REFLECTION P4

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Ever since I started the Urbanism master track, I have been interested in working with the smaller, local scale and even building scale. It is clear that any strategy planned for a neighbourhood or any small area of a city, must also be coherent with the bigger city or regional scales. With that in mind I started Urban regeneration studio.

Being an immigrant myself, I decided to address a subject related to immigration. The massive migratory movements are nowadays a major force influencing cities all over the world. Contemporary cities are multicultural cities. Neighbourhoods with high shares of immigrants are quite frequently deprived ones and as a consequence the stigmatized ones. Immigrants are in general a vulnerable group and they arrive at some areas of a city, most probably marginalized areas which are not a priority for the city scale planning schemes, they are not the focus of urban regeneration projects or public space improvement projects. However, they may be the ones with a greater need for improvement.

To a higher or lower degree, contemporary cities host a wide variety of cultural and ethnic groups. Madrid, the Spanish capital, is home to more than three million inhabitants and according to the 2010 census, 17 percent of the city’ population are immigrants with a cultural background different from the Spanish one. These different cultures sharing space in a city have different ways of living together.

Due to the high share of immigrant population in some specific districts in Madrid –higher than the average- I chose one of those districts for this project. The research has revolved around multicultural social interaction in public space and the challenge it represents for most European cities to deal with diversity and difference in cities, a challenge that would keep growing in time.

The lack of public space in some historical parts of European cities, as well as the lack of spaces that could facilitate multicultural interaction are the two main components of the problem statement for this research.

First, the lack of qualitative public space in the studied area is partly due to the morphology of its historical urban fabric, where public open space other than the streets is almost non-existent.

Second, the lack of social interaction between different cultural groups –or any interaction at all- takes a toll on the social cohesion of the study area. This lack of interaction may be related to the shortage of public space.

The research carried on for this project has had a theoretical component and an analytical one. The design interventions have been based on the results of both components.

On the one hand, for the theoretical framework the research has been focused on the definition of public space as the host of public life; on the relationship between both social and physical space; and on how we assign value to public space in multicultural cities, depending on different claims from different groups.

It is important to state here that most of the literature that has been researched about multicultural environments and what challenges they pose, has been approached from the social
sciences point of view. There seems to be a missing link between the findings of those studies and their spatial implications. This is the reason why I decided to focus on multiculturalism and try to use it from an urban designer point of view and apply this knowledge to spatial interventions.

On the other hand, for the analytical framework the research has been based first on understanding how the study area works within the city context, and within the district scale. And second, on finding out the components of the smaller scale, what elements are already present in the study area and which ones are not. It has been key to understand how the existing spaces and facilities are working, what is being performed, how are they using them and so on, in order to pin point missing links in order to use them as inputs for the design.

Through the literature research, I found out what kind of spaces have been considered as facilitators of interaction; therefore I could find if such spaces are present in the area or if they are not present and needed to be included.

As far as the research methodology goes, a combination of different tools has been crucial, using each tool to get a specific result. It is possible to see that the combination of methods has worked really well by providing not only hard data but also additional perceptions.

Aside from the theoretical research which has been the base to build on with other methods and the analytical research, observation and exploration of the study area have been fundamental for the understanding of the project context. It has been by walking its streets, interviewing people and experiencing its spaces that I have been able to get a grip of the area that no amount of maps and literature could have provide.

At this point I have to say I was more optimistic about the idea of multiculturalism at the beginning of this project than I am today. Since the beginning of the research I considered multiculturalism to be an asset that could be capitalized on in contemporary cities, I still do. However, through some of the fieldwork I realized that reality was not as optimistic.

The times I visited the study area I witnessed that the only interaction happening nowadays-if any-is between people from the same cultural group. At the beginning of this project I thought that most conflicts-non-violent conflicts in this case-arose from a lack of understanding as a result of ignoring and avoiding one another.

I was basing my intentions on the idea that since each person belongs to several groups—depending on age, gender, culture and so on—it would be possible to exploit the common ground between different groups with different claims to find overlapping claims. The less optimistic reality is that multicultural interaction will not come that easy, especially when the goal of most of the groups seems to be to avoid one or more specific groups.

After being too optimistic back then, I came to comprehend that as an urban designer I can only do so much. Spatial interventions are the ones that urban designers and planners can propose. Nevertheless, it is also this profession’s responsibility to take into account the needs of different users and include them in such interventions.

As an urban designer I have developed a strategy and a set of rules to generate public spaces that could facilitate interaction between people from different groups, cultural or otherwise. After the research done so far, I can say that diverse public spaces which are able to accommodate different desires from different groups are the main design intervention that have been proposed.

However, for the stereotypes that burden some cultural groups, I can just hope that with time, acknowledgement and open-mindedness we can look pass those and that we will consider diversity as an asset.

Even though I started this project wanting to make a very specific local design for the study area, I am glad to see that the process has been leading towards a more general design concept, presented as a strategy and a set of rules regarding the quality of the built environment. This set of rules could actually be applied in other locations with similar characteristics.
Important to clarify here that it has never been my intention -nor would it be- to design specific spaces so specialised for a specific cultural group that they would generate more segregation between the groups and not the other way around. The idea behind this project has been to bring people from different groups to spaces they can share, which could accommodate them all, even if not all at the same time.

To close this reflection I want to say that I do believe in cities that I have discovered only through literature, like the ones described by Leonie Sandercock, Iris Marion Young, David Harvey and Ash Amin among others, where difference does not mean fear and violence, where there are available places for everyone and where resources are more fairly distributed. In the words of David Harvey: ‘The right to the city, as it is now constituted, is far too narrowly confined’, so the goal should be to constitute it on a wider manner that includes the diverse people who live in cities nowadays.