



Encounter and exchange: during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Piazza della Signoria was the political center of Florence. The idea that public places are necessary to shape society was formulated in ancient times, but is still valid today.



# Creating space for existential awareness

Researching the old to develop the new – what better place to do this than in Florence? At the **Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institute**, the “Ethics and Architecture” research group led by **Brigitte Soelch** and **Hana Gruendler** invites discussion of the history and theory of architecture and the applicability of its teachings to the present and future of building.

TEXT **MARTIN TSCHECHNE**

It might have been a day just like today. Clear blue skies. A fresh, gentle, yet billowing breeze blowing through the streets of Florence from Monte Ceceri in the north east, where Leonardo da Vinci was to test his flying machines a couple of

decades later. Leon Battista Alberti had walked up to the monastery church of San Miniato al Monte with his companions Agnolo Pandolfini and Nicola de' Medici – one a Stoic, the other a critic of the Stoic philosophy of calm forbearance. Yet since their seemingly acciden-



Free seating: as with the Loggia dei Lanzi, some of the Renaissance palaces in Florence have protruding plinths. Once designed as waiting areas for petitioners, they are now used by grateful visitors as seats that do not oblige them to buy food or drink.

tal meeting under the mighty dome of the cathedral, their dialogue had developed in an atmosphere of friendly mutual respect.

They had talked about virtue and destiny, aesthetics and morals, ethics, the relationship of humankind with creation, and the cornerstones of a good life. In the course of their conversation, they came out of the cathedral and strolled along the river out of the city and up the green hill. Their subject was the peace of mind. Agnolo advised and taught, Nicola listened and replied; it was he who had broached the topic.

### THE ART HISTORIAN ASKS ABOUT THE RAILWAY STATION

In later centuries, their dialogue, *Della tranquillità dell'animo* (1441), was repeatedly extolled as the literary manifesto of an epoch that drew on the ideas of classical philosophy and invoked Aristotle and the Roman master builder Vitruvius to pave the way to a freer future that respected the dignity of humankind: the Italian Renaissance.

The cathedral architecture, the layout of the city – all this helped give meaning and form to the discussion. Alberti, an architect, master builder, mathematician, author and humanist, gave his dialogue an elaborate structure. The characters, their arguments and counterarguments, the whole conversation – all these were fiction. Yet the place was real.

Brigitte Soelch and Hana Gruendler, who together with Alessandro Nova are in charge of the “Ethics and Architecture” project at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, sometimes follow the path taken by the literati up to San Miniato when they need a breath of fresh air. Florence is hard to endure. The queue at the entrance to the cathedral goes back as far as the side streets, the Baptistery is surrounded, and the flags of the tour guides wave atop a pushing, shoving mass of humanity like poppies in many different colors.

In almost every building there is a coffee bar, a guest house, a pizzeria or a souvenir shop awaiting an influx of tourists. On the Ponte Vecchio, it's impossible to make your way through the crowds. T-shirts and cheap leather jackets for the rest of the world. And a visit to see the paintings in the Uffizi Gallery? Not in this life. Men with submachine guns stand in front of the entrance. The city is choking on its beauty, its popular myth, its history.

“Have you actually seen the railway station?” asks Brigitte Soelch, and at first the question is startling. The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz is located in Via Giuseppe Giusti, house number 44, a stately palace behind gray walls, just a few steps from the cathedral and right behind the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the city orphanage. In 1419, Filippo Brunelleschi, who shortly afterwards became the master builder responsible for the world-

famous cathedral dome, laid the foundations of a building that was to become a moral, social and aesthetic sign of his times. His asylum for foundlings made the newly awakened early Renaissance concept of humanity very tangible, of humankind made in the image of God. This is reflected by the reliefs of babies created by Andrea della Robbia on the frieze above the arcades. Yet the art historian asks about the railway station.

