

Prague Quadrennial 2015

Pro Helvetia

Wenceslas Line

Markus Lüscher, Erik Steinbrecher

I'd like to welcome you on Voklavske Namjesti - Wenceslas Square and on Voklavaska Cara - Wenceslas Line. And I do like to thank you for your interest not only in what we did here, but your interest in public space in general, what I suppose that you have it. I'm pleased to give you some information, let you know about our idea of this construction you are standing or sitting on. I will talk about Presence, Reflection, Mood, Shared Space and Resonance. I'll try to make it not too long and you are invited to ask questions, to discuss afterwards.

Wenceslas Square was created in the 14th century to connect Prague's old centre with the New Town. It is 750 metres long and 60 metres wide, which makes it one of the largest public squares in Europe.

Presence

What is fascinating about the square is not only its unusual geometry, but also the way it is embedded in its topographical location. The slight incline towards the South-East gives it the impression of having been gently laid into its urban setting. The square seems to defy the laws of perspective, by which views of streets usually fade and disappear towards the horizon. The entire area of the long square remains in sight. This unusual spatial arrangement gives rise to a more intense sense of presence. It is not surprising therefore that it is Wenceslas square and not the main square in the old town that has provided a platform for numerous historic events during the last 500 years. The heightened visibility makes the impact of a large crowd much more impressive. Wenceslas Square is no less than a stage for social and political life in Prague.

Reflection

First of all, Wenceslas Line wants to emphasise the qualities of this square. The construction, merely 1.4 metres wide, 4.0 metres high and a few hundred meters long, consists of a conventional Czech scaffolding system. Like a backbone, it underscores the square's special geometry.

The construction occupies the empty middle part of the square. Since the tram lines there disappeared and public transport moved underground, several desperate attempts at finding some meaningful use for this space have been made, for example with patches of green.

Mood

Untreated steel pipes have been joined together by connecting elements, and wooden planks have been fitted between them at a height of 50 centimeters and one meter. The rusty pipes and the almost new planks have been and will be fully recycled. This makes for fragile aesthetics and allows for a variety of possible associations. Scaffolding is first and foremost perceived as something temporary. Its assembly, use and dismantling have performative aspects. Moreover, scaffolding that we encounter in cities is also a herald of change. It announces lasting permutations to places we have become familiar with and maybe even fond of. They can signal the redevelopment of entire districts, with negative consequences that may give rise to fears. But scaffolding can also be a harbinger of positive developments, the renewal of existing, even historical buildings. In Prague, we hope for this for example when we look at the same kind of scaffolding that has been placed in front of the National Museum at the upper end of Wenceslas Square. However, the museum has remained closed for years now and the scaffolding is still there.

Shared Space

The construction adds life to the middle of the square und reinforces its function as jointly used public space. It is intended to appeal to locals and tourists alike. The wooden planks invite passers-by to sit down, rest for a while and watch the world go by. Sitting fulfils a primary ergonomic need, and the material aspects of the installation are directly perceived through the sense of touch. However, the construction can also be used as a long corridor. Treading the planks, we hear their specific creak and this might just evoke the smell of building sites we entered illegally in our youth. We can walk above the flowerbeds and observe street life from a slightly raised perspective. This somewhat unusual point of view is conducive to a heightened awareness of the here and now. It provides a fresh view of the town, the inhabitants and the tourists.

The construction thus splits the square into two halves, devides the space or - in German words "teilt den Raum" - and, at the same time, invites people to share the space - "den Raum zu teilen".

Resonance

The cross-section shape of an upright rectangle and a gable refers both to Marc Antoine Laugier's prototype house image from 1755 and to early representations of a "skene" - the starting point of scenography - on crater fragments from the 4th century before Christ found in Taranto.

Is this construction a house, a corridor, a market stall, an elongated bench, a stage, an urban ornament or simply another building site? It remains in a state of ambivalence, defying any hard-and-fast definition and evoking associations ranging from rigorous ordinary to extremely artificial. It does not want to tell a story, but to appeal directly to all our senses, to evoke memories, to give rise to expectations and to generate emotions. The construction is not intended to signify anything specific, but simply to be. Perhaps its undefined character can reinforce the sense of presence. Wenceslas Square, divided into two, resonates around it, through the city and beyond. And thus it may be that our construction will face the same hard fate or lets say fortune like the scaffolding in front of the National Museum. We hope it will remain also for years.