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Pirgos Peiraia

The Repair of the City and the Re-establishment of Urbanity with the Spatial and Iconic Activation of a Vertical Wasteland

Abstract (short version)

In the middle of the hectic – almost chaotic – heterogeneous space of the port of the Greek town Piraeus reposes a sleeping giant: the Pirgos Peiraia (Piraeus Tower). With its height of 85 meter the high-rise rises from the not even half as high city like an alien. It is empty, unused since its construction in the 1970ies and existent only as an image in the perception of the city. A vertical wasteland, used only as supporting structure for large-scale commercial messages.

The present thesis takes this concrete situation as a starting point for an analysis of the relation between high-rise and city, of the (in the most cases unexploited) possibilities of the integration in its neighborhood and the potential to generate a considerable surplus for the city. The Pirgos Peiraia is conceived as a tool, an instrument of urban development or, generally speaking, the high-rise as an urban project.

The eight essays of the first, theoretical part of the thesis and the photographic essay „Perfected Imperfection“ placed in front have to be understood as a discussion on the city of Athens and its architecture, on the high-rise, on image and space that goes far beyond a pragmatic analysis only preparing for the design. It could as well stand on its own. The rather undefined, contradictory character of the contemporary Athens (and its little sister Piraeus) is highlighted, the attempts of controlled urbanism and their failure, the Polykatoikia typology as the ubiquitous generic element of the Greek city and the excessive spread of Athens as a seemingly homogeneous concrete carpet. Moreover the high-rise in its immanent conflict between structural-constructive building and the creation of symbols and icons is examined and finally the role of architecture as an image (or sign) and as carrier of images (or signs) in the city is considered.

The second part condenses the acquired in a design that responds very closely to the context of the place – its structure, function and meaning – and formalizes the architectural and social attitude. Space and image, interaction and iconicity, close and far are identified as the horizontal and the vertical dimension of a high-rise in context which constitute a dialectic pair. The tower is completed with its horizontal counterpart, the Ypsilos Dromos. This elevated pathway connects the building with its surrounding and even more the various spaces among each other. Harbour and city are interlaced again, the existing urban fabric and the fragmented squares are made tangible as an ensemble, turned present and usable as public space. The new (and re-)created space redeems what the dominantly towering sign of the Pirgos Peiraia promised for 40 years: a center of urban life. The tower itself houses as inversion of the principle of „White Cube“ plenty of space for the production and communication of arts and several - culture-affine functions. The immanent iconic power of a high building is concretized as a White Void, as antithesis to the white noise of the urban flood of images. A simple form that does not need to immediately express the complexity it internalizes (Ulrich Schwarz), an architecture that poetry does not arise from its autonomous aesthetics but from the faith in the place and the staging of it (Roger Diener). A sign against the (self-involved) signs is set. It isn't produced an architectural spectacle but established an architecture that offers an urban stage for the social spectacle.

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