

MAROJE MRDULJAŠ

LEBBEUS WOODS: ZAGREB FREE ZONE REVISITED

EDITORS: LEO MODRČIN, LOVORKA PRPIĆ,
ALEKSANDRA WAGNER
GRAPHIC DESIGN: SVEN SORIĆ



Co-publishers: Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb; Oris House of Architecture
Graphic material and texts by Lebbeus Woods © Estate of Lebbeus Woods.
Zagreb, 2021

Texts: Lebbeus Woods, Joseph Becker, Leo Modrcin, Fedja Vukic, Aleksandra Wagner

Exhibition: LEBBEUS WOODS: ZAGREB FREE ZONE REVISITED. March 30 – April 24, 2021, Oris House of Architecture, Zagreb, Croatia

ISBN 978-953-8042-66-9 [Faculty of Architecture, Zagreb]
ISBN 978-953-6888-65-8 [Oris House of Architecture]

In a series of speculative projects for Sarajevo, Havana and San Francisco gathered in his 1997 book *Radical Reconstruction*, American architect Lebbeus Woods (1940-2012), advocated a third path in the reconstruction of devastated cities. This path differed from the two common methods: facsimile renewal, and erasure of the old to build the new. Woods argued that both approaches seek to disguise historical trauma by advocating the return to the “old normal” – the continuation of life as if nothing had ever happened. Woods saw potential in the ruins and the rubble. While erasure and duplication push traumatic content into the collective unconscious from which trauma continues to act destructively, building on, and in active relation to the ruin, embraces the memory of trauma and promotes its integration into collective identities. Such a task necessarily requires a transformation of the ruin into a new entity, a redirection of the negative energy of destruction into a creative act, a new potential. This is where the second point of Woods' programme of radical reconstruction resides. In his words, building on the ruins creates a “new normal”, a new urban and social space in which hierarchies and power relations are deconstructed and *heterarchy* is affirmed. Thus, destruction becomes the starting point for the development of *Free Zones* and *free* (or liberated) *space structures* that are interpolated into the ruins of the old, giving them a new meaning.

In the project statement for the *Zagreb Free Zone*, precisely this programme has been indicated: “Designs for political and architectural transformation of Zagreb, as a heterarchy of free space structures.” First contacts with Zagreb and Woods' reflections began in 1989; the exhibition was realized in 1991 at the Museum of Arts and Crafts, in cooperation with the Zagreb Architects Association and with assistance of Leo Modrcin. The idea of realization of a free space structure in the yard of the Museum extended to 1992. In his notes, Woods mentions coming to the city and country undergoing radical social and political changes echoing the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc that seemed like “the end of history”.

Originally developed for Berlin, the concept of *Free Zone* gained new architectural and political articulation in Zagreb. Woods provides a precise overview of the situation: “Would this country... simply start its race to catch-up with the West, becoming a second-rate, or at best, *nouveau* consumer culture, or would something else emerge from the confusion of politics and private aspirations?” Can Zagreb, in a state of radical crisis, create some other form of social reality, even if there is no physical destruction or visible wounds in the urban fabric? The *Zagreb Free Zone* project can therefore be read as a political programme for a new set of conditions: can the ruins of a vanishing society become the basis from which something new would grow, unrealized or unrealizable elsewhere?

The nomadic *Freespace* structures have no pre-determined function, but they are equipped with digital devices that are part of global information flows. They are inhabited by individuals “rooted only in themselves, only in the strangely social isolation of their modernity”. Parasites in the urban space and in relation to the existing buildings, they erode boundaries and call into question the hierarchy of public and private, individual and collective. *Freespace* structures and *Free Zones* suggest a new layer of reality. The new state of affairs – populism, elitism, something else? – will depend on the ways they will be used, as they are prosthetic extensions of the capacity and ambitions of their inhabitants. Woods did not prejudice anything; he was aware that even architecture created with the most democratic ambitions could serve as a site of undemocratic events. His provocative, imaginative, dramatic, dynamic and fundamentally modern vision of the transformation of the city also offered a sketch for the development of an open society characterized by resistance to hierarchical systems of power. Woods was interested in the coexistence of different urban and societal strata, and viewed ruptures and frictions between them as productive points of further development. His architecture, advocating self-invention and the construction of

individualistic spaces of freedom, emerged as a refusal of complicity in reproducing existing social order. Therefore, viewing his work only through intrinsic architectural procedures would be an intellectually inappropriate reduction.

The exhibition *Lebbeus Woods: Zagreb Free Zone Revisited*, was held at the Oris House of Architecture in the second spring of the pandemic, marking the 30th anniversary of the project. The book which accompanied the show was nominated for the *Neven Segvić* Croatian Architects' Association Award for 2021. Both re-actualized Woods' research at a time that is, and is not, very different. We continue to witness the destruction of cities and the associated conflicts, crises and traumas. Do we believe that these situations have the potential to become new beginnings? Woods' interest in nomadism and radical non-rootedness took on a new meaning in the digital age. A return to his deliberately “non-operational” proposal is a valuable reminder of the position of the architect who saw the crisis as a challenge and a potential, as opposed to the aspirations for harmonization and obscuring ‘solutions’.

The editorial team – Leo Modrcin, Lovorka Prpic and Aleksandra Wagner – with the impressive support of graphic designer Sven Soric, credibly conveys and contextualizes Woods' position. Woods' drawings, collages, models and texts are accompanied by the critical input from local commentators active in 1991, project correspondence and other documentary material. Fresh interpretive overviews are offered by Leo Modrcin and Aleksandra Wagner, as well as Joseph Becker, the Associate Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Becker's text, *'Zagreb Free Zone – Architecture is a Political Act'* is especially illuminating: “The focus of Wood's work... is about the prospect of our evolution.” At a time when it is getting ever more difficult to understand the contradictory but still symbiotic relationship between evolution and de-evolution, a return to Woods' work has a global resonance.

