
Ever After: Speculations on Public Space in Iceland

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INTRODUCTION

Iceland lies on the periphery of the civilized world. Its architecture and urbanism appear normative, but buildings and spatial networks operate differently there. Nature is a physical force that exerts limitations and a cultural authority that regulates social engagement. Over the past decade, overinvestment in name brand works of architecture and urban planning has upended the nation's modest but sophisticated traditions of building. Global economic and cultural aspirations superseded local influences, such as the landscape and a specific, regionally influenced interpretation of Modernism. Then, in the wake of the banking crisis of 2008, the economy collapsed and sent the practices of architecture and urban planning reeling. Conventional design work became scarce, and as communities confronted needs normally addressed through construction, new methodologies of spatial engagement emerged as challenges to normative practices of space making. This paper investigates the stark contrast between the design culture that preceded (and perhaps contributed to) the crisis and the innovative strategies that are rising from its ashes.

The first part of the paper is a critical reflection on my participation, in 2007, in an urban design competition for the redevelopment of central Reykjavík. With my design partner, Jonathan F. Bell, I responded to a competition brief that envisioned Reykjavík as an international metropolis on par with the greatest European capitals. Coincidentally, I had visited Iceland shortly before the competition was announced. My preview of the nation's architecture, urban planning, and infrastructure was an invaluable advantage dur-

ing the first phase of the competition, and it informed both the premise and the details of our competition entry. When our proposal was shortlisted as a finalist in the competition, we examined the nature of building in Iceland more closely and attempted to devise strategies that were suitable, both culturally and technically, to Reykjavík and Iceland.

The second part of the paper summarizes the objectives and the findings of a recent urban design research workshop on the Reykjavík Capital Area. April Arkitekter, a progressive design firm based in Oslo, Norway, conducted the workshop in conjunction with Iceland Academy of the Arts between August 22 and September 2, 2011. The project belongs to a larger initiative called SCIBE (Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment), which is funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area). SCIBE conducts research in four cities (London, Reykjavík, Oslo, and Vienna) on how an insufficiency of resources may motivate architectural and urban acts. Due to the timing of the workshop in Reykjavík, the conference presentation of this paper in October, 2011, will include materials from April Arkitekter that were unavailable in September, 2011, when these proceedings were published.

As a conclusion to the paper, I will outline plans for a travel studio that will bring architecture students from the United States to Iceland for a collaborative design-build project in a remote area of island. Inspired both by the pre-crisis competition and by the post-crisis community involvement fostered by SCIBE, the design studio seeks to engage issues of community, identity, and construction in a pedagogical context.

CITY OF SEAMS

The commissioners of the competition to redevelop the Vatnsmýri area of Reykjavík (currently occupied by a domestic airport) sought detailed strategies to create “a contemporary and robust urban fabric with the flexibility required for research, technology, and knowledge based enterprises mixed with significant housing, services, and residential forms.”¹ The competition brief included unusually specific parameters and information that provided entrants with a thorough understanding of the urban and regional conditions of Reykjavík. The specificity of the brief was a sign of the seriousness of its aspirations. It included the results of community workshops on the objectives of the project, as well as technical information on various stakeholders in the project. Unlike some “ideas” competitions, the Vatnsmýri competition was based on extensive research and on a firm belief that Reykjavík would soon emerge as an innovative hub in a new global economy. Throughout the process, the scale of the project seemed unrealistic to me. Especially since I had recently analyzed built environments throughout Iceland, it was difficult for me to imagine the realization of such an ambitious plan. Nonetheless, we followed the parameters of the brief and developed a design proposal that would have dwarfed the existing city of Reykjavík and transformed the area of the capital into an unrecognizable megaregion.

The conceptual inspiration for the project, which we call *City of Seams*, is Þingvellir, the first significant work of architecture in Iceland. Stretching along the Reykjanes Ridge (the American-Eurasian Continental Rift), Þingvellir is a geological seam that accommodated the world’s first parliament in 800 A.D. The transformation of the raw site into a work of architecture was an act of occupation, not construction. The site was recognized as a special moment in the landscape, where tribes from across the island could meet and devise the rules of their society. At Lögberg (Law Rock), issues were debated and rulings were pronounced above a vast plain, in front of a giant shear in the landscape. At Þingvellir, the early citizens of Iceland beheld the eternal power of the earth and the ephemeral strength of their community. Architecture and urbanism today are rarely that dramatic or effective. Þingvellir offered us a model of space making that was rooted not only in the history of the nation, but also in the culture of the land. Given the enormous scale of the proposed urban re-

development, these references were considered as a way to mediate the potential incongruity between the new and the old capital.

