

The Art of Urban Design. Post-Industrial Regeneration in the Work of Marcel Smets

Curators: Cristina Purcar (project coordinator), Ovidiu Leuce, Andreea Milea
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The place. Cluj-Napoca is a Romanian city under pressure of intense development. Is there a coherent strategy that governs all projects that slowly but surely progress toward completion? What is the recipe for good development and positive transformation entailing at the very least the collaboration of private and public resources, if not even partnership? On this very active scene, last September, an important exhibition discreetly emerged suggesting possible answers and offering models.

The cultural venue *Centrul de Interes [The Center of Interest]* — an important pole of contemporary art — is organized in a former industrial building still in use, isolated in an oasis of redevelopment by *tabula rasa*. There is no position in the city more adequate to host such an exhibition, entirely dealing with examples of urban projects, all from the vast portfolio of a single creator, the Belgian architect Marcel Smets. One can characterize his work as being post-industrial and infrastructural regeneration, encompassing three decades of recent practice for the renewal of large areas in cities like Leuven, Antwerp, Genoa, Rouen, Porto, Nantes, Ghent, and Hasselt.

Local politicians in Romania started to speak about urban regeneration, smart mobility, and other slogans without really understanding what it is about. For a couple of weeks, the venue of the exhibition became an effective “center of interest” for the Art, as titled, and the Science, as demonstrated, of urban design.

The organizers. *The Center of Interest* and the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca are the joint institutions that organized this special event and dedicated it to the larger audience, as well as to civic activists, architects and planners, professors and students, politicians, and journalists as well. Behind and inside any institution there is always someone who comes up with the idea, who does the necessary research, who conceptualizes the format and the media for the exhibition, and in the end, someone who puts up the necessary resources for production. The host, *The Center of Interest*, is created and managed by Florin Ștefan, painter and professor, curator and vice-rector of the University of Art and Design. His wide perspective allowed urban planning performed by architects in co-creation projects to be presented as art. The initiator and creator of this exhibition is Cristina Purcar, architect, and professor in Cluj with a consistent research stage in Belgium. *Inventarium* is the research group inside the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, where Cristina developed the exhibition project with Andreea Milea, also an architect and professor interested in heritage and landscape. The team was completed by Ovidiu Leuce, a visual artist currently based in Cluj (previously in Rome), with a rich and diverse activity overlapping artistic expressions. The whole upper floor of the venue was perfectly taken over by the exhibition, specially designed to fit, and to establish a certain dialogue with the space itself as well as with the vicinity that one could survey through the windows.





The exhibition. The title of the exhibition is “The Art of Urban Design. Post-Industrial Regeneration in the Work of Marcel Smets”. Although one may be surprised by the unreserved description of urban practices as art, the levels of complexity, innovation, and competence manifested in the works are raising the results to the very level of artistic expression. Let’s look at the content of the exhibition as defined by its authors:

“Encompassing three decades of recent urbanistic practice, the exhibit highlights the complex environments and co-creative processes at work in the renewal of the contemporary city. Rather than a *métarécit* of the prodigious career that connects the showcased projects, the exhibit occasions the opportunity of starring many individuals, organizations, and communities, grouped into professional or social constellations are generated by two kinds of gravity: on the one hand, the axiological weight of the city and, on the other hand, the undeniable attraction force exerted on contemporary subjectivity by derelict industrial and infrastructural places. The selected projects display a threefold diversity: (a) chronological – from the early ‘90s to the present; (b) typological – railway stations, port districts, urban river fronts, road infrastructure, and derelict industrial areas or public facilities; (c) geographical – projects from Belgium, France, Italy, and Portugal.”

The two concepts present in the title — art and urban design — are also explained from the very beginning: “While the city is recognized as quintessential object of contemporary art, urban design is simultaneously reclaimed as a most relevant artistic genre.” In the specific language of architecture and urban design shows, the exhibits combine drawings, pictures, graphs, and visual simulations, all textually informed. A special place is awarded to the projection room where, on a large screen, an ample interview with Marcel Smets taken by Cristina Purcar in July 2023, in Leuven is presented. The exhibition highlights Marcel Smets’ art of directing productive dialogue and negotiation between private and public bodies, between promoters of social-cultural values and promoters of economic values.

The curators further reveal:

“Brought to public attention for the first time in this configuration, the presented carried-out projects and studies make up a complex discourse, with several essential common traits: the generation and/or re-appraisal of public space in tandem with the facilitation of economically productive developments, coherent from both the programmatic and the morphological points of view with the community ambitions regarding the public sphere; the importance of the architectural, not just purely utilitarian approach to infrastructure; the need to integrate uncertainty – always intrinsic to urban evolution – into open, yet sustainable visions, not devoid of concrete, mid-term achievable milestones, to guide and correlate – yet without of completely determining – subsequent developments.”

A tiny, subtle, yet relevant section of the exhibition is dedicated to the local context of the industrial platforms of Cluj-Napoca and their recent transformations. The objective mapping is complemented by a photographic installation, created by the students of the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Technical University, and of the Photo-Video Department of the University of Art and Design, under the guidance of Andrei Budescu, dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts.

