



# WHOSE CITY IS IT?

» PUBLIC SPACES UNDER THREAT » THE DRIVE FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING » ALPBACH FORUM EXPANSION PLAN

## Alpbach News Magazine

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# Editorial



**Elvira Krithari**  
Greece

“Architecture at its best, is a form of knowledge”, in borrowing sociologist Saskia Sassen’s words from an interview, I would like to welcome you to our magazine, dedicated to the Built Environment Symposium of the European Forum Alpbach 2014.

The city is often a form of expression of social activity, feeling and potential. But what forms the city? The capital, the governments and the people are the main subjects that shape their living environment and, more often than not, a city is created through their conflict. In this issue, you will not find a strict definition of the city, mostly because the term is being re-made again and again, developed in the same way that our actual cities are being developed.

In this issue you will find a story for the future expansion of the congress center of the village on page 7 by Jan Schacht, and the path to affordable housing by Slobodan Maricic, on page 6. A further remark on the tensions, problems and characteristics of the places the majority of the global population lives in can be found on page 4.

With the closing symposiums of EFA 2014, the problems and ideas we tried to solve these past two weeks remain: For all of us to carry them out of this lovely Tyrolean countryside, to the compact, busy and lively built environments most of us live in.

*Elvira Krithari*

## WHAT TROUBLES THE CITY

# Who owns the streets?



APA PICTURE DESK, DENNIS M. SABANGAN

**Every day, a girl walks down the broad avenue of some southern European capital. She pays scant attention to the tall, square, 1960s architecture buildings that have surrounded her forever or the historic monuments of timeworn marble, or to the cyclists who overtake her fighting for space in a road intended only for motorised vehicles.**

*Written by Elvira Krithari*

▲ **Global city: an arial view of smog over skyscrapers in the metropolis of Manila Philppeens**

She hardly notices the people: like those sitting on the bench, next to a few trees, “to watch the passing crowd and to be seen”. And those who have been gathered in the square along with their pickets and banners, ready to demonstrate against the same southern European country’s economic policy.

All the above happened in a place called “public space”, a place that belongs to all, or to nobody, a place in a city. Saskia Sassen, Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology, whose latest book *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* by Harvard University Press, published last May, asks the question “whose city is it?”

Sassen took part in the European Forum Alpbach as a keynote speaker in the session “Creating Liveable Neighbourhoods”. She shares her thoughts with us: “I often use a little test when I am in a city and ask: whose city is it? Increasingly modest-income residents will say: it is no longer my city. I wrote a whole article with that title. The best cities – and Europe’s smaller cities are mostly pretty good models – are distributed spaces where the residents feel: this is my city.”

It is believed that new, contemporary and liveable parts of the city are targeted at the upper classes, while the lower classes are being displaced

and crowded in the suburbs. Sassen explains: “This varies enormously. One trend of the last 20 years that begins in certain parts of the world, Europe and North America, is to live in the centre. The very old rich classes have always had beautiful grand homes in the centre of their main cities. The novelty is the high income middle classes for whom living in a house with a garden used to be the ideal,” Sassen replies and continues, “Not now. Now there’s a luxury apartment building in the centre with swimming pool and gym as part of the building and terraces with flowers. In many ways this has upgraded the quality of urban life, and led many to argue over the last decades (until the current explosion of recognising inequality) that everything was fine with our economies. But their argument is a truly narrow perspective on the matter. Because a few steps away from the sharply expanded upgraded/gentrified centre, living standards for the modest middle classes declined sharply. They had once been able to live in the earlier more, modest centre of our great cities.”

### **GENTRIFICATION**

So, is the liveable (and ideal) neighbourhood the urban equivalent to organic food? “In a way, but only in a way: the cost of it, the exceptionalism

of it. On the other hand if organic becomes the norm and is affordable, we would all be happier...also in cities," the professor answers.

It didn't start from Islington, London, although sociologist Ruth Glass invented the term 'gentrification' back in 1964 to describe the changes her own neighbourhood had suffered. Gentrification is often displayed as a rejuvenating process of the city regardless of its social implications. During this process a degraded urban area, where society's outsiders often have been placed there on purpose, is seen as a charming example of real life's poetic by fortunate people who get inspired by the diversity and multiculturalism of the unfortunate ones and as a potential residential heaven by real estate investors. The former residents are displaced by new richer ones, while their homes are being renovated and their value rises. As Peter Marcuse (1985) puts it, "For the gentrifiers, all roads lead to downtown. For the poor, all roads lead to abandonment".

