

Interrupted Spaces, Engineered Traditions

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The conference *Interrupted Spaces, Engineered Traditions* took place on 30 June 2021 via Zoom and, within a dense one-day program, fruitfully addressed the question of what role spatial interruptions plays in the production of cultural and political identities. Despite its brevity, the conference gathered an impressive geographical as well as thematic range of presentations that created very different approaches to spatial interruptions. International contributions analyzed case studies from the United States, Asia and Europe. In doing so, the presentations demonstrated the complex effects that various forms of disruption can produce. These include both the physical and material consequences as well as ideological fantasies of power, such as propagating a reconstruction that surpasses what once existed. Each contribution shed light on specific constellations of political, social and cultural factors that acted as catalysts for the realization of long-term urban projects. The presentations painted a complex picture of the concepts underlying demolition and (re)construction as historically specific constructs, resilient yet flexible, that shaped and were in turn shaped by various political and ideological discourses over time.

The first panel drew on the role of urban spaces as archives for interruptions. In this panel, the speakers showed how urban development is connected with the interruption and reconfiguration of urban space putting an emphasis on urban development in Europe before and after World War II. Only the last presentation had a slightly different focus, deliberating about counter-mechanisms that undermine the intentions of urban planning which she talked about using a New York City

example.

LORENZO GRIECO (Rome / Canterbury) presented the results of a recent cooperation with Maria Grazia D'Amelio (Rome) and described in his lecture how during Italian fascism different urban planning projects were created to stage the power of Benito Mussolini and his political regime. These plans took little account of existing streets or residential development. According to Grieco, urban planning interventions were intended to create a „modern reinvention of a past topography“.

DANIEL HADWIGER (Erkner) showed how German occupants used the negative image of the Marseille port district as a problem district to justify the radical demolition of an entire neighborhood and disguised the social cleansing as an overdue action in line with earlier planning objectives. The old port district was reconstructed between 1945 and 1958 integrating historical architectural elements into contemporary design. The result was a moderate reconstruction in comparison to other French cities. Still, Hadwiger underlined that though the demolition and reconstruction of the port aimed at erasing the negative image of the area, the prejudices remained and only moved spatially to the suburbs of Marseille.

CARMEN ENSS (Bamberg) dealt with Germany's destruction during World War II and how it was interpreted differently in the context of reconstruction supporting different interests. Enss presented the thesis that reconstruction planners and emergency organizers determined where old structures would continue to exist and where long-term spatial disruptions were made. The decisions specifically helped to overwrite the past in order to obscure unwelcome memories, emphasize other memories, or even introduce entirely new traditions. Enss illustrated the different results and intentions behind the planning of the reconstruction on the basis of Munich, Leipzig and Nuremberg. Enss concluded in particular that an intact historic townscape does not mean that there were no bad damages. Rather, in reconstruction, urban planners generated zones of tradition in which curated construction took place. The new „old towns“ were just as much modern spaces as visibly modern architecture.

KATRINA GULLIVER's (Bristol) focused on a Pepsi sign in Queens, New York City. The sign was placed on top of a roof of a Pepsi bottling plant in 1936. In 2004, the neon advertisement was dismantled when the bottling plant was sold for redevelopment. Locals advocated successfully for a re-installment of the Pepsi sign. Gulliver underlined that nostalgia not only affects objects or places that were planned as historical sights but also things like the Pepsi sign which was not intentionally built as a heritage site. This unintentional urban heritage can be seen as a counterpoint to the traditional mechanisms of preservation, which were conceived to protect for example churches or graveyards. Gulliver emphasized the role affection plays in relating to urban space and that certain objects can become focal points of identification regardless whether they were intended as heritage or not.

The second panel was devoted to political ideologies and urban interruption as vehicle to shape political and cultural identities taking up examples from socialism. Thus, this panel focused more on political power forcing spaces to change rather than on the process of urban planning that put agendas into reality.

