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Potamic Deuce and Other Stories

“The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well. Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves; here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs.”¹

These lines may also be seen as the description of a city, which is displayed in a multitude of images (books, maps, pictures...), whose entirety remains unrevealed (too dark to see anything). Depending on which images or books are viewed or read, different impressions (images) of the library, the space, the city or the surrounding area arise. Keeping the choices diverse and their density high, allowing a more precise, specific and differentiated debate on the part of the visitors or inhabitants about the city and causing a stronger identification with the city and its environs. “Transifying” – transforming urban textures through “densifying” them can therefore be understood as the act of densifying images, with the aim of creating or layering “urban images” (impressions, atmospheres, analogies, pictures, materials...).

In this article we set out to combine our views on urban planning, discuss our understanding of the notion of “transifying” and try to link them to our diploma project, which we completed in 2004 at the chair of prof. dr. Josep Lluís Mateo with the support of prof. Christophe Girot and prof. dr. Philip Ursprung. The text is “densified” by interlacing images, general thoughts, quotations and descriptive texts taken from our diploma project.



physiological interaction, Zurich, diagram

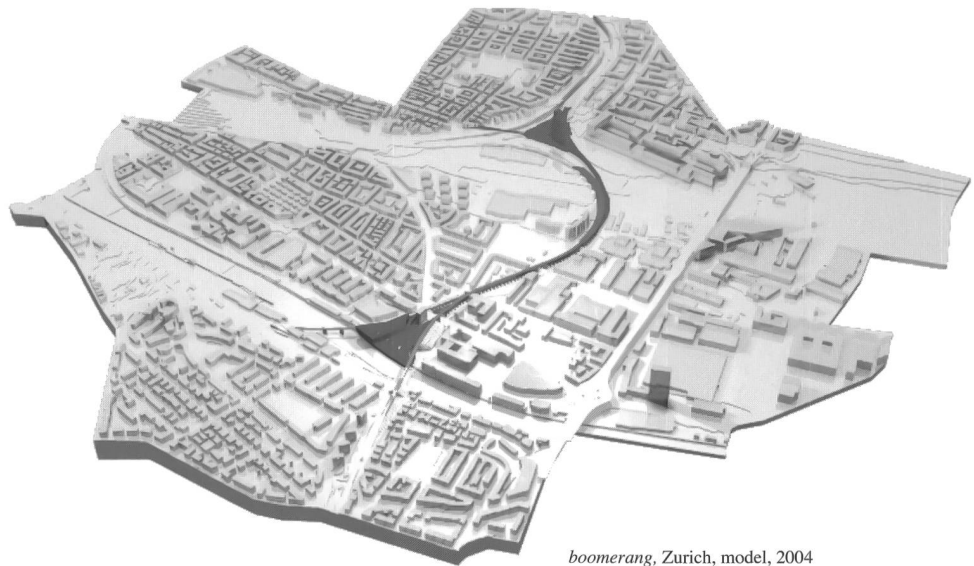
1 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Gutenberg Project, 1994, p. 52

2 Caspar Heuss, *Schlaues Büchlein*, 2004

Urban transformation

“A product faces the noble task of being in permanent flux. This is the only way it can satisfy the discernible necessity of contemporary aesthetics, which is expected by the consumer and promised by the product.”²

With the slogan “Zurich – downtown switzerland” tourists are attracted to Zurich by marketing strategists. Aside from the arrogant attitude towards the rest of Switzerland, this claim reveals a contemporary approach to cities. Downtown describes the most dense, diverse and active area of a typical city. Zurich is described as being the “hot spot” of Switzerland and the word combinations “city – country” are replaced by “downtown – city”.



boomerang, Zurich, model, 2004

A city differs only slightly from other products as far as its marketing strategies are concerned. While the main arguments for buying a new car are its eye-catching design or its coming equipped with air conditioning, gps system, six airbags and the like, the ones for Zurich would be the Grossmünster, the lake, the banks or more recently the Langstrasse. In both cases the prominent features are essential. If, according to Caspar Heuss, they are not changed or updated over a certain period of time, the products are bound to lose their appeal. It is clear that the outstanding characteristics of the city are important for the visitors just as much as for its inhabitants, because they provide identification.

