

The Genius Loci of the Hopfenmarkt (Hamburg)

In times of globalization, boundaries of history, environment, landscape, topography, climate and architectural style are increasingly vanishing. Reconstructions of ancient buildings and ensembles are indicators of a longing to subjects that used to characterize a location. But these reconstructions pretend a continuous history instead of a continuation of the place itself.

Architecture should develop from the encountered context and draw on the spiritual identity of the place and its surroundings. Continuation in the sense of compositional harmony is able to replace randomness and preserves the uniqueness of our cities.

The "Hopfenmarkt" is located in the heart of Hamburg. It used to be the origin of merchant settlement that evolved over the centuries to the trade metropolis Hamburg is famous for today. Over the centuries two historic experiences took place in this area, which lead to structural rearrangements.

The first one was the "Großer Brand" (big brand) in 1842, which destroyed one third of the city by also demolishing the medieval Church of St. Nikolai. St. Nikolai, continually expanded, characterized the place for nearly 650 years. In 1882 a new church, representing the gothic revival, replaced it. The architect Sir George Gilbert Scott placed "new" St. Nikolai about 50 meters southeast of the medieval one. This also influenced the city planning. Orthogonal streets displaced the organic evolved structure and rearranged the area.

With the Second World War another upheaval took place. Bombs demolished parts of the nave of St. Nikolai and the development of the "Hopfenmarkt". During the air assault the tower of St. Nikolai served as point of orientation for the Allies, without being struck. Later St. Nikolai was turned into a memorial.

Today the "Hopfenmarkt" suffers from the traffic- and city planning of the postwar years. It's a large-scale monofunctional office- and business district without amenity value, separated from the other quarters.

Visiting the archaeological excavation, located at the "Hopfenmarkt" 32/33, in summer 2015 generated the starting point of my master thesis.

On the one hand I was touched by the traces of a thousand years heritage that convey a lick of the spirit, this place used to be. Beyond that I was disappointed hearing that after the diggings this special location has to give place to another commonplace office building.

But what if we would protect this site and its spirit to encourage the identity in terms of saving the heritage?

Relating to the "Genius Loci", I tried to merge the temporal and spatial layering of the eras to create something that feels natural at the place. Something that wasn't put in there but rather grows out of the existing and makes a reference to it.

The first point was to preserve the archaeological excavation in the shape of the former main room of the medieval Church. Protected by big walls, which house the museum and a small chapel, the outlines of the building relate to the former urban space encompassing old St. Nikolai. This structural shell forms the potential of the dense multifunctional city planning surrounding the archaeological museum. The new urban construction is a revitalization and transformation of the medieval texture.

To integrate the "hollowed" building of the memorial into the urban space with a reverent use, I designed a columbarium, embedded into the former nave of St. Nikolai. The columbarium counteracts the exclusion of death and memory and incorporates it into our daily routine to prevent necropole outside of our cities.

In coexistence with the existing documentation center in the basement, the memorial room situated at the former apsis and the exhibition of St. Nikolai on top, the columbarium is a place of silent reflection.

The design of the columbarium refers to the structure of the gothic church in an abstract way. Topics of light, dematerialization and gothic buttresses influenced the new building. In contrast the archaeological museum seems like a mass with punched out spaces arranged to a cellular structure, not even following the logic of the wall. The columbarium and the archaeological museum are set in an antithetic relationship to each other.

Both, the diggings of the medieval- and the remains of the neo-gothic church are witnesses of the epochal devastations. Although many similarities, the dealings with the relics of the former churches are different.

But both attend to the spirit of the place, the "Genius Loci".