In her presentation, HELÉNA TÓTH (Bamberg) dealt with the development of the political cult of the dead under socialism and its effects on the architecture of cemeteries and their integration into urban development. She impressively demonstrated these effects using the example of Neubrandenburg's Carlshöhe forest cemetery, which was opened in 1976. Within the framework of a socialist funeral culture, rituals shaped by the church were to be pushed out of the public consciousness during burials. Instead, a secular funeral culture was to be propagated in accordance with the ideology of the „socialist new man“. This particular interpretation of the socialist cult of the dead was only able to establish itself to a limited extent, because the population did not agree with the new conditions under which relatives were buried. In her lecture, Tóth argued that the history of the cult of the dead in the GDR had been marked by spatial interruptions. The architecture that emerged from this, however, was not simply a reflection of the political will from above, but also the result of a process of negotiation between the

party and the population and the material exigencies of urban planning.

NICOLETA ȘERBAN (Bucharest) focused on the plans of Nicolae Ceaușescu in Communist Romania to demolish about 8,000 villages and build agricultural centers. Consequently, a few million people would have had to leave their houses. Ceaușescu imagined an enormous growth in the agricultural production by tearing down the villages and building modern industrial and agricultural buildings. However, in reality these plans were not realistic. The real ideology behind the utopian plan was to move the people into housing blocks into small apartments where they could be controlled and would have a lack of intimacy. Coming up with the plans only in 1988, they were not put into reality apart from a few exceptions as the regime was overthrown in 1989. Șerban interpreted Ceaușescu's desired project from an architectural point of view as a totalitarian erasure and culturally, as an interruption.

The third section of the conference opened up another perspective on interrupted spaces, going beyond European examples to include perspectives on colonial and postcolonial heritage.

In her presentation, PARIDHI DAVID MASSEY (Sonipat) unfolded the history of the Sri Govind Dev Temple and its „metamorphosis from a monument in British colonial India to that of a symbol of national culture in postcolonial India“. Throughout the 19th century, the temple was transformed into a public site to propagate the ‚magic of the East‘. In postcolonial India, the political and industrial elite of the newly formed independent India emphasized the urgency to restore the temple as symbol of national pride. Massey showed vividly how the flaws and material interruptions of the fragmented temple repeatedly serve as a starting point to negotiate the political and religious significance of the temple and how these interpretations tend to project an ideological completeness and purity into the building.

LISANDRA FRANCO DE MENDOÇA (Berlin) examined the colonial heritage of Maputo and its interpretation during the Transitional Government (1974-1975) in Mozambique and after the independence in 1975.

The presentation focused on the colonial urban planning of Maputo which divided the city in a „city of cement“ and surrounding suburban structure. Within „the city of cement“ the Portuguese colonizers built a landscape of colonial monuments. In the wake of independence, many monuments and places were regarded as unwanted heritage. Mendonça argued that the contested colonial heritage should not be taken as an end but as a starting point to investigate the dynamics of heritage practices like the selection, preservation, representation and reception in the post-independence cityscape to shed light on the repercussions of colonialisms across space and time.

RITIKA SAHU (Guwahati) analyzed the staging of historic parks in Sivsagar, Assam. She distinguished between historic parks that enclose historic sites and those that were created in the context of curated and reimagined history. Using the parks around Gargaon Palace and the Rang Ghar historical site, she showed how parks function as gated spaces and the staffage in the park serves to reimagine the past. The parks, according to Sahu, paint an exaggerated picture of the past and are subjected to the economic dictates of conservation. In addition, Sahu convincingly concluded that theme parks serve to stage individual personalities and reproduce gender stereotypes. Through her presentation, Sahu demonstrated how the staging of the parks represents a spatial incision as parks are fitted to a particular historical image. Behind these mechanisms, there is also an ideal of 'beautification' that derived from the colonial picturesque aesthetic.

