Temple in a House

NEREÁ 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. 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. That same year, over 1400 refugees were resettled to Buffalo.

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.

Acknowledgements: Katheryn Hobert

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.
Temple in a House

Located in the art area, according to Liang and Huoliang’s analysis, the Temple is a basic architectural form. The basic shape is a cube, and the roof is a pyramid. The translucent glass is processed to be transparent, and the weight-bearing structure is constructed under the roof. The framework is made up of several glass panels that have been processed and assembled with metal elements. The interior space is a series of offices and other functional areas. The spatial layout is simple and modular, providing a comfortable and efficient environment for work and leisure.

Several themes can be observed in the design of the Temple. The glass and metal framework create an open and airy space, while the traditional Chinese roof design adds a sense of history and culture. The transparency of the glass panels allows for natural light to enter the interior, creating a bright and welcoming atmosphere.

In addition to the structural elements, the design also incorporates natural elements such as plants and water features. These elements help to create a sense of unity between the building and its surroundings, and add to the overall aesthetic of the design. The Temple in a House is a unique and innovative architectural project that combines traditional and modern elements to create a functional and beautiful space.