecture Award, aiming to support young architects who will solve the problems that former generations have created. The Commission invited all sides to continue cross sectorial dialogue and cooperation, to build a brighter future for the EU, especially in the context of the EU Urban agenda.

Finally Paul Dujardin shared his post Second World War memories when Mies van der Rohe was at the opening of the Bozar, and when the future of Europe was conceived through the shared concept: “no war again”. He also reminded that Olafur Eliasson, one of the authors of Harpa, is not an architect but an artist and an innovator, combining a new renaissance with contemporary technology, always placing the human being at the centre of his works, just as human beings are at the centre of shaping European cities.