### THE CONCEPT OF GOOD FORM HAS IMPACTS ON LIFE

The building is a testimony to *longue durée*, adds her colleague Hana Gruendler – to the sustainability of a philosophy that shaped the face of Florence and still influences it today. This information is certainly helpful, as the Stazione Santa Maria Novella, built in 1932/34 by Giovanni Michelucci and his Gruppo Toscano, is a monument to Italian modernity with its clear, elongated, strictly functional front. It is also a stark contrast to the magnificent domes and cathedrals of the old town, the colonnades, bands of marble and highly effective perspectives.

“Not quite,” corrects Gruendler. “Just look at the material from which the railway station has been made, especially the front. It's just like the main body of the Santa Maria Novella monastery directly opposite. It's the same as what we see on the incomplete façade of San Lorenzo, for example.” >



Urban planning then and now: the “Ethics & Architecture” research group cites the Florentine suburb of Scandicci (right) as a current example of citizen-centered building. The visionaries who paved the way for this development left their traces in the old town (top) 600 years earlier.

Indeed, half of Florence seems to have been built using stone in this warm shade of yellow.

In such details, the researchers recognize the expression of an ethic, the concept of good form that also applies to a good life. Even the choice of building material is an affirmation of the city and its history, and a political manifesto. Special consideration may not have been given to ecological questions at the time, qualifies Gruendler, but some thought was certainly given to what characterizes a place. Where does a material come from? How does it get here? And how does it represent the character of this place, the popular myth of the Florentine? A warm, calming ochre in the light of the setting sun – even today, the color alone is enough to inspire thoughts of Tuscany.

The interaction between architecture and ethics is the focus of the researchers working on the project. How are forms of thinking expressed in a cityscape and its buildings? What dimensions and proportions are derived from ethical principles? And what un-

derstanding of reason and responsibility, of community, citizenship and democracy emerges from the arrangement of a city, its openness and structure, its green spaces and public squares, its agreements on the height of eaves, street layout and pavement width?

### FLORENCE IS ALSO THE CRADLE OF FUTURISM

Gruendler and Soelch dig through historical layers to find the answers to these questions. They engage in an invariably exciting dialogue between their subjects of art history and philosophy, with occasional excursions into psychology, sociology and politics. They also invite guests and organize whole congresses to discuss the metaphors of architecture, the aesthetic education of humankind through the environments they construct, the idea of heaven in late Gothic architecture, and the virtual cloud in a present that is opening up new spaces. They talk about Bauhaus and the Werkbund, about the Wittgenstein house in Vienna, the

Weissenhof estate in Stuttgart, Villa Tugendhat in Brno, or Alexander Rodchenko’s aestheticized photos of the construction of the White Sea Canal. In Florence, they say, you bump into all this at practically every turn.

Brigitte Soelch solves the puzzle of her startling question about the railway station by explaining that the Renaissance and modernity were both more radical than anything that went before, and that both laid claim to being completely new. We are going forward into a new future, said the pioneers of both movements. We are leaving everything old behind us. And they said this in Florence. The city, as the art historian reminds us, was not only the cradle and zenith of the Italian Renaissance, not merely a repository of a closed chapter in history.

500 years later, the founders of futurism, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and painters such as Umberto Boccioni and Carlo Carrà, also sat together in the Caffè Le Giubbe Rosse (the Red Jackets) on the Piazza della Repubblica, where they extolled their



passion for everything new, for courage and rebellion, for struggle and speed, *salti mortali*, punches and slaps in the face in lampoons that were sometimes rather forced.

Nevertheless, the past always remains alive, is accepted or fiercely opposed, redefined and integrated into the present. And continues to be the fundamental basis of modern times. The ancient idea of the agora and the forum as a place of intellectual and political exchange runs all the way through history – sometimes only as an empty popular myth – to the shopping malls of the present day. The Federal Constitutional Court, says Brigitte Soelch, invokes the law of the ancient forum to justify why demonstrations may be held at Frankfurt Airport.

