

Human Bodies and the City: Art as a Medium to Explore Urban Landscapes

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Innsbruck has a new landmark: the sculpture REAGENT on the square in front of the University of Innsbruck created by the Italian architect and photographer Stefan Hitthaler (see Figure 1 and 2).¹ The idea behind this work of art was developed as part of the conference *Cities and Landscapes: Considering New Orleans and Innsbruck as Multiple Landscapes (24–26 June 2015)*. The sculpture shows a test tube, inside which human bodies are caged (see Figure 3). The artwork stands for the relationship between the human spirit and matter, culture and nature, as well as the interactions between life sciences and humanities. The world consists of poles and can only be experienced together through these. The naked bodies and the artificial, cramped space of the test tube surrounding them express this pressure and tension. The container is sealed by a lid. What happens if it is opened? Which reaction can we expect?

Cities can also be seen as containers—social laboratories. At the same time, they are multiple and open formations. Different groups mix within them whose identities are closely woven into the city fabric.² Cities themselves are bodies in all their different facets.³ Urban landscapes guide human movements, the eye, actions, and practices, and they influence our emotions

1 Stefan Hitthaler completed his degree in architecture at the University of Innsbruck. In 1992 he opened an architecture studio in Brunico in South Tyrol. From 2006 to 2009 he was a contracted professor at the University of Ferrara. His architectural works have been awarded several jury prizes. For more about the architect visit www.raum.it.

2 See Markus Schroer, *Räume, Orte, Grenzen – Auf dem Weg zu einer Soziologie des Raums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 174; Helmuth Berking and Martina Löw, “Einleitung,” in *Die Eigenlogik der Städte: Neue Wege für die Stadtforschung*, ed. Helmuth Berking and Martina Löw (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus, 2008), 7–14, here 8; Susanne Rau, *Räume: Konzepte. Wahrnehmungen. Nutzungen*, Historische Einführungen 14 (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus, 2013), 153–7.

3 See Jürgen Hasse, *Der Leib der Stadt: Phänomenographische Annäherungen* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2015).

and imagination or they may otherwise manifest themselves through the human body.⁴ The sociologist and historian Richard Sennett even thinks that “urban spaces take form largely from the ways people experience their own bodies.”⁵ This connection between *flesh and stone* can be seen in the 18th century when the discovery of the human circulatory system inspired urban planners to design urban spaces in a way that encouraged physical movement.⁶ Today the capacity of bodies for creating space becomes tangible in *micro-landscapes*, which are created by the movement of bodies.⁷

By erecting his first giant art work *Corpus Intra Muros* in a highly prominent position in the middle of the South Tyrolean town Brunico in 2014 (see Figure 4), Stefan Hitthaler made us aware of the relationship between spaces and human bodies. It was dedicated to the question of how it would be possible to retrace a building when none of its history was passed down to us. The point of departure of this sculpture was the building known as the *gunpowder tower* in Brunico. The tower is, to use the term of the French anthropologist Mark Augé, a *non-lieux*,⁸ because unlike many other historical buildings the tower has no identity of its own; no information on its history was passed down to us. The tower became a channel for the exploration of the relationship between human bodies and the power of walls. The project *Corpus Intra Muros* dealt “with the themes of confinement, constriction, encasement, and the potential desire for freedom,” as Stefan Hitthaler puts it.⁹

These subjects recur in the REAGENT sculpture, because one of the fundamental challenges cities currently have to face is the tension between openness and limitation, between the chance of creating something new and

4 See Ulrich Leitner, ed., *Corpus Intra Muros: Eine Kulturgeschichte räumlich gebildeter Körper* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017 forthcoming).

5 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 370. Sennett has drawn the long trajectory of citizens living in Periclean Athens (the relationship between *flesh and stone*) down to the social body of multicultural New York. He sees modern cityscapes being neutralized and standardized through high security precautions and thereby losing their stimulating urban condition.

6 Ibid.

7 Brigitte Franzen and Stefanie Krebs, “Einleitung,” in *Mikrolandschaften: Culture on the Move*, ed. Brigitte Franzen and Stefanie Krebs (Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte et al., 2006), 12–9, here 14.

8 See Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992).

9 Stefan Hitthaler, “The Tower is Calling,” in *Corpus Intra Muros: Catalogue for the Art and Science Project*, ed. Ulrich Leitner et al. (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2014), 89–91, here 91.

maintaining the blockade. Hence researching and comparing cities we might ask where we can find distinctive features in urban landscapes. Are they visible objects and things, such as the wall of a house or a monument? Or are they of a symbolic kind or manifestations of power politics? Are they linguistic or cultural boundaries?