Two keynote lectures concluded the conference. FRANCESCA RUSSELLO AMMON (Philadelphia) used the history of the bulldozer in the U.S. as an example to describe how systematic and politically motivated land clearing and destruction of building structures occurred in the U.S. after World War II. A veritable „culture of destruction“ emerged which included ideology, policy, technology, and practices of destruction. The lecture demonstrated the significance of the war economy for the bulldozer and for its deployment as a vehicle of social and urban engineering. All this was interwoven with an

ideology that regarded nature as an enemy or an obstacle to technological progress. It was not until the 1960s that a critical rethinking began, when the enormous social traumatization caused by land clearance in the countryside and in the cities became visible. Ammon pointed out that the question of how exactly landscapes or buildings were created is pushed into the background and too much focus is placed on analyzing the results. As a result, the dramatic interventions and disruptions that people inflict on the environment are forgotten.

TIJANA VUJOSEVIC (Vancouver) showed in the second keynote how architecture was used in the Soviet Union to make the Soviet ideology directly physically tangible. Using vivid examples, she demonstrated how movement, sensory perception, and the architectural realization of institutions were instrumentalized to bring the ideology of the socialist New Man to life. She differentiated the general basic assumption that Soviet architecture in the 1920s and 1930s was mainly characterised by unrealized utopian ideals, while in the Stalin era a serial and monotonous architecture dominated, which was completely interwoven with the ideology of communism. Vujosevic, on the other hand, proved that very different architectures emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, testifying both to utopias and to the real manifestation of an ideology in the form of built spaces. Especially impressive were the explanations about the Moscow Metro and its construction. Vujosevic demonstrated how the design and the materials used, especially highly reflective surfaces, such as marble, were intended to make workers experience the power of communist ideology as a manifestation of collective wealth. The „gleam“ of communism's success was even inscribed onto the bodies of the construction workers who built the metro, as many of them demonstratively spent their earnings on golden teeth. The collective experiences of ideology therefore were engineered to engage a broad register of sensory perception. In total, the keynote demonstrated how spatial strategies were regularly repeated in order to create a Soviet identity through spatial experience.

The presentations looked at topics ranging

from interrupted spaces (Ammon) to engineered Traditions (Vujosevic), always regarding both aspects. As a whole, the conference engendered a fruitful conversation crossing disciplinary and geographical boundaries around its two starting points. The presentations emphasized that realized projects incorporated several historical layers simultaneously: as markers of „heritage“ or vehicles to communicate (invented) traditions, their interpretation was both historically specific and continuously contested.

Conference overview:

Panel I: Urban Space – Archive of Interruptions

Maria Grazia D’Amelio (Rome) / Lorenzo Grieco (Rome / Canterbury): Interrupted Interruptions: Urban Politics and Unexecuted Projects in Rome during Fascism

Daniel Hadwiger (Erkner): Transforming a City’s Image by Destruction. The Demolition and Reconstruction of the Old Port of Marseille, 1943–1958

Carmen M. Enss (Bamberg): Scraping the Palimpsest: City Planning and Map Making in Early Post-War Europe

Katrina Gulliver (Bristol): Commercial Identity and Community Identification: Interrogating Urban Memory in the US

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Panel II: Spatial Politics in Engineering the Socialist New Man

Olga Marassanova (Perm): Electric Frontier of Soviet Urban Space: The Cultural History of the Energy System, 1920-1930 in Ural City Perm

Heléna Tóth (Bamberg): Engineering Grief: The Politics of Cemetery Architecture between Technocracy and Ideology in Neubrandenburg, 1964-1976

Nicoleta Șerban (Bucharest): The Project of Rural Systematization in Communist Romania, 1988-1989

Panel III: Interrupted Spaces, (Post-)Colonial Heritage Making

Paridhi David Massey (Sonipat): Shri Govind Dev and the Claims to the Past: Life of a Tem-

ple in the Pilgrimage-city of Vrindavan, 1880-1950s

Lisandra Franco de Mendonça (Berlin): Topographies of Loss and Liberation: Colonial Disentanglement and the Quest for Mozambicaness — Maputo’s Socio-Urban Space in the Aftermath of Independence

Ritika Sahu (Guwahati): Park(s), Public space(s) and the Past(s): A Study of Urban Parks of Sivasagar, Assam

Keynote Lectures

Francesca Russello Ammon (Philadelphia): Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape

Tijana Vujosevic (Vancouver): Space-Making as Ideological Practice: Modernism and Soviet Identities in the 1920s and the 1930s

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