

chat history on everland

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Julia Schäfer:

20:29:47

Your first encounter with the ‹Hotel Everland›-Project occurred at a symposium in Switzerland and you immediately started to work on the idea of bringing ‹Everland› to Leipzig.

Barbara Steiner:

20:33:43

I was invited to a symposium in Fribourg to speak about our new building. L/B were there for a talk about their hotel project. The hotel had been created for the (Swiss) Expo.02 where it sat at just off the shore of Lake Neuchatel. L/B were hoping to send their one-room hotel on a journey, bringing it to different places. And it just occurred to me: what a perfect fit for our terrace.

Julia Schäfer:

20:37:29

So the one-room hotel was planned as a traveling project from the start. The Expo took place in 2002. Now, in 2006 it has found a temporary home in Leipzig. It is also interesting that an institution in Eastern Germany would be the first to risk putting this – what to call it? – this UFO on its rooftop. It may be indicative of the strategic choices our institution must make to generate interest in the long term. How come the hotel has not traveled anywhere else since the Expo?

Barbara Steiner:

20:44:09

I guess the project is just too complex with its elaborate technical design and the difficulty of coordinating all the people involved – never mind finding sponsors because the project is not cheap by any means. It took me a while to fully realize what we had gotten ourselves into: commissioning a structural report, filing for a building permit, levering up the building to put down the necessary water and sewage lines, cutting open the roof, etc. Then again I was convinced from the start that the project was well worth the effort. And then you came on board. That was important.

Julia Schäfer:

20:49:01

It actually complements our institution's other projects rather well: the new building, garden, café and library, art education and now a hotel that makes us the talk of the town here in Leipzig. The new (eastern) states of Germany and many of the people who work there and operate in the new

– and they have been doing that for some time now – had to be fairly resourceful in finding strategies for survival. The hotel as a closed container is perfect. And I am quite sure that the way it works here is rather different from the way it would work elsewhere.

Barbara Steiner:

20:54:10

What interests me about the strategies for survival is how art, i.e. its actors take back the space, both literal and metaphorical, that their activity requires. It seems to me that this space is dwindling, that art is increasingly subjected to the demands of economy. How can one 'utilize' the potential of art but still retain the authority to define its functions/functionality? The focus does change once economic questions enter the work itself – that is as true for institutions like ourselves as it is for many of the artists we work with. If you chose to ignore this you may suddenly find yourself dominated by a logic of economic utilization that you may not appreciate at all.

Julia Schäfer:

21:02:50

Absolutely. In a certain sense this is uncharted territory: the hotel as an economic system from which you can learn. How do services work? How to generate structures anew? How to transfer them to the field of art? The hotel may be a good case in point. It doesn't generate an economic surplus – at best it pays for itself. But that's the whole point, even on a large scale. In the best of cases, this is how it might work: manipulating economic systems in your own best interest.

Barbara Steiner:

21:07:18

I am very intrigued by the parasite aspect: the system within the system, the economy within the economy. Look, it starts with the placement of the hotel. Even as it appears well integrated into the existing architecture the hotel somehow remains an alien presence. It doesn't fit. This no-fit best describes the hotel project for me. The hotel sits on top of a building that houses an art institution. You have to pass through the building, through the administration to get to the terrace. It also doesn't fit in terms of an economic logic exclusively concerned with utilization. A one-room hotel is not profitable, it will never make any money. As a guest you have your own private concierge, excellent service, breakfast. I'm not surprised that various people have suggested to L/B that they produce additional Everlands – start a sort of mass production as it were.

Julia Schäfer:

21:14:00

That is precisely the point where L/B say: one hotel is enough. There will not be more hotels. This is not a prototype. And they are right, of course. As a model of economization the hotel would hold no interest for us. Bringing the project here for 14 months is quite a structural feat in itself – but as is so often the case you just can't ever anticipate every effect that a thing might produce. People come from all over. For the sake of art they put up with things they'd never accept in a normal hotel. In this sense the project has an educational angle too. All the things you mentioned – having to pass through another building, a breakfast menu that is ok but far from opulent, no TV... yes, it's true, you do engage with art, you become a part of its logic. People don't even mind the view of the Plattenbauten (prefab concrete buildings). The guest book proves it.

