A Tale of two cities: The archipelago and the enclave

A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!

― Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

In 1977 Oswald Mathias Ungers, along with a group of architects (Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, and Arthur Ovaska) presented the project “Berlin as Green Archipelago,” following the format of eleven successive theses envisioned to make Berlin the testing ground for an alternative model of urbanism, consisting of approximately sixty isolated urban islands within the city.

In 2015, one of the weirdest border dispute in the world has officially ended, when India and Bangladesh finally found a geopolitical agreement for a dispute around 160 enclaves, also called chitmahals comprised of a series of Indian territories contained within Bangladeshi territories which in turn were situated within Indian land. This sort of matryoshka-doll territory, constituted the world’s only third-order enclave to the date.

What is the connection between these two stories?

This is a tale of two cities. One, designed and dreamt by the architect. The other, the result of regional, political and economic border disputes. The intangible architectures that conceptually emerge when we think on the relationship between the physical geography and the human geography, can be found in both cases through the notion of enclave. One, an
architectural proposal, well designed and trying to challenge the rules of urban planning on those years. The latter, an example of several worldwide studies where the geopolitical situation provokes the creation of ‘a city in the city’ — in Ungers’ words — by the enclaves that conforms these contemporary archipelagos of exclusion.[1]

Ungers et al. proposed to intensify the experience of Berlin as an architectural ensemble for a new model of Zero-growth Europe; with enclaves that were envisioned as islands belonging to an archipelago of architectures. The first operation was to identify a selection of dispersed areas that already have a strong identity within the city, to be completed with a final architectural intervention but preserving their fragmented nature. In this context, the proposal focused on the remaining fabric of the city, that would be allowed to deteriorate and turn slowly into nature around the enclaves. The facilities created by this system would generate urban ‘tribes’ of Metropolitan gypsies —described as those categories of inhabitants who do not benefit from a fixed location. Major goals included the restoration of identity in the city fabric, and the intensification of the complexity of the city as a complementary organization.

The intricacy of such a proposal relies not only on the complex set of architectural interventions proposed for a single city, but also in the team desire of rationalizing the chaos: to classify and organize an assembly of fragments, a complete set of ideas, in a static way. For Rem Koolhaas the word ‘archipelago’ symbolized the separateness, but also the larger entity of something; in his own words, “It seemed to have a great relevance in conditions where the whole had been broken.”[2]

A ‘broken whole’ can be also a current definition for ‘enclave’: a portion of territory surrounded by a larger territory. Sometimes, the enclaves' inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct, and other times it is just a political manoeuvre to control places where the people share the same religion, culture and language. The case of the India-Bangladesh enclaves is paradigmatic: after the partition of India in 1947, some territories from India and Bangladesh merged, creating 160 enclaves dispersed in both countries. In 1974, the Land Boundary Agreement was signed to exchange all enclaves in order to simplify the international border, but India did not ratify it, until this year. Sixty-eight years after Partition, the two nations decided to swap these enclaves. But this is not the only paradigmatic case of enclaves, even if it has been used as a recurrent example for its geopolitical resonance — and also for the complex archipelago they form. An intricate system of 102 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh contained, at the same time, 21 Bangladeshi counter-enclaves, one of which contained an Indian counter-counter-enclave. On the other side, in India, there were 71 Bangladeshi enclaves, containing three Indian counter-enclaves. All of them summed up a population of more than 51,500 stateless residents.

In 1974, the Land Boundary Agreement was signed to exchange all enclaves in order to simplify the international border, but India did not ratify it, until this year. On July 31 of 2015 — that is, 68 years after Partition — the two nations decided to swap these enclaves. On that date, the enclave residents were allowed to choose citizenship of either nation. New citizenship, if chosen, took effect from August 1, 2015.

There are other metrics that are excluded of surveys and political plans, such as the cultural, social and emotional connections of the citizens; in that situation, the border becomes just an imaginary line within the same, shared landscape. Even if the people living on the enclaves can decide their new citizenship and receive the news as the end of a stateless existence, the relocation process will include temporary rehabilitation camps[3] with no clear date to have proper shelters and houses for everybody, while other problems, such as social discrimination and economic constraints are not yet solved. The archipelago that has been formed by all those enclaves for almost 70 years continues to challenge the traditional rules of planning in the border area, even having an ‘operational’ approach (such as Ungers’ project) to
be developed in phases. Here planning is still a testing ground subjected to trial and error, when it comes to the fact that social and cultural relations cannot be managed only by political or geographical negotiations.

This is, however, not the only paradigmatic case of enclaves, even if it has been used as a recurrent example for its geopolitical resonance — and also for the complex archipelago they form. The human geographies we mentioned above are the ones that — along with geographic and political issues — bring conformity to other kinds of archipelagos of enclaves that are not even recognized with that name. In Guatemala City, the barricaded ‘El Gallito’ neighbourhood is controlled by the traffickers of drug cartels. In 2005, the government closed 12 streets inside the neighbourhood, leaving only three streets to come in and four streets to get out from it. Here, the enclave is a territorialization of power, empowering the conditions of hierarchy and economic segregation, which are ruling a violent way of living inside this almost militarized community — structured on its own rules, where not even the State has a voice. We find here, then, an archipelago of violent enclaves within the city.

