

Buoyant Entities: 'Objects', 'Zones' & 'Islanders' within the 'Harbour of Ideas'

By Louisa Adam

http://www.floatermagazine.com/issue01/Harbour_of_Ideas/



Fig1: Development Images: Overview for the future of North End, Andrejsala, Riga. images: www.andrejsala.lv

How do these linguistic terms give buoyancy to the re-conceptualisation of a place of regeneration in Andrejsala, Riga? What opportunity for re-negotiation and creative cultural running room may this yield?

Andrejsala is an area in the heart of the harbour district in the city of Riga, the capital of Latvia, a country that has seen great political change during the last years. The early 1990s brought the end of the Soviet rule, it became member of the World Trade Organisation came in 1999 and the country was welcomed into the European Union in 2004. A national move towards globalisation is reflected in local development programmes such as the one currently under way in Andrejsala. The former harbour area is a run-down district and funds have recently become available for its re-development. The development programme has invited the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) to be involved. The engineering company OVE ARUP & Partners Ltd and the landscape architecture office Inside Outside have completed the master plan of the Riga Port City project (Fig1). The development company Daunrigas Attistibas Uzņemums aims at "the development of Riga centre towards the River Daugava to establish a multifunctional and high-quality urban territory in the area cleared from port operations." ¹



Fig 2. View within The Tin (Skardene) 'Object' No 5, in the 'Harbour of Ideas', South End (Dienvidu Gals, Andrejostas Iela). Photo: Aigars Cervinskis

'Harbour of Ideas' is the title given by the team of developers to the development project in Andrejsala. If the title 'Harbour of Ideas', figuratively speaking, signals the reframing of the space, literally speaking, it will also signal the temporal and spatial comings and goings of cultural and economic activity. This correlates with the policies formulated by the developers and OMA for the urban fabric in this specific area: "The plan of Riga Port City is mainly a tool, which does not dictate and does not create a predictable and explicit aggregation of applications. (...) It should make one sufficiently convinced about the features of a newly developed city port, in order to arouse the interest of the target audience. The main goal is that the plan should be indefinite and definite at the same time. The concept resembles a guessing game – predicting possible future options." ² The modes of address within the project parameters are intriguing. Some outline information about the project development is published on-line so that any member of the public has access to it. Amongst the opportunities advocated is the provision of temporary spaces for cultural activities. These are provisional spaces, not dissimilar to outhouses. They are presented as 'open-houses' in order to introduce public access into the area for a new form of cultural activity. This will be an alternative response to that of the previous function of these buildings.

Amongst the institutions to be generated by the development programme is a New Latvian Museum of Contemporary Art. The aspirations for it are to be culturally aligned with other Museums of Contemporary Art around the globe, including: Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow; The Museum Of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London and The State Museum Of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki etc. In the meantime, before the art institution is created, the site at Andrejsala is available for temporary exhibitions and other cultural events.

One of the interesting conceptual aspects of Andrejsala as an exhibition site, is the fact that commercial developers avoid referring to the outhouses to be renovated, as 'buildings' and prefer to use the term 'objects' instead (Fig2).³ In English the word 'object' literally refers to any material thing that can be seen or touched, whereas in the art world has specific connotation of the art object -an object that is considered to be of artistic value. Now, all material things -including outhouses- are objects and it is therefore legitimate to refer to outhouses as 'objects'. However, more information is conveyed by the term 'outhouse' than by the term 'object': the use of the word 'outhouse' tells us what type of object we are talking about. Given that language is often expected to provide maximum information, it would be unusual for someone to refer to a building as an 'object' unless they had some special reason to do so. One could assume that the developers' idea and purpose in performing the linguistic abstraction from 'building' to 'object' is an attempt to make an associative abstraction of the buildings from their previous functions -as customs houses for trade and exchange, engineering workshops, transformer buildings for power et cetera -as well as reposition them (the buildings) as buoyant and association- free entities. In project management float is the amount of time that a task in a project network can be delayed without causing a delay to subsequent tasks or to the project completion date. This reification of the 'objects', at float, signifies that the buildings are immersed in the shifting cultural and urban ideology (Fig3). The adaptation of the 'objects' by the developers has come to mean that they could instead be considered as the tensile between ideas and ideals.

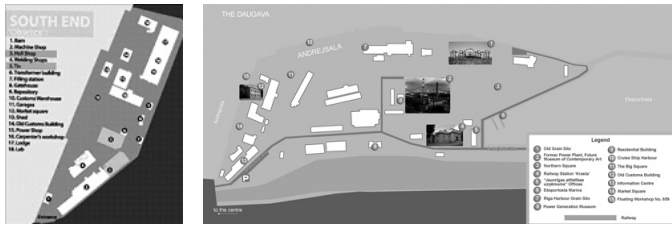


Fig 3. Site Map. South End, Andrejostas Iela and the 'Legend'. images: www.andrejsala.lv

