

From City to City

The cities of the world are coming to resemble each other more and more. Their building blocks are streets and squares, apartment blocks and commercial buildings, public facilities, shopping arcades and parks, surrounded by suburbs which expand into the countryside. In this context Rem Koolhaas speaks about “cities without characteristics,” around which suburbs spread out at a furious pace (Rem Koolhaas, “The Generic City” in *S, M, L, XL*, ed. Jennifer Siegler). Since 1999 Nicola Meitzner has been exploring the characteristics of cities at her respective place of residence, either Berlin or Zurich, as well as in distant metropolises such as Singapore, Tokyo and Sydney. Before seeking out foreign cities, she carefully prepares herself through the available literature, then arrives with specific questions concerning each particular concretization of the globalized infrastructure. It becomes clear that the topography on the one hand, and the inhabitants and their lifestyles on the other continue to define the structures and to lend them a site-specific profile. Something emerges into view which we would perhaps not notice in familiar surroundings. These are characteristics having to do with major changes, growth, land settlement, upheavals and reorganizations on the one hand, and with everyday life, habits, minor gestures and fleeting encounters on the other. This constant shifting of standards has always been typical of urban life but tends to be overlooked, both by tourists wandering through city districts which are laden with history and hence landmarked, as well as by local inhabitants enmeshed in daily life; even expert urban planners seem to prefer to cling to their plans and models which make it easier to cope with the challenges of transportation planning and zoning regulations.

Nicola Meitzner attains her insights in the alternation between views from near and far when she looks at street intersections, surveys recreational facilities (*luckyland*) or investigates the uncultivated land awaiting future suburbs (*newspace*), while at the same time always keeping her eyes open for people involved in everyday life at their particular sites – in brief portrait sequences or as passers-by or protagonists (*forward motion* and *in operation*). At the interfaces where the inhabitants of a city interact with already built-up structures or where these structures are in the process of arising, the city becomes perceptible for a short time as a complex, changeable and adaptable organism. Its characteristics are fixedly defined only at those locations which have been singled out as historical, identity-endowing sites; otherwise the city must remain open for growth and transformation.

These same questions also structure the investigations of Berlin, where Nicola Meitzner lived from 1999–2001, and Zurich, her present place of residence. The strategy is a similar one: Once again there are cityscapes alternating with portraits (*83295/3* and *Projekt Zurich West*) or with everyday situations (*Wie viele Stockwerke hat das Haus, in dem Sie wohnen?*). The familiarity with the surroundings permits – in fact demands – a bolder playing with distance, so that some of the pictures from these works are more intimate and everyday, more minutely detailed and even lower middle-class, while others vividly emphasize the anonymity and grid-like patterns of the structures.

From the bird’s-eye view of the urban planner or the focused perspective of investors active throughout the world, cities are coming to resemble each other more and more. The commercially interesting centers are dominated by a few commercial brands, and the actual living and working quarters evolve and are organized according to prevalent paradigms. Seen from the eye level of the city’s inhabitants, on the other hand, the master plans play a subordinate role, because they adapt their everyday life to the pre-existing structures. Their close-up vision, however, makes them blind for what lies right alongside, for this is the familiar which is seen again and again. Nicola Meitzner shows us, both from a distance and quite close, that which we as city dwellers are all too inclined to overlook, namely the features of our featureless cities.

Tomas Kadlcik