“Identification refers to the identifying characteristics of an urban system, communicated by various media. These characteristics create orientation and order within space and time, and are therefore essential for urban existence.”³

Identification is not rigid. Adaptations to the new needs are necessary to keep the city attractive to an ever-changing society and the new generations. More than ever attractive urban spaces with lasting qualities are needed in Zurich. Like in southern european regions life is moving increasingly towards the outdoors. Obviously the demands in professional life are also changing. The increasing importance of the service sector and the related, unforeseen centralisation, which Saskia Sassen describes, lead to changing conditions in the existing cities. Carefully planned and precise interventions are direct consequences of these phenomena. The existing cities, or as “Zurich Tourismus“ would say, the downtown areas have not lost their importance under the influence of globalisation or increasing networked thinking.

potamic deuce – the common elements that combine and cut the identities of zurich are the limmat and the track field. these spaces have the potential for connecting specific characteristics (identifying locality) and generic inputs (identifying a meaning). the two spaces could work like the thread of a pearl necklace and be the connecting part of different characteristics of the city. as a result increasing the presence and the use of the river field and the track field in the city is an important issue of the project. the borders of the track field in zurich are like a facade for the city. they conduct the arriving passengers to the heart of the city. the track between zurich and baden was the first in switzerland (spanisch-brötli-bahn). the river lay at the origin of zurich and it still runs through its very center.

Urban acupuncture

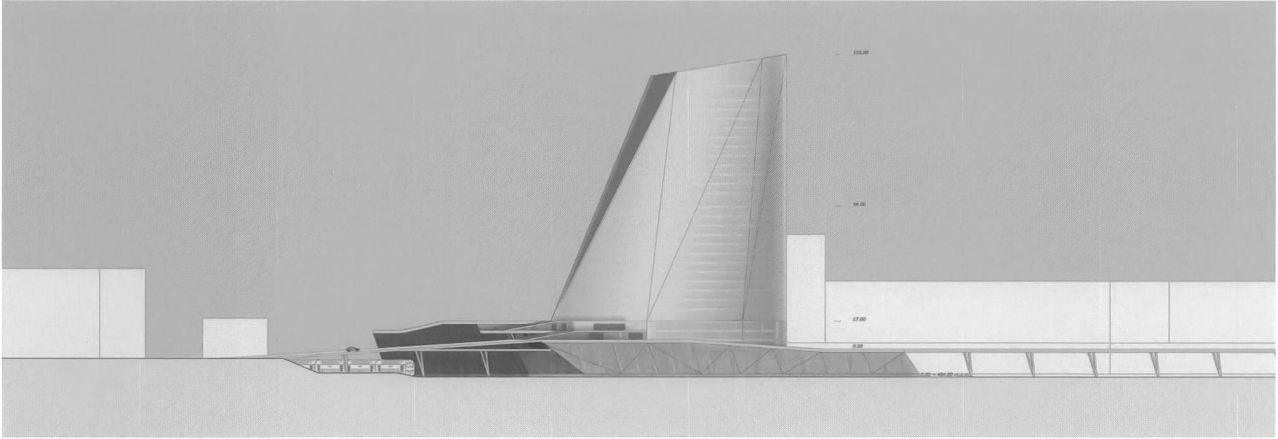
“Acupuncture (stylostixis) - treatment of pain or disease by inserting the tips of needles at specific points on the skin.”⁴



track field and limmat, Zurich, map

³ Franz Oswald and Peter Baccini: *Netzstadt*, Birkhäuser, 2003

⁴ www.thefreedictionary.com, Stand 2004



trek, Zurich, elevation, 2004

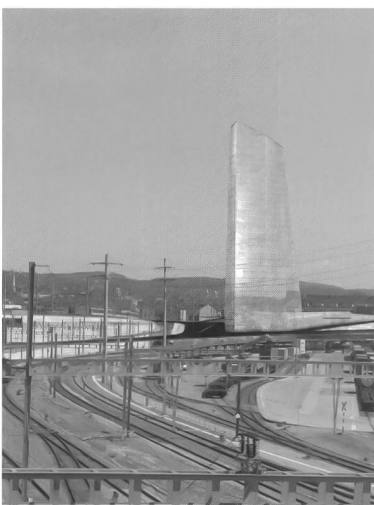
A feasible, effective strategy to provide change inside a dense urban fabric are selective, but precise and incisive interventions at neuralgic points inside this so-called net. These interventions, described as acupuncture pricks, are projects, which provide impulses on the self-organising system (city) by their programme and their contact to its nervous system and they may induce an adjustment or change in the activities and the communities, thus providing an identity to the site (region). In a dense urban structure, which is marked by a tight grid of property dispersion, and in times, characterised by rapid structural changes in the social and economical fields, the selective urban intervention constitutes an effective and efficient tool.

For an area or a region to come alive, a multitude of flows need to take place: flows of people, of goods and/or of information. These flows cannot be readily defined, much less modified. nevertheless diversifying their “attractors“ will make it possible to direct and channel them by making precise interventions in the urban fabric.

If these attractors are strong enough, i.e. attract a lot of people from different communities, the adjustment of the activities at a neuralgic spot in the city may induce a change to a certain perimeter. In other words, the field of impact of these attractors, which can range from a local to a global scale, will change the flows of people, goods and information and consequently the activities in this area. Thus developments are initiated, which should be conceived for two forthcoming generations and serve to strengthen the identity of the different locations.

potamic deuce – the programs are based on the idea of creating two local attractors, which interfere in their action radius and in this way start to link the river field with the track field. they are producing a field of tension in between, but still have their own character and react to the direct neighbourhood of each site. like acupuncture pricks, they are alien elements that create new relations, new fields of potential and overcome disjunctions. at the same time they should trigger a reinterpretation of the existing character of the area and initiate further developments.