Now it is on our roof. There was a debate right from the start; it was sitting there and everyone thought the large panorama window would surely be giving onto the city. No. Of course it doesn't. It looks out on the three Plattenbauten next door that many people really hate.

Barbara Steiner:

21:18:12

Different expectations permeate the entire project. This is a very interesting point because it marks the differences between individual participants and their expectations. After all, not everyone holds a negative view of Plattenbauten and there are visitors who actually appreciate the link between these faded emblems of utopian promise for a better society and Everland – a very different utopian project that travels from place to place dressed in 1970s reminiscences – and find it very interesting and appropriate.

Julia Schäfer:

21:22:50

We also arrived at different ideas with regard to the economic aspects. What is profitable, what are you willing to spend money for? How can partners from industry and art become close enough to benefit and learn from each other? Goals and motivations differ. Yet a project like this requires a partner from the hotel industry if it is to function professionally. Art here depends on the competence of others and of course this exchange is one of the reasons we have taken an interest in the project. And, as we have learned, there will be friction.

Barbara Steiner:

21:24:48

I guess there is a fundamental difference between an interest in economy and economic interests. In L/B's work questions of economy are not just considered but literally put on display.

The hybrid nature of L/B's hotel – a work of art during museum hours it turns into a fully functional hotel at night – somehow marks the relation between art and economy: because points of friction emerge and because the economics of the hotel have aspects of irrationality built-in (from the one-room idea to the permitted theft of towels and the full minibar free of charge). At the same time it also concerns the idealized sphere of art as an economy-free space. I reflect all this by doing and using.

Our run-ins with partners from business and industry do not surprise me. Their methods and expectations – vanishing points would be more like it – are different indeed. They do not care for the view of the Plattenbau – it is considered ‚ugly‘ – but prefer the more attractive prospect of city hall. They want the idyllic postcard view because, after all, people pay good money to be here. They also frown upon guests who steal towels because this cuts into the profit. Such practices are dismissed as inefficient and are scorned.

Julia Schäfer:

21:31:20

In the long run, comparing reactions of visitors in different places might turn out to be the most interesting aspect. Or do you think they will be pretty much the same everywhere?

Barbara Steiner:

21:34:33

I think the situations will be very different depending on the context.

After a while, i.e. after a number of stops in different locations, the major differences will become apparent: the size of the budget, the hotel guests, the involvement of businesses or private sponsors. Here in Leipzig, we had a very committed architect who filed for our building permit in exchange for two nights at the hotel. This is very context-specific. We didn't receive a lot of cash donations but enjoyed an incredible amount of non-material commitment and support instead.

Julia Schäfer:

21:44:19

Differences also emerged the minute we realized there would be a different kind of clientele than we were led to expect by outside forecasters. Hoteliers were skeptical with regard to the view – especially the view from the outside in (fear of voyeurism). Not one guest ever complained about that and nobody seems to use the screen that we bought specifically for the purpose. The people who come are very flexible, in part because they already know what to expect. They appreciate the extraordinary (see guest book). On the other hand there are people who think nothing of hauling along their grill equipment and organizing parties and generally behaving as though they were the proud owners of the entire museum lot – landlords for one night, no questions asked. Others work hard to save up the 222 Euros because, for once, they want to be

part of an exclusive project. Then there are the Everland fans who already spent a night on Lake Neuchatel and are already looking forward to the hotel's next station. For them, Everland has become a concept and they might never have visited Leipzig if not for the hotel. Locals, on the other hand, book a night to gain a different perspective on their city – at least I assume that's why they do it. And all of them appear to get something from the experience that one would not necessarily have expected. They enjoy the sheer luxury of it: doing nothing, listening to music, reading, taking a bath and looking out the window... and no one seems to miss the standard accoutrements of a night at the hotel – the TV, the DVD player, the Jacuzzi. Just this morning, another happy guest told me that you simply don't want to go out once you have arrived. He lives in a building shaped like a sphere, apparently a prefab from the US. He insisted on showing it to me on the Web, then and there, and seemed totally obsessed with alternative forms of residential buildings and hotels. This model, our hotel here, is very much a child of the caravan idea.