To answer these questions, urban landscapes have to be studied in terms of their physical properties, their psychological meaning, and their historical development and function. But we have also to keep in mind how important it is to experience a space through sensory and bodily activities;¹⁰ and how people are influenced by atmospheres, a concept the German philosopher Gernot Böhme defined as “something between the subject and the object” and “a reality common to both.”¹¹ We should also reflect on the fact that colors and light, as well as sounds and smells, play a distinctive role in perceiving our surroundings. We should also examine how visual skills are acquired¹² and how people deal with material culture.¹³

The sculpture REAGENT is the condensation of all these questions and scientific discourses about the relationship between human bodies and urban landscapes made available on the square in front of Innsbruck University (see Figure 5 and 6). Similar to the Agora in Ancient Greece, which is a place of assembly and public debate, science becomes visible in the public sphere. The university itself assumes a position within the urban area and can be experienced through the sculpture. Art as a medium is well-suited to bringing together science and urban landscapes as well as the general public, to raising mutual awareness and to letting one influence the other. Stefan Hitthaler’s artwork may have the strength to make a significant contribution to focusing public attention on academic research, especially on the question of how cities and human beings influence each other.

10 See Helga Peskoller, *BergDenken: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Höhe* (Wien: Eichbauer, 1997).

11 Gernot Böhme, “Dämmerung,” in *KörperDenken: Aufgaben der Historischen Anthropologie*, ed. Frithjof Hager (Berlin: Reimer, 1996), 36–44, here 39.

12 See Paul Virilio, *La Machine de vision* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

13 See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); see also Christina Antenhofer, ed., *Fetisch als heuristische Kategorie: Geschichte – Rezeption – Interpretation* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

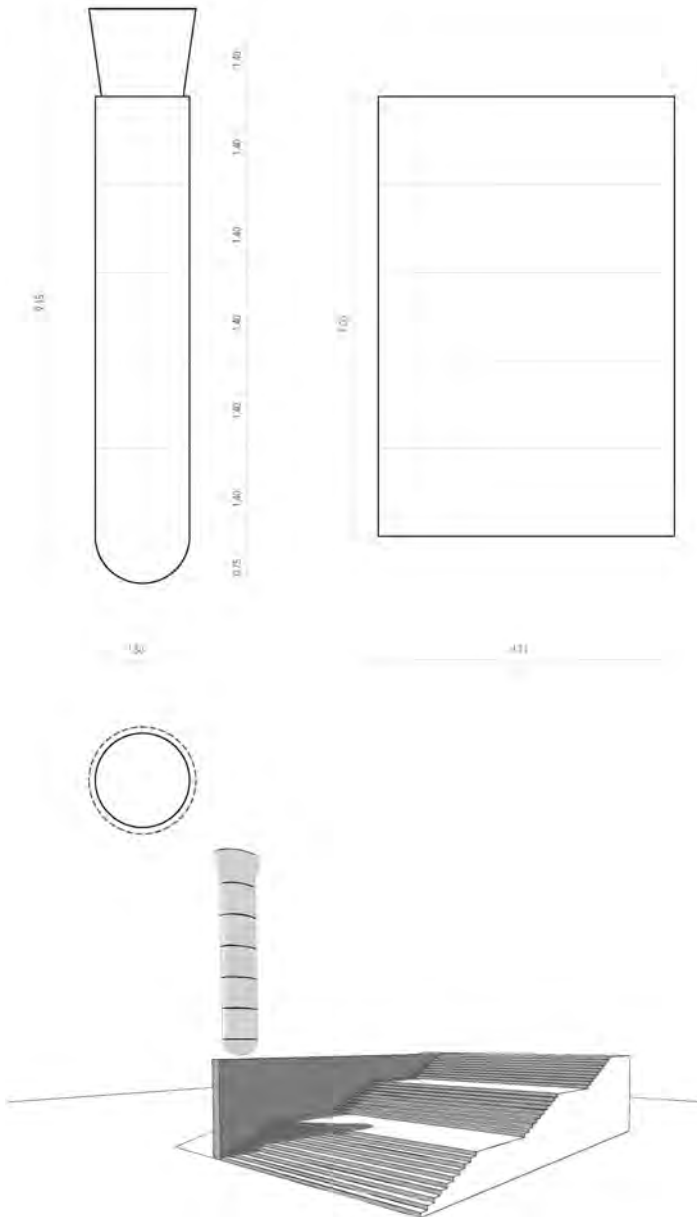


Fig. 1: The REAGENT—An experiment on how form arises (Graphics by Stefan Hittbaler).



Fig. 2: The sculpture REAGENT by Stefan Hitthaler (2015) on the square in front of the University of Innsbruck (Picture by Stefan Hitthaler).



Fig. 3: Human bodies caged into a test tube (Picture by Stefan Hittaler).



Fig. 4: Human bodies and the power of walls: Stefan Hittaler's giant art work Corpus Intra Muros (2014) in Brunico, South Tyrol / Italy (Picture by Harald Wisthaler).



Fig. 5 and 6: The sculpture REAGENT transforms the cityscape and works as a link between science and urban landscapes (Pictures by Harald Wisthaler).