

Cover «MONU» #13, © MONU



Interview to Bernd Upmeyer edited by Luca Vandini

Luca Vandini: *I would start by asking you to introduce «MONU», how would you like to describe it in summary?*

Bernd Upmeyer: «MONU - magazine on urbanism», is a unique bi-annual international forum for artists, writers and designers who are working on topics such as urban culture, development and politics. Each issue collects essays, projects and photographs from contributors from all over the world on a given topic. MONU provides a platform for comparative analysis.

LV: *When was «MONU» born, how and why did you decide to give life to this kind of experimental magazine?*

BU: The idea came up around six years ago, but the first issue appeared a bit later, in the summer 2004. Originally it was conceived as a way to keep in touch with a friend of mine, Thomas Soehl, who was co-founder of «MONU». We studied together in Kassel, but in 2002, at the end of our degrees, we decided to take different routes: I came to the Netherlands, and he moved to the United States. We were searching for a way to keep in contact, and continue to intellectually challenge ourselves, as we did during our studies. The first issue was really small, around 300 copies, printed with the help of the University of Kassel, where I was teaching and researching at that time.

LV: *Has «MONU» undergone any mutations in its five years of existence? How has it developed since the first issue of summer 2004?*

BU: The quality of contributions got better and better during the years. But we also improved the layout and the format of the magazine in general. In addition to that, we tried to ease access to the magazine by introducing not merely texts, but also infographical work and art projects to complement the text. We wanted to open the magazine to a wider public.

LV: *«MONU» - the title of your magazine is an acronym, where the U stands for Urbanism. Does this refer to the phenomenon or to the field of studies? In other words, is «MONU» more about urban phenomena or about discussions inside the urbanism discipline?*



BU: «MONU» is more about urban phenomena. What we were aiming at since the very beginning was to explore every kind of urban aspects, everything that appears around the city. We were always intrigued to find out the hidden political, social and economical truths and interdependencies in cities. Nevertheless I still imagine one day making an issue on traditional topics, such as space and density. The great thing about using the city as a subject is that it allows you to talk about almost everything, and that is what really attracted us since the very beginning.



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LV: *The choice to publish an entire magazine about urbanism is quite particular in a world overloaded with interior, landscape or architecture publications. Does this choice arise only from a personal feeling, is it a way to fill up a presumed lack, or does it stand on a modernist conception that sees urbanism coming before and going beyond architecture?*



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BU: I think that this choice has a lot to do with the kind of education I received at the University of Kassel, where I studied in the Nineties. There, even if you were a student of architecture, like me, you were always forced to start thinking large-scale. For whatever design we had to do there, we were always asked to think not only about the urban context, but also about the city as a whole. I think that this kind of approach really shaped my mind and has been projected onto «MONU». At the beginning I thought this way of being trained as an architect was cutting away a lot of interesting aspects, as I originally started studying architecture in order to design first of all architectural objects and not cities. But after a while I understood the power and the potential of this interdisciplinary design approach, and, as you can see, I am no longer able to escape from it. In Kassel as an architecture student I was more or less forced to do projects together with urban design and landscape design students. Therefore the urban scale became the basis of our discussions.

LV: *Every issue of «MONU» has a title/topic that puts a different adjective or noun next to the word “Urbanism”. Why did you make this choice? Do you think you will be able to keep going on this way forever?*

BU: Everything started with the topic of the first issue entitled “Paid Urbanism”. Paid Urbanism was originally a University project that Thomas and I were planning to do during the late Nineties, but eventually never did. It was based on the idea of paying people to appear in public spaces that are deserted after shops were closed. We created the “Paid Urbanism Project” to inject artificially life into dead urban areas. It was a reaction to the conditions that we witnessed in the city centre of Kassel after 5 p.m. What was at the beginning only a joke to entertain ourselves as students, became more serious with the time and finally ended up as the topic of the very first issue of «MONU». In the second issue we wanted to deal with the middle classes and their impact on cities and we spontaneously decided to continue with the term “Urbanism” in the title and called the issue “Middle Class Urbanism”. After that it became a routine and continues until today. At the beginning we had of course a lot of doubts about using again and again the term urbanism, but we also started appreciating the power of its repetition. It became very easy to recognize and to remember, so I hope to be able to keep on this way.

