Eine Stadt wie Deutschland
Wolfsburg inszeniert sich als
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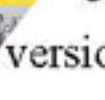
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„Workshop Biennale 2016: The Cypriot Pavilion"

Interview of Socrates Stratis, Curator of the Cyprus Pavilion at the 15th Venice Biennale of Architecture, by Kaye Geipel in the special edition of Bauwelt (extended version in english), May 18th, 2016

A "Reporting from the front"

"Reporting from the front" wants to be an "authentic documentation" as Aravena is suggesting. Thanks to the networked structure of the contemporary society, "Reporting from the front" can enlarge the "Reporters' pool" with practices that operate in such contexts on an everyday basis, besides those sent to the front from any kind of center. However, being part of such enlarged "Reporters' pool" we may need to confront six challenges.

Firstly, any "authentic documentation" is a purely political act. In other words, we have to choose a side to support, something rather delicate in regards to the conflictual frontiers' context. Secondly, by employing architecture as a medium for such "authentic documentation", we inherit Architecture's interventional character adding an additional layer of conflict. Thirdly, the context of frontiers is bound by contested institutions thus, any reporting practice may be easily trapped in the on-going conflictual narratives of the opposing sides. The fourth challenge is about the role of "Reporting from the front" before or after bloodshed conflicts even if first-aid kind of architecture is extremely useful to support the suffering population. Supporting reconciliation processes for conflict transformation could take into account the generative aspect of conflict in the arena of the political. The fifth challenge is about the complexity of the "age of anxiety" as called by Baratta and Aravena, for describing our era. Such kind of complexity calls for synergies across disciplinary and national territories challenging the nature of the Venice Biennale of Architecture. The sixth challenge is about taking a stance in regards to our disciplinary divides, such as that between the autonomy of architecture and the dependence of architecture or that between investing in the materiality of the architectural object and supporting the immateriality of the architectural process.

Addressing the six challenges may help us to understand better Architecture's limitations but also its potentials within the contemporary world, where there is an increasing value given to enclosures of all sorts, in the name of safety and security. How could Architecture go beyond consolidating such trends by erecting additional physical enclosures? What if, our "authentic documentation" focuses on the political dimensions of the materiality and spatiality of the architectural process? Then, we could become aware of the great potential of agencies of space and of technology lying within the Architecture's discipline, following Bruno Latour's definition, ready to contribute into processes of change of actual status quos. I am referring to the active agency of means of representation and communication as well as of tactful organization of physical spaces and support structures of events and rituals. Then, Architecture could support those agents in society that invest in agonistic practices to promote exchange between communities in conflict, across all sorts of enclosures. This is truly, the aim of the "Contested Fronts: Commoning Practices for Conflict Transformation" curatorial project.

B. The Cypriot Pavilion

THE CONFLICT AS STARTING POINT

"Contested Fronts" documents an on-going project in Cyprus, which I have been leading, called "Hands-on Famagusta" and invites international practices, networks and pedagogical programs to join the on-going debate. Famagusta is a Cypriot coastal city, located on the east edge of the island just north of the UN cease fire military zone and east of a UK military base. Famagusta's inhabitants are Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. However, after the 1974 war with Turkey, the city has been deprived of its Greek Cypriot inhabitants who were displaced to the south part of the island during the war, and the Turkish Cypriots moved to the north. The Famagusta population was 38,960 inhabitants in 1973, of which 31,960 were Greek Cypriots and 7,000 Turkish Cypriots. The population in 2011 was 37,939 inhabitants consisting of Turkish Cypriots and settlers from Turkey. Famagusta consists of all kinds of enclaves with the most notorious one being the Turkish army controlled, ghost area of Famagusta. It is an abandoned urban area that used to house around 32,000 Greek Cypriots, located by a beautiful sandy shore. A French/Venetian walled city is situated further north, very close to a university enclave.

