

INHABITING CONTINGENCY

Reflection

Theme of the studio and the subject chosen

The theme of Design as Politics graduation studio "A City of Comings and Goings" is migration. As the naming of the title suggests, the studio is set to explode the disbalances between city and countryside in a shifting geo-political climate, which prompt the increased mobility and flow of goods, people, and capital. Furthermore, a close exploration of this theme invites diving from the abstract level into particularities that certain flows of migration exhibit and inhabit.

The subject chosen in this studio framework is refugees in Latvia. This basically means two lines of research – the refugee crisis with its historical background, and politic-economic inner workings; and Latvia, a post-Soviet Eastern European country, as a receiving ground for this unprecedented flow. Regardless of Latvia being part of EU now, the context for refugees there is much different than in Western Europe, where refugees have been a presence much longer. Only slightly more than 25 years ago Latvia was still behind the iron curtain and only had to accommodate top-down enforced migration from within the Soviet Union. This has left a lasting impact on the composition and attitudes of the society, which make themselves known at present as well. For a lot of the local people the refugee flow is still a top-down issue due to EU quota system, and even more alarming due to the unmistakable foreignness of the new arrivals in this racially and religiously homogeneous part of Europe.

It is clear that the delicate juxtaposition of conditions described above cannot be tackled by an architectural design project alone, therefore from the very beginning the graduation research and subsequent project has had a broad outlook focused on conceiving a relational system addressing aspects beyond built environment. Only within the framework of this system can an architectural project gain the meaning and agency, which the subject calls for.

Method of research and design

The method involved in research is focused on mapping relations between numerous factors, agents and fluxes, which all together create the particular situation. This mapping involves not only looking at refugees as such but also the particularities of the location and society into which they arrive, thus creating several layers of a power apparatus, which are all interlinked and in constant movement and development. The problem statement, which situates this approach, is that neoliberal capitalism increases inequality, drives migration and amplifies existing developmental asymmetries. The drive of neoliberalisation is what ties the subject with location, and brings the two lines of research together into a research question of "how can refugees act as a key to address existing urban asymmetries, resulting from a shift from planned economy to neoliberal capitalism?"

The most important aspect of the research method is the relations between the various factors. Precisely through analysing these relations and their inter-connectedness it was possible to distinguish which areas could be most productively targeted. In terms of location, a different kind of mapping was required to determine the precise site of the project. In Riga, the chosen city for the project, this involved mapping urban developmental asymmetries and looking for areas, where grids clash, or

disintegrate, areas which are forgotten, abandoned, or disused, but at the same time not remote enough to instantly alienate refugees from the fabric local society. At the same time, it always bears keeping in mind that neither are refugees a homogenous and constant flow, nor is the location used and experienced the same by all local inhabitants. This means that the conceived system needs to accommodate different 'stories' with their own particular drives and needs.

The method of analysing urban asymmetries and power apparatus has been effective in finding a balance between different aspects of the initial problem statement, as well as giving direction for the design. However, throughout research and also the design process, the speculative aspect of the project has been a constant struggle. Factors that can be analysed through the apparatus are endless, and all of them can never be uncovered, therefore researcher's subjective input is required in selecting relevant factors, as well as (to an extent) in perceiving and mapping the relations between them. There is also a certain lack of reliable and specific information about the location, and some conclusions need to be inferred from available evidence. This speculation problem, in addition to the heterogeneity of the subject matter, also poses challenges for the design.

Relationship between research and design

The programme of the project is derived directly from the research and analysis of the system of relations in the apparatus described above. From each of the six big categories (economic, legal, cultural, physical, social, and political factors) the most interlinked factor is extracted and transformed into programmatic elements, which are further grouped into spatial and non-spatial. While the spatial aspects, such as dwelling, work, and learning, manifest in an architectural programme, they each need to be constantly checked against the non-spatial aspects – tolerance and inclusion, social security, and ease of starting a business (in legal and financial terms) – in order to ensure the potential of productive success of the project.

There are always more grounds for reasoning, when intervening in an existing situation with particular actors and distinguishable challenges. In contrast, this project deals with an unprecedented combination of subject and location, and therefore enters entirely in the realm of speculation. However, this does not mean that the proposal can be unrealistic, conceptual or abstract. On the contrary, the design aims to be as specific as possible, while allowing room for contingency – for change over time, appropriation by users and room for different meanings to take place. This is why the project is titled "Inhabiting Contingency", which is opposite to a final and static object, but alludes to a process in a shifting environment.

In terms of design itself, the method was applied by conceiving a catalogue of urban elements, which were tested in different arrangements, keeping in mind the specific relations between them. Essentially this means looking at interaction between agents, fluxes, and territory. There are natural fluxes (sun, wind, water), virtual fluxes (political and economic decisions) and material fluxes (mobility of goods and people), which are constrained by the first two. These fluxes shape the territory into solids and voids. The design also deals with relations between different functions and their levels of publicness and privacy, as well as occupational intensity. Aim is to match and increase the density of occupation and activity in the area, which in turn can allow more scope for productive creative action. Delicacy in treatment of all the mentioned relations is essential because the objective of the project – to facilitate productive mingling of refugee migrants and locals – is also a delicate one, which cannot be preconceived.

Relationship between the project and the wider societal context

One of the main objectives of the method applied and project on the whole is to avoid instantly marginalising the newcomers by conceiving a project directed exclusively at them. This would only serve to increase hostilities between them and the locals, many of whom are in a similarly dire economic situation. Therefore the project is conceived as a development open to both refugee migrants and locals, if only they want to live, work, and learn there. Besides locals and refugees living and working directly together in the development, the project is also meant to be open and attractive to the wider public, by creating a node of activity for the whole neighbourhood, regenerating a misused site, and providing public space and activities. In order to avoid this being only empty words, special attention in design is given to the kind of institutions that would be needed to facilitate this, how the entry process would work, and how the daily, seasonal and yearly life cycles of inhabitants would unfold.

The contingency aspect of the project has led to much of the project being designed through affordances and a scale of concreteness. Affordances are, in short, possibilities for action that skilled users can pick up. It follows that also the acquisition of these skills needs to be addressed. Scale of concreteness sorts different functional spaces according to how easy it is to change them, and how likely it is that they will change. This accounts for some aspects of the design being demonstrated with a particular focus on the possibility of change in different time frames. It is my conclusion that only thus can the design stay true to the method of relational thinking, and only this method can address the initial problem statement in an ethical, non-preconceived way.