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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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BUILDING IDENTITIES

Architectural approaches to integration

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ABSTRACT

Cities are at constant change, continually and simultaneously old and new, but in the urgent context of an emergency situation, there is an immense shift in the identity of a city. Old and new city dwellers adapt to both this constant change and the already existing; contemporary urban development approaches take into consideration the ever-evolving city; practices today revolving around immigration focus much more on the aspect of integration both socially and physically in the urban fabric. But at a sudden point of crisis, what (or who) then defines city identity in light of displacement? Digging into the aspect of typology and architecture, as a simplification for the basis of planning, in the sense of pre-defining the needs of new users, is identity, as well as the welcoming sense of the city, then, dictated upon?

This paper looks into relevant urban interventions that attempt to maintain or develop the identity of the city, in light of the emergence of unfamiliar identities that arrive together with migration. Emergency situations result to the need for both short and long term solutions. The integration of immigrants in the city deals with a shift in patterns, both for the newcomers and in context of the already defined urban fabric. Differences in parameters as well as distinct parallel patterns evolve from prototypical intermediate settlements to more accommodating and sustainable solutions. Attempting to look at the city as not just a vaguely undefined identity in constant change, rather as the continual progression of identity in the making and redefining.

Key words: architecture, typology, city, integration, migration

INTRODUCTION

Arrival Cities / Arrival of the unfamiliar

“The European city, beyond the formal illusion of its official, symbolic center, is largely a collection of migrant enclaves... They are increasingly where the real life of the city is found; they are the places where the old city stops being a museum devoted to its former self, and starts being a laboratory devoted to its own future...”

The arrival cities, these migrant-created urban quarters are ripe with both peril and promise; they are where the new creative and commercial class will be born, or where the next wave of tension and conflict will erupt. Much of the difference depends on how we approach these districts both organizationally and politically, and, crucially, in terms of physical structures and built form.” (Saunders 2016, 22)

The 2016 German Pavilion Exhibition at the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale centered on the topic of the integration of refugee immigrants. And while evidently a political issue, the approach towards the critical situation was directed towards a more relatable aspect– thru the face of architectural interventions, the everyday setting of the urban fabric.

Entitled ‘Making Heimat. Germany, Arrival Country,’ Germany’s contribution to the Biennale resulted from the influx of refugees back in 2015. From looking into cases of integration throughout Germany and its neighboring ‘Arrival Cities,’ a number of theses were developed as relevant conditions for successful integration¹. A published atlas², together with an online database³, of completed or then soon-to-be-finished refugee housing was put together to showcase the continual efforts of providing both initial reception and accommodation centers, and more sustainable long-term solutions. While the examples were focused on dwellings, key points remained to revolve around the importance of integration beyond the private sphere. Following in the same direction to a certain extent, I have chosen to dwell on the layering of urban interventions, and focus more on the social intersections of these spaces.

City Identity / Identity as a place

Assuming the tangible concept of architecture as primarily instructional in its form– as an architect, this paper serves as an inquiry contrary to a judgment or recommendation. In the notes that follow, I attempt to offer another approach towards identity and integration that can possibly reframe the conversation and engage in potential dialogues beyond the limits of the European migration crisis. Moving through this paper with the premise of the city as a shared space in

its interactional setting, and approaching the city as an intersection, the premise of identity in the city is the definition of identity as a place. The structure of this paper runs thru brief profiles approached at level with theoretical concepts, simultaneously intersecting the social and the spatial.⁴

BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES

The intersection of unfamiliar identities

The dictation of identity at a sudden moment of displacement through a temporary intervention exemplifies itself in a prototypical grid like the typical evacuation center or refugee camp. Already primarily defined by location, at the intersection with an already existing city identity, this temporary intervention and dictation of identity somehow maintains the existing identity. However, given time (and not a particularly lengthy period, rather quickly even) this results to the evident and inescapable emergence of unfamiliar identities and intersections of the ‘new’ and unfamiliar, with the ‘old’ and existing.

Yoshiharu Tsukamoto delves into the concept of a commonality, that allows for multiple aspects of individuality within a public space, with the possibility of a space gathering a multitude of different users who can use the space with each other or free from each other (Tsukamoto 2014, 35-45). The idea of people of difference coming together in a common space is an important factor to note in the function of common spaces.⁵ Within these differences, there should be a permeability of boundaries taken into consideration, rather than an overlapping or fragmented separation (Tsukamoto 2014, 41).

