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P4 Reflection

In the following text I will reflect on the research and design process as well as the results. I will discuss the way the project relates with the wider social context as well the relation between design and research.

Today the problem of socio-spatial segregation fragmentizes urban landscapes and divides social groups that live in the city. One of the places where the phenomenon of socio-spatial segregation is most evident and tangible is the city of São Paulo in Brazil, which is also known as “the city of walls.” The time that I lived in São Paulo allowed me to experience and observe the impact of socio-spatial segregation closely, which motivated me to research it more in depth. My graduation research, and specifically the field-research that I did in April 2015, helped me a lot to understand the complexity of the phenomenon. Besides socio-economic and historical factors that involve contemporary segregation, the everyday experience of citizens, prejudices and stigmatization for instance take their share in the process as well.

I aimed to design an architecture that enables social integration. This design is particularly related to the way in which social segregation takes place within the context of São Paulo, as it emerged from the research that I did there. After interviews, observations, photographic documentation were made during the field-research, the mental aspect or experiential dimension of the socio-spatial segregation soon became the central subject of my research. Besides that this mental level turns out to be key in the process of mutual estrangement among citizens, it is also precisely the level on which architecture can be meaningful. Particularly the various works of the *Escola Paulista* and *Lina Bo Bardi* that I visited in Brazil, convincingly showed me the social and engaging potentials of architectural design. However, the great difficulty I encountered was to develop an architectural concept that relates the social and mental levels of segregation with the spatial dimension of the architectural project. For segregation as well as architecture seems to be both very abstract and very concrete, yet in totally different ways.

It was when I discovered philosopher Elias Canetti’s concept of *Verwandlung* that I finally found a means to link segregation and architecture, research and design. As ‘empathic metamorphosis’, *Verwandlung* for the human subject implies both an internal transformation and

a behavioural exteriorisation, and thus moreover always occurs in relation to the context or environment one finds oneself in. This resulted in the idea of architectural *Verwandlung* as a main theme/aim for my design. Architectural *Verwandlung* denotes the coincidence of two transformations: a formal architectural one and a social one that is instigated by it and that gives it first meaning. Particularly the built work of Lina Bo Bardi provided me with inspiring case-studies for the further elaboration and exemplification of the concept of Architectural *Verwandlung*, which in her work seems to be the direct result of both her social engagement and sense of theatricality, the latter of which I had from the beginning intuitively understood as being a major theme for my project. Thus having read Canetti, it was as it were through a re-reading of Lina's works that the categories of social engagement and empathy, theatricality and architecture naturally came together in the concept of Architectural *Verwandlung*. Also, this concept allowed for a differentiation of design levels, from abstract and intangible 'atmospheres' to very concrete architectural elements. I believe Architectural *Verwandlung* does not concern some fancy architectural 'concept' but rather forms the explicitation of architecture's social essence: it involves only the *perception* of a synthesis between formal design and social effect which revives the social ambitions of architecture.

The knowledge from my research that architectural expressions of socio-spatial segregation limit or even inhibit *Verwandlung* and the assertion that architecture has the ability to encourage human *Verwandlung*, is fundamental for my proposal of an architectural design that aims to counteract segregation. By stirring citizens' ability of *Verwandlung*, architectural *Verwandlung* helps in building bridges among citizens from different social groups. Counteracting socio-spatial segregation by means of architectural *Verwandlung* means here to address foremost the mental level through an architecture that is both open and engaging. The strategy of architectural *Verwandlung* was helpful to create a social environment that enhances social integration.

Based on the history of socio-spatial segregation in the area of the design plot, the typology of the mansion essentially helped me further with the architectural design. The mansions that were originally built on Paulista Avenue are not only segregation symbols but also emblematic homes. The use of terraces and verandas turned out to be a very rich theme to create an overall image of an open and welcoming building. Particularly model-studies of the general volumetrics were crucial to study openness, positioning, proportions and so on. In my final proposal the mansion typology is combined with an office tower on top of it, whereby the complex as a whole

embodies the social transformation of the current business district, both architecturally and functionally (social centre; rental office spaces). I am fully aware of the fact that this building will not ,solve‘ São Paulo’s problem of social segregation in general, as its causes lay far beyond the reach of architecture. But I hope and believe that it could form a local contribution to the city as a social environment. And I am sure that through this graduation design at least I myself have become aware of architecture’s mentally transformative and socially engaging, in other words, its “*Verwandling*” potentials.