Reflection for the P4

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Title of the project: Providing a home for the Roma’s

Being a Hungarian I am bothered by the strong racism of the majority of my folk towards Roma’s. It seems as if being Roma in my country is a large disadvantage. To learn more about the cause of this phenomenon and to try to have positively influence on it through my studies I decided to focus on this issue during my graduation.

My design task is the improvement of a Roma settlement in a post industrial city of Hungary, Ózd. After the change of regime the factory, being the main work source, had closed and since then the population has been decreasing. On the other hand this year the government set up a plan to invest in the city through renovating a significant part of the factory-plot turning it into a touristic centre. This development offers a new chance for Ózd, however at the same time it is threat to the poorest Roma settlement of the city; Hétes which is located nearby the factory. It is clear that the proximity of such an impoverished area is not ideal for the new centre. Therefore it is most likely in the current political atmosphere that the main approach will be to evict the inhabitants in the near future, forcing them into an even worse situation. My solution on the other hand is to invest in the area in a way that the inhabitants could still stay; through involving them in a process of improving the surroundings.

My research focused on the living patterns of Roma families and their position in the Hungarian society. Literature research gave me a strong basic knowledge on the topic, which was very useful during my fieldwork, what I consider as the most valuable part of my research for my project. Not only learning the facts about the area and the inhabitants, but actually spending time there gave me the possibility to understand the atmosphere as well as the main problems. In my former projects there was no possibility for such an elaborate research and I have to admit that this time I realized how important this is. Understanding the social context in my project was essential and even though my main goal is to make an architectural design I found it an exciting challenge to formulate a design task based on a social issue.

The most challenging part was to realize my ideas on the different scales present in the project. I found that without a good strategy the project would lack a strong base and the tools of architecture might not have enough strength to contribute to the issue. On the other hand it is very exciting to use a strong strategy which overgrows the boundaries of architecture but it is still using architecture as a tool for solving the issues. For me it was a great challenge to learn how all the scales, from the master plan to the detail, have their own importance and they all can be used as useful tools to make the strategy a complete story.

By having more knowledge about how such neighbourhoods function and what the problems have been in the past – also regarding housing – I realized how the approach in my project should differ from those that have worked on the issue before. These projects always
provided a finished home for the Roma’s which from my point of view has always lead to more harm than improvement. Questions arise such as: Do they feel responsible for housing that they have had no say in and which do not acknowledge their culture? Will they be able to appreciate a home which offers them much more advanced living conditions than they have at the moment? Even if they do, how can they sustain it? The trip made me realize that in a project like mine the process and the future of the dwelling has an essential role. Instead of providing them with “the perfect home”, I have found solutions on how I could capacitate them on working towards the home they personally wish for in the long run.

The Hétes settlement is a former worker’s neighbourhood with specific architecture from the beginning of the 20th century with monumental value. After analyzing the state of these buildings, it became clear that they are still constructively sound; however they are far overcrowded, as the floor area per person is 5 m². These facts lead me to firstly providing a design of renovation of the existing dwelling stock and secondly to add new dwellings to achieve that the number of dwelling units for the number of inhabitants is sufficient; every family will have a private home. It was a very exciting task to bring back the historical value of the existing housing stock, but still adding changes which make them proper housing for the local community of today. The new housing blocks on the other hand will have the same architectural language and will show how a new design grants the freedom to realize in steps appropriate housing that this specific community can call their own.

The Explorelab graduation studio is not only the best option for me because I could choose my own project, but also because I have the possibility to work with those mentors who have expertise and enthusiasm regarding my fascination. I have found the methodical line of the studio convenient because it offers me a free schedule. It is very challenging though to set up your own process and goals. The freedom on the one hand was appealing, however at the same time I needed to cope with additional tasks that came forth because I had to manage the project myself. Especially while setting up the field trip, I realized how I was the one responsible for every aspect. Compared to other studios with organized trips; in my case everything depended on my capability of planning and flexibility in the field. Next to these difficulties this lead to many joyful moments and at a whole the experience was extremely instructive.

Even though I focused on a specific community in a specific area there are numerous issues which I have addressed which are not only present for the Roma’s in Hungary, but for groups of people all around the world who are excluded from the society because of reasons such as race and poverty. My aim is to provide a solution to help the inhabitants of impoverished areas in a way that they will be empowered through the building process. During my design process I was constantly questioning the border between the responsibilities of the architect and the freedom and involvement of the individual. What are those elements that make my knowledge in the process necessary and which tasks could be fulfilled by the dwellers? My project offers an architectural frame as the base for a neighbourhood where the dwellers get an active role in filling it up and developing it. Even though I am certain that every location has its characteristics and that those specifics need to be addressed within the project, I believe my design can work as a model that could be used as a reference for developing areas with similar issues.