architectural issues - social spaces

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01. Image of men playing cards in Orange Farm (by author)

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IMAGES **02,03,04,05.** Images of organically developed social spaces in Refugee Camp in Chad (Herz 2007)

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city of refuge

The idea of a city of refuge is not a new one and first emerged in the Hebraic tradition of protecting others in the Bible book, Numbers. It deals with the basic human right to immunity and hospitality if one conducts oneself peacefully. The Bible sees all people as God's creation that has common possession of the surface of the earth and no one can withhold access to it from another man. (Derrida 2004:58) Historically the homeless and people seeking asylum are pushed to the periphery due to fears that they will cause social strain. People who have been granted asylum or shelter are still often controlled, curbed and closely monitored.

A city of refuge is then defined as a protected place for people to develop independence and develop a greater sense of self. (Davis 2004:20) The need for Refuge is normally tied to a political transition. Abrupt transitions of politics give rise to many emerging as well as disappearing types in space. Instances of these spaces are being repeated globally, such as squatter camps, emergency camps, disaster zones, disaster settlements, temporal borders, check-points, customs areas and tents. All of them are normally seen as a B version of high architecture, or high urbanism, an exception to the stable and obedient arrangement of space. Normally, the acceptance of a temporal solution is an acceptance of lowering standards. At the same time there is a strong belief that it is an appropriate method with which to reach the next level with the promise of stability. (Weiss 2007:1) Architecture may not be the first thing most people will consider when looking at the plight of the homeless, displaced, refugees and asylum seekers. However, architecture can play an important role in creating environments which help sustain dignity and create a sense of belonging for people with very few social connections.

This thesis will explore how planning can help to alleviate feelings of mistrust and problems of xenophobia. The intervention will aim help people regain control of their lives by helping them to contribute to the market economy. The design will need to reflect the values of society, sustaining hope and human dignity. (Davis 2004:20) To achieve this there needs to be a balance between function, quality, construction and delight. There needs to be an architecture that is against alienation and will facilitate healing. For this solution to be successful, the intervention needs to be indistinguishable from the surrounding area to avoid being stigmatised. The design must be carefully handled, creating more functional and dignified spaces. It will need to cater for a sense of identity for the isolated person to feel welcome, comfortable and safe. Good design can improve the quality of life whether it is physical or emotional. (Davis 2004:20)
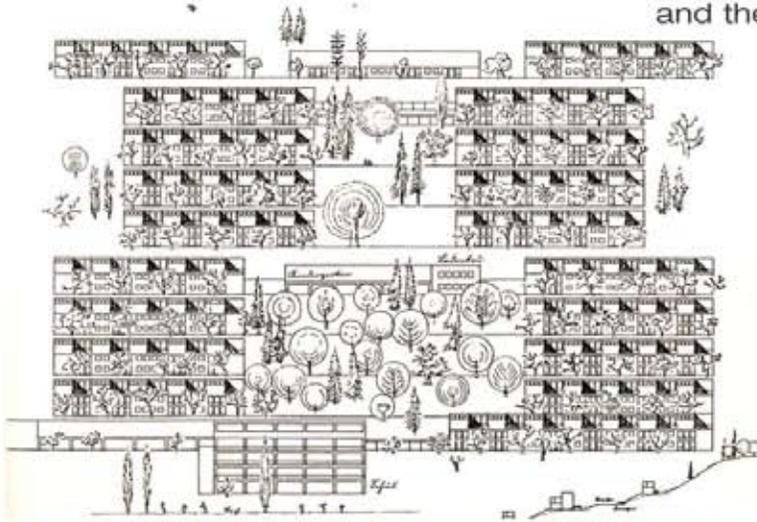
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06. Image of fence at border between South Africa and Zimbabwe (by author)

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Refugee Camps- Manuel Herz

Manuel Herz sees the layout oi refugee camps like the modernist city segregated with a lack of diverse function and lack of identity and the place of social interaction.

07. Images from Refugee camp in Chad (Herz 2007)

Heterotopias as a city of Refuge

The concept of Heterotopias as described by philosopher Michel Foucault in 1967 is a term used to describe places and spaces of otherness. These are 'spaces to be' within the contemporary 'spaces of flow'. Heterotopias are sheltered spaces closed off from the political and economical sphere. They are essentially sanctuaries, refuges or protected spaces. They are sacred healing community spaces in which people are able to take refuge or escape their everyday existence. Examples of these places are graveyards, temples, theatres, cinemas, libraries, museums, saunas, holiday resorts, brothels and theme parks. The philosopher called for a society with many heterotopias, not only as a space with several places for the affirmation of difference, but also as a means of escape from authoritarianism and repression. (Foucault 1967:3-9) The term is also used to describe the complex relationships spaces have to memory, culture, rituals, identity and history. The space in which we live and in which our time and our history occurs is heterogeneous and complex.

