IMPROVISATIONAL LANDSCAPE
ONE STEP CLOSER TO INCLUSIVE
&
DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPACES

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Immigration has continuously been an evident part of human history. Throughout time, for one reason or another people have left the place they call home. Whether voluntarily seeking better opportunities in other cities/countries/continents, or forcefully being asked to leave due to political, social, or natural complications, resettlement continues to be a difficult challenge for those who are displaced, as well as their new cities. When faced with such challenges, individuals often find themselves in transitional or temporary living situations, most of which tend to be less pleasant, safe, or engaging spaces. Besides the negative impacts that these spaces have on individuals at that time, they are likely to leave them with primarily negative long-term psychological impacts as well.

Restorative environments, namely landscapes, allow for recovery of individuals through their components of mystery, coherence, complexity, and texture (Kaplan & Kaplan). In the case of immigrants and refugees, the time of adjustment and adaptation heightens the absence of sense of belonging and potential social injustice; however, design and very particularly as showcased throughout this thesis, landscape architecture has the capacity to create spaces that are more just, inclusive, and engaging through not only participatory methods, but also improvisational design elements. Through these elements, a displaced individual has an opportunity to engage in the efforts of placemaking, which enhances their experience by making something unfamiliar, familiar. “Yes, and...” the very fundamental and simple rule of improvisation suggests acceptance and addition, which allows for the involved individuals to not only be creative regarding their surroundings, but encourages them to become a part of evolving of the space. Furthermore, improvisation allows, or rather encourages exploration, investigation, additions, and finally adaptations, which elaborates into a community of inclusion.

This thesis research and design study serves as a case study to best understand these circumstances at a smaller scale with very similar characteristics by studying Virginia Tech’s WAAC (Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center). At 30 years of age, this institution has welcomed students from over 15 countries over the years, some of whom have only stayed for a short time of three months. A thorough study of its history, diverse past, engaging nature, and improvisational characteristics, the WAAC proves to increase a sense of belonging as a transitional space via inclusion, engagement, and participation.

This context becomes especially important for a displaced/marginalized group of individuals. The process forms the society and the built environment, which in return shape the people building it in the first place. This, increases the sense of belonging, and therefore, makes for a more positive experience in a given space. Ultimately the inclusion, encouragement, and engagement makes unfamiliar spaces familiar to the individuals. Familiarity, repetitiveness, and freedom of contribution are significant in sense of place. This becomes specifically important for a displaced-detached group of individuals.

Keywords: landscape architecture, improvisation, sense of belonging, sense of place, happiness, environmental psychology, urban campus
INTRODUCTION

The issue, human displacement, whether caused by natural disasters or political/social issues, is rather serious, especially in our world today. Whether the wildfires of California, the hurricanes of Louisiana, or political issues of Syria, there is a massive population who voluntarily or forcefully leave the place they call home. Despite many psychological and physical challenges, trauma, and difficulties that these individuals have to face, where they go next does not have to be a tough adjustment. As of June 2016, there are more than 21.3 million refugees in the world. In the case of Syria, for instance, over 1 million refugees arrived to their camps in the first five months of 2013, with about half of them being children. Today, this number exceeds 3 million people. For immigrants and refugees alike, the culture shock, climate differences, and emotional distances accompanied with stress and trauma are parts of the everyday life; however, this challenging issue of human displacement tends to be dismissed and ignored as a design issue. Though in the more recent years, design of shelters and temporary housing has sparked an interest in the design community, it tends to be most within architecture; however, the surrounding environments are just as contributing to the wellness of these individuals. Despite many challenges that immigrants or displaced individuals encounter, they add a tremendous amount of values to their new homes if they are given the opportunity to participate in the placemaking of their surroundings.