The formulation of six different zones within the development site is also important. It mirrors the open-ended language employed by Archigram and Team X in the 60's and 70's as an introduction to imagining a fully experiential but 'affective' urbanism. The use of conceptualisation and the term 'Zone' by Archigram has influenced its use by Koolhaas' team at OMA and it is interesting to observe how it is re-defined by the Dutch architectural firm, in the present day, to control environments: "The zones subdivide the site more subtly into quarters with varied urban characters or 'feel'. The atmosphere of each zone is created through an amalgamation of a local identity, derived from the adjacent areas or from the zone's former use, and an international identity referring to universally known urban and dock typologies. This hybrid identity serves to create quarters that appeal to both local and international users. The different character of each quarter is enhanced through a plan, in which the zones (at regular intervals) are superimposed on the irregular shape of the site. This creates an alternating rhythm of continuous zones and zones interrupted by the basins of the former harbours. The character of each zone is further reinforced by the allocation of specific functions." ⁴ This mode of urbanism, animated by conceptual vocabulary, is designed specifically to act upon the minds of those engaging their imagination with the development plans and process. The structure of this conceived mode of urbanization, realized by the complex system of organization, is not only an attempt to affect the edifice as perceived in the (concrete) architecture and experienced by the pedestrian, but also to encourage the individual's (abstract) impression of the shifting social and cultural surroundings. For example, in 2011 it is planned to open a Latvian institute of contemporary art that will occupy one of the larger buildings in Zone E: Riga Soho, in order to generate the same trendy feel to the 'experiential' environment as that in Gazi, Athens. It also aims to replicate the employment of Guy Debord's 'Derive' and his explorations of the city as 'Psychogeography'. ⁵ However, performance zoning can be recognized by the use of performance-based criteria as establishing review parameters for the proposed development projects. ⁶ This discretionary activity outlined by OMA offers evidence for what is being performed in a public space to give buoyancy to the re-conceptualisation of a place of regeneration before the institution is established in the wider European cultural context. Paradoxically, the developers are offering a 'derive' to simulate cultural running room while having control over the coming and goings of 'actors' through different zones at the same time.

Following the recent shifts in architectural and cultural activity, these customs houses are now given a different status. They are privileged, advertised by the developers as being unique, and they are re-asserted as being positioned at the centre of a creative community. Therefore it can be argued that, structurally speaking, the 'objects' are integral to the system

of re-conceptualisation of space. In acknowledgement of the community claiming temporary use of these buildings in the South End, the developers have categorised and agglomerated this newly-generated creative community as 'Islanders'. The term implies that the 'Islanders' may be cut off from something but I cannot define from what, other than from the 'mainland' activities within the city itself (Fig4). ⁷ It is therefore necessary to consider why this area in Andrejsala is being formalized as Heterotopian. Michael Foucault's concept of Heterotopy has been re-conceptualised by Edward Soja in his book 'Thirdspace'. ⁸ In his introduction Soja describes how this concept of space was drawn up, by Foucault, for architects but was never published. The architects and the developers in the 'Harbour of Ideas' have tried to present their activities, occurring in this context, as having non-hegemonic and heterotopian -as opposed to utopian- conditions. Heterotopias are spaces that are both physical and mental. Since the space in Andrejsala is referred to as a site in which there is anticipation of something that is 'already here but that is not yet here', the concept and practice of zoning spaces during planning resonates with this idea. At present, the 'zones' are offered as parallel 'other spaces' within which the spatial and the temporal alternatives and ideals can be creatively defined and redefined. This may be a planning device to encourage and manage potential for productive creativity. However, as it is presently 'buoyant' as a liberal and pedagogical space, set aside as a ground for exercising ideas, it offers space for reflection on any matters of concern over the re-formalisation of this area. Soja also outlines his thoughts on "proximity and the synergy that sometimes transpires when humans share ideas" in his explorations of urban agglomeration and what he has defined as 'Synekism', in his text *Writing the City Spatially*. ⁹ This is useful to refer to when considering how we encounter ideas.



Fig 4. Development plan for Riga Port City. Images: www.andrejsala.lv

In anticipation of a response to changes in the overall socio-demographic profile, the stated aim of the developers is to allow a creative community on site in order to mitigate any adverse socio-economic change that the development might cause. This implies that the developers believe that forming a creative community will lead to creative industry, which in turn will support economic development. This infers that the participants in this community are situated within a 'democratic' provisional liberal system of cultural production, in which anything can be experienced temporarily. However, the socio-economic conditions or the strategic interests of the investors are, of course, that it must attract the public as well as capital investment. By their affiliation with contemporary art practices and institutions, the developers of 'The Harbour of Ideas' are implying that creative activity will lead to a higher level of economic development in the future, through engagement with innovation. This possible future scenario offers an introduc-

tion to the code of the industrial creative classes, identified as creative high-technology knowledge workers, who will become 'actors' within the 'Harbour of Ideas', as just one of a range of socio-economic stipulations for the place. The understanding of this code is part of what it means to be a member, citizen or 'Islander', identifying with this community and culture. It is therefore important to make a response to these codes; for instance, within a critical contemporary art exhibition, establishing the presence of the artwork on site so as to take a role within the pedagogical process, by offering various forms of institutional critique, and therefore by participating (through relating alternates) in criticizing and shaping the institution before it is established in the wider cultural context. In order to investigate the 'buoyant entities' within the 'Harbour of Ideas' then perhaps the abstract tensile between the ideas and the ideals may be considered temporarily harboured in order to allow creative cultural experimentation along with space for a divergence of interpretation and response.

Notes

¹ www.jau.lv/eng/index_new.php (July 15, 2008)

² *Concept of development of Riga City Port: The essence of the plan*, www.andrejsala.lv/64/ (July 15, 2008)

³ www.andrejsala.lv/162/103/ (July 15, 2008)

⁴ www.andrejsala.lv/64/ (July 15, 2008)

⁵ Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive*, www.library.nothingness.org/articles/all/all/display/314 (July 15, 2008)

⁶ www.andrejsala.lv/100/ (July 15, 2008)

⁷ Completed by Jaunrigas Attīstības Uzņēmums in cooperation with Analītisko Pētījumu un Stratēģiju Laboratorija, *Four Future Scenarios for Rīga and Rīgas in 2020, The World's Cities: Symbolic Capital. A Case Study of Rīga, Rīgas' citing Richard Florida*, www.andrejsala.lv/117/597/ (July 15, 2008)

⁸ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places* (Massachusetts: Wiley Blackwell, 1996), 15

⁹ Edward Soja, *Writing the City Spatially*, City Vol. 7:3 (November 2003), 273