The notion of heterotopias is the opposite to that of the notion of the camp where civil and human rights have been suspended and where life is reduced to 'bare life'. 'Bare life' is a life that has been stripped of its cultural form and it civilised character. It is also where the distinction between public and private space has been suspended. It occurs when a citizen has been stripped of his citizenship. In the contemporary city we are beginning to encounter more and more

instances of camp like situation where the 'bare life' is exposed. These can be seen in plight of the homeless in slums, informal settlements and refugee camps. Although not all of these are camps per say,their precarious informality exposes its inhabitants to the conditions of a 'bare life'. (Cauter 2007:237-239) So the intention of this project is therefore concerned with the making of heterotopias (safe havens) as opposed to camps or camp like situations.

Problem of Camps

In order to understand how architecture can affect on the condition of a 'bare life' we need to firstly understand how the design of camps contribute to the loss of identity, culture, sense of self and distinction between public and private. Refugee camps are planned by architects and technical planners of UNHCR. Based on the belief of identical human needs and global human rights, fundamental planning approach for camps is characterized by neutrality. The standardized plan for a refugee camp starts with the tent as the smallest basic unit which is then organized in clusters (16 tents), blocks (16 clusters), camp sectors (4 blocks) and the complete camp (4 sectors) that houses 20.000 refugees in its 'ideal' case. (Herz 2007:316) People are reduced to numbers with the only way to identify one's tent is to look for the assigned row and tent number . There is little regard for how these people live their lives, their cultural and religious practices and their social networks.

The image of an idealized utopian city emerges, reminiscent of urban planning of the modern era in its belief in structured organization and clear separation of functions and uses. This modernistic planning approach finds its application all over the world. The strict order based on western European ideals seems can be a completely inappropriate response in its context. Regardless of whether the refugee drama is taking place in dense jungles or dry mountain regions, the same model of a European idealized city is used to house refugees. This often becomes jeopardy in the context of violence and catastrophes. The camp is actually the embodiment of rationalist planning. This suggests that the modern movement promoted authoritarian architecture as a system of control. (Herz 2007:316)

An example of this occurred when the UNHCR applied their standardized plan for refugee camps for the new camp of Gondje in Sudan with a projected refugee population of up to 20.000 on a region that was heavily forested and had specific topographical features, making their 'neutral' plan unusable. As they were lacking the specific local knowledge of the region, the architects of UNHCR never noticed the inappropriateness of their plan. This lead to the clearing of large forest areas and the settlement of approximately 15.000 people – a size of settlement that is unknown to the region otherwise – had gravest effects on the nature and water balance of the region. In this we can see that through irresponsible architecture we can do even more harm than good. (Herz 2007:316)

Team 10 and Herman Hertzberger

"Everyone wants to be accepted, wants to belong, wants to have a place of his or her own" - Hertzberger(1991:12)