Public Spaces as Shared Spaces

Existing (activated) public spaces as immediate places of encounter

At the critical point at the sudden influx of migration, immediate reception centers such as refugee camps are primarily focused on the provision of shelter and living essentials. However, this is something that remains constant from reception centers onto wherever these people are relocated to or to wherever they decide to settle. ‘How much living space per person’ may generally increase (at least incrementally) for example, but the general concept of being in an unfamiliar environment also comes together with the territory of arrival into an already existing city identity.

The Public Library

The public library has evolved beyond its typed function of a house of references into a space of encounters. Particularly in arrival cities, the public library has turned into an integration hub and initial support network for new arrivals. At the same time, it maintains its function as a public center, simultaneously used by students and principal neighborhood inhabitants alike. It is where unfamiliar new arrivals encounter fellow new city comers, at the same time, intersecting with the already existing and conventional intuitional building.⁶

Georg Simmel in his article ‘How is Society Possible,’ suggests that there are two different approaches between distinct individuals in an intersection. Firstly, in a more general sense, recognition of another individual is based on a generalization at a specific circumstance. If it is one’s individuality that allows him or her to belong in a setting, this points out a somewhat singularity or generalization of the individual. Secondly, he suggests there is also a going beyond the general, the aspect of seeing this other individual as something beyond this initial generalization (Simmel 1910, 372-391).

It is important to note on this idea of the arrival of unfamiliar identities, is that it is a reflexive concept when categorizing both new and old city dwellers. The arrival of the ‘new’ creates the idea of the unfamiliar in a vice-versa form as this existing city, too, is unfamiliar to its new inhabitants. But moving forward with the consideration of the unfamiliar as physical, for the new comers what is to be considered unfamiliar is this new environment, for the existing inhabitants the unfamiliar is the creation of these new spaces or the redevelopment of their existing environments.

New-build projects redefining development

New constructions developing initial structures for seamless integration

Project Streetlight Tagpuro

A new orphanage as an initial development of active collaboration

Location: Tacloban, Philippines

Leading Architect: Alexander Eriksson Furunes

Situation: Typhoon Yolanda 2013, displacement of 4 million people

Intervention: Incremental redevelopment and relocation of an orphanage through community engagement from workshops up to construction

Significance: Long-term development oriented relief work

What makes Streetlight Tagpuro an outstanding example of redevelopment post-disaster is not just its participatory approach, but even more notably is its incremental and inclusive process that not only resulted to a successful new orphanage, but the development of its surrounding community.⁷

Hanover Dormitory

A new housing facility as an initial development of passive collaboration

Location: Hanover, Germany

Architect: MOSAIK Architekten BDA

Situation: Rapid initial housing for asylum seekers, completed in 2015

Intervention: New-build residential; prefabricated modular units; subsequent use as student accommodation
Significance: Redefinition of borders and boundaries

Looking beyond the mass-produced façade of the new building, and instead directly on the site plan of the Hanover Dormitory by MOSAIK Architekten, what lacks in concrete form creates an invisible border that blurs the boundary between the new and the existing. The exclusion of a perimeter fence goes beyond the blurring of boundaries in the social sense, but also continually into urban planning and development.



Fig. 1: Site plan reflecting a barrier-free perimeter, Hanover Dormitory by MOSAIK Architekten

Thresholds of borders and boundaries

Richard Sennett describes cities as being closed systems resulting from specific factors such as over-determination, equilibrium and integration. The form-fixed condition of closed cities makes for a difficult adaptation and evolution of a city through time. In contrast to the current state of closed cities, he proposes a change in approach of the city “—a system which is open socially to different voices who attend to one another, rather [sic] who do their own thing in isolation” (Sennett n.d.).

Open system cities in contrast to closed ones focus on factors like ambiguous edges, incomplete forms and unsolved narratives. He goes on to differentiate the terms boundaries and borders; boundaries act as confined edges, whereas borders are more permeable and open to interaction. He relates these permeable borders to the concept of the natural cell membrane, which is “both porous and resistant at the same time, holding in some valuable elements of the city, letting other valuable elements flow through the membrane” (Sennett n.d.). Citing a personal example of a project turned unsuccessful due to the neglect of the edge and focus on the center of the city, he made a point on how the consideration of borders are vital in having a well-functioning open city. Elaborating on the incomplete form, he discusses how the sociological term ‘dialogics’, in its ambiguity and indirectness, aids in social interaction. Planning open cities does not just address issues through problem solving, there is also problem finding, defining new issues that need to be addressed.

Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp also note the importance of the periphery and its point of accessibility rather than centrality (Hajer and Reijndorp 2001). This context of boundaries and permeable borders, in as much as it concerns the possible general openness of the city, it is also important to zoom in and see how it can be applied at a more concentrated level within the city at points of interaction. At this level, there is an evident relevance in the connection “between objective structures and subjective constructions” (Bourdieu 1991) of a social space.

Haus Märkisches Ufer

An adapted hostel as an intermediate threshold of adjustment

Location: Berlin-Mitte, Germany

Architect: dreigegeneinen - architektur

Situation: Collective accommodation for refugees with an interim contract of 4 years from 2016

Intervention: Converted landmarked townhouse in an upscale central locale

Significance: Transition place within a prime location, functionally out-of-place, aesthetically appropriated



Figs. 2,3,4: A hostel for refugees in central Berlin, Haus Märkisches Ufer by dreigegeneinen⁸

Beyond the façade of the building (meaning exterior or out⁹) it would be essential to point out that directly in front of the building, right across the canal, is a densely green public park, and even further on, crossing the main highway, is the Berlin Central Library¹⁰. Haus Märkisches Ufer is not just strategically located in the city center, it is physically a linear intersection of accessibility through the existent city.

CONCLUSION

Building Identity / Designing Social Situations

What started out as a plan to briefly tackle multiple urban interventions, eventually resulted to a more condensed look into a few introductory cases considered through several exploratory intersections. Albeit a limited locus, what these profiles have presented allow for a preliminary theoretical framework to broaden this specific discourse with the prospect of further definition.

The provision of basic living needs and space, allowance of full integration into the city, allocation of opportunities, while all clearly principal, all result to an initial dictation of identity. However, looking into the development of notable urban interventions, this initial dictation seems to turn out to be somewhat more enabling than it is limiting. As architecture in its built form is first and foremost dictated, as being a physical structure, it is interesting to see how the un-fixed sense of identity, together with its social essence, actively intersects with it.

Through the activation of existing spaces, building opportunities for interactions and creation of more integrative environments, well developed (and possibly continually developing rather than fully developed) urban interventions

do not just influence integration, but can conceivably contribute to the development of the city overall, the development of identity.

“The city is, however, by definition the idea of density and difference materialized as space. Density is its nature, a social mix its character. Only density and difference produce infrastructure, cultural institutions, knowledge and information, commerce and exchange in an economical way. Cities are integration machines, motors for jobs, and places of knowledge... Yes there are conflicts over allocation; yes, there is a housing shortage; but yes, this also provides an opportunity to reinvent the city and to reanimate its essence: density and difference – combined with spatial quality... A reasonable welcome culture emerges when it is the future that one is welcoming – by designing it.” (Matzig 2017, 250)

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¹ The Arrival City is a City within a City, The Arrival City is Affordable, The Arrival City is Close to Business, The Arrival City is Informal, The Arrival City is Self-built, The Arrival City is on the Ground Floor, The Arrival City is a Network of Immigrants, and The Arrival City Needs the Best Schools

² Schmal, Peter Cachola, Anna Scheuermann and Oliver Elser. 2017. *Making Heimat. Germany, Arrival Country: Flüchtlingsbautenatlas/Atlas of Refugee Housing*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

³ Available at <http://www.makingheimat.de/en/refugee-housing-projects/database>

⁴ As an initial sketch, I have chosen specific cases that I have personally encountered or have direct proximity to. A collection of ideas as a starting point that will hopefully lead towards a more defined structure and approach, as well as the amount of available information and context allows for the possibility of elaborate studies of the cases in the future.

⁵ Also see:

Amin, Ash. 2006. "Collective culture and urban public space." http://www.publicspace.org/en/text-library/eng/b003-collective_culture-and-urban-publicspace.

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2763090>.

⁶ Further reading and elaborate studies on public libraries available at <http://citiesofmigration.ca/>

⁷ More information on development in Tacloban <https://issuu.com/alexanderfurunes/docs/learning-from-tacloban-summary-conc>

⁸ Figs. 2 & 4: photos from dreigegeneinen, by Nina Röder / Fig. 3: photo by Anna Weber

⁹ However, it is important to explicitly note that the private interiors too have substantial considerations, having to deal with the temporality of the occupancy, and including the challenges of collective accommodation.

¹⁰ The Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (ZLB) is the official library of both Berlin City and Berlin State.