

## *Transgenic Urbanism* – Mitchell Rasor

Summer 2008. The great great great great grandson of Frankenstein, Bruno, is in Braunschweig as a project architect for the Media Center collaboration between Rem Koolhaas and Will Alsop. Every detail of the building construction process is stored in Bruno's hardbrain. By coincidence, the great great great great granddaughter of the bride of Frankenstein, Emily, is working for the City coordinating public relations. Emily and Bruno met at a recent press conference.

It is a warm summer day and Bruno and Emily are sitting on a bench on Franfurter Strasse eating lunch. They are in the shade of a beautiful arching street tree, the official Braunschweig Tree of 2010, genetically engineered and inserted into the cityscape in a unique collaboration between MRLD, the Society for Biological Research, the Federal Research Institute for Agriculture, the Braunschweigische Landesmuseum and the Institute of Architectural and Urban Development History. Biology, history, politics, urban forestry, urban design, ethics and branded identity manifest in the Braunschweig Tree of 2010.

Some cities have t-shirts, postcards and medallions as souvenirs, but Braunschweig will have a living tree, derived from the genes of the best urban tree in the City genetically engineered to create the ultimate urban tree, a symbol of the past, present and future growing simultaneously. Cities are culture and the Braunschweig Tree of 2010 can only be conceived through culture, not nature....if nature is even a valid concept in 2003. Braunschweig Tree of 2010 cannot self-propagate; the seeds can only blow in the wind of labs and nurseries.

When Bruno walks down the street people are scared of this tall monster in black, his wi-fi presence, his 6'-6" height and green pallor make people stare. But then guilt rises in their throat as they say his name aloud, Frankenstein - the Jewish monster - the national guilty conscience. Der Golem. Part man, part scapegoat, part hubris. The new peculiar institution.

Bruno Frankenstein reads the paper every day at lunch in the shadow of a transgenic tree. One day he reads about environmentalists destroying a field of genetically

engineered wheat in Switzerland. Pastoral luddites. He thinks twice about his upcoming trip to the Zumthor's thermal baths

For the last couple years the voids in the City, abandoned industrial sites, parking lots and residual open spaces have been nurseries for the Braunschweig Tree of 2010. Voids like the Bohlweg, Buchler-Areal, a car park at the Wilhelmstrasse / Neue Knoochenhauerstrasse, vacant allotment gardens and the Ausbesserungsweg are just a few of the once ignored and underutilized spaces now acting as laboratories, contested ground for raising Braunschweig Trees of 2010 until they are ready to be transplanted to esplanades, parks, and offered as gifts to other European cities. People no longer ignore these spaces. But once the transgenic trees leave the nursery/laboratories, they blend in with the cityscape. For ages, freaks of nature or people in trouble have come to the City to blend in, find work and escape the countryside.

Bruno and Emily meet for lunch in a park. Emily has been reading Darwin and talks about how evolution is changing and that the Braunschweig Tree of 2010 is a rupture in the time continuum, but at the same time an evolutionary dead end unless humans continue to propagate the trees. They are sitting on a blanket with the genome sequence for the Braunschweig Tree of 2010 stitched in a pattern. In fact, the genomic sequence for the tree, this very special genetic sequence made for Braunschweig has become an unofficial logo of sorts for 2010. It is on postage stamps, t-shirts and projected on the side of buildings at night. Bruno talks about how Rem and Will keep fighting over light fixtures for the Media Center. Emily mentions that some students cut down twenty Braunschweig Trees of 2010 planted in the John F.-Kennedy –Platz and burned them in protest of genetic engineering. The green wood created more smoke than fire. A genetic smoke signal like the smoke that use to pour out of the smokestacks of industrial buildings.

Residual space, open space and vacant lands have been ignored for years, but the Braunschweig Tree of 2010 has brought attention not only to the ethics of genetic engineering (even though the trees cannot grown naturally) but to urban design and the need to reclaim lost space and revitalize the city. The trees are lightning rods for debate. Forgotten space is now front-page news. People now notice the beauty of street trees. People now look to the past and the future for solutions. What is the city, what is the countryside, what is the value of land, what is the value of culture, what is the role of ethics in city branding. Architecture has become a tourist attraction, but in

Braunschweig 2010 it is also the mysterious Braunschweig Tree that people want to see. They tour laboratories and nurseries as if they were museums. They pluck a leaf off a Braunschweig Tree of 2010 and press it in a journal like people pasted tickets to Chicago's White City in their scrapbooks.