

REFLECTION

Public Building_ Borders&Territories

Border Conditions along the New Silk Road

Jiayun Xu | 4718305

THE SPACE OF DYNAMIC INFORMALITY

Today's standard spatial experience of the contemporary city is like one of a continuous sequence of small homogeneous functional enclaves via thresholds and leftover spaces, which can be summarized as the 'margins', where plenty of temporary or long-lasting informal practices take place. Those marginal spaces, as well as informal practices they host, are being mostly ignored, but still, have great potentials. They are under constant change, always reflecting the needs of their occupants and inhabitants. Interested in this hidden layer of urban ecology, my concern is how can we as an architect react to the existing informal practices, not in way of negation and demolishment, but respect and continuation.

RESEARCH

My research is based on the study of marginal spaces, including informal practices they host, and the corresponding effects. By analyzing the case of marginal spaces exist along Baku's railway infrastructure, I studied their evolutionary process through aspects of urban structure, human involvement, and spatial qualities.

The research, according to the studio methodical line, started with the observation, description and investigation of emergent spatial conditions, by emphasizing the relationship between place and spatial practices. These practices are constituted by the spatial acts of everyday life, mostly informal, take place in marginal spaces, while the spatial phenomena and conditions of the places or spaces themselves are inversely influenced by the practices.

As my argumentation is that we should respect and preserve the informality in urban margins, the research is intended to conclude those characteristics and spatial qualities in their own evolutionary logic. By investigating, tracing and mapping contemporary spatial conditions, I made a series of narrative drawings as heuristic materials for further architectural translation. Apart from drawings, I also did theoretical studies. There are several characteristics of the marginal space that I found being critical, and making the margins meaningful spaces:

- Fragments and the bigger whole: The margins are edges of formal urban construction, which make the margins have deep relations and dependences with the urban fabric nearby. The relationship between them is like parasites and their host, fragments and the collective body. The margins are a collection of fragments of experiences and achievements. These fragments within the margins, together with the formal part of the urban, form the city as a whole.
- User-led and diversity: Physically generated by the surrounding formal urban fabric, the margins are spaces determined mainly by the behavior of its visitors. They continually obtain diverse and ever-changing meanings when their users occupy and organize them.
- Inclusive and inventive: The margins are available for everyone. While they are all inventors of their own lives. Their practice is *"neither a matter of creating entirely new knowledge, nor discarding existing systems of living and knowing, but rather a matter of expanding them at their limits"*. (Woods, L., *Radical Reconstruction*)

- Dynamic and unstable: The margins are autonomous spaces, repeatedly changing the occupants, being deconstructed and being organized again. Thus the evolution and the shape of marginal space is always dynamic and unstable, with a kind of indeterminacy or openness.

FROM RESEARCH TO DESIGN

Consistent with the studio's strategy, my proposal does not pretend to be able to govern the current processes within the site I studied, nor does it pretend to offer solutions to straightforward problems, for example, 'problems' within those informal communities along Baku's railway I investigated - actually it is controversial to decide if the 'problems' need to be solved or if there are really 'problems' exist. Instead, I applied the theories and image study methods from my research to the new practice. In a complex block with potential in Tbilisi, I introduce a set of infrastructure, which offers marginal spaces available for occupation and use. The characteristics I've concluded in research should also reflect in the materialization:

- Fragments and the bigger whole: marginal spaces exist based on bigger infrastructure system, available for people's use.
- User-led and diversity: spatial configurations result from people's needs and uses.
- Inclusive and inventive: various components and tools provided.
- Dynamic and unstable: everything is flexible for reassembling.

Apart from the theoretical principle, there are also new interpretations relating to the context. Using the same method of translating the contextual images into drawings in research, I analyzed both typical spatial elements and people's informal practices in the area as references for my design, trying to keep the continuous spatial experience.

INFORMALITY, PUBLIC BUILDING AND BORDER CONDITIONS

The studio's interest in the city originates from the recognition that there is an abundance of potent, yet little understood, spaces that are in urgent need of corresponding theories, while the urban margins and the informal practices they host are actually among them. While the idea of the public building is often related to the building which reflecting power relations directly, the notion of public also means a lot relating to human activities and practices, which is also a critical part of my topic.

Concerning Border Conditions, the marginal spaces, where informal practices frequently happen, can be considered as a type of border - not a clear, figurative boundary, but a blurred, uncertain, dynamic intersection of spaces. More precisely, it is the boundary between different formal/planned spaces, while the boundary is no longer a line, but has a certain width and height, so that this border is a space, where spontaneous activities and occupations take place. Thus in my case, the border conditions I am dealing with are not something like national borders, but marginal spaces in the city brought by mega infrastructures.

WIDER SOCIAL TRANSFERABILITY

The topic of the city's marginal space and informal practice has always been a meaningful target for research and design. As the world's contemporary reality, there are a huge amount of marginal spaces along with informal practices existing almost everywhere, not only in those 'underdeveloped' areas but also in those developed countries. The background situations and issues of this topic are the conflict and contrast of the rich and the poor, the lack of freedom in standard cities, the side effects of the superpowers and infrastructures to the existing city, etc. It is not only an architecture or urban topic but also a social concern.

There are already many pieces of research and proposals about this topic, for instance, researches of Urban Think Tank in Havana, conceptual projects of Lebbeus Woods. As for my project, it also has a certain universality, since my research and design is based on the model of margins and informalities take place along mega infrastructures, which is one of the most seen situations, there are similar scenarios elsewhere in the world suitable for my theory. The informality exists, and that is the reason why the research and design of this topic should keep carrying on.

ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

There are indeed ethical controversies and practical dilemmas exist in the topic of informality. Are informal practices and marginal spaces valuable for study? Yes. I avoid judging if they are simply good phenomena or being 'problems' in the city. Is it really proper to carry out interventions, whether led by official power or voluntary designer, in the autonomous marginal spaces? In my proposal, I tried to make interventions following the existing context and logic, in other words, I suppose the new construction should be a guide based on the contextual conclusion, rather than enforcement. The final design can be considered as one of the possible practices of my theoretical model about informality in marginal spaces. Thus it does not serve as an outline about how marginal spaces should be improved, but more like a conclusion and possible interpretation from my understandings of this topic, leaving the controversy open.