Another case that can be considered as a contemporary kind of enclave is that of the gated community, which exists worldwide. This enclave is usually characterized by a closed perimeter of fences or walls, with a security hut at the entrance. These urban islands are not only an architectural manifestation of power frequently built in countries with high rates of violence where class segregation is a norm — they’re usually staffed by private security guards, creating home to high-value properties—but they are also based in a set of rules or protocols that generate living patterns. Peter Marcuse defines the gated community in the U.S. as an enclave that is a “voluntarily developed spatial concentration of a group for purposes of promoting the welfare of its members” and according to Setha M. Low, “middle-class and upper-middle-class gated communities are creating new forms of exclusion and residential segregation, exacerbating social cleavages that already exist.” It’s possible to refer to these communities as a new phenomena of behavioural enclaves that, at the same time, operate within and beside the political and economic system.

The question to be addressed by confronting these different types of ‘enclaves’, is of the role of architect and the scarce influence of the architectural practice to affect the social realm. The intangible architectures that emerge from these urban ecologies create a wider system; an archipelago of enclaves can be found from one place to another, from one epoch to the next one. It is possible to see geopolitical enclaves in countries such as the ones mentioned above, but also it’s possible to find some others like the Vatican City (enclaved within Rome), Lesotho (enclaved in South Africa), or the non-contiguous Belgian exclaves of Baarle-Hertog in the Netherlands which, in turn, has Dutch enclaves within it. From other historical enclaves, the most famous one was West Berlin, when it was enclaved within East Germany with the Wall as a border.

Architecture is often imbued with political content and thus, the interests in the manifestations of power — political, economic, social — can also be found in the site-specificity of these other enclaves. The barrier of separation is not only geopolitical, but based on human behaviours and desires, which, in the end, remain dominated by the economic system that creates exclusion and segregation. Such is the economic system capable of creating a city within the city.

The enclave as an island, surrounded by deep waters of unpleasant consequences, can be the metaphor that connects the cases stated above with the hopeful monster that is the archipelago of islands and ideologies proposed by Ungers; where the city as archipelago would only
need to be revealed as the city’s underlying reality.\[^{[3]}\] The first proposal projected by Ungers was envisioned to be developed in the Berlin of the early 70s, when the city was already an enclave, surrounded by the Wall and embedded in East Germany. The political situation of those years made Berlin a fertile ground to create these architectural mementos, a necessity of reminders about the city’s underlying tensions in a world where “memory has a time limit for all.”\[^{[2]}\]

If these architectural projects, based on the notion of the archipelago, have remained as speculative proposals, while at the same time there exist infinite archipelagos of political, economic, ethnic and cultural enclaves—with no or only small intervention by any architect—does it mean that the role of the architect is not capable of responding to political and economic segregation? Is it possible that the aforementioned architect’s scarce influence in the social realm is a consequence of using limited metrics—square meters, height, weight, budget, investment, return—to read the complexity of the city?

“Without question the city must endure. Without question the city as [sic] a significant environment because it is total theatre and total experience. Without question we must engage with the city with enthusiasm and resource.

[…]

Our project seeks to augment. Such an augmentation must be made with wit at the same time as sympathy. It must be made with audacity at the same time as empathy.”

Ron Herron and Diana Jowsey mentioned in this text in 1972\[^{[11]}\] some other metrics that can be useful to understand the complex nature of the city: enthusiasm, empathy, audacity. Perhaps this is the same reason that motivated Hejduk to explain his projects with poems and not only with drawings?

Is there something that we can learn from the current political, geographical and cultural condition of enclaves? This tale of two cities working as mirrors of each other — from a geopolitical dimension to a more architectural one — can bring some glimpses of other possibilities to go further when thinking of the architect’s role in the city. Usually, the architect deals with the political dimension of the practice in safe and granted conditions, trying to adapt his or her knowledge, creativity and skills to respond to granted situations, and taking care to not transgress against the limits imposed by urban laws and political correctness. But proposals such as the ones we cited by Ungers and Hejduk, can be useful
to read the spatial configuration of the city through its underlying dynamics and start a new understanding of ‘architecture’ that has been limited, diluted and finally absorbed by the capitalist system; thus helping us to get rid of ‘architectural responses’ only based on quantitative metrics of space and finances.

Recalling John Hejduk again, it’s worth to remember that there are other ways of understanding architecture, the city, the people:

To take a site: present tracings, outlines, figments, apparitions, X-rays of thoughts.
Meditations on the sense of erasures.
To fabricate a construction of time.

To draw out by compacting it. To flood (liquid densification) to place-site with missing letters and disappeared signatures.
To gelatinize forgetfulness.

If we blatantly update current architectural metrics, epitomized in oeuvres like Neufert’s standards, then we could realize that things like poems, conversations, tales and all sort of urban interactions can be political tools all of them as strong as conventional architectural proposals. A new vocabulary would be helpful for a renewed understanding of city complexities while working in a small scale, and to raise awareness of our own real influence in the urban realm. All together can be helpful to demystify the allegedly creative role of the architect, but also to take consciousness that our field of action surpass the aforementioned limited metrics and that can be used to react against complex realities of systemic oppression, where architecture have helped to create enclaves of control, segregation and exclusion. Understanding architecture as an active occupation that overlaps with several other dynamics that form our cities affecting the relation within its human and non-human elements could be the first step to mould different intangible realities that, in the end, could have a physical translation in urban space. And that is building a new tale, with nodes and relations instead of enclaves and segregation, an archipelago of human connections.

REFERENCES

[2] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/project.php?id=164 Accessed August 5th 2015