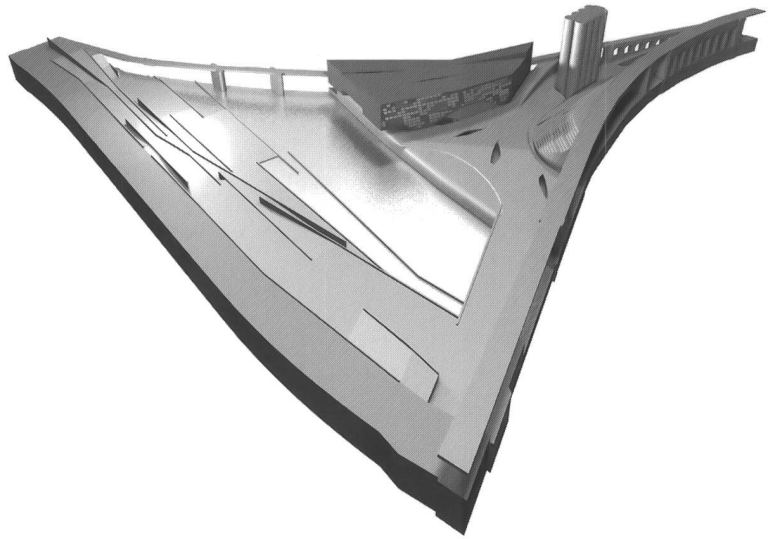
the two projects provide platforms on which different communities are able to meet and interact. it is important that the two programs adapt themselves to existing functions and habits of the surrounding area on the one hand and represent a “new“ activity in the area on the other.



trek, Zurich, perspective rendering, 2004

Densifying image stories

One can differentiate between two kinds of images. On one hand there are pictures which have a certain objective clearness. On the other there are images, which are created through the interpretation of the observer; they can



watar, Zurich, perspective rendering, 2004

be evoked or initiated, but never reproduced. In our discussion we will focus on the latter. They can be elicited by shapes, materials, space and last but not least activities. They are always individual and are formed by layering different impressions. Unique images mark the urban landscape. They help users to orientate themselves and create identity. In addition they constitute the advertising media of the city (and the surrounding area). The seductive use of images creates individual, personal stories, which are related to the specific site. Images elicit stories and, conversely, stories elicit images.

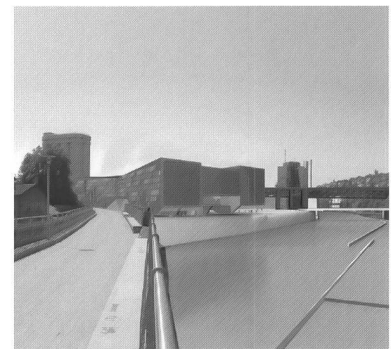
In addition to the common usage of the notion of “density“, such as density of people, of buildings etc., there is the density of images. It describes the images, elicited in the viewers through surface and time. Obviously it cannot be measured scientifically and will always remain a vague notion. Nevertheless it can be used consciously as a tool in urban planning.

But how can images be densified in an urban context? Introducing or adding an alien image is one possibility. With this, something completely external will collide with the existing environment, to attract new communities and provoke new contacts. An alternative is to amplify an existing element – to inflate it. Both strategies, including their combination, follow the same objective: to specify one or more images. Through the precise layering of several images, a general view will emerge.

potamic deuce / watar – the public space is channeled by the tribune and the building and directed towards the limmat. it is introduced as a new layer covering the sihlquai. this space is orientated towards the river and the existing river space is reinforced by the proposed landscaping of the north-bank. the new platform consists of a transit way for pedestrians and forms a new connection over the river towards bahnhof wipkingen. the terraced landscape allows the existing activities, such as swimming and dwelling, to be retained.

potamic deuce / trek – the public space bifurcates towards the hohlstrasse area and the langstrasse area by the tower. it is located on a split platform positioned on the city level, but above the surrounding tracks. the space consists of two transit ways, which are tangent to the tower and of a higher level, which can be used for dwelling.

This strategy describes what we call “transifying“. It transforms an existing urban fabric by densifying image stories in their context. Thus *potamic deuce* tries to transform the existing urban fabric using the strategy of acupuncture and the method of densifying images. This approach describes what one could understand as the notion of “transify”.



watar, Zurich, perspective rendering, 2004

Pascal Berger and Marc Schmit recently finished their studies at ETH Zurich. *Potamic Deuce* is their independent diploma thesis work at the chair of prof. dr. Josep Lluís Mateo.