According to the art historian, the Renaissance succeeded in stepping out of the chronology of history precisely because it drew on ancient ideas. She calls to mind the plinths of the old palaces, which were often preferred to benches. Those who wished to be allowed inside first had to wait outside. This was what court protocol demanded. And nowadays, lo and behold: the seats are an unexpected, almost subversive gesture of hospitality in a public space which the tourist office has com-

mercialized right down to the very last corner. Every traveler is aware that anyone who wants to sit down must at the very least order a cappuccino. And then they are suddenly invited to sit down on the plinth of a palace free of charge and write a postcard home...

Stay calm, be at peace, *tranquillità dell'animo*. This is how Alberti put it. Reason, reflection and responsibility. He built the front of the church of Santa Maria Novella on existing medieval foundations, modified his plan wherever necessary, and designed a spectacular façade in green and white marble that truly epitomized the spirit of the new era.

## EDUCATION THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

Sometimes economy, ecological thinking and respect for the history and identity of a place come surprisingly close together. For the two researchers, the benches and sacred ensemble opposite Florence railway station are only one intellectual step away from their counterpart, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin – even down to the reconstruction of a castle, the atmosphere of which is focused entirely on an idealized past. Incidentally, these construc-

tions unwisely turn their backs on the old and new in the east of the city.

Wouldn't the Uffizi galleries have been a better model? They were built by the artist, art biographer and master builder Giorgio Vasari, interposes Hana Gruendler, who together with Alessandro Nova is one of the six co-editors of a new edition of Vasari's "Lives". Vasari had a whole city district demolished to make way for an administrative center reflecting the Commune's newly awakened Republican self-image. After all, the famous art collection was not exhibited there until much later, although the Medici expressed their passion for collecting and their enthusiasm for art early on in the Tribuna of the Uffizi.

The art historian and philosopher refers quite naturally to terms learnt in Latin lessons, to *cives* and *civitas*, the citizen and the urban community as standards for future-oriented building. This is apparently how it has always been in Florence. What was (and is) important was the moral education of humanity through architecture. Even Vasari gave due consideration to traces of the past from which the future could grow and on which it could feed. He studied and evaluated old plans and compiled them into a handbook for his guild, a *Libro de'*

*disegni*, used spolia (building elements repurposed from earlier times) and integrated parts of a medieval church into his brand new government center on the bank of the Arno.

The architect acted as an archivist and curator, as a legal scholar and moral philosopher. Does this mean that architecture's political and social responsibility was greater in those times? Not necessarily, claims Brigitte Soelch. But it was probably closer to its intellectual roots in ancient times. When the boundaries of the city are also the boundaries of a judicial area, the significance of the buildings is tangible. In this respect, Florence has always been something like the prototype of a modern city.

When the façade of a church such as Santa Maria Novella is built on foundations from the past, the respect felt for history is palpable; when its structure looks forward to a new era, it becomes all the more obvious that the program is directed at the *civitas*, the urban society. And when it uses materials from the surrounding area, as was also the case in the past, it confirms the city's identity at this location and provides a firmly anchored foundation for the new awakening. Little additional explanation is necessary: the municipality's buildings are accessible at all times.

"Don't expect us to provide finished solutions," Brigitte Soelch will say at some point. "Our group just asks the right questions." While Achim Reese, currently a doctoral student on the project, is now investigating the humanization of architecture after the end of World War II and is challenging the cliché of an allegedly "inhuman" modernity, his predecessor Nele De Raedt took a closer look at the relationship between moral behavior, palace architecture and the patronage of popes and cardinals.

One of the questions relates to what present-day architects can learn from early modernity. The researchers make it very clear that an answer will never be found without direct reference to political practice and everyday life as a building architect. Moreover, every valid answer is based on the realization that new ground can only be broken by investigating the ideas and disputes of intellectual history, and that ethical positions that go beyond a generally formulated morality always require a reference to a specific social structure, to the reality of its intrinsic possibilities.

Leon Battista Alberti called for this through the idealized character of Stoic Agnolo Pandolfini, as did his Milan-based contemporary Filarete in his *Treatise on Architecture*, and both of them drew on this for specific planning ideas. Principles of an intelligent architecture, both then and now.

