24 Hours in the Backyard
A Transcript of Urban Light and Colour Observations

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ABSTRACT
Dictionaries define “backyard” as ‘a yard at the rear of a house’. Some of them are used as parking lots, others as rubbish dumps. Often they appear very dark, probably as a result of the fact that nobody feels responsible for them. The inherent mystery of these hidden places in town has inspired many writers and has delivered a lot of material for cinema and art. Is there an oasis hidden in the city or do we face the dark side of town there? To find out, 62 architecture students were sent out to backyards in the city of Graz. In detective manner they observed the backyard city life. For 24 hours the atmosphere of the scene and the activities in it were carefully documented. This ‘city in the city’ experience provided the plot for reconstructing light and colour ambiences in a 1:1 scale in a laboratory setting. Students transformed real scenes into spatial installations. The project’s success became apparent as the students improved their skills to analyse spatial transformations and embody them into light and colour expressions.

Keywords: Architecture Design, Light, Colour

1. INTRODUCTION

...Hardly anyone in sight, a woman is smoking a cigarette on the balcony. It's cold. Snow is falling. All in all very quiet, only from time to time the sounds of everyday activities break the nightly silence...

...An old lady hiding behind the curtains and observing us keeps shouting at her cat. It's getting late. The lights are switched off, only the television is flickering. Nothing happens the whole night, only one window stays illuminated. Suddenly, in the staircase there is light, then a shadow - maybe the paper deliverer? From now on more and more lights are switched on and it's starting to get busy behind the walls...

From the notes of two different groups of observers.

The backyard being generally accessible but visible for just a few provided an incentive for us to look closer at how such ‘forgotten’ spaces in town are used. The question of usability, sensory conditions, artificial and natural light changes remained important to us. ‘Which narratives, visions or projections do we associate with a backyard?’ In the beginning the students observed the activities and consciously perceived the atmosphere, especially the
rhythm of light and colour in relation to the spatial conditions of the scene over 24 hours. In the main focus was the discovery of something unique and special within the yard. About 10 backyards in different districts of Graz (Geidorf, Gries and Lend) were selected, observed and analysed in groups. A picture was taken every hour from the same spot and notes about life in the area were jotted down, allowing the students to analyse their ‘city in the city’. Finally, a leporello was made out of 24 pictures to get an overview of the light and colour changes. The analyses of the experienced stories were presented inside the laboratory and discussed before the practical part of the workshop.

Each student had discovered their ‘backyard’ individually, reflected on their own ideas and developed concepts inside the group. After finding out what happened in the most joyful hour of tension or dramaturgy the ‘backyard’ was used as a topic of transformation into a laboratory setting.

The resulting ideas and discussions were very interesting, as through the active examination of spatial conditions different spatial concepts were developed.

In this paper two of the students’ projects are described as examples.

2. TRANSFORMATION WITHIN LABORATORY CONDITIONS

After becoming familiar with the lighting topic, the groups reworked the result of their observations and developed new ideas for their installation. During a period of 24 hours natural light constantly changes its character and intensity and this, of course, nearly unrecognised. This slight change of colours of the sky provoked feelings causing dynamic and strength in action and the light formed a body of 3 dimensionality.

The experience of light observation made the students aware of the inseparable connection between ‘light and shade’, ‘colour and motion’ and its correlation to spatial conditions in architecture.

The objectives in that timeframe were discussed and specified beforehand and a place inside the laboratory was provided for the students’ ideas. In the existing spatial conditions the groups were supposed to use simple means such as light, shade, material and colour in order to actively transform the given space of action into an installation. Out of memory and by means of their new ‘tools’ the real scenes
were abstracted and transformed into spatial installations. An experiment was started with different materials, layers, shadows, light, colour and computer based spatial projections. Some groups were inspired to work with memories of experienced situations, some with motion and sound in space. The given space was transformed for the final presentation. Short choreographies of light and colour were developed and the resulting installations were discussed among all students. The project became exciting when the groups started to integrate light inside the design process without thinking it as an object.

MOVEMENT OF COLOUR AND SOUND

The starting point for this installation was the natural light and colour change between 5 and 6 p.m. when all the windows were lit and inside the backyard and behind the walls everything started to come alive. As the name of this installation already tells, movements of colour, light and sound were used to express the ideas. A beamer projection of the backyard windows was thrown into a corner of a room. The windows were scaled in an abstract way in order to ‘dissolve’ the wall and play with the appearance of colours. An interactive simulation of the ‘windows’ changed it appearance according to the noise inside the room. Lights turned on and of. The illumination of the white surface was realised with a beamer and 7 light sources with filters in magenta and yellow. The lighting conditions changed according to the observed conditions inside the backyard. By opening a door inside the wall another space was added and a 3 dimensional impression was reached. By using light as a material the spatial borders started to dissolve. As a consequence, the installation showed a play of perception with light, colour and sound. The quality was found in the dynamic strength of the movement provided by the installation.

LIGHT LAYERS

During the 24 hours of observation in another, rather small spaced backyard many different nuances could be perceived, but no extreme colour difference because of the diffuse light due to weather conditions at that day. Just a subtle play between the fore and background unfolded as the lighting conditions changed. With the help of the pictures from the analyses this impression was made visible.

In the laboratory, the spatial quality of depth altered depending on the lighting conditions. Sometimes the ceiling was in front, sometimes in the scene. The goal of this installation was to work with changes from cold to warm and diffuse lighting situations. An impression of warm tungsten light was created without adding any colours. With a dimmer the light scenes were changed slowly. Black shiny nets and white transparent screens were mounted on the ceiling like layers. The screens where illuminated by 5 light sources. The screens were back / front lit at the same time to create
a spatiality for the perceiver. A smooth play of light and shadow was the result. The perceiver could easily imagine the change of back and foreground through this play of connected spatial sequences. The final result of this installation was a play with spatial characteristics by creating an illusion through a progression of light intensities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main topic of almost all projects was the fascination of light transition. Another important issue was the change from natural to artificial light with its strong contrasts of light and darkness. Through intensive work and analysing of the urban spatial qualities of the chosen backyards the students were made aware of the changes in action, natural and artificial light and colour. By understanding the urban scale they began to develop their own way of transforming the topic of light and colour into laboratory conditions. Based on their own experiences during the 24 hours observation the students started to systematically include light in their projects. Architectural space was thought together with light and light was integrated in the design process without thinking it as an object. The results were unrestricted interpretations of urban moments into a stimulating laboratory situation of spatial scenes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The focus was to abstract experienced spatial conditions and transform them within laboratory settings. Light and its form of appearance was the main actor in this play. Through discussions about their gained experiences, perceived thoughts and feelings they could explore different spatial conditions with the help of light and colour. The selected colours were mostly used for changing the natural light conditions. The experience enabled the students to get a deeper understanding of architectural design processes and led them to a more critical reflection about light and space.

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