Hertzberger suggests that architecture has the potential to create feeilings of belonging and acceptance. He suggests that it is in the design of social encounters and instilling users with a sense of responsibility feelings of alienation can be addressed. It is these 'human spaces' that encourage feelings of acceptance and social responsibility. The inbetween is used provides opportunity for connection,dialogue and creates moments of poetry, interest and interaction.
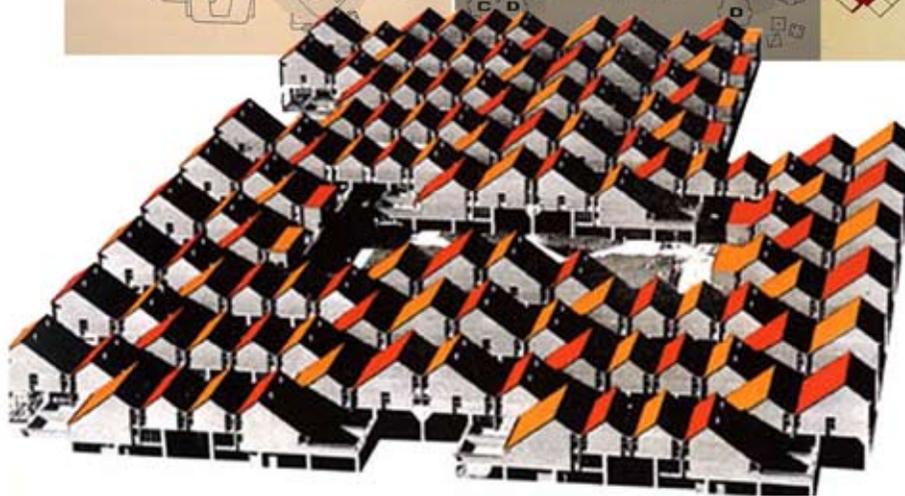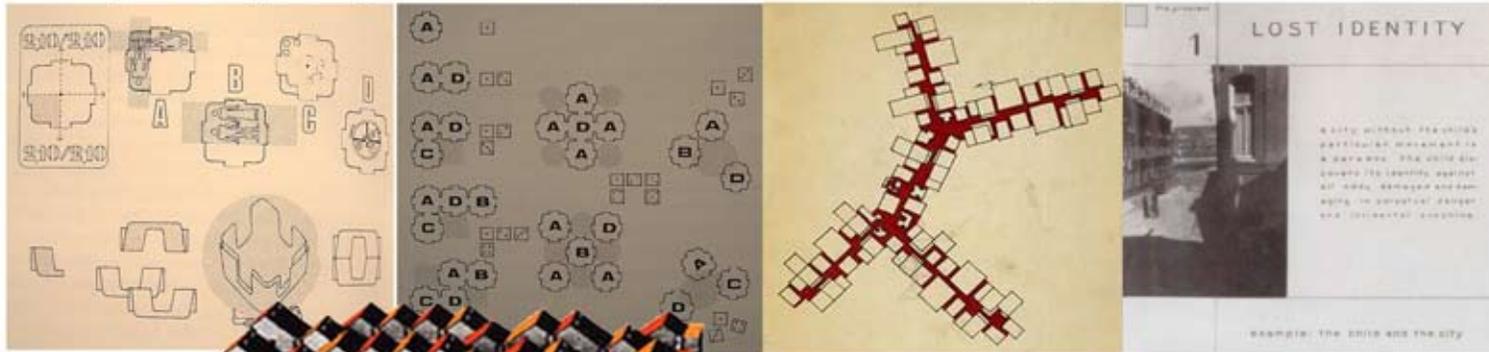
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07. Images of various projects
by members of Team 10 (www.team10online.org:accessed July 2008))

hierarchies of space

So how are the notions of Heterotopias applied in architectural terms? We began to see some examples in the 1950's and 1960's in the work of Team 10 as a critique of the modernist utopia. Team 10 grew out of the criticism within CIAM at the extreme functionalism of LeCorbusier and the modernist movement at the time. The Modernist notion of the city could be clearly seen in Le Corbusiers design for Le Ville Radieuse where functions were segregated within the city. Le Corbusier and other modernists saw streets as having an obsolete function and proposed separating pedestrians and transport to increase the efficiency of movement. They also divided the functions of the city into 3 main categories or zones namely dwelling, work and recreation which were to be separated and only connected by transportation. Members within CIAM in 1953 began to oppose these ideas and instead divided the notion of the city into a hierarchy of spaces namely the house, street, district and the city. These ideas were fundamentally different as architects began to see the city as a hierarchy of space with an emphasis on the activities of people. These members of CIAM later became team 10 as included architects such as the Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Van Ayck, George Chandalis , Shadrach Woods, Giancarlo Di Carlo, John Voelcker, Jaap Bakema and Ralph Erskine .

Team 10 architects were concerned that modern architecture was not based on the real lives of its users. They believed that how people used their homes and neighbourhoods could not be standardised and became interested in the everyday use of the built environment. They felt that the 'heroic' modernists were insensitive to the diverse everyday interactions of people. They also felt that modernism ignored the desire of ordinary citizens to shape the space around them. Modernist design consisted of buildings with dominant size, intimidating scale and space hungry plans. They were undifferentiated masses with no sense of personal space and identity. They saw that this type of planning as only being suited to an idea of a stable society that is not fundamentally changing. This however was not the case as contemporary cities are in constant flux and a city which is not adaptable is unsustainable. This was the beginning of the shift of focus of architecture back towards ideas of humanism, regionalism and the organic operation of cities.

They wrote ' Man may readily identify himself with his own hearth, but not easily with the town within which it is placed. 'Belonging' is a basic emotional need - its associations are of the simplest order. From 'belonging' - identity - comes the enriched sense of neighbourliness. The short narrow street of the slum succeeds where spacious redevelopment frequently fails. '