### DEBATES ABOUT THE FUTURE OF CONSTRUCTION ARE ESSENTIAL

In order to breathe life into these ideals, the researchers permit themselves a kind of utopia, according to which a serious architect should still be able to think, argue and write extremely well today. Like the great authors and master builders of the Renaissance, with their manifestos, treatises, polemics and policy papers. What is important is to challenge building owners to engage in dispute on an equal level and initiate large-scale, fundamental debates on the future of building. At issue here are questions of sustainability, habitability and ethics. Gruendler and Soelch say that one example of such a combination of practice and theory is the Dutch designer Rem Koolhaas, with his in-depth analyses and carefully developed theses on architecture. His counterpart would be an ordinary star archi-

tect who merely elevates his personal style to the status of a trademark. With a rather short expiry date.

Florence is hard to endure. Particularly for its inhabitants. They have become accustomed to the fact that tourism dominates every aspect of life and business in the city. After all, they too are responsible for this development. However, the researchers report that over the last two or three years, residential space in the city center has become almost unaffordable for the local population – because even the smallest room promises quick, barely controllable profit through online portals such as Airbnb. Florence is drowning in tourism.

So off to Scandicci! For the Ethics & Architecture group, the western suburb is confirmation that the Florentine talent for bringing forth new ideas on the basis of an evolved identity tempered by constant debate is still alive and well. In Scandicci, the city has been experiencing a kind of Futurism 2.0 since 2016. The British architect Richard Rogers, who built the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and who was incidentally born in Florence, made the bold move of completely redefining this urban area as a metropolitan region with functions and structures expanded to the scale of a network. A modern concept is reduc-





ing the crush on the streets, while supplies and administration have once again been brought closer to the local inhabitants. Perhaps this will help Florence find itself again.

The best thing (here Brigitte Soelch waxes positively lyrical) is that Rogers sought and found expression wholly in keeping with the spirit of the great master builders, expression that adopts, invokes and integrates the surrounding forms and aesthetics sensitively and respectfully – not the distant domes and loggias of the city center, but rather the local residential architecture of the 1950s and 1960s, the typical façades given structure by light grids and red tiles, and in the middle of it all, a town hall dating from earlier times that was made of *béton brut* (raw concrete), and which unexpectedly gives a whole new lightness and dignity to the region. Very clever, says the art historian. This is how architecture can guide the present into the future. Tourists are never seen out there. Unfortunately, architects and architectural historians are also rare visitors.

Supposing they had taken part in the competition to design the area on which Berlin city palace had stood until it was destroyed by the GDR regime? What would they have built there? The

two researchers barely hesitate; this topic is obviously familiar from their congresses and ongoing dialogues. The Palace of the Republic has disappeared, a formative phase of history has been rudely obliterated. So why not use this physical, historical empty space to invite the world to Berlin?

To build a vertically layered urban space in these narrow confines, taking China or Brazil as a model, Le Corbusier or the Dutch architects MVRDV with their Expo pavilion as intellectual sponsors. They imagine the area as a mixture of public amenities, with a sports arena on the first floor, above it cinemas,

Linking a variety of interests: the research project led by Hana Gruendler and Brigitte Soelch (from left) unites architectural and social questions, philosophy and psychology, politics and art history.

bars, libraries, open areas and forums. And there has to be space with cultural and subcultural potential on the open ground floor. Undefined, and constantly open to rethinking.

This would probably have been the best solution, because it would have confirmed what the classical thinkers repeatedly postulated and substantiated: the city belongs to its citizens. ◀

## SUMMARY

- Architecture and urban planning reflect the concept of humanity and the idea of citizens coexisting in the respective epoch in question. Conversely, building design influences the lives of both the individual and of society as a whole.
- The "Ethics and Architecture" project at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max Planck Institute is exploring these interactions and their development from the Renaissance to the present day.
- A key role is played by public spaces as places of intellectual and political dialogue. Another important factor is the challenge of amalgamating new and existing buildings to form an integrated whole.
- As in the Renaissance, architects today should put their planning-related and social ideas on paper and open them up to discussion.