The Campsite: Lessons from the edge of architecture

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Architecture is a physical manifestation of the essential human needs to both connect and separate; to bring together and to divide. Whilst the creation of architecture is bound up with ideas of the spatial – making spaces and places is what architects do – it is the edge condition that frames that space, be it the barrier of a wall, or the implied division of a threshold. Thus the making of space is inevitably bound up with the notion of separation and edge – what (and who) is in, what (and who) is out, and what (and who) defines that edge.

This demarcation of territory is multiply constructed through the processes of land ownership and architectural production, but simultaneously overlaid with demarcations of territories that are not limited by such rules (from the turf of a street gang to the catchment areas of primary schools). However there are few opportunities where individuals and groups have the freedom to carve out their own territories, to define their own spaces and to position themselves in relation others. Open field campsites are one of the few places where this is possible, and as such they offer valuable insights into: notions of de- and re- territorialisation; the subtle ways in which boundaries are implied; the sequence of thresholds that partition the public from the private; and the relationship of the small unit (individual, couple, friendship or family group) to the larger group (the group of strangers who temporarily make up the campsite community), see fig 2.

This research explores the transient architectures of camps as a stimulus to thinking about more permanent architectures; by exploring the peripheries, of what we might consider architectural production we are better able to understand the centre. Six case studies during the summers of 2010 and 2011 are used both as data and illustration, to investigate notions of threshold and liminality (exploring the demarcation, use, and experience of space) and the impacts that differing qualities of threshold have on networks of social interaction, see fig 3 and 4. This investigation is
used to explore the underlying elements of architecture, which are understood as a
synecdoche for the process of site allocation, construction, occupation, community
assimilation and demolition, all compacted into an observable space and timeframe.

Fig 3  Dyer/ Sara: Chairs used to demarcate territory

Deterritorialization/Reterritorialization

As each small unit packs up their lives in a car, bicycle or backpack to go camping
they decontextualize their existing sets of social and spatial relations, holding them in
limbo until they arrive at a camp; they have been deterritorialised. In the new context
of the campsite, they must find a new place to be – demarcate a new territory and in
doing so establish a new set of social and spatial relationships; through the marking
out of their own boundaries, through tents and cars, bicycles and seats, swingball
and picnic blankets, and the human body, they are deterritorialising the pitch from its
previous existence and reterritorializing it as ‘theirs’, to be used in the way that they
want. In doing so the whole camp is affected – there is a social and spatial shift to
accommodate the newcomers; that patch of grass is no longer for football, or where
the guys with the pirate flag were, it is theirs.

Simultaneously the process of reterritorialisation acts upon them, the site affects a
new order and regulation on their behaviour, their spatial relationships, their social
relationships. In this way the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization is
realised both physically and anthropologically; there is a physical resettling of
boundaries as well as a socio-cultural one, that is both enacted by, and acted upon
each new arrival. It is an act of temporary architecture, demonstrating the way in
which a new piece of architecture reconfigures the way things are, as well as the
people that use it, even vicariously.

Temporary Architectures

In the decision to set up camp a number of fundamental elements of architecture are
explored. The physical site conditions of topography, ground conditions, sun path,
wind direction and strength, noise, smell, space and proximity to facilities all impact
on the choice of location. Equally influential are the perceptual site conditions of
atmosphere, view, enclosure, intuition and superstition. In addition the social
condition (communicated by both the physical and the perceptual) influences the
siting of the small unit: proximity to neighbours, relationship to communal space,
which groups to be near to and which away from, and levels of privacy all have an
impact. In the positioning of each unit, campers opt into a certain lifestyle, at least for
the duration of the camp. In that one event, there is a process that is part: social, ecological, topological, economic, phenomenological and architectural.

Fig 4 Sara: Drawing analysis of sequential boundary relationships

Sites are chosen that position each group in relation to the physical and social context (see fig 4). Corner and edge locations are inhabited first and sites are then orientated to make the best of site conditions like views, but also typically to look into communal space. Boundaries are defined at all scales using equipment (chairs, tables, camping gaz, toys) to imply function, privacy, relationships and territory (see fig 5 and 6). These set up a series of implied boundaries that are easily read by adults (children are far less attuned to these, animals not at all). For example cars are parked far enough away from the tent to define an outside space, but not so far that someone else might come and pitch a tent between the car and the tent. It all works with little conflict. There are a strong set of implicit socio-spatial rules at play: rarely would anyone walk between another person’s tent and their table (even if it is the most direct path).

