

REFLECTION

Master of Science Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences, 2014-2015
Complex Projects, Chicago studio
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The graduation project was commenced by carrying a broad analysis, trying to investigate social and political circumstances, urban conditions and the faults of American incarceration system that have influenced the emerging problems of Garfield Park community in Chicago, USA, such as unemployment, segregation, high incarceration rates and dilapidated built environment. It was conveyed by mapping, cataloging and field work.

The methodological approach of Complex Projects studio requires working on three different scales, starting with broad urban analysis, developing a master plan for the entire neighborhood and finishing with detailed building design. It also promotes independent thinking and reflecting on broader cultural, social, political and economic context.

I have been particularly interested in emerging collective spaces and socio – political conditions that influence them. Working on Garfield Park neighborhood enabled me to apply heuristic research methods and broaden knowledge within my field of interest.

The choice of an object to be designed - a halfway house - drew my attention to the problems and needs of ex - convicts as well as characteristics and design specifics of defensible space. The issue of recidivism is complex and depends on many aspects, for instance inappropriate accommodation, insufficient finances and skills to find a job, criminal record and stigma, no support from family and friends, low self - esteem. All of them were considered during the design process and appropriate solutions were found in order to provide ex - prisoners with a wide range of opportunities to start a new decent life in Garfield Park neighborhood.

Besides the social and economical domains, the characteristics of the Garfield Park area were investigated on urban level, using the method, introduced by Ungers.

He suggested to see the city as an assembly of numerous urban layers such as buildings, infrastructure, public facilities, green areas or water, etc. His method includes identifying characteristic places in the city (areas of recreation, culture, commerce, residence and work), developing and improving the specific features such “complementary places” possess.

The points in the city, where multiple layers overlap, offer a variety of activities but at the same time this creates contradictions, which emerge between the layers. Such research methods helped to identify the points where various layers intersect. The program and spatial characteristics that are present in those layers attract people from the neighborhood and other parts of the city thus creating a potential for enhancing of the hard conditions of the environment.

Having discovered, that new educational and community program could provide better opportunities for communities to fight recidivism and improve lives, intervention nodes were established in order to fight spatial segregation by providing connectivity between disjointed urban layers. The latter research methods resulted in new master plans and guidelines for future design.

As it turned out, one of the main problems of the community of Garfield Park, as well as the USA in general, is a mass incarceration. The costs - in lives and money - are enormous. Although prisons are often far away from the most problematic neighborhoods, they become one of the most important social institutions for many blocks. Another big issue is reintegration of former inmates into society, which ends up most of times in prison reentry within 3 years. These facts have to be approached in order to enable people to make a better transition from prison to the community, and to interrupt vicious cycles of recidivism.

This project tries to examine the faults of existing American incarceration system and conditions that have created it, with the intentions of deriving a new design. A new transitional facility between the prison and outside world is proposed. "Exodus Home" is a halfway house for ex-offenders and non-violent criminals, merged with educational facility for residents and ex-convicts. It will provide therapy and an opportunity of positive daily life.

An investment into an educational facility for ex-convicts on a longer term helps to create new productive members of society, unlike investment into prisons, which ensures inmates have no future.

The design approach followed the research methods. Accordingly, starting with an urban scale, a site plan was developed within a larger framework of a master plan. The main aims of a site plan involved extending a green boulevard through a block, connecting it to a Garfield park, opening up a back yard to public, designing a halfway house as an assembly of residential buildings with common facilities in between. All elements of design play a significant role in rehabilitation process of the residents.

A long process of searching for a suitable typology and spatial configuration resulted in a design concept, which changed radically since the P2 presentation. The shape evolved from one consistent building into a complex of small scale buildings, creating an urban village. This arrangement allows for a better reintegration of ex-convicts into communal life, creates a non-authoritarian and non-regimented atmosphere and follows the concept of less an institution, more a home. The halfway house is divided into smaller, recognizable and comprehensible-at-a-glance enclaves, which allows for a safer residential units and helps ex-convicts to identify themselves with a place. Juxtaposition of residential with "safe" functional facilities allows for interaction with community and strengthens social ties. The developed scheme corresponds to my understanding of contemporary relation between the private and common space and relates to the needs of impoverished post-industrial cities.

The program of the building provides the tenants from the most basic daily life facilities, through more elaborate services like job counseling and vocational training to publicly accessible workshops. Educational activity is focused on comprehensive development of ex-convicts personality and aims to shape and maintain sense of responsibility. It is important to provide them with opportunity to both care for common wealth as well as learn to sustain themselves.

The gradation from public to private is also reflected in the facades and applied materials. The philosophy behind the architectural proposal is to introduce more a house than an institution. That is why the design relates to an archetype of a house with an elements of vernacular architecture, such as a common porch. The materials used for the construction and facades, mainly wood and limestone, are locally sourced and typical to the neighborhood, this way blending the project into the surrounding rather than alienating it.

General layout of each residential cluster is inspired by the typical Korean Hanok house. What is appealing about the arrangement of spaces is a central courtyard, which works as a catalyst for community activity, from where all surrounding functions can be accessed. Also secondary internal connections between the spaces are provided to enhance the interaction of inhabitants. Proximity of light and nature due to the garden in the courtyard has beneficial effects on physical and mental rehabilitation of ex-convicts.

The first level of each cluster is transparent and accessible to the neighbors. The intention is to show the society the normality of halfway house inhabitants and their transformation from consumers to producers.

The more closed penalty institution is, the worse relation with the surrounding neighborhood and the people. However, the second, residential level, is more closed and distanced in order to provide privacy and sense of safety to those, who are vulnerable and sensitive to overcrowding. The key issue is about finding the balance between being isolated and surrounded by people. The porches serve as the connectors between the two levels.

In his essay "Right to the city" Henri Lefebvre claims, that all citizens have right to urban life – to creative activity, places of encounter and exchange, complete usage of moments and places.

To achieve it, a city needs a thick heterogeneity, spaces of density, spaces of "otherness". City as an oeuvre, as a collective, but not singular, project, produces new modes of cohabitation and co-existence . Although written in 1968 and since then a lot of geo-political circumstances have changed, today Lefebvre's article is more relevant than ever. Despite the hype about globalization, mobility, space of flows etc., we still live in striated space, full of control, exclusion, disconnection. Therefore, my graduation project tries to confront this faults of contemporary American cities - consequences of Neoliberalism and failure of incarceration system.