Team 10's critque however did not go far enough and was ineffectual. This challenged many architects and writers to re-examine the modern planning principles being employed at the time. Some of the more radical of these were groups such as Archigram and the Metabolists who designed schemes for mass society which created large flexible and extendable structures which relied heavily on and embraced technological advancement which enabled an organic growth process to allowing the city to adapt and change with society.
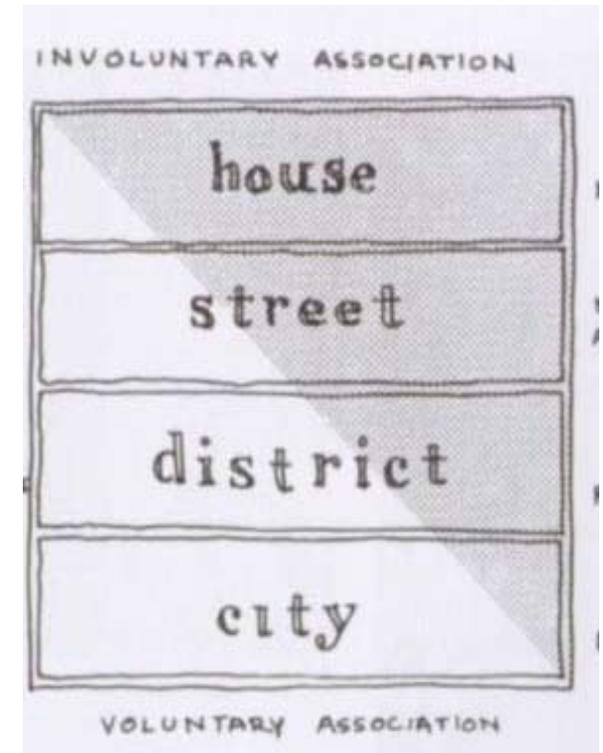
08. Team 10 diagram of the city (www.team10online.org:accessed July 2008))

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designing for the inbetween

"Everyone wants to be accepted, wants to belong, wants a place of his or her own" (Hertzberger 1991:12)

Herman Hertzberger an architect associated with Team 10 suggests that architecture has the potential to overcome feelings of alienation and foster feelings of belonging and acceptance. He suggests that it is in the design of encounters, social interactions and giving users a sense of responsibility, feelings of alienation can be addressed. The design of these 'human spaces' can encourage feelings of acceptance and enhanced social interaction. (Hertzberger 1991:15) In order to achieve this, the designer must pay special attention to public/private relationships as well as zones of transition and threshold. The degrees of public and private space are directly related to the accessibility of the space.

The "in-between" (Hertzberger 1991:32) offers an opportunity to negate sharp transitions and divisions. These thresholds offer opportunity for connection, dialogue, adjustment and provide spaces for social interaction. At these points, architecture with a highly programmatic brief has the opportunity to create moments of poetry, interest and interaction. Hertzberger also suggests that giving people a sense of responsibility within the community increases feelings of belonging and acceptance.

Another important influence on architecture and planning was the book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities', written in 1961 by Jane Jacobs an urban theorist, writer and activist which highlighted the importance of the organic operation of cities. Her book was also a strong critique of the urban renewal policies of the 1950's which, she claimed, destroyed communities and created isolated, unnatural urban spaces. Jacobs advocated dense, mixed-use neighborhoods and frequently cited New York City's Greenwich Village as an example of a vibrant urban community. Her emphasis was on the realm of social activities in the city and the spaces that they occupy. These are parks, sidewalks, streets and gathering spaces where people can have contact within the city. She saw that cities contained different people and activities and that these interactions had to be fostered by architecture and planning. The importance of mixed uses with smaller blocks and medium densities were highlighted as generators for the required diversity in the city. She saw public space as not being undifferentiated open space but as smaller pockets of space for a range of activities. These writings were an important influence on the New Urbanism moment of the 1980's.

So we begin to see that it is in these spaces that a city and architecture begins to come alive. Charles Correa (an Indian Architect, planner, activist and theoretician who studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of technology) also sees the value of space which addresses social needs within a city. Correa states that architects face the formidable challenge of using their skills and knowledge to alleviate the dehumanising conditions experienced by those who are at the margins of society. (Correa 1983:43) Correa believes that housing people is about more than just providing houses. There needs to be a system of space that becomes a place where people live with a series of thresholds which address social needs. These begin from the private (sleeping spaces), to the common space (cooking, eating), to the semi public (the front door step where people interact and children play) to the common public space. This is about creating an architectural response that responds to the user, by understanding human needs and not simply about abstractly solving the problem programmatically. Correa compares the role of the architect to that of carpenter and mason who must be able to participate in the design and construction process while heightening the visual sensibility of the environment. He also suggests that we have to be careful not to patronise the marginalised.

We need to be aware the problem of diversity and not only focus on the integration of people into society. Correa suggests that a design for a community needs to be a celebration of diversity and not merely about integration. Diversity and richness comes from layers of complexities of a society that need to engage with in order for a community to be successful. (Correa 1983:45) There isn't only a need for coherence but there is also a positive tension that exists in diversity and difference. There needs to be an understanding of what forms of integration can make a difference in people's lives and how this can be achieved. Integration that facilitates connectedness that brings people together in their diversity by using various elements in the urban fabric produces a truly liveable space that will allow people a sense of refuge and belonging.

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