### URBAN LAND

It's all about land's merchandising. Sassen says: "A major trend that is keeping the average citizen from being able to access or to buy housing that 30 years ago they would have been able to buy, is that urban land itself is becoming an object. For

instance, much of central London and key parts of New York are foreign-owned. How do you buy 'urban land'? You buy it via buildings – office buildings, homes and apartments, and big shops, such as Harrods's in London. All of this begins to reduce the areas of a city where your average resident can actually feel that this is 'their' city. Again, the question becomes: Whose city is this? It affects much more than the buildings: it becomes a weakening of the civic."

### CONTROLLING SPACE

It is not new, but it always raises contradictions. The redevelopment of the cities decided by governments, has always been a major political decision. From George-Eugene Haussmann's famous renovation of Paris, which started in 1850s and totally changed the city's structure, to today's reinvention of public space, the question is: Does this serve as an attempt to control and designate people's activities? "Definitely," Sassen answers.

"We see it everywhere. In the US it often takes an extreme version by policing which is more about controlling the space, so it is safe for the desirable residents and visitors and keeping out what looks like trouble. This often includes all kinds of devices to keep people from staying overnight in the park – talking, dancing, playing the guitar... all things I used to do in Lower

Manhattan long, long ago, which now are almost impossible. City residents should protect their public space from excessive controls that benefit only a few," says Sassen.

"Public space is a key dimension for the making of citizenship. This is a subject I have written about. Part of the story especially in megacities of the global South, is the street – that indeterminate but public access space that should not be left to cars," Sassen says and continues: "I contrast the global street with the European style piazza, a space for ritualised practices. The street is a space that is far more indeterminate. By the street, I mean more than roads, also empty spaces, even if temporarily empty in a city, and certain sections of parks and piazzas, such as Zucotti park in New York for the occupy movement, or the big plaza in Barcelona for los Indignados."

### PEOPLE'S CITY

Sassen concludes that urban planning should not be left solely to the professionals. People make a city through their practices, though how they use some streets and not others, some open spaces and not others. And those who have the power to implement a plan should know this. "They should know every square metre of their city before they make the design that might shape or mis-shape a city's public space," Sassen says. ■

▼ Saskia Sassen, Robert S. Lynd Professor, Department of Sociology at Columbia University, Co-Chair, Committee of Global Thought



**Professor Saskia Sassen:**  
when I am  
in a city,  
I ask:  
whose city  
is it?

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

# Hope for the homeless ghettos for the rich

“Having a roof over your head is a basic human right”, the projector writes on one of the walls at the Alpbach Congress Centre. Everyone nods in agreement. And yet, Europe is home for three million homeless people. As you can probably guess, that number is much bigger if we look at the whole world.

Written by Slobodan Maricic

**A**nd there is no place like home, as Dorothy says in *The Wizard of Oz*.

How big of a flat can you buy for one million dollars? A big one for sure. With three bathrooms, north wing, sauna and a pool? Well, it depends on the location. In Manhattan, for one million dollars you can probably buy a room. Small room. In some other place, situations vary. But, who worries when you have a million in your pockets. But if you have just finished college and want to start your new, independent life, you have different possibilities. You need affordable house.

Iva Cukic, PhD candidate from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Belgrade and an activist who participated at the Build Environment panel “Providing Affordable Housing for All” says that the value of a square meter on some locations is determined by local politics.

“Huge political and economic interests undertake urban regeneration or resettlement programmes,” she says. “They usually try to avoid any vulnerable parts of society, working class and people who can’t afford something to make a good impression. That creates closed, ghetto communities, which is usual in New York, for example. Once artists and culture get there because it’s cheap, preparations are made for

► **Dietmar Eberle of ETH Zurich talking about the diverse future of European cities**



foreign capital to renovate everything.”

One of the solutions could be way of cooperation where people would share the expenses. “There are different systems of paying your way there, getting into the ownership and, most economically important of all, how to save your money,” Cukic says. “Zurich has a good system, a kind of cooperation where people are allocated by age. For young people, singles, families with kids, one kid, two... In Amsterdam you have something which is not quite legal, but it became socially acceptable. There are agencies which are working with abandoned and unused housing potential and renting them for a really small amount of money. But, there are rules: you can’t change anything, so you don’t really feel like it’s your home, but you have a housing solution.”

## BALANCE

Co-operation is only one, small scale solution for affordable living and it’s very hard to achieve politically in the long run, Ljiljana Blagojevic from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Belgrade thinks.