Barbara Steiner:

21:45:37

Caravan-idea? What do you mean?

Julia Schäfer:

21:49:18

Caravan-idea as related to mobility: taking your home with you. Or in our case the single room.

Julia Schäfer:

21:51:54

The inside stays the same, the surroundings change. There's something of the train experience in this.

Barbara Steiner:

21:53:19

It also meets to a requirement that we know only too well from the neoliberal discourse: be mobile, be flexible... Still, the hotel has to dock in specific places. And that brings us back to our points of friction. Here, you look out on a Plattenbau, in Switzerland you have the lake...

Julia Schäfer:

21:53:59

You too spent a night in Burgdorf on the roof over L/B's atelier. What does this transfer do to your perception of the project?

Barbara Steiner:

21:57:25

When I heard about the hotel in Fribourg I was hooked on the spot. And L/B, without missing a beat, invited me for a sleep trial. First impression: wow! I'm in a different world. I felt like I was in a James Bond movie from the sixties.

In these films absolutely thrilling utopian architectures appear out of nowhere. Maybe I should call it: architecture as anticipated utopia, as model, as prototype. This is how the world could also be, how we can imagine it. Alas, the gentle glow of utopia in L/B's room soon yields to a retro-stylishness that is very much of the moment – pleasurable, slightly sentimental and eminently fashionable. One clearly realizes that we live in utopia-free times. Utopia as design: the hotel is definitely a case in point. Later, I spent a second night in Burgdorf because I wanted to show the hotel to my husband. He, too, loved it. However, Everland in Burgdorf was clearly a private affair and not a professionally managed one-room hotel. It sat on the roof of a private building, was run by the artists themselves (mostly for the benefit of friends) and was absolutely charming! Here in Leipzig the situation is different: you can't help but notice the professional room service. This further enhances the contrast to the institution but also to the feeling of absurdity that surrounds the entire enterprise.

Julia Schäfer:

22:03:10

The guest book, more commonly used to gauge the satisfaction of hotel guests, gives you a good idea of Everland's effect on our overnight visitors. Many people leave drawings. They draw Everland, they draw themselves on the sofa by the window or the view outside. They try to find individual forms of expression, try to be other than 'normal'. They are exclusive and never boring. At least that's the impression you get. They thank the artists and promise to come back. They feel part of an 'Everland-community'. It sounds almost esoteric – but that's how it reads. You get the impression that the people who were here come out purged. It is like a trip in a space ship – that's how it is perceived.

Barbara Steiner:

22:08:07

I can only agree with you. What I observe from my office with a direct view of the hotel entrance every morning are happy people leaving the building, taking farewell photographs of themselves in front of Everland, kissing... Everland seems to produce a certain kind of behavior, even when people arrive. Most people enthusiastically circle the hotel several times, take lots of pictures, and enjoy the terrace. One enters, as you described it, into a very exceptional state.

Julia Schäfer:

22:09:26

Of course there are also many visitors throughout the day who only get to look from the outside but can't go in. It is interesting how normal something becomes if it is here for any length of time – I'm talking about myself now, I can always „have“ Everland, I see it every day. L/B have insisted from the beginning that no one can book more than two nights. Desire is apportioned.

Barbara Steiner:

22:11:21

During the day it is a work of art. It is viewed in the classical manner of art appreciation. You circle it the way you approach a sculpture. At night, however, you're part of it, you're a guest who is temporarily in charge.

You operate the hotel.

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