The bubbles of each small unit exist in a ‘connected isolation’, which visibly express Sloterdijk’s quadruple relationship of being, in which ‘being means someone (1), being together with someone else (2), and with something else (3), in something (4)’. The arrangement demonstrates human coexistence, or connectedness at the same time as the human need for non-communication, or isolation. Sloterdijk posits that each of these bubbles can be visualized as connecting to each other as a foam, which conceptualizes the way in which the small forms protect the small unit from complete fusion with the mass. Each bubble is a form of protection: from the physical and social; to the symbolic and ritual levels.

Overlaying and interfering with the organisation of the small units are the multiple networks of paths, routes and desire-lines; social networks and biological networks. Left-over surfaces are temporal shared spaces where cars, bikes, a game of football and an exploring toddler all inhabit the same space with no perception of danger. Where else can one cook, drive a car, play football, enjoy a glass of wine, make a fire and ride a bike, make a friend and watch a butterfly all in the same space? These actions each temporarily shift the territories, redefine the boundaries and reprogram the space, in a constant cycle of reterritorialization.

 Campsites demonstrate a complex and shifting continuum of thresholds, with private and public spaces at the extremes. The most overt spatial thresholds are at the scales of: private (tent bedroom); semi private (internal communal space); liminal
(porch); semi public (space between tent and other demarcating objects (chairs, car, picnic blanket, toys, human bodies, junk); quasi public/communal (shared space of campsite) and public (the road). These thresholds repeat those found in the more permanent built environment, but are constructed far less permanently and are far more explicitly socially mediated. The boundaries are transgressed by sound – again reinforcing the model of connected isolation.

Socio-spatial networks define and negotiate these boundaries; in some cases they also cut across or pass through these thresholds. Basic communal facilities are shared – each small unit has to use them - so meetings are inevitable over a tap, by the washing up area, whilst waiting for a shower. Moments that have become more and more private in our permanent environments are played out in public at the campsite, where it is not possible to live entirely in the private realm. In contrast in the built environment it is now possible to move from the privacy of bedroom to bathroom to kitchen to garage, to car, all without stepping into an even semi-public zone. As our built environments allow us to retreat into more and more private lives, the experience of living our everyday activities in public has an impact on our social interactions. Social networks develop quickly, far quicker than in permanent build environment. Children forge friendships in 5 minutes whereas they still don’t really know children that live 5 doors down after 5 years.

Discussion and Conclusions

The temporary architectures of campsites reveal in real-time the socio-spatial construction of boundaries, thresholds, edge and centre. The timeframes within which these are generated and destroyed are measured in hours or days, in contradistinction with the more permanent architectures of cities. These sped-up versions of built reality enable a synecdochic examination of the camp as ‘Architecture’. The event-decision of where to pitch a tent combines aspects that are quasi: social, ecological, topological, phenomenological and architectural. What is centred and what is peripheral are defined almost instantaneously and subconsciously. The rules of the game are not explicitly defined, but are implicitly understood and recreated by most to define territories (and their determining
thresholds or boundaries) which work for both the small unit and the campsite as a whole.

These thresholds/boundaries operate in a number of ways, and in multiple directions: they deterritorialize and reterritorialize the campsite, the spatial context, the (momentary) societies, and the objects within this frame. They also operate through the assemblage of materials (including human-bodies) within each territory. The boundaries are fluxive; they ebb and flow, emerge and decline, both rapidly and slowly. The what (or who) is out, and what (or who) is in, momentarily reveal themselves and in doing so highlight fundamental (as well as exotic) socio-spatial ingredients of dwelling.

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2 Simmel, G (1994) [1909] "Bridge and Door." Translated by Mark Ritter. Theory, Culture & Society. 11:5-10
3 Open field campsites are defined by the research as camping grounds that do not specify particular plots for guests, but allow tents and campervans to be located by the guests themselves.