Points of Intervention: Systems thinking led by design as an approach to conflict by Elis Mendoza Ph.D. candidate in Architecture History and Theory, Princeton University

The refugee, as an architectural subject and client, has recently been the center of attention in architecture scholarship and design; in part corollary to the acknowledgment of a disciplinary neglect in favor of linguistic and formal experimentations that came with postmodernism.¹ The relationship between humanitarianism and design, however, although not critically addressed, has been a continuous one. My research examines how the first generation of humanitarian architects, that made the refugee its central subject, gave rise to a whole new design movement during the Cold War. If the Cold War was a war of ideas, and as the United Nations took on the challenge of rehousing people displaced by conflict or natural disasters, concepts like "shelter" and "refugee" needed to be challenged and entirely redefined. In this context, a group of highly skilled designers, a sort of new technocratic generation, stepped into this global context.

Their intervention into the field emulated what Buckminster Fuller had called "comprehensive designer," a figure that could step outside of the bureaucratic apparatus of state politics and with the knowhow to read the system underneath the problem.² This new kind of designer was to create a cross-pollination environment between disciplines and to become a "human translating tool" towards political and economy structures. In humanitarianism, this type of new universal expert was best exemplified by Frederick C. Cuny, an American urban designer and disaster specialist, who worked in more than fifty missions and playing a key role in developing policy and procedures for international organizations that included UNHCR, UNPROFOR, UNRWA, Oxfam, IRC, and Red Cross.

As a "humanitarian designer," Cuny not only brought with him an interdisciplinary fixation, inherited from the Cold War research centers that originated at MIT, but also many of its disciplinary discourses and debates which ended up infiltrating what Didier Fassin has called the "government" of the "second humanitarian era."³

¹ In 2014, the Pritzker award, the most coveted architectural prize, recognized the work of Shigeru Ban, whose work was described at the award press announcement as "inventive and resourceful design approach for his extensive humanitarian efforts." The Museum of Modern Art has recently presented the exhibition "Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelters" which opened on October of 2016 accompanied by a series of short essays and two round tables. The exhibition showed an array of design solutions and engagements and attempted to make a case of design as a visual medium through which the refugee condition could be addressed. MoMA, (2016, February 13) *Insecurities: Tracing Displacement and Shelter.* Retrieved from https://medium.com/insecurities Other events around refugees and displacement have flowed after MoMA, including those at CUNY and e-flux, the former by presenting a round table entitled "The Camp and the City," and the latter by starting a research project into the heritage preservation of the Palestinian Camps. See Alessandro Petti, (2017, February 22) *The Architecture of Exile.* Retrieved from http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/refugee-heritage/99756/the-architecture-of-exile-iv-b/

² Fuller, Richard Buckminster, and Robert W. Marks. *Ideas and integrities*. Prentice-Hall, Incorporated, 1963.

³ Didier Fassin, "Humanitarianism Non-Governmental Governments," in *Nongovernmental politics*, ed. Michel Feher (New York :: Zone Books ;, 2007).

This new hybrid institutional culture soon gave way to "design thinking," and evolution of systems-thinking in which the environment in its totality could be analyzed as a closed system to locate specific points that could effect strategic change. Cuny called these "points of intervention," a method that attempted to localize sudden breaks in the local social, economic and urban structures to effectively tackle an emergency. Cuny famously coordinated the water purification system project in Sarajevo with the funding of the Open Society Institute and the International Rescue Committee.

The water project became one of the most famous examples of international aid, PR manipulation, and local politics, and thus set a parameter in framing future interventions. Therefore, this project acts as the centerpiece of this research allowing for the analysis of the complex power matrix in war and emergency sites administered by the international government (other examples I am looking at in my research are the Biafran famine and the Iraq war as examples of the complex role of humanitarian aid). The water project was designed to provide water to over a 100,000 people, together with this plan Cuny created a seed distribution program to elevate the quality of alimentation during the siege, and a gas project in which the residents would dig ditches 1.5 meter-deep to create a new gas network to tap into the gas line that supplied the city of Zagreb.

The focus on media of the OSA allows for the development of another side of the research differs from traditional institutional archives. My plan for the OSA archives was to elaborate a sorts of context mapping of the historical moment in which this history unfolds. With the advent of the 'global refugee' humanitarianism became a propaganda to simultaneously demand or reject an international aid agenda (often coupled with international intervention), and the refugee camp became one of its most pervasive images. The material at OSA, therefore, served a double purpose. On one side to trace the expansion and advent of the cold war refugee by providing extensive historical and media reference through the Forced Migration Project [HU OSA 124], and the Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) [HU OSA 300] collections. On the other, to analyze the Sarajevo siege as a case study of "systems thinking" and media as two strategies aiming at the redefinition of the citizenry of Sarajevo. I analyzed this premise through the collections pertaining to the Balkan wars including the Records of the International Human Rights Law Institute Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia OR "Bates file" [HU OSA 309] and Croatian [HU OSA 310] televisions, among others.

Sarajevo became a war for public portrayal in which all sides used the figure of the sieged resident to their advantage. Looking at the **"Bates Files" [HU OSA-304]** the history of PR agencies propaganda unfolds into a clear pattern. The Bates file documented efforts by Wise Communications, a PR agency hired by the Serbian American Association, to influence the American congress that atrocities were being committed against their citizens by Muslim

generals. In the same way, Rudder Finn and Hill & Knowlton represented the Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian military respectively, and their many attempts to control the news appears also in the **OSI New York collection [boxes 1-3, 9,11]** in describing Soros/IRC/Intertect water project for Sarajevo, and in the extensive record they kept on cables sent from the field and media portrayal of the same incidents which can be found in the **Records of the International Monitor Institute [HU OSA 350].** By following this line of research, I intend to make apparent the complex negociations that happen behind any plan for aid and humanitarian intervention, the carving of "safe zones" the creation of grey and black markets, and the redistribution of power and authority.

My experience at OSA was enriched not only by the access to its extensive catalogue, but through the contact with a great community of researchers, especially through the support of Csaba Szilagyi, who suggested new paths and material, and who generously put me in contact with people working at OSI during the Sarajevo siege.



Article found in the OSI New York Files. Box 27. Open Society Archives, Budapest, Hungary.