

THE PROCEDURAL VOIDNESS

ARCHITECTURE THEORY THESIS

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Foreword

Mashhad, constructed upon the burial place of Imam, gently narrates its own experiences through the urban morphology in relation to the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza. Chaotic yet organic, this fabric witnesses the 1,000-years history of Mashhad, alluding that a virtuous interaction between the shrine and the city has been embedded in its genes. This situation seems to be unassailable. However, the floods of urbanization and commercialization have been gradually rinsing the unique fabric out of its history, breaking and erasing the dialogue between the old and the new. Loss of identities leaves the illusion that no one has ever set his foot into this place. The fact is that, Mashhad is meeting its past. Before the rational zoning and massive volume being materialized in reality, the land is temporarily turned into a suspension in the form of various voids. This natural procedure of voidness - [de]construction of urban voids - replaces the spontaneous sociocultural roots with their emptiness, and features Mashhad for a certain time in an uncertain situation.

Introduction

As the indispensable configurations within an urban environment – that is, as spatial evidences depicting the transformation of build environment – urban voids essentially reflect the roles that human either intervene or dominate the city. They should be recognized in the sense of human culture but not simply filled with commercial architectural products. [De]construction of the voids simultaneously leaves themselves outside of the smooth continuum of space, and constantly claims new territories through its invisible interactions as a course and visible emptiness as a consequence. Discontinuity characterizes these voids as “foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative” (Solà-Morales, 1995, p120), which states the situation of “Terrain Vague”^[1]. This conflict not only brings the identity of dualism to the voids in urban context, but also reveals political tensions between society, culture and economy during the procedure of voidness, where human intervention^[2] involves and turns the landscape into an intricate condition out of its visual form as a void.

Featuring in spontaneously being inside and outside of the city, the urban void is an entity of contradictions. On the one hand, although its obsolete procedure to large extent declines the emergence of inhabitant activities, the unconstrained semantic liberty provides enough possibilities for unexpected events. On the other hand, “they are evidence of the capacity of the urban fabric to dominate people’s lives but they also offer a respite from this dominance” (López-Piñero, 2020, p147). Due to these paradoxical faces and complex developments in understanding these hollow territories, urban voids should not only be understood as a result that is waiting to be redeveloped or returned to nature^[3], rather, they should also be understood as a transgressive process towards voids in which realizations, motivations, and determinations are trying to cross the limitation of the borders in both sociocultural and ecological terms.

By anatomizing the transitional stages of voidness, relations between course and consequence can be re-

[1] The term “Terrain Vague” embraces a broader definition in terms of the residual spaces, marginal spaces, and vacant spaces within the social life of metropolis. The commercialization related urban void is one of these spaces. The territorial vagueness problematizes this large scale interruption in the city not only as an optic discontinuity but also as a haptic one.

[2] Inspired but different from the intervention that mentioned by Gil Doron in *The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression* (2000), where it mainly concerns about the architectural and planning practice, the proposed human intervention embraces a broader notion that includes the powers and executions from architects, inhabitants, developers, municipalities, etc.

[3] Returning to nature can either be decaying naturally without any human intervention until the trees take over the place, or

artificially turn it into a garden or a park.

[4] Koolhaas (1995) understood the void as nothingness, where “functions with more efficiency, subtlety, and flexibility than any object you could imagine in its place; in architecture, absence would always win in a contest with presence”. Meanwhile, Solà-Morales (1995) elaborated on the notion of void as “absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation”. Doron (2000) saw the voids as transgressive zones “not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating” based on Michael Foucault’s *A Preface of Transgression* (1977).

[5] A voice-over in documentary *Amnesia* (2017)

examined, and thus alter the chances of engagement and perspectives towards the urban voids, as an architect or urban planner. This thesis attempts to reconsider the urban dilemma where invisible capital interventions are overwhelming the uniqueness and the irretrievability of historic fabric in the form of voids. Through the lens of construction instead of deconstruction, it aims at constructing the urban void with deeper and further values in architectural and sociocultural sense.

