

Ulrich Gehmann

“We have to reflect on the reality we are building”

Ulrich Gehmann, founder and director of Ideal Spaces Foundation was in Guimarães at the invitation of Hugo Lobo, CEO of the Zegnea group. The Foundation began its activity in 2016 with exhibitions at the Venice Biennale.

The purpose of the visit was to take the first steps towards holding, in the home city, a Symposium in 2025 in which the future of architecture, the construction of public spaces adapted to new demands and ways of life will be reflected in a profound way, for citizens.

Ideal Spaces aims to bring to life the exchange of ideas that influence the present and prepare the future. “The focus is on developing spaces for communities, and this includes a reflection and understanding the history of places and the history of the concepts that integrate them. We try to learn from the past for the future”, said Ulrich Gehmann, in conversation with Mais Guimarães.

We have to understand the process, from where we came from and where we are going?

That's exactly it, it's in that direction. It is about the quality of history based on ideas, something that is not found in academies, with respect for the architecture of buildings that also depend on different realities and economic factors, social needs, but also the built heritage.

When we look at the ideal construction of a city, an experienced architect decides, on a cosmic basis, how to build homes for people and communities, and this influences them to live in a certain way. Understanding spaces for communities means understanding the basic concepts and respecting construction, from the past to the present day.

To consider the inhabitants of the future, I have the impression that the most important thing is to understand what people feel inside buildings.

Sometimes we realize that there are architects who think more about themselves than about the people who will use the buildings...

This happens sometimes. To understand the connection between the ideal, our assumption and the reality of the buildings, we have to make that connection. Ideals have to respect reality, this is the interesting part.

And this is about feelings?

Yes, it's about feelings. Our most basic and rational assumptions have to be superimposed on cultural aspects. And rationally, we have to understand how to build. This connection is an important aspect of our work and our foundation.

ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ART IS JUST CONSTRUCTION

And how does the Foundation want to change things in the world?

We want to make our formula available. Understand what people really need, think and discuss about creating life in spaces for communities, and make this a little realistic.

In this formula we include architects, decision-makers, investors, academics and citizens interested in participating in the construction of spaces for communities. When we think about art, we think about urban art. How we can improve community life, improve spaces, through art.

One of the biggest problems facing cities today is mobility. This is the case of Guimarães.

Mobility is an important aspect, and if we look at a global scale, the majority of people live in densely populated urban areas, and often live in miserable conditions, in neighborhoods and slums.

I'm not against the liberal market at all, but the new liberal market is not, in fact, a free market. And that's a big problem in cities, with gentrification, with problems for older residents who are displaced from their homes. And this is a trend that we have to observe and that moves us away from the very European idea of free citizens. How is it possible to have free citizens if we have this problem of gentrification within Europe.

Can Europe show the world how cities can grow harmoniously?

Our ideal of democracy is spreading. I was in India recently and heard a lot about democracy, true democracy, not pseudo-democracies or authoritarian regimes.

How free can citizens really be in an urban environment and in the context of a developed market? It will be very difficult.

In this case, perhaps European cities, such as Guimarães, could be a positive example, if they are based on the ideal of free citizens.

We met with the mayor of the city, proposing our plans. What type of architecture can we propose in the expansion of the city of Guimarães to provide a better life for citizens, and a better life means more human.

IN CITIES LIKE GUIMARÃES THERE ARE TWO ESSENTIAL FACTORS TO COMBINE: CULTURAL HERITAGE VERSUS INNOVATION

For Guimarães, what will be the best solution, the growth of the city or the growth of our nine villages that are located in the municipality?

It could be a solution to grow these nine villages. And this is the time to talk about it, to make comparisons with what is being done well, with the good examples, and with what is not being done well.

Do you want to discuss this in Guimarães, in the conference?

Yes, but we do not want to directly point out practical solutions, but we want to invite those responsible for putting into practice the ideas we are going to discuss. We will have different views, different perspectives, which will be approached in an even more informal way. People are often led to build without thinking, and in the current context this is very easy to happen. You can build an apartment block in the middle of nowhere, with a wide road and that's it. This is maximizing property but not quality of life.

In this symposium we want to bring examples of cities that have currently done something in this direction, and compare them with Guimarães. We will be able to discuss the problem of mobility or the development of the nine villages, so that they do not just become small-scale population clusters.

THE BASIS IS HOW TO CREATE SPACES TO LIVE. IT IS THE MAIN OBJECTIVE OF OUR FOUNDATION AND THE SYMPOSIUM THAT WE WANT TO HOLD HERE

Guimarães wants to be European Green Capital...

And there is no contradiction. Guimarães can be a green city and can, at the same time, create spaces for people to live, if it combines cultural with ecological objectives.

In cities like Guimarães there are two essential factors to combine: cultural heritage versus innovation. And innovation includes a green city. And why not combine them?

Is it possible?

Yes, and we have examples from other cities. Let's invite to our Symposium those who have, in fact, done this. On one hand we show the context and on the other the possible changes for a city like Guimarães.

We have a crown jewel that is the Historic Center. How to combine this historic space with new construction?

We have to be careful like in other historic cities. The city can grow harmoniously by combining the interests of investors, environmental concerns and the preservation of historic buildings. We cannot just focus on one aspect because we will not have a consistent solution.

Could this be the first step in the discussion, the Symposium you intend to organize?

Yes, it could be, that's our hope. We want to provide input so that the best solutions can be put into practice.