Evidently, immigration has continued to provide opportunities for cultural exchange and economic development throughout the world. Immigrants are important and significant to the thriving nature of contemporary urban centers, both for the existing and evolving communities. Having a diverse group of individuals has proven to increase the quality of teamwork\(^1\) as well as to add to the economic opportunities of their towns and cities of residence through purchasing goods, investing in businesses such as restaurants, stores, and production facilities, resulting in more jobs overall\(^2\). A report from the Brooking Institute suggests that in the United States, “among people with advanced degrees, immigrants are three times more likely to file patents than US-born citizens. Such investments in new businesses and in research may provide spillover benefits to US-born workers by enhancing job creation and by increasing innovation among their US-born peers.”\(^3\)

This is also true in the world of arts, according to news outlets, including CNN\(^4\).

Likewise, the United States has always provided unique opportunities for the advancement of individuals by providing professional, personal, and social growth; however, it is inevitable that the process of feeling at home is not always easy. Cultural differences, language barriers, and often fear of the unknown can contribute to feeling lonely and isolated, which would impact the immigrant as well as the US negatively in social, cultural, and economic aspects. Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, two of the pioneers of environmental psychology have been working on the importance of environmental psychology on the wellbeing of individuals and their thriving futures, for the past two decades. “Social injustices are created when certain uses are ignored or not provided for […] in the park.” Mental fatigue as they continue, is a rather crucial issue faced by the frazzled, hassled, worn-out, stressed, or irritable individuals, which consequently negatively

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3 Ibid.
impacts their performance as citizens in personal and social settings. Restorative environments, namely landscapes, allow for the recovery of these individuals through their components of mystery, coherence, complexity, and texture. In the case of immigrants and refugees, the time of adjustment and adaptation heightens the absence of sense of belonging and potential social injustice; however, design and very particularly throughout this thesis, landscape architecture—due to its restorative nature, amongst other benefits—can be crucial in creating spaces that are more just, engaging, and a positive experience to a displaced individual.

Garett Eckbo, one of the pioneers of modern landscape architecture in the U.S. believes in the importance of landscape architecture in the wellbeing, physically and psychologically, of migrant workers in California. This is a highly related and significant issue in our world today because many immigrants and refugees, regardless of their origins and backgrounds, will be an active part of the society they move to. Just as any other citizen of said society, it is only their rights to feel a sense of belonging and create an attachment to a place. Furthermore, stressing on the importance of environmental psychology, a given space could be a tremendous improvement to the physical as well as psychological wellbeing of these individuals, who will be active members of their new society.

The intention of this thesis study, investigation, and design is to look at landscape architecture as the means of the powerful design tool that it is, to allow for an easier, less stressful, and more engaging journey of adaption, adaptation, and adjustment for a diverse group of individuals who may be experiencing with displacement and detachment. It does so by looking at the issue of displacement and its possible design solutions through the lens of improvisation. Improvisation is significant, since it encourages involvement in a given situation, increasing the sense of belonging to the individuals.

**STUDY & ANALYSIS**

Spontaneity, flexibility, and sense of personality are a few words that come in mind when thinking about improvisation in the arts, comedic scenes, and musical experiences. The reason improvisation, in particular, could be a beneficial response to this issue, is its very certain characteristics of spontaneity, imagination, and creation. Improvisation allows individuals, as well as groups, to use existing elements to make something unfamiliar, familiar. This is especially crucial to the lives of individuals who may be feeling out of place for one reason or another, since it will allow them to live in more comfort and peace of mind. Improvisation, as Walter Hood suggests, “utilizes previous canons as a framework for departure, but demands individual responses”, providing them opportunities to make something of their own. This characteristic of improvisation—appropriation—reinforces the image of a community these individuals come from, making them a part of the new community they are a part of, while at the camps. One of the most important parts of improvisation is what is left over of it. Since it encourages and allows the next person, group, or generation to see that as a starting point and carry on, adding their own elements, points, and ideas to it. With that, something ordinary and unfamiliar can become unique and familiar.

Graphics studies of unexpectedness
“Through layering of spaces and events an improvised landscape emerges which reflect the soul of the community, particular to place, extending the tradition of landscape design.” (Noise Orders, p. 7) Improvisation, he continues, is fundamental to imagination. When in a transitional space and time, providing the users of the landscape with opportunities to create and inspire to imagine, not only allows for an easier adaptation, due to caring, but also creates a sense of belonging. Improvisation is not ultimate freedom, in an improvisational design, a framework is provided, and within the framework there are opportunities for adjustments, imagination and creation. A significant part of improvisation is allowing and providing the users and visitors to see and discover possibilities of creation.