Chapter 1: The indifference possibility

Upon the typical comprehensions of urban voids from Rem Koolhaas, Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Gil Doron and other scholars^[4] – that is, vacant land can be considered within a different ideological framework - Sergio López-Piñeiro elaborates the situation of vacant land further as “a type of land that offers freedoms and opportunities that other parts of the city cannot offer” (2020, p33). This liberation of disciplinary stereotype of the urban environment to large extent accommodates various social events and stimulates new social vitality towards the voids within certain contexts. However, it is worth to notice that conditions of voids vary dramatically in different urban contexts, especially those between European and Asian cities, although they both are considered as the residues of capitalist processes of urbanization and commercialization.

An urban void in European is relatively separated within a dense building environment reconciling its borders with the previous ones, and thus the peripheral pattern remains isomorphically the same in the context. Despite it is regarded as a hole in the continuum which is external to the environment, its influences on the city fabric will never be dominant because of its limited size and intact surroundings. Therefore, the emptiness accommodates multiple expectations and possibilities in the resulting ground. In Asian, especially developing countries, the urban void renders another scene, where developments out of commercialization continuously generate new vacant areas in the historic cores of cities regardless of the deprivation of its sociocultural and historical background. For this reason, the void becomes a symbol of capitalism in this situation, in other words, as long as the building is demolished and turned into a void, the land has already been able to manifest its commercial values even though no plans are conceived for the future. Nevertheless, in order to increase the capitalist accumulation, the separated voids are connected to expand their territories scaling its size from small to extra large, and thus a city is gradually depriving its traditional characteristics. This problematic transformation is not only the erasure of physical objects but also events and habits that embedded in the memories of the inhabitants. Ironically, these inhabitants are often compulsively and violently expelled from their homes. Money becomes the main concern in this dialogue; its people and culture have come after it^[5].

Due to their roles and meanings in the construction and definition of urban configuration, these empty plots demonstrate distinct ideological frameworks according to their initial motivations and manipulating manners. Therefore, the urban voids should not only be implied as the notion of possibilities, otherwise, this overly optimistic attitude would lead to ignorance of the past where these indifference and deceptive potentials are embraced at the expense of histories, stories, and memories.

Instead of being excessively optimistic in terms of looking at urban voids as a result, the course towards a void constitutes a profound perspective of exploring the entities of a city under the perceived reality. What are the reasons for the urgency of deconstruction? What are the disciplines involved in the process? What kind of architectural and sociocultural strategies does the city need? How does an architect contribute to the land in different phrases of voidness? etc. By decomposing the procedure of an urban void into the several behavioural and situational phases, divisions occur and new insights into the dilemma would be discovered and become a trigger of a different strategy, a strategy that might be embedded in the gene of architecture.

Chapter 2: A transgressive procedure

Creation of a void undergoes a transgressive^[6] procedure, within which human intervention incessantly obscures the singularities and thus host its substantial proportion of defining the intricate transgression of voidness. This research divides the process into six situations, namely departing, abandonment, demolishing, debris, fixing and vacancy, categorizing them into three actions and three subsequential conditions. An urban void initiates its procedure after the leaving of inhabitants and gradually unveils itself by compromising on or embracing to this series of radical decisions.

1. Departing brings abandonment

Departing is an action that describes the inhabitants' departure of their houses either actively or passively, while commercial exploitation accounts mainly for these changes of originally inhabitable commonality. It causes the condition of abandonment that shows little daily activities and remains the architectural constructions on the land.

Apart from the emptiness of lives, this action unconsciously affects the position towards the place, where perspectives on how it is perceived and discussed switch gradually from internal participants to external intervenor. In this case, the invisible yet significant sociocultural values that embedded in unconsciousness would be neglected due to the lack of empathy and enthusiasm as an external intervenor. A breakage is therefore created between the place and its subsequent events in the sociocultural sense, even though the shell of a building is still existed there to manifest its historical trajectories. This residual construction is actually a static element whose configuration changes from liquidity of the clay to the stability of a brick because the fluidity of the residents' movement is evaporated from the place^[7]. The innate fluctuation of inhabitants generates spontaneous tensions that largely liberate heterogeneous vitalities from bottom up, in which tensions internal frictions and external resistances against radical interventions will vanish due to the departure and abandonment from inhabitants. At this moment, political power unveils its role in convincing or urging to leave by means of regulations, treaties, rules, or even secretly using a hammer to break a hole into a building; those invisible commercial strategies that drive these socio-political operations show their ignorance to the autonomous interventions on the iteration of a city. This action of departing, which is essentially an interruption to spontaneous tensions between distinct individual forces, freezes a moment that claims the end of a place.