LV: *«MONU» was born out of teamwork. Now that you are editing it alone it still keeps a shared dimension through the “call for submissions”. Why did you do this choice and what are the positive and negative aspects?*

BU: This device of “call for submissions” has been based since the beginning on the realization that the view of one person is limited. We wanted to open the magazine to different and changing perspectives. We realized that it had not been very interesting if every issue would have been written by always the same people. So we decided to focus on diversity, as the core of the magazine. I believe this way helps «MONU» to stay fresh.

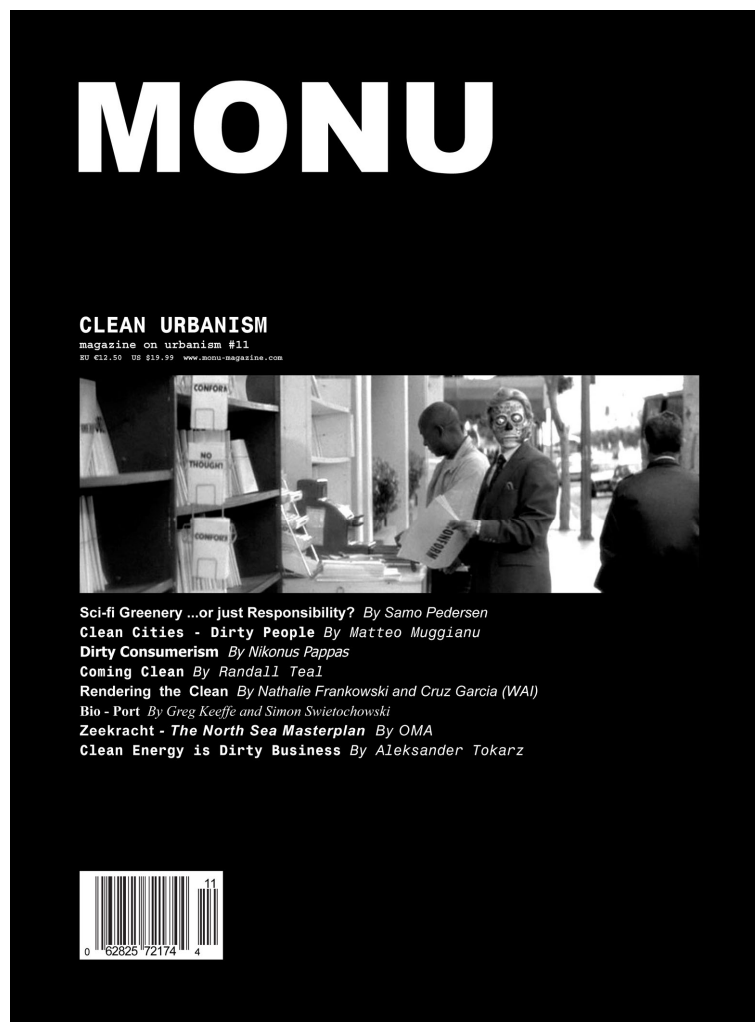
LV: *Can you explain a bit more in depth what is the role of the editor in chief of a magazine like «MONU»?*



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BU: The idea is that the editor in chief has to be a sort of moderator, who initiates topics. Like in a conference the moderator throws the ball and helps it to go as far as possible. You create a topic and hope for interesting reactions to come; tis what the magazine is made of. In a way it is like leading a seminar at University, where you create discussions that lead finally to a publication. But one of the most interesting parts of that process is that the result is unpredictable and usually also for me surprising and unexpected. I always learn a lot of new things. That is very exciting and challenging for me. The involvement of different perspectives of different authors always creates something that was not completely intended at the beginning. The calls for submissions are always very speculative and are mostly led by a hope that a topic really might have potential.