Why addressing Famagusta and not Nicosia that is well known of its divided state? Because, Famagusta seems to be the next divided city of Cyprus. There are indications that the south part of the city will be returned to the

Greek Cypriot substituent State and its north part will remain under Turkish Cypriot substituent State, both part of the Cyprus Federal State. Such scenarios are part of the United Nations on-going negotiations between the two community leaders who strive for agreement and hopefully keep Turkey out of the north part of the island where it has an overwhelming control since 1974. During the last couple of years, the "Hands-on Famagusta" project team has created awareness in regards to this partition scenario, and it has provided alternatives that may lead to a unified city, influencing the on-going debate about the city's future across the divide. The "Hands-on Famagusta" project is built around an interactive digital interface, (www.handsonfamagusta.org), face-to-face roundtable workshops and a physical transportable model of the city. The digital interface is an interactive web-platform which hosts a smart archive that advocates for the commons of a unified Famagusta by introducing a playful mode of designerly knowledge exchange. It introduces modes of reconciliation deep into potential urban reconstruction processes.

The "Hands-on Famagusta" project team consists of a wonderful group of people coming from both communities, part of "Imaginary Famagusta", "AA & U for Architecture, Art and Urbanism" and "Laboratory of Urbanism, University of Cyprus". They have to surpass every day the divisive mental and physical divides deeply imbedded in the island, in order to meet and work together in Nicosia, for the construction of common urban imaginaries. They are also my collaborators for preparing this curatorial project.

THE EXHIBITION

"Contested Fronts" revisits the methodological approach of the "Hands-on Famagusta" project by making explicit three processes that are behind commoning practices for conflict transformation. The first one is called "Counter-mapping" and it has to do with using the practice of mapping to problematize the civil society in regards dominant mental geographies. Entering the exhibition you will see a large isometric drawing of Famagusta in its entirety, but broken down into many parts, enclaves, which are floating on the black background. Such drawing was used to encourage the Famagustians to go beyond their split mental maps and become aware of a severely fragmented urban environment. You will also see 20 parts of a transportable city model with its folding base. All stored on metal shelves. In this case the Famagustians had the chance to see for the first time their city territory represented in its entirety. The "Build-up" which is a peacebuilding collective, operating in conflict zones, is part of this section. In addition, you will see "Archis Interventions SEE", a network of independent urban initiatives in South East Europe, both working on issues of representation and spatial narratives.

The second one is called "Creating Thresholds" and it is about practices of exchange across edges, transforming limits to alive thresholds, encouraging the opening up of urban enclaves to the city's commons. In this section you will see the work done by the "Hands-on Famagusta" with the help of the Urban Design studio of the University of Cyprus and that of KTH, Stockholm. Transformative themes, for example about sharing infrastructures, or networks of third spaces suggest the presence of the commons within the actual Famagustian enclaves. In addition the work of the "Institute of Threshold" will be part of this section, investigating the geopolitical architectures of bordering in the Middle East region. "Passages", an action-research project dealing with small mobility spaces and launches competitions in architecture, design and short movies, is part of this section too. The third one is called "Introducing Urban Controversies" and it has to do with the unfolding of the positive aspect of conflict within the making of the architectural and urban project where the urban actors are in constant re-alliance and dispute. We usually tend to analyze contested spaces based on ethnic characteristics. We also tend to see peacebuilding urban reconstruction as neutralizing agent of conflict. The "Hands-on Famagusta" project team suggests that part of the reconciliation process is to offer ways for the urban actors across the Cypriot divide to re-ally beyond their ethnic identity and confront other urban actors on organized platforms that address specific controversial questions about the city's urban reconstruction. "Mapping Controversies" which is a research and pedagogical program transposing Actors Networks Theory in Architecture, is part of this section. "City Reparo" is a social enterprise that focuses on Belfast's urban transformations is also part of this section.

I consider the Cypriot participation in the 15th Venice Biennale of Architecture as a stepping stone for synergies between the participating agents to hopefully create a critical mass for alternative methods of urban reconstruction in deeply contested societies like the Cypriot one. The "Contested Fronts Open Source Archive" assembled in Palazzo Malipiero, Venice could be handy for those who look for methods to "report from the front", (www.contestedfronts.org).