City of Seams translates the power of the geological rift at Þingvellir into an urban context. Urban seams are the inherent discontinuities and juxtapositions found in every city. Like Þingvellir, they have the potential to accommodate public spaces and to generate collective meaning. In the nineteenth century, Haussmannian planners sought to erase urban seams through the homogenization of the street facade. In the twentieth century, Modern planners scarred the city through a disregard of context and an exaggeration of seams. Our project seeks a middle ground. It rejects both the seamlessness of boulevard urbanism and the severity of urban renewal. *City of Seams* indulges the heterogeneity of urban life, both socially and formally. Social precedents include high density, mixed-use urban fabrics, from the medieval cores of European cities to contemporary developments that grow around transportation hubs. Formal precedents include both vernacular and pre-historic housing typologies, such as cave dwellings and turf houses, as well as awkward and abrupt edges that are typically perceived as problems, when in fact they offer us solutions. Infrastructural networks, such as the geothermal energy pipelines that hover atop the Icelandic landscape, also inspire the seam strategy.

Programmatically, seams allow us to embed infrastructure into densely populated environments; they also shelter us from weather conditions, such as the harsh winds that infiltrate Reykjavík during the winter. Experientially, seams provide material richness, adventure, and unpredictability.

The signature objective of *City of Seams* is to create a new entrance into the capital of Iceland. Inspired by (but not indebted to) nineteenth-century train stations, Tengiberg (Connection Rock) is a proposed transportation hub that punctuates a dramatic new arrival sequence into Reykjavík. It is conceived as the primary seam of the capital – a Þingvellir that cuts through the middle of Reykjavík. Around the globe, sprawl is erasing the physical integrity of urban boundaries, and in the capital region of Reykjavík it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern precisely where the city begins. Tengiberg serves as a gateway for both air travelers and regional travelers arriving by car or public transportation, and it ensures that visitors, as well as Icelanders,

immediately sense the physical integrity, as well as the international significance, of Reykjavík. At the same time, the hub does not announce itself as focal point or a clearly definable monument. Like the rift in the landscape at Þingvellir, and unlike the nineteenth-century train stations that inspire it, Tengiberg is a linear organization of spaces that operates as a vibrant, multi-functional public space, permeable from all directions, both vertically and horizontally. Tengiberg blurs the distinction between architecture, urbanism, and infrastructure. Travelers and local residents cross paths and share spaces, and surrounding areas filter through Tengiberg via a series of lateral connections. The frontal, façade-driven paradigm of urban architecture is abandoned to accommodate both the heterogeneity of the surrounding fabric and the complexity of programs that inhabit and lie adjacent to the hub. Tengiberg acknowledges that twenty-first century gateways are far more complex than the “front door” model of entry in the nineteenth-century.

A contemporary source of inspiration for the seam premise is a general condition of governmental architecture, both in Iceland and in Reykjavík, which adheres to the spirit of Þingvellir. Reykjavík succeeded Þingvellir as the site of parliament in 1845, when Iceland was a colony of Denmark. In 1881, a soundly Northern European parliament building (designed by Ferdinand Meldahl, a Dane) arose on the edge of the city’s main public square. Althingishúsið (Parliament House) fulfills almost every expectation of the typology. Despite its modest scale, it is solid, symmetrical, and imposing – an architectural object that commands respect. If the colonial government had the capacity to understand the emphasis of occupation over construction at Þingvellir, it certainly did not have the motivation to rekindle it in Althingishúsið. The informal spirit of Þingvellir, however, persisted in a curious way through the inaction of the municipal government in the capital. The City of Reykjavík (founded in 1786) operated without a formal seat of government (meaning a work of architecture) for over two centuries, until the opening of Ráððhúsið in 1992 (designed by Studio Granda). It is inconceivable that another European capital could have operated for so long without an architectural headquarters through which to exert its symbolic and political authority. Reykjavík, like Þingvellir, is different.