The protagonist. Marcel Smets studied architecture and engineering at the University of Ghent (1970) and urban design at the Technical University of Delft (1974). He received a PhD from the University of Leuven (1976). It was in Leuven where he was appointed as chair of Urbanism (1998). His research in theory and history is disseminated through titles such as *Huib Hoste* and *Charles Buls*, on the *Belgian Garden Cities*, and the *Reconstruction of Belgium after 1914*. He published regularly in *Archis*, *Topos*, *Lotus*, *Quaderns*, and *Cassabella*. He co-authored the referential *The Landscape of Contemporary Infrastructure* with Kelly Shannon. He was a founding member of the ILAUD (Urbino, 1978), visiting professor at the University of Thessaloniki (1987), and Design Critic at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design (2002-2004). He was member of the scientific committee for EUROPAN (1995-2004) and CSO

chair for the *Institut pour la Ville en Mouvement* (2007-2015). Marcel Smets also founded the design-based research group *Projectteam Stadsonwerp* and acted as advisor and partner in ORG Urbanism as well. In 2005 he was appointed as Chief Architect for the Flemish Region, for a mandate of five years. From this position he managed numerous public design commissions. In 2009 Smets was elected to the Royal Academy of Belgium, Section of the Arts. He was awarded with the Prize of the MO-RO Foundation and received the Matexi Legacy Award (2016). Recently he published *Foundations of Urban Design* (ACTAR, 2022). For all these, Marcel Smets is a real *influencer* for contemporary urbanism.

The debate. The evening of the opening of the exhibition was indeed special. A discussion with the author and the curators was organized, and a debate on the current state of play in Cluj-Napoca was also highly anticipated. Although it turned out that Marcel Smets could not make the trip, with the help of a big screen and powerful loudspeakers he seemed to be more in Cluj, than in Belgium. I had the honor to moderate the debate and to capture the main ideas of the discussion. A pleasant surprise was prepared by the organizers. Architect and planner Daniela Pennini was also present. Originally from Turin, and currently working in Rouen, at the beginning of her career she had the chance to participate in Marcel Smets' project for Rouen. She reminisced about and explained the role of mentorship of the famous urban thinker. We talked with Marcel Smets about the Art of Urban Design and the nature of the exhibits. Smets modestly rejected the label of art, mostly because of the nature of the urban project. It is unfinished and collectively realized. It consists of working with ideas, incomplete visions, and with no details. Only the big picture, the large scale, is relevant. We spoke about the origins of inspiration for his work. Aldo van Eyck, Herman Herzberger, and Adriaan Geuze, all well-known architects, landscape architects, and innovators of the second half of the previous century, were cited as sources. We came to talk about the nature of urbanism as an ever-changing profession. Marcel Smets mentioned togetherness and informality as the important ingredients of the urban project. As a statement for his professional involvement, he said that he could only do a project if he believed he could in the end improve the life of the people affected by it. Following the debate with the protagonist, discussions were ignited, and a long evening of engagement commenced, undeterred by the powerful thunderstorm outside.

The come-back. Marcel Smets finally managed to come to Cluj a month later, with the occasion of the regional architecture biennale BATRA. He was invited to be part of the jury of awards and to offer an event of book launching. He was asked in public about his impressions on the development of the city of Cluj and he mentioned that the evolution is obvious, but we need to treat occasions with care, because some opportunities may never be retrieved. A second visit of Marcel Smets is expected in Cluj for the launching of the catalogue of the exhibition.

The book. *Foundations of Urban Design* came out in 2022 at Actar / Public Space, (Barcelona, New York). The book was part of the exhibition *The Art of Urban Design*, alongside other pieces of the intellectual production of Marcel Smets, suggesting the slow refining of ideas throughout a vast career in urbanism and architecture. The show consists of 29 pairs of notions classified as foundations, and described in their deep understanding and subtle definition, all related with conception, perception, or phenomenon of urban form. Among possible examples are *monument* and *icon*, *path* and *avenue*, *hole* and *void* or *creator* and *curator*. To quote one of the professionals who commented on the book, Marteen Van Acker, Professor of Urbanism and City Development, UAntwerp:

"Marcel Smets manages to bundle both timeless and contemporary urban design concepts, phenomena and paradigms into a rewarding source of inspiration for designers, policymakers, students and anyone who is concerned with the design development of our environment. This inspiration is primarily triggered by its clear texts, brimming with historical and current best practices, as well the equally clear diagrams that capture the essence in an appealing way and, above all, make you want to get to work."

The catalogue is the complete description of the content of the exhibition, but certainly much more than what one normally expects from such literature. The interview with Marcel Smets, conducted by Cristina Purcar in the new City Hall and the area of the Train Station of Leuven, both part of an Urban Design project by him, will be transcribed in the catalogue.

The lesson to be learned is rather a collection of lessons. We were all students encountering Marcel Smets. He is a contemporary alchemist. He transformed abandoned or derelict sites with patience, in time, never alone, based on logical approach and innovation, using coherence of thinking and a vast experience in observing and understanding the built environment in relation with people. In the first week of the fall semester all students of fourth and fifth year from the architecture school in Cluj attended classes in the exhibition. *The Art of Urban Design* consists of the responsibility to work with large spaces, culture, society, economy, and nature, in and for togetherness.

As a final reflection generated by this important event, I revert to our urban practice in Romania. Something is clearly missing in our case: the Urban Project, as shown in this exhibition as a species, is absent. The Urban Project, not only Urban Plan, as for current local practice (PUD, PUZ, PUG). The co-creation of Urban Design, combining public and private interests, resources, and expectations always in balance, is also missing. Finally, the position, mission, and performance of the Bouwmeester, the Chief Architect, as Marcel Smets performed for The Flemish Region, is crucial. As a title, Romania also has that of the Architect in Chief; not the same could be said for the Architect in Chief understood as the consequences of practicing an independent, responsible activity with art.

Born in Cluj-Napoca, *The Art of Urban Design* will travel throughout 2024 with a first stop in Graz, Austria.

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