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Interview with Christian Welzel

– Christian, you have a diploma of engineer, but graduated in interior design (Innenarchitektur, which literally means inner architecture). First, do skills of engineering help to create design interior? Can you trace the difference between Inner architecture and interior design? (at least they have different nuances)

Christian: Actually there is no difference. Probably “Innenarchitektur” curriculum has a bit more technical and architectural content in Germany than in other countries. Intersections are floating, there is no clear cut-off between architecture and interior design. In the past the degree for interior designers at several universities was “Diplom-Ingenieur”.

My professional experience comprises a range from small design objects up to 600ha. urban design.

Silke: From my perspective, it is important and quite helpful for a project, when architects and interior designers work closely and at an early stage together, as the two topics have a strong influence on each other.

– You worked a lot with huge professional companies, and now you have your own studio. I suppose, now you are freer to do what you want and what you like. How does it influence on a creative process, in what (which aspects) the freedom is expressed?

Christian: It's a good feeling being able to take one's own decisions. Of course this positive aspect is always accompanied by the awareness of being responsible for the staff as well. Bringing home the daily bread is first duty.

But now we have the possibility to specialize according our individual skills. This keeps the efforts economical and is basis for optimized results.

The most important factor of having an own studio is that it's up to you to set the agenda and to accept the result or not before being published.

– Your projects are in Germany, USA, Russia and many other countries. How the working process differs in each one of them?

Christian: The most important criterion is to take the local preconditions into focus. Weather and climate differ considerably and also sociocultural matters should be kept in mind.

Regarding planning process we made the experience that e.g. in GB or Germany integrated design is state of the art. Planning process of involved specialists proceeds hand in hand with direct reflection to other fields. From my point of view this could be improved in Russia.

Common consideration of issues by architect, engineers and other specialists, prompt feedback and direct integrating of third parties' contributions allow straight and undisturbed course of design. Planners should also act with a holistic approach, considering building lifecycle management and third use options. By use of non-hazardous materials, renewable energies and low-tech concepts for energy saving buildings a sustainable result can be achieved. The necessity of such an approach is not everywhere accepted and the awareness of effective advantages differs.

Further: I appreciate that especially in Russia upper management often is represented by younger professionals than in Germany. A sane mixture of age enables future-oriented thinking with well-experienced background.

Silke: We work constantly with cooperation partners in different countries. It is always interesting and challenging.

Different views based on different historical and ethical background widens your own horizons and can improve a project.

– You have also many projects with factories, what strong and weak sides has such type of architecture? What's more complex: build a new one or revitalize the former?

Christian: Factory and industrial design is a challenging task, because it's more bound to economical and use-oriented factors.

To convince the client not to ignore the need of design quality and to inspire him to put efforts on individuality and sustainability satisfies all parties in the end.

The revitalization or even conversion of a brownfield estate into a successful new development is much more complex than a green field project. But due to complexity of given facts and new requirements it's also a much more fascinating procedure.

– You have projects in Yekaterinburg and Kaliningrad, why did you choose these cities? (or they chose you) How this process was initiated?

Christian: Silke and I have been working on international projects for more than a decade.

Among them were a lot in Russia and CIS, starting with a brewery in Angarsk which Silke did in 2006. We enjoyed collaboration with Russian partners and our aim is to go on with establishing and cultivating corresponding business relationships.

It's a difficult task for a start-up to put a foot into a market that is affected by political irritations, sanctions and economic crisis at moment.

So we decided to participate in architectural competitions.

Handling with existing buildings and creating new concepts for abandoned real estates are interesting challenges and become more and more important. So we chose revitalization tasks.

"Aviator's Garden" (how we named our Yekaterinburg concept related to the former use as machine factory for aviation devices + instruments) was of our special interest, because it's a really representative site and buildings offer all conditions for being dressed up. Idle assets, but part of city history. Our intension was not only revitalization of building, but enhancing quality and amenities of embankment and public areas. This causes high public acceptance and increases quality of life.

Kaliningrad is a wounded city, war and unintelligible post-war development left a city without a heart. People long for identification with their environment, a nucleus fulfilling cultural, commercial and social requirements. Nearly all towns all over the world started from a small heart of early settlement and grew. And the early heart usually remains a hub of social life. Kaliningrad has lost its heart over the last 7 decades. New concepts are being created by town planners and architects to create a new one and we wanted to become participants of this process.

– I dare to suppose you've been in Yekaterinburg. If so, please, tell us your impressions about the city, mainly your favorite architectural pieces, places. (this question is extra, just I don't own this information)

Christian: Yes, I visited Yekaterinburg in September 2014.

A big benefit and highlight of cities is, if they are crossed by a river. The course of a river or an inner-city lake opens axes and views and provides distance and open spaces, helps to balance local climate and usually offers attractive sceneries at the embankments.

The fascinating play of lights and reflecting surroundings on the surface of the water bring steadily changing views. You can sit for hours, fascinated and enjoy the natural amenity values. So it's not a big surprise that my favorite area in Yekaterinburg are the embankments of Isset river.

– Which upcoming projects are you planning to do, mainly in Russia? And which ones would you like to realize (wherever they are)?

Christian: Since I cannot see into the future I do not know what kind of tasks we will face.
My dream is having opportunity to design a museum one day.
But generally I'm open-minded and I'm happy about each new challenge.
No matter, if it's about interior design, architecture or urban design.
A great personal wish is to come back one day to Belarus, having a project there.
And if I should write a short-list, St. Petersburg would be on top as well.

Silke: I think for every architect it's a dream to build a high-rise building or a skyscraper, which can to be seen far from distance and from any point of a city.

*Thank
you for your time!*