Some of the qualities that improvisation adds to the spaces include:

1. An open-endedness that allows and rather encourages for imagination of a variety of activities, as opposed to a certain activity
2. Offering hints of potential use of spaces, as opposed to prescribing to a certain use of the space
3. Activating the spaces differently at different times, based on the users

Improvisational spaces flow and intertwine, encouraging flexibility and choices amongst the users, but more importantly, they follow the one rule of improvisation, “yes, and…” They encourage users and passerbyers to leave something behind, leave it different than they had found it, encouraging the next users to make an addition to it and make it their own. This circle of interactions, though at times and often subconscious, creates a cycle of sense of belonging between the users and their –now- shared space. Similar to the movable chair studies of William H. Whyte, the very idea that individuals had the capability and power to just lift a chair and move it a few inches, made them feel more empowered. But, what exactly are some other types of improvisational landscape elements, and how do we use them? In other words:

Can landscape architecture, through the lens of improvisation, design and create a place—however temporary or transitional—that makes the adaptation and adaption journey for a displaced individual easier, more pleasant, and engaging?
EXPLORING TRANSITION, SENSE OF BELONGING, AND IMPROVISATION WITHIN A LANDSCAPE & FINDINGS

The WAAC – Washington Alexandria Architecture Center- is a satellite extension of Virginia Tech, with a focus on architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and design. Providing a unique educational experience to 200 students every year from over 10 countries, the WAAC has had a longstanding reputation of inclusiveness, unity, and community while encouraging creativity and a space of sharing cultures. Considering the students share the space and their experiences with one another between 3 months to 3 years, the WAAC and its surrounding environment is more transitional and temporary for some than it is for others. Furthermore, the WAAC, during its 35 years of service and education, has proven to be a memorable and positive experience for its students, with students returning for higher education or teaching positions; therefore, understanding its reasons of success, especially those that were contributing spatially was important. Due to the ever-changing nature of the WAAC, and opportunities it continues to provide students and faculty to explore and experience within the building, the culture at the WAAC is –and has been- improvisational. The understanding of improvisation and its vivid and active residence at the WAAC encouraged the investigation of this thesis to design an urban campus for this institution, to further explore the concepts of transition, sense of belonging, and improvisation within a landscape setting.

The main building of the WAAC, purchased in 1990, has been an ever-evolving phenomenon. After two decades of tireless efforts of many faculty and students, the main building -originally built in 1909 as the Robert E. Lee School for Girls- has kept its structure of brick walls, heavy wood joints, and wooden floors. As a design school the building and the surrounding grounds have themselves become a kind of laboratory for learning and building. Through this collective endeavor, for the betterment of the school and through a desire to shape their own environment - each year students propose, continue and complete design-build projects and architecture interventions of various scales within the space.

Considering the importance of participatory design and engagement, a portion of the investigation called for student surveys to identify where they saw the boundaries of the WAAC, where they
felt their footprints, and most importantly, why did they walk. Collective, individual, as well as interviews were conducted to understand how and where the students and faculty would define the informal boundaries of the campus to be and reasons they would walk. These studies later determined the immediate and larger boundaries of the campus, as well as declare the primary and secondary routes, based on most popular designations. Furthermore, extensive studies were conducted to best study the surrounding context of sounds, smells, shadows, and types of uses around the WAAC. The findings of these studies helped identify spaces that were best suitable for class setting versus social settings of the campus.

Sketches/studies of existing use of space at the WAAC

Sketches/studies of existing use of space at the WAAC

Sound and smell study

‘Why do the students walk” survey results
The land use study suggested that the location and its surrounding land use could welcome neighborhood individuals to use the space as well. The movement study suggested that the foot traffic tends to be concentrated around the main building, but more specifically the faculty parking lot, located directly behind the building. More importantly, the faculty parking lot was which is divided by a wall from the City’s parking lot has been used for small informal gatherings, primary connecting point between the students and the nearby cafes and restaurants, as well as a short getaway from the hectic studio desks. Furthermore, despite the exiting brick wall between the two parking lots, students have created concrete steps to allow for shortcuts to the cafés. These clues and suggestions provided a unique opportunity for the two parking lots to become the site of further investigation and study.

