
Temple in a House

NEREA FELIZ

University of Texas at Austin

In 2011, 15 families of the Burmese refugee community on Buffalo's West side collectively purchased a vacant house in Buffalo at 349 Plymouth Ave. They wanted to convert the house to a Buddhist temple and residence for three monks. 'Temple in a House' is an adaptive project designed in collaboration with local architect and artist Dennis Maher (University at Buffalo), which presented a significant challenge: that of trying to reconcile a very radical change of program, use, and cultural references. Beyond the project's unique socio-economic characteristics pertaining to Buffalo, this project has global implications. Changing world demographics, as a result of different economic and migratory dynamics, are increasingly asking designers to negotiate complex cultural, social, religious, and economic systems.

This project was triggered by the International Institute in Buffalo (IIB), which is a nonprofit organization helping to integrate refugees and other immigrant groups in the community. They introduced us to the Burmese community on Buffalo's West Side. Buffalo's urban fabric consists of a striking concentration of mansions and beautiful single family homes. Many are empty. The city happens to have the oldest housing stock in the nation with 58% of the units built before 1940.¹ As a postindustrial city belonging to the "rust belt" region, with a dramatic population loss dating from the 1960s until today, the city has a proliferating amount of vacant houses. In 2011, the year this project was conceived, there were more than 15,000 abandoned houses in the city.² That same year, over 1400 refugees were resettled to Buffalo.³

We were living only a few blocks away from the future temple. Moved by the Burmese hospitality, we participated in a number of discussions with the community regarding the scope of work for the interior conversion, primarily consisting of basic heating improvements, insulation, electrical upgrades, painting and demolition of a few interior partition walls. Motivated by the unusual enterprise, we designed an installation inspired by Burmese traditional weaving techniques, consisting of a series of wooden frame combs suspended from the ceiling at different heights, through which a number of red rods span in tension throughout the space. We chose red, because it is the sacred color in Tibetan culture and it is believed to have protective qualities. The simplicity of materials made for an economic solution. The repetition and the overlaps of the string planes result in a red hovering topography that attenuates the radical, spatial and atmospheric gap between a Buddhist temple and a standard living room. We felt that this intervention, would enable the building to perform as a time-specific communication and a socialization device for the Burmese community in Buffalo. We believed that the overlap of the existing domestic environment and the envisioned temple would result in a rich and unique spatial palimpsest of cultures and temporalities.

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ENDNOTES

1. Partnership for the Public Good. 2011. The City of Buffalo's Abandoned Housing Crisis. (Online August 10th 2011) Available at: www.ppgbuffalo.org/buffalos-abandoned-housing-crisis/ (last accessed 6 April 2015)
2. Ibid.
3. "Buffalo without borders". Buffalo Rising, November 1, 2011, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://buffalorising.com/2011/11/buffalo-without-borders/>

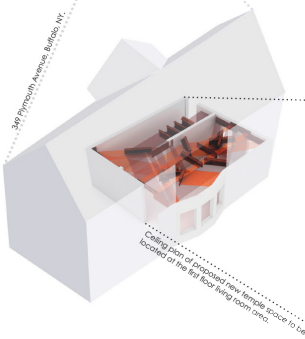
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Over the last years, according to Crumey and Breiling in their book "Architecture and Living Habits," conversions and upgrades account for 30 to 70 percent of all construction works. Socio-economic trends, the real estate market, immediate economic interests, and increased mobility, have accelerated dramatically the demand for interior design adaptive projects. It is in the context of crisis between the physical and costly constraints of architecture and the dynamic nature of content cycles that adaptive projects become a critical strategy towards sustainability and that the field of Interior Architecture stands at the forefront of the architecture discipline.

"Temple in a House" is a modest interior design proposal that deals with architecture that has evolved by intended use. It proposes a redefinition of space that emerges from new occupants and content. It is an adaptive project which presented a significant design challenge: that of trying to reconcile a very radical change of program, use, behavioral patterns and cultural references.

The project was triggered by the Immigration Institute in Buffalo which is a nonprofit organization helping to integrate refugees and other immigrant groups in the community. They introduced us to the Burmese community in Buffalo's West Side. Buffalo is a post-industrial city belonging to the "rust belt" region which is confronting a proliferating amount of obsolete and vacant buildings.

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We chose red, because it is the sacred color in Tibetan culture and it is believed to have protective qualities. The simplicity of materials makes for an economic solution. The repetition and the overlaps of the slitting planes result in a rich weaving topography that offers us the radical, spatial and atmospheric gap between a Buddhist temple and a standard living room.

This interior design intervention enables the building to perform as a time specific communication and a socialization device for the Burmese community in Buffalo, NY. A succession of transformations of space constructed by different authors, over time lead to spatial qualities which could not have been imagined when the building was first designed. The overlap of the existing domestic environment and the envisioned temple result in a unique spatial palimpsest of cultures and temporalities.

