Revealing the hidden
The urban shelter

Luz Adriana Carrillo Hurtado
Tutors: Oscar Rommens | Marc Schoonderbeek

The MSc3 vertical studio for Public Buildings intends to generate several positions from
the students towards a city that has already transcended the conventional urban
standards. Due to its extension and increasing growth, Istanbul becomes the container
of multiple variations of the public realm and thus, the frame and object of study. “It
provides an extended field of survey to the discipline of architecture for intervention: to
regenerate, transform or project intensities, which becomes the new epicenters within
the urban fabric...The complicated issues and problems of an unmediated growth of
the city itself pose challenges at extreme quantities, to undertake so that any attempt
for immediate action is sent to oblivion with the overwhelming intricacy of the already
emerging ones: It is an urban Frankenstein. However, it is also just this extremity of
interwoven problems of urbanity that makes Istanbul one of the cases where radical
thinking, spatial experimentation and architectural projection has the potential to put
the city back in the frame of the discipline of architecture.”

I chose immigration as my starting topic of research to try to understand how this social
phenomenon takes place in Istanbul and how it can transform the city and its built
environment. In order to do so, I analyzed a neighborhood that is characterized for
being an epicenter for immigrants, especially from abroad Turkey. Nevertheless, it is not
only about the transformation due to the presence of an external population but
involves the overall transformation of a place in transition. How is this transformation
taking place and is manifested through signs in the ordinary environment.

“They try to understand these relationships and consider their different ways and
rhythms of change, knowing that the space isn’t a metaphor of the society (it doesn’t
reflect directly the transformation of social behaviors), but often it shows –often belatedly- only signs, traces and clues of that change.”

As stated before this is a place in transition but its transformation is happening in a
subtle, almost hidden way; the insertion of new functions and uses due to the presence
of the immigrant population on one hand, and the transformation in the morphology
that an old neighborhood experiences, on the other. The neighborhood is undergoing
a transformation that is only revealed through signs in the built environment. Signs are
what talk about the specific character of a place, and thus tell a story about how it
was before, how is now and how it is going to be. “A sign on a building carries a
denotative meaning in the explicit message of its letters and words. It contrasts with the
connotative expression of the other, more architectural elements of the building.”

From the study of a social phenomenon a study of the transformation of a place in
transition was derived, in which it is important to recognize the existing architecture, the
ugly and ordinary, recognize its value and try to learn from it. In Learning from Las
Vegas, Venturi and Brown mapped a strip of Las Vegas trying to identify the different
signs that were present and made an inventory of everything they could see that talked about the process this city was undergoing in order to understand why and learn

1 Brief for MSc3-4 Public Building | Studio Istanbul
2 Boeri, Stefano. “Eclectic Atlases” in Documents n3, the Documenta X magazine (Kassel: 1997)
3 Venturi, Brown, Izenour, op. cit., 100
from it. In a similar way I took a fragment of the neighborhood and analyzed different typologies of vacancies and the signs that were revealed in these “back facades”, especially in terms of materiality, in order to make an inventory. In these surfaces is where we can find the hidden signs that I am so interested in and that became the starting point for my design.

I took one of the voids in the neighborhood and developed further this inventory of signs that I had built for it during the research. I took the pictures of the details of the materiality that I had taken and started to create drawings based on them through my interpretation. In this way I attempted to find a meaning behind these signs, rather than just being decoration, in order to start my design from this experimentation. From these set of drawings I reached to spatial abstractions, which then became experimental models as well. Each drawing became a plane of projection into the space and in that way they started having points of connection between themselves in the void (this idea was actually elaborated in a conceptual model).

The approach to the design came from the reading of the existing and the qualities of its materiality. It became the envelope of the project and the whole building was designed on its immediate relation to this existing materiality. Different explorations were made on how to occupy the void both in a horizontal and vertical way. Through the section, the building was first explored as a set of platforms or tribunes from which to observe the existing. The viewer could be placed at different heights and what was being seen could be reframed by adding horizontal and vertical planes, changing what was being seen through each new frame. Both section and plan were used then to explore the different relations with the existing facades given with the change on distance from which these platforms are placed from them. How the perception of what is being seen changes depending on how close or far the observer is (textures, colors, relief, deepness, shapes, materials).

Derived from the initial research of immigration, the idea of creating a housing project came to the table. For that reason an exercise was proposed in which three typologies of Turkish houses from different periods were to be deconstructed in order to make the design. Through a collage the houses were re-assembled in order to make a new structure between all of them (a mono-material one: wooden) that would still maintain the main spatial characteristics of the individual houses. However this structure kept on mutating as each element of the composition was transformed as a response of its relation to the existing facades. How close it got to the existing, how high, the position and the shape were all defined by what wanted to be framed and how it wanted to be framed. In the end the elements developed autonomy of their own, generating an interesting variety of spaces (both interior and exterior) and of relations between the spaces themselves. The resulting outcome not only defines a whimsical interior spatiality but an exterior as well, both in the terrace (creating platforms that change in height to observe the existing landscape as well as creating places to sit) and on the ground floor (where it shapes a ceiling for the public space understood as a continuation of the street).

The idea of the project is that it’s not perceived as a private building but as public space. It is not a dwelling project but an urban shelter, and as such it’s based on both the communal and satisfying the basic needs of humans: eating, sleeping and cleaning. The shelter is designed as an open building with multiple ways of entering to it and circulate around it, which is why it is invaded by stairs. As a shelter its purpose is to protect the inhabitants from the outside conditions as well as providing air and light. That’s why it works as an open-able and close-able structure which works with movable panels, made out of wood as well, that open or close letting or not the entrance of light and air, as well as constantly transforming what is being seen by its reframing through the movement of the panels.