Conducting a number of case studies -two campuses and a popular local public space specifically- began to suggest the significance of texture, variety, familiarity, and thresholds in creating basic framework as well as thriving public spaces. By understanding these fundamental aspects, and adding the unique characteristics of the WAAC, a few concepts developed that would make this campus correspond to its needs, while leaving room for further investigation. The main findings were as followed:

• **Movable Thresholds**: the ability to have fluid boundaries would allow for spaces to transform immediately to accommodate to the need of the users;
• **Texture & variety**: using not only a durable, sustainable, and simple paving material, but also adding a variety of vegetation would contribute to the diverse ecosystem, contributing to the elements of coherence and complexity identified by Kaplan and Kaplan as significant in restorative environments; and
• **Improvisation**: within a given framework, individuals are encouraged to contribute to the storytelling of the space, providing them with a sense of belonging in the process.
One of the unique aspects of improvisation is its ability to provide unique experiences when possible. Considering there is a constant and many variables in an improvisational case, one’s experience could vary based on the change of the variables. In addition to the movable garden walls, as well as in using this campus as a learning environment, as well as managing stormwater on-site, the amphitheater acts as a catch basin, a pinup space, and a hangout location on campus. Based on the time of the year, this space reduces stormwater runoff from the site, capture the stormwater from the adjacent buildings, but also measures the amount of rain, providing learning opportunities and varying visual experiences based on a variable that is the weather.
Movable thresholds would allow for the same space to be transformed immediately into smaller spaces, or to provide more privacy for discussions or pinups, which is important within a diverse campus setting. Flexibility of use within the same space allows for the transformation of a large space into smaller spaces and therefore simultaneous use. Movable thresholds, in this thesis investigation, have been designed as garden walls on wheels with growing vines and vegetation to not only provide screening and more privacy, but also a sound buffer as well as an added greenery element to the campus. The movable component of these walls allow for the entire campus to be reshaped and reused based on activities. Furthermore, the design-build component of these walls reflects design-build classes at the WAAC, providing more opportunities for students to be involved in the landscape projects as well.
DISCUSSION

Improvisation is a powerful design tool, especially when the primary users, stakeholders, as well as future users of the space are diverse, from a different culture or background, and may be feeling a lack of sense of belonging. Walter Hood once said, “the improv process expresses particular attributes about place and culture from an insiders’ point of view” (Hood, Urban Diaries), which further presses on the significance of using improvisational elements within landscapes that may be rather transitional and temporary in an individual’s lifetime.

Sense of belonging and sense of place are characteristics that require time to develop within the space and for the individuals, especially those displaced; however, participatory design, understanding everyday patterns, freedom and encouragement of involvement can help in creating spaces that are inclusive, both in process as well as results. Sense of belonging and inclusiveness, significant in the wellbeing of those displaced, is mostly created through interactions and the process of making the space, moreso than the final result.

The research highlights the significance of participatory design and storytelling. The existing and everchanging characteristic and persona of the WAAC, and all who made it what it was in its life span, had been studied in detail, and echoed in the design of the campus. Furthermore, by acknowledging the unique characteristics of the WAAC, its new campus provides for future projects to become a part of its on-going design-build series. Studying the behavior of the students and faculty, such as their favorite cafes and destinations, dictated the routes, boundaries, and even entrance of the site. The types, times, and occasions that spaces would be used for also drove the boundaries and their types.
One of the main findings of this thesis investigation is the significance of learning as much as possible about the stakeholders, their patterns and desires. “The everyday pattern must be integrated into a visionary future that is more than the sum of individual desires. This is typically done by a pattern maker. The first requires heightened social-research skills; the second creative form making.” (Hester, 2006. p.263) Asking the right questions is crucial to learning and connecting with stakeholders. More importantly, designing for and with diversity requires leaving room beyond the current patterns in order to welcome and encourage new patterns of the future generations.