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LV: *In the issue #10 of «MONU» you borrowed the work of an artist for the cover page. What in the magazine is the role of other disciplines such as art; is «MONU» a publication that is trying to go beyond urbanism or does it look more inside the phenomenon itself?*

BU: The integration of more art works is also based on the belief that diversity and different perspective can lead eventually to a greater understanding of things. Moreover after issue #7 I realized that the magazine should also include pieces that can be appreciated in a shorter period of time. I wanted to create different doors to enter the magazine, one for a ten seconds overview, one for a ten minutes flip-through, one for a one hour reading, and one for an eight hours deep survey. But it was not possible to create these different entrances without images, illustrations or art works. Since then «MONU» features also more art works.

LV: *Let's talk a bit about the structure of «MONU». Your magazine, for example, lacks the classic editorial and doesn't have any periodical column. Do these aspects belong to a personal view or are they linked to episodes in these 5 years?*

BU: Actually there is always an editorial. On the first page I always write an editorial that describes and explains the content. It is an overview of the most interesting and most relevant contributions to the magazine. It is a sort of summary that allows you to understand what that issue is made of. Maybe when you talk about an editorial you expect a traditional small article, were the editor gives his personal view on the matter. We stopped writing such editorials after the second issue, because we didn't want to appear too heavy. Magazine editorials can become easily too self-referential. We wanted simply to provide a wide overview of what you could find inside. I think my point of view appears strong enough through the selection of the published pieces and I think I don't need a specific article to express it. I don't want to constrict the audience to bear my opinion every time. What I find most annoying in typical architecture magazines is to be confronted all the time with the very particular opinion of the editor in chief that enjoys too much expressing himself and his view on things. I really want to avoid that. «MONU» is not about me, it is about its topics.

LV: *Even with regard to the graphics the choice you made is a bit peculiar. Is black and white only a way to reduce printing costs or does it belong to a personal choice?*

BU: About the black and white graphics I would love to tell you a more interesting story, but as you said, it was at first a way to prevent high publishing costs. Later it became even a style of choice and a way to make it recognizable on shelves full of colored magazines. But what I like about the black and white aesthetic is that it appears very radical, which fits to the content. But one day «MONU» might also appear in colour. In general we are more interested in content than in appearance.

LV: *A magazine, like all other publications, is always a means of display. In «MONU» you give the chance to not famous, or at least not well-known, people to*



show their work. Why did you make this choice, and what does this add to «MONU»? Did you discover yourself to be a talent scout?

BU: It turned out to be such a thing, although it was never intended. A typical «MONU» contributor stands at the beginning of his or her academic or professional career, like Phd candidates, assistant professors or young architects or artists that are searching for ways to spread and exchange their ideas and thoughts in order to get a better understanding of cities. In that sense «MONU» became a platform for a lot of intelligent and talented young professionals. I am quite proud and excited about this, because I could never imagine this to happen, when we started out at the beginning.



Cover «MONU» #10 © MONU



LV: *Moving to a more general approach, what do you think is the role of written words in contemporary urbanism?*

BU: Thinking about something is different from thinking and writing about something, because writing helps you to organize ideas and to discover new aspects. Writing is like placing a lot of pieces on a table, assembling them and finding relations between them. When you write about things you are able to connect things that cannot be connected or understood in a conversation. It is a bit like in a design process, where you start with some rules that get transformed during the development of the project. Something new and unforeseen can happen and you get the chance to learn more about certain topics. To find out more about cities is one of the main motivations to produce a magazine like «MONU».

LV: *If you should engage in some self-criticism, what is the aspect or point of «MONU» which less powerful?*

BU: It sounds weird, but I think «MONU» is way too ambitious and too meaningful for a magazine. «MONU» is very hard and difficult to consume and therefore will probably never reach a huge audience. «MONU» is damned to stay small, which makes it very difficult to survive. But I would not be interested in making it more superficial only for the sake of reaching a greater audience.

Image courtesy of «MONU – magazine on urbanism»

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