When Ráððhúsið opened, the municipal government of Reykjavík finally assumed an architectural iden-

tity, albeit a modest one. Ráððhúsið is a relatively subtle public building, despite its Modern forms, which stand apart from the surrounding fabric of the city, and its intrusion into Tjörninn, an artificial lake that is an iconic landmark in the city. Its elegant concrete composition is reminiscent of the apologetic Modernism of Tadao Ando. To complement these understated forms, Ráððhúsið is permeable and permissive. It thereby dismantles one of the stalwarts of Western civic architecture — the impervious frontal facade. Multiple entries, from various directions, transform the building into a spatial hub and allow it to operate as more than just a final destination. Non-public spaces are relegated primarily to upper levels, allowing the ground floor to fully welcome the public. Interior galleries and cafes offer resting points, as Ráððhúsið inhales and exhales the flux of the city. The building achieves civic meaning through how it is used, creating a stimulating public space by circumventing conventional grandeur and symbolism. Unlike the great powers of Europe, old and new, Iceland does not rely on its built environment to exert cultural symbolism and political power. The built environment is functional and meaningful, but it lacks grandeur and self-importance. The spirit of the nation lies elsewhere, in the land itself.

The undisputed highlight of Ráððhúsið is an enormous topographical relief map of Iceland. It introduces visitors to the true seat of power there – the land. The map reveals not only the striking geography of the country, but also the manner in which civilization has adapted to it: roads follow erosion patterns; cities cling to opportune moments along inhospitable coastlines; thermal power plants take advantage of particularly active geological moments. Built environments are always a function of their natural context, but the phenomenon occurs in Iceland in an unusually visceral and pervasive manner. The placement of this map in an important public space underscores the extent to which geography defines cultural identity. Nature is the venue of everyday life. Herein lies the essential difference between Iceland and its European peers, who associate culture with urban development and view nature as an escape from civilization. The map in Ráððhúsið can be read as a territorial reinterpretation of the Nolli Map of Rome. While both maps record the ordering of culture within an environment, they do so at vastly different scales. The map of Iceland bypasses the scale of the city because infrastructure and planning are more culturally relevant than architecture and urban design.

In *City of Seams*, we attempted to incorporate the meaning of the land into the urban redevelopment of the capital. Throughout the project, public spaces occupy awkward edges and informal juxtapositions, while transportation networks follow and create sectional differences in the ground. Small gestures complement the larger moves. For example, subtle sectional modulations and material changes throughout the street network demarcate pedestrian areas and tram stops. An attention to detailing allowed us to further mediate the vast scale of the project, which (as already mentioned) did not seem appropriate to the context.

The scale of the vision, in the end, was unrealistic. As soon as the winner of the competition was announced, the economy of Iceland collapsed. After its three major banks failed, the blur of the boom years came into focus: sprawl, fragmented communities, stretched resources, devaluation of natural ecologies. The redevelopment project was meant to correct these errors of the boom years, but in the wake of the crisis, big projects were both unfeasible and unpopular. Conventional modes of urban manipulation were unable to rescue the built environment. Instead, smaller scale solutions have arisen, and they may prove to be more effective than the regional and environmental symbolism of *City of Seams* or the other urban visions of the competition that sought to solve problems of sprawl through massive and ultimately unsustainable development. In 1937, W.H. Auden predicted this state of affairs when he wrote, "Europe is absent ... I can't quite picture your arrival. What was your impression of Reykjavík harbour? Is there any attempt to make the visitor feel that he is arriving at a capital city? Not much."² Reykjavík has always envisioned itself as something other than a conventional capital, so it is no wonder that global urban visions fall short of understanding it. For example, in retrospect, Tengiberg's emphasis on the articulation of "arrival" fulfills a goal of the competition brief but also robs Reykjavík of its enigmatic power.

RESILIENT URBAN STRATEGIES

The efforts of SCIBE provide an alternative model of urban development, one that values local initiative over global intervention. The organization describes itself in this way:

SCIBE explores the relationship between scarcity and creativity in the context of the built environ-

ment by investigating how conditions of scarcity might affect the creativity of the different actors involved in the production of architecture and urban design, and how designed actions might improve the built environment in the future.³

The design research workshop recently conducted in Reykjavík exemplifies that mission. Here, I will summarize its primary objectives as well as the methods of the workshop program. Urban ecology is a driving force of the workshop. How can a re-consideration of urban land use ease pressures on resource flow, both regionally and globally? How can designers and stakeholders identify ecological potentials in apparent scarcity? Iceland's inherent relationship to nature is particularly suited to such a discussion. The workshop addresses this question through the development of speculative scenarios