Secondly, the history of the site, including any contributing buildings and stories, is significant in understanding and showcasing some of the basic frameworks. Within history and stories are often clues regarding basic needs that should not be neglected. “Framework is fundamental to adaptability” (Hester, 2006) and it “changes little, if at all, but it holds together the change.” (Hester, 2006. p.264) Understanding the history of the place provides a unique insight into the needs of the users and stakeholders. “Design for everyday requires satisfying people’s basic needs – fundamental things like security, new experience, response, and recognition. It avoids pettiness that often accompanies the struggle for personal fulfillment. Dick Meier believes that this is the process of drawing out of people their heroic insights and finding ways to implement them.” (Hester, 2006. p.297)

Lastly, using movable elements, such as the garden wall, allows for diverse uses of the space, encouraging improvisation within a given space. Understanding from the history of the WAAC, improvisation within a framework adds to the sense of belonging and sense of place, significant to displaced individuals. The campus, corresponding directly to the existing characteristics and needs of the WAAC, had to be flexible in its programming and space transformation, enough to accommodate for a diverse number of activities and group sizes. Thinking about movable thresholds as a way to improvise within a space was significant, because it allows multiple classes or activities to take place simultaneously.

This improvisation through landscape design elements for transitional period has the capacity to be used for any temporary transitional life, including displaced. The participatory process of every day pattern in combination with the cultural history of site are essential to identify landscape design elements. In designing elements, according to this study, the texture, variety, familiarity, and threshold, as well as specific elements, such as stormwater engineering, are basic, least, and essential to provide an opportunity of inclusiveness, sense of belonging, and just. Further studies, especially in a displaced camps are needed to identify the specific design elements for forced displaced population. Currently, the results of this study are being taken into account in investigation and design study of a children’s’ bereavement camp, which essentially deals directly with an emotional loss of sense of belonging and a heightened sense of loneliness and isolation between children suffering from a sudden death of a parent or sibling.

**SUMMARY**

Improvisational, inclusive, and participatory design is key to achieving spaces that are just, engaging, and democratic. The process and product of these spaces carry repetition, familiarity,
and encouragement to be contributing in the making of the place, providing a sense of belonging to those involved. Sense of belonging comes from the ability to partake in the history of something, even if small, which is significant for displaced individuals. That sense of belonging creates a long-term admiration, connectivity, and sense of responsibility to the place, which encourages further contributions to those environments and the next generations involved.

Randolph Hester suggests that, “city designers create landscapes that, in turn, convey messages-intentional or unintentional. The landscape around us teaches.” (Hester, 2006. p. 338) What individuals, especially those displaced, can teach to and learn from the landscape is important, necessary, and valuable. Similar to the significance of immigrant contributions to economic development, it is important to provide opportunities for their contribution to the spatial development of their surrounding environments. The act of stewardship, and active responsibility, “encourages us to conserve, to consume conscientiously, and to be voluntarily inconvenience for family, community, and urban ecosystem.” (Hester, 2006. p. 383) Furthermore, this creates an opportunity for an on-going storytelling of generations, which adds to the sense of place of the given space as well.

The flexibility and freedom that improvisation –the context of “yes, and…”- provides, specifically in terms of design, is unique in that it creates a comfort zone for everyone despite their languages, cultures, background, or beliefs. Improvisation allows for variables and constants to work together and continue creating. Everyone who is involved in the process of making something is a part of something, and that ultimately brings a sense of belonging to the space, the activity, and those involved in it as well. As a result of inclusiveness and diversity, we create cities that are more livable and thriving, because a sense of place and sense of belonging often encourages care, dedication, and involvement.

Lastly, it is important to remind ourselves that similar to many things in life, the experience is most precious and significant in the process and not end result. Likewise, the process of designing with and for immigrants, refugees, and the displaced is most important to their increase of sense of self, sense of belonging, and ultimately what they contribute to the storytelling of the space.
Books:

Articles:
Ferrai, C. Walking As a Creation of Narratives and the Formation of Space.

Lectures/Others:
WAAC www.waac.vt.edu