2. Demolishing catalyses the debris

Demolishing shows the action that violently breaks a building into apart with different intentions. It is intriguing that, as an ideological reflection, their implemented methods would probably demonstrate the tensions between the demolishing event and remaining resistances. Due to the difficulties of physical conditions, three instruments, namely hammer, bulldozer, and explosive device^[8] are regarded as the typical tools of demolishing the constructions, however, their initial motivations which will not easily change allude the political urgency on site.

A hammer is commonly used to remove certain architectural elements in small scale. Instead of intentionally

[6] Foucault (1977) elaborated transgression as "it is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust". Since the process of becoming a void embraces both pure and complicated existences where we would like to describe its situation with the colour of grey, this play of transgression contributes to the further investigation of the events happened in the process.

[7] Simondon (1992) described the activity in motion as a transductive process to express the reality of individual relations. Haghghi (2015) elaborated this process upon the tensions of a

space's configuration and an arched passageway in her article, in order to understand the events/activities happened in this passageway strengthen reasonability of the arch in terms of its heterogeneous socio-political, architectural, economic, cultural and religious codes.

[8] In an interview from Amnesia, a resident complained that the municipality manually destroyed his house to expel his family at night, while in another scene a bulldozer was demolishing the construction of a building. These plots also remind me that the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis, Missouri, as well as some large scale buildings in China, are demolished by explosive devices.

removing the elements in an efficient way, it is more likely to be a threatening tool that expels the residents from their houses. A broken hole in a wall or ceiling, easily managed by a hammer, exposes the indoor to the exterior environment so as to instigate a sense of unsafe to the people who resist to follow the given policies. In fact, this type of insignificant destruction as a means of removing people is a gesture representing the incapability of living. Bulldozer, a mechanical tool, is the one that aims for demolishing architectural constructions within a large scale and area. Spatial connection of the voids emerges, yet this connection obfuscates the borders between the sites, enabling creation of new territories which claims the power of commercial colonization to its history. In such a context, everything becomes less concerned compared to the efficiency drew upon the profit-orientated principles. The urban morphology is gradually losing its contextual influence on a new construction. However, what is a more devastating demolition counts for the explosive device, the one that symbolizes a complete and instant deconstruction. An explosive device is capable of demolishing a massive volume, for instance, monuments, and thus create an extra-large vacant space. This type of area establishes a relatively autonomic zone that is not possible to organically connect to its peripheral environment as it was before. Ironically, if we look into some cities in Asian, commercial bombs have already dropped onto the a certain amount of irreversible historical areas, and some of them were implemented by architects or urban planners. These methods transgress the collectively autonomous norm by contributing the voids and hence they reveal the dualism of an urban void through detaching the material periphery and isolating itself. Discontinuity characterizes these places as an abrupt insertion that escapes the build environment from the materialized and contextualized entities.

The action of demolishing is also a course of unveiling the remedial measures and the provisional repairing that manipulated by the residents, within which extra materials and new technologies were applied to maintain the houses. For instance, steel beams were added to reinforce the roofs of a brick house; timber panels were patched to fill broken enclosures. Subsequently, objects that remained after the action of demolishing catalyse the debris, a condition that states the termination of a building and indicates the collapse in the sense of materiality. The land loses its focal point as a space. The increasing emotional sense of distance and the blurred vision of the land lead to a dilemma that its architectural and cultural values split up and conflicted with each other in terms of their authenticity. These demolished debris are incapable to reassemble and reconstruct in order to maintain their cultural values, and the difficulties mainly ascribe to fragmented tectonic relations and their indecipherable presentations. Due to the reduction of cultural values as an incomplete debris which causes decrease of commercial values, the participants' positions towards the land therefore shift from intervening to dominating in which their subjectivity and sovereignty appeared and estranged their relations to the city.

3. Fixing renders vacancy

Fixing is not a necessary action in a naturally demolishing process where debris are remained until new development starts. However, the expression of fixing reveals an act that attempts to cover the trajectories and evidences by means of implementing new materials and treatments, becoming obsessive with flat, impact, and perfectionism. It features the commercializing tendency in the historical urban area, but the unknown future plans result in the only solution to fix the land in order to alleviate the awkwardness of voidness. In fact, the more one tries to hide, yet, the more one is exposed – that is, the reaction actually exposes the incapability of materializing the commercial blueprint as well as the confusion about the future plan. By taking compromised measures on the surfaces related to a void, the action of fixation reveals its competitive nature against the perplexed future.

