Position Paper

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Introduction

MSc3 RMIT framework

In the current economic climate the role of the architect evidently shifts from accommodating huge investment plans to dealing creatively with a growing empty building stock within the urban fabric. RMIT Sarajevo graduation studio addresses therefore, the need to re-think about the future of cities in their context, on many different scales and parameters. The intervention strategies that would arise during this quest cannot be generic, but strongly related to the experience and spirit of the place, its current tangible and intangible values.

Project description

This study is ‘placed’ in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a city that integrates many different stories. Sarajevo is a place with a long and complex history; starting from prehistoric settlements, to a difficult recovery from a recent and violent war. It is a place of unique landscape, as it develops along a river valley, in a constant ‘battle’ with the dominating surrounding mountains. It is a place where religion and politics blend-in; a place where culture unites people, as well as divides them. Today, the city is under transformation. Foreign investments on one hand and relatively low living standards on the other hand, are responsible for the co-existence of new high-rise administrative glass towers and malls, competing in height to the steep hills packed with illegal private housing. At the same time, numerous bullet marks on residential and public facades all over the city are still not repaired to remind citizens and visitors the rigidness of an administrative fragmented state.

Accordingly, the task of this studio is actually to (re-) imagine the city of Sarajevo and its potential future development. Taking into account the huge gaps of urban activities within Sarajevo’s fabric, like its ex-industrial site, and the recent establishment of initiatives, like the Green Design Festival, the assignment focuses on sustainable transformation strategies, which will not only address every-day life, but also boost economic, technological and societal growth and plurality. To assist this aim, the discovery and experience of the genius loci becomes the main tool to understand the unique qualities found in-place, whereas adaptability forms the anchor point and inspiration for the re-design interventions. Place-making will finally be produced through the enhancement of the values that lay for centuries –hidden or visible- in the industrial zone of Sarajevo.
European cities are currently in a state of transition. Global competition, economic crisis, urban congestion, personal mobility and climate change push designers and policy makers towards a comprehensive re-thinking of the future. Changes affect all aspects of development: economy, society, technology and ecology constitute a new cast of actors in reversed hierarchies. Gradually nations lose their protagonist role over dominant entrepreneurial cities, which grow in demands and acquire international branding. (Sassen, 1991) The times when everything seemed solid and permanent are well gone, and the future looks unreliable and very much centered around the networked development of those complex urban regions.

Meanwhile, and also due to the shifting needs of the contemporary society from industrialization to services and international commerce (Castells, 1989), the cities are faced with the spatial consequences of the current climate: a drastically rising number of vacant buildings and sites scattered across their urban fabric. Spaces designed for various purposes are underused or stand completely empty as the evidence of the brutal inability to adapt to change. Those buildings and their surroundings constitute large non-functional gaps, at the same time when cities continue to exert pressure to cover their growing needs. Derelict and ‘forgotten’ industrial structures, especially, located on financially or spatially valuable land within or at the edge of the urban nest are becoming a common ‘non-place’. At the same time, they act as the receptors of a certain history, collectors of memories and attached values that are both personal and collective. Nowadays the strategic conversion of such sites has been a common ground for researchers and designers. From comprehensive redevelopment to temporary uses, there is a variety of different ways to treat those areas. Today’s economic climate adds though a higher degree of complexity, due to the lack of funding and multiplication of empty spaces. Contemporary society has to come up with new ways to overcome those challenges.

Current trends in dealing with such matters explore concepts such as sustainability and resilience, in all levels of scale and aspects of development. It is evident though, that despite the considerable efforts, sustainability largely remains an undefined field of knowledge with a huge variety of interpretations and fields of action. To be able to comprehend sustainability, and implement it in a transformation strategy all efforts have been concentrated on narrowing it down to a specific aspect, which reflects the potentials of the particular place (Sarajevo). Inspired by the Europan 12 theme, adaptability becomes here the principle vision for future cities: ‘it is about anticipating the inevitable impacts of change, allowing a plurality of uses, but also being capable of making creative use of what already exists. And therefore, adjusting to what is already there while developing visions of the possible that take account of both permanence and variation.’ (Europan Brochure, 2013) This attitude furthermore responds to the ‘official’ visions of the local authorities of Sarajevo that dream of a ‘Green City’, without any substantial measures or ways of implementation.
In Sarajevo, such conditions are revealed when dealing with its ex-industrial zone. It is more than evident that the area is led by strong forces of transition, ever since the end of the recent war. Even if it is still identified by its industrial character, the zone is clearly in limbo between comprehensive redevelopment plans along the main boulevard and the exerting dominance of urban residential sprawl on the hills. Evidently, the residents and former workers have no say in the development of the area, which is mainly based on commercial investments with minimum care by the public and the local authorities. The old industrial zone is in the hands of private interest that only takes advantage of the financially profitable proximity to the road networks without a particular local vision. This in-between state of the area shows its potential to be used as a testing ground for a transformation strategy that would allow the city to adapt in the near and long-term future. Consequently, the general research question that comes up from such an approach examines the ability of the industrial zone of Sarajevo to act as an incubator and point of reference for an adaptable development of the city.

This investigation is not applied only in the large scale of the whole industrial zone, but considers it as the starting point and field of exploration to finally position the study in one of its ‘place-making’ elements. For this purpose, the railway lines that run through the site and the city become the incentives for further research. It is a fact that the transportation network of Bosnia and Herzegovina has undergone a series of development phases during its existence since late 19th century, but retained its importance until the recent war. Initially built during the Austro-Hungarian period, the railroads were widely exploited for passengers and cargo transit after WWII under the socialistic governance of ex-Yugoslavia. Additionally, Sarajevo preserved a strong identity of a ‘crossroad’ throughout its history. From the Ottoman caravanserai to a busy 19th century Balkans rail station, the city was continuously situated along the connection corridors between the West and the East. Today the railway is underused and infrequent, but most importantly acts as a border, both spatially and mentally. Accordingly, the research focuses on the potential to overcome this challenge and reconnect the city and its people with one of the most sustainable means of transport, and an indisputable symbol of connection and communication between cultures and people. Therefore, the research question is formulated as following: How can an adaptable bottom-up design of a station reactivate the underused railway network and transform it from its current divisionary role into a local hub connecting the region socially, spatially and economically?
Following the challenges and potentials that are addressed here, the general scope of this study is to re-imagine Sarajevo, and show the city and its people the bright possibilities of their adaptable future. The aim is to use adaptability in design interventions that would contribute to the ‘distinctiveness of place’ by discovering and preserving the existing spirit of place. It is about finding an ‘appropriate transformation strategy between legacy (history of places), invention (innovation to accommodate a plurality of uses) and reversibility (temporary developments). [...] It is a method of establishing links between natural and cultural environments and finding compensations and connections [...], by adding meaning and purpose (re-connections) to the place. (Europan Brochure, 2013) For this reason, a network facility such as the railway is to be revitalized to assist this goal, and re-introduce to the city its unique contribution to its genius loci. Creating a new station, which is much more than a train platform, would primarily have a tangible impact to the area as well, as it would boost the economy, assist the current residents’ needs and bring new public facilities. Then, ‘the combination of economic development with the preservation and enhancement of spatial qualities’ would have been achieved (Ovink, H. Wierenga, E, 2011). The research question, theoretical framework and method of work are all interrelated to support and achieve this aim.

**Theoretical framework**

Why define a field of theory?

It is a fact that every design approach is inevitably connected (consciously or not) to a field of analytical research or -according to Michel Foucault- to a specific ‘episteme’. In his book The Order of Things (1984, original Les Mots et les Choses, 1966) the French philosopher describes the notion of ‘episteme’ as an ‘unconscious structure’ defined by the ‘particularities of time, place and culture’, which guides and produces the knowledge of its time. (AR3A160 course booklet, 2013) In other words, Foucault is trying to define the obvious: How we perceive the world, and how we analyze it, finds its origins in what we already know as a society, and where we stand for as individuals.

For the purposes of this study, phenomenology, an ‘episteme’, forms the theoretical framework that will assist this research and design approach during all phases of delivery. Phenomenology is the study of perceptual experience that is explored here through the written work of three architects: Gordon Cullen (The concise townscape), Kevin Lynch (The image of the city), and most importantly Christopher Norberg-Schultz (Genius Loci; towards a phenomenology of architecture). Under the influence of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, all the aforementioned approaches focus on an existential analysis of the build environment and set the ground to understand how people perceive the space they live in.
According to Norberg-Schultz, the place is the primary element of the environment, the 'content of our existence' (Norberg-Schultz, 1980). It is a totality consisting of 'concrete things' that have 'material substance, shape, texture and color'. But because place is a qualitative phenomenon, which combines the tangible three dimensional space with an intangible character, it cannot be properly described 'by means of analytic, scientific concepts' that usually form objective abstractions. Phenomenology is therefore a more customized method to analyze the place, by means of experience and perception of every-day life that can be explored with the use of different methods: recordings of serial and changing perspectives while moving in a city, intense observation of living space, interviews with people, reasoning of natural phenomena or other forces in the production of space, experience and perception in the form of sketching, drawing, mapping or photography. Those methods used by Norberg-Schultz and the others crystalized their principles. Those are for example the distinction between the natural and the man-made environment, concentration and enclosure (Cullen), outside and inside, orientation (Lynch) and identification of space. Furthermore, the spirit of place, the genius loci, is conceived as a reality derived by the combination of structures and meanings, which relate to economic, social, political, cultural and many other complex phenomena of human life. The discovery of the spirit of place is twofold, regarding architecture as the spatial expression of it. On the one hand, the theory of place illuminates architecture for its capacity to incorporate meaning. 'The existential purpose of a building is therefore to make a site become a place that is to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment.' (Norberg-Schultz, 1980)
Therefore, a phenomenological analysis is based on the existing build environment, and especially on an architecture, which reflects the genius loci of a place. On the other hand, the theory of place can greatly influence the production of new build form. In his book Norberg-Schultz argues that the recent 'loss of place' experienced under the pressure of 'new functional demands' of modern societies can only be replaced by the preservation of the genius loci. 'The idea of preservation [...] implies that architectural history is understood as a collection of cultural experiences, which should not get lost but remain present as possibilities for human use.' (Norberg-Schultz, 1980) He also stresses that 'to respect the genius loci does not mean to copy old models. It means to determine the identity of the place and to interpret it in ever new ways'. (Norberg-Schultz, 1980) Therefore, through the discovery of the genius loci, the architect can potentially draw new forms and imagine spatial conditions that would enhance the existing identity.
Architecture therefore, is the tool that gives form to the intangible meanings of the place. A theory of place assists the quest for identifying the genius loci, through which a meaningful architecture (form) can arise. Place-making is the end result of an analytical investigation that very much centers on the interpretation of the existing values of place. The missing factors from such an approach are the people themselves. All aforementioned authors tend to investigate the place as spatial qualities that are produced for serving everyday life, but do not include the users in their analysis.

Before those studies were conducted, another group of artists, philosophers and architects was gaining attention for its innovative way to understand and map the urban experience. The Internationale Situationniste (I.S.), an Avant-garde movement of the 1960’s, developed a new field of existential urban studies called Psychogeography. The concept derives from the conviction that the built environment is perceived subjectively and subconsciously by every individual, who basically relates to the place through his/hers past memories and current emotional state. Guy Debord and the rest of the international group argued that the alienated and fragmented urban space can be reclaimed and transformed through the notion of ‘derive’, a ‘technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances’. (Ioannidis, Y. 1999 – ‘The Theory of derive’ originally published by Guy Debord in 1956) This actually meant conducting a random walking movement through a place while allowing the subconscious to direct the pedestrian so that mental and built structures can equally produce a new perception of space. The result of those walking experiences was the production of mental maps -primarily of European city centers. Those maps were not corresponding to the actual built environment, but filtered it through the memories and interests of the people.

For the purposes of this study, Psychogeography backs up the phenomenological approach of the genius loci in order to enhance my position related to place and time. If we take for granted that people constantly move and are the means of a perpetual exchange with their environment, then every perception of place can potentially add to its meaning. The task here is to concentrate all those meanings and interpretations of qualities into a local hub that could keep adapting to the changes in perspectives and perception. Overall, the discovery and enhancement of the spirit the place (industrial character, railway connections, bridge) and the memories of the residents of Sarajevo (labour, war, borders) are the ingredients of the place-making design strategy (station as a local hub).
Methodology

Research method

In terms of method of work, this study was initially related to a wider analysis of Sarajevo, in order to first discover the city’s identity. This situational approach combined the research of the past, present and future of three different scales: Bosnia and Herzegovina (country), Sarajevo (city) and Novi Grad (municipality). At that stage, the preliminary online and literature review were supplemented by the personal experience of space during a field trip. The next step was to understand the dynamics of the (ex-) industrial zone of the city. To accommodate the in-depth research, mapping was used as an analytical tool to document and present in a coherent way the results of the on-site observations. Collecting and classifying different layers of information concluded to space and time related maps that help to determine and detect the existing qualities of the place. The combination of those consequent illustrations with the problem statement, research question and the theory of place (thematic research) shaped the next step. Shifting from the analysis to design, the study was focused on the elaboration of a planning strategy for the redevelopment of the industrial zone. Design principles were set to accommodate and discuss the assignment, which derive from the concept of the adaptable city, as a list of specific strategic points: (1) Activate bottom-up planning, (2) Discover and meet the local needs and ideas, (3) Strengthen networks and communications, (4) Reclaim nature and landscape, (5) Re-invest in the existing building stock, (6) Boost diversity in all levels, (7) Set the ground for a civic economy, (8) Use technology to accommodate visions. At this phase, the starting points of the redesign, the specific location within the industrial site and a more explicit topic of research are set.

Design method

The next steps are focused on the design methodology. Phenomenology and the theory of place are to be used again not just as the theoretical background, but mainly as the method for analyzing and imagining the specific location. How people move and experience the space today, but also how they will perceive the area through the intervention of the railway station becomes the main aim. Reference projects are to be investigated for a variety of reasons. The SESC Pompei by Lina Bo Bardi offers inspiration for lively community centers where the old industrial sheds form the background of a neighborhood’s everyday life. The NDSM Wharf in Amsterdam shows how a collective initiative can lead to innovative business and climate concepts. Finally, the recent High Line of New York celebrates the heritage and social value of inactive infrastructures in the heart of the cities. Those references and the theoretical and phenomenological tools of this research will support the development of a design concept. Research and design are interrelated during the whole process in order to demonstrate and justify the existing values while adding new meanings. Such a methodology that focuses primarily in the discovery of potentials of existing environments is one of the main reasons that distinguish RMIT studios from other fields of architectural studies.
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