“You must find a balance, compromise and connection between private

initiative and state,” Blagojevic says. Enter Dietmar Eberle, architect and professor at ETH Zurich, who offered a different perspective in his keynote “Beyond Current Imagination” at the Forum. “To say that housing in Europe’s cities is becoming unaffordable is very superficial”, says Eberle, “because there is no single city that could be taken as representative for all Europe”. Instead, the architect explains, every city, every country had different causes for housing becoming more or less expensive.

“It all comes down to the question: What do we understand under ‘affordable’”, says Eberle: While in countries like Belgium or Luxemburg people would readily accept to spend 40 to 50 percent of their income on housing, in Austria they would groan if that percentage went above 20 percent. According to Eberle, this threshold is the main cause for rent levels in different countries - “and in itself, it is an effect of different histories of housing”, like Austria’s strongly subsidised building programmes. “There is no one-size-fits-all in thinking about housing in Europe”, says Eberle, “and that’s our strength when comparing us to more centralized systems like in China. ■

## A GIANT GETS BIGGER

# Expanding Alpbach 246

The Alpbach Congress Centre is to expand over the next two years. A larger, new home for our brainstorming European conference with 415 sq metres of thinking space in a new plenary hall, three new seminar rooms for breakout sessions and discussions, a new kitchen for larger receptions and a shiny, fresh foyer to greet participants.

Written by Jan Schacht



The funding is a European joint venture in itself. The state of Tyrol estimates their contribution at €9,700,000, with the Alpbach municipality, as well as the local tourism association, contributing €500,000 each. This brings us to about €10,700,000. Not peanuts, but an investment in future, according to the heads of the provincial governments

▲ Officials sign the Congress Centre expansion agreement

in the European Region, consisting of Tyrol, South Tyrol and Trentino. The two states south of Tyrol also each promise one million euros of the total to share a venue and work closely “to achieve common goals”, says the mayor of Alpbach, Markus Bischofer.

## LEAP FORWARD

The expansion could be a breakthrough for the Alpine town. With conferences on around 160 or more days a year, the expansion should not only have a positive effect on the quality of these, but also on their quantity. More participants will need more beds to sleep. And most of them are used to four-star plus accommodation.

Bischofer says there are “basically no opponents of the expansion – everybody understands that it will have positive effects on all of us”. In fact, the Alpbach Congress Centre, alongside the European Forum Alpbach influenced other infrastructural improvements in the past: “Our sewerage system reaches 99 percent of all dispersed houses and outlying dwellings; the congress centre is a hub for fibre-optical broadband internet connections in town. We wouldn’t have that without the Congress Centre,” says Bischofer.

The biggest problem is parking, which will be tackled with a new parking garage including a delivery dock as a part of the congress centre

WE WOULDN'T  
HAVE ALL THIS  
WITHOUT THE  
CONGRESS  
CENTRE

expansion. “Large trucks and cars block the streets, especially on busy days. We identified this problem, because this is also a question of safety. The fire trucks need to reach all parts of Alpbach anytime,” Bischofer states.

## GREEN AWARD

Soon the state of Tyrol will issue a tender document open to the public and to all medium-sized companies wanting a piece of the cake. Until now the Paula-von-Preradovic house has an EVVC (Europäischer Verband der Veranstaltungszentren e.V.) Green Globe Certification, a sustainability award established by the tourism and events industry to better market their venues. Bischofer promises that it will be recertified once construction is finished in mid-2016. More conferences, congresses and exhibitions will then head for Alpbach, the Mayor hopes. ■

## ALPBACH FUN FACTS

■ Did you know there are officially no street names in town? Alpbach’s register is based on house-name. Most houses received their names based on neighbouring fields. The only identification is a number, which is assigned in the order of building planning applications. That’s why Alpbach 651 is smack in the middle of town, but 652 is located in Inneralpbach four kilometres away. The Congress Centre is 246. For those not into online maps, who are completely puzzled, there’s a Sudoku-like paper-based version with coordinates available in Alpbach’s Gemeindehaus (council offices).

■ The most common name in Alpbach is Moser. About one-third the villager turns around when you shout the name out loud. The name derives from the German word moos, which is a swamp. Runner-up is Margreiter. No idea about the meaning.

■ The mayor has nothing to do with the Bischoferalm, the guesthouse up the hill. But it’s a really nice place to visit anyway. Great views, great strudel.

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