The stage of fixing initiates with flattening protrusions out the surfaces within a void; plinths, beam-corbels, and crumbling walls are assumed to be the main obstacles. These tectonic intersections that epitomize the notion of support are erased to dissociated the visible material connections from ambient constructions. Benefited from this flattening, unifying the surfaces that faced inwards the empty space becomes less difficult to approach, and thus the commercialized standardization prevails among the continuous voids in large scales. Surfaces like the walls on the ground floor are paint into white colour to normalize those multiple situations and to imitate a lively environment^[9]. Surfaces of the ground confront a similar treatment

THE PROCEDURAL VOIDNESS

– that is, asphalt, the symbolic material of modernisation, replaces sand/soil roads in an alley and brick tiles in a courtyard. This oversimplified substitution that unifies different materials into one is conflicting the spontaneous development and engagement with the inhabitants, where the ways of making and manipulating the materials shift from stacking sand or bricks to solidifying asphalt. In a line of thought that resonates with the role that builders playing with the materials transforms from organizing - where one has to accept the threshold level of material and he needs to compromise with the actual situation - to controlling – where one can mound the material in any shape fitted with his ambition. Unification of the surfaces eliminates the allusive interface borders between the spatially connected voids, allowing them to get visually and thus substantially connected.

At the moment when fixation comes to the end, an urban void features itself as vacancy, in which condition the land is unoccupied, unexploited, unprogrammed, and states the suspension of its formal activities within the scale of time. Suspension is the act of future planning^[10], a planning with unknown motivations and schedules. It is an integral phrase and a common strategy of the urban development and it alludes the limitations of the plan and intention of architects. Creation of emptiness in the urban environment attracts more attention to its enclosure, where the interior side of a wall is unveiled and acts as the elevation of a void. This transition enables an elevation to record the stories of a void from outside, leading vacancy as a specific moment that acknowledges the place by means of its surroundings rather than itself. At the moment when suspension continues, moveable partitions – concrete barriers will be involved as the elevation and become a transgression into the void, because these blocks construct an inharmony border that claims their provisional territories for the coming new activities of the void. Placement of these barriers prevents the unrestrained activities from the earlier unification, however, it also lay down new colonial rules which challenge various values and powers between society, culture, and economy.

Along with this parallel process, the involvers' position consists both of intervening and dominating instead of only one of them. In this shifting, it is important to underscore that vacancy of the land is not only an issue of abandonment or debris, but it is also an issue of its spatial identities in the future. On the one hand, the continuous voids declare little limitations on the land, where volumes and scales represented metropolitan identity ought to be designed to accommodate the contemporary era; on the other hand, the fabric that comprises the primary core of a city formation should not be forgotten in that its ideological uniqueness is unduplicated. This dual situation reveals a reality that the emptiness demonstrates a city is losing its cultural autonomy.

Conclusion

A void will never be the void without its context, in which the procedure of voidness has more values compared to the static observation with its peripheral environments in a frozen moment. If voids are to be dynamic, if they are to be places that reflect the sequences of transformation, the voidness enable us to distinguish the prevailing ideologies and allow us engage in process with more valuable insights, rather than reading the void as a result that filled with possibilities and potentials. This process unfold a diverse entity of the void in which sociocultural background and historical uniqueness are involved before the emptiness occurs. The process of constructing a void is an irreversible yet contributed process in the metabolism of old

[9] These are two assumptive reasons that I proposed for white walls. The related phenomenon is captured in documentary *Amnesia* and some photos about the worn-out fabric in Abkooh area, Mashhad, Iran.

[10] Doron (2000) stated the reciprocal relations between suspension and transgression, where suspension establishes the border to allow transgression to operate. In this research, I considered that transgression happen in the whole process but not only the suspension with different intentions because these transgressive actions catalyst the emergence of a void.

city fabric. Voidness, in the case of Asian city, is a sequence of transgressive activities that problematizes the involving actions and their inevitable consequences that address many obscure motivations, interests, manners, etc., many of which will not have been previously determined, planned, or even characterized. If architects hesitate to involve in this process, hesitate to identify the palimpsest of a city, this series of transgressions will manifest that a city is meeting its past.

For a city, the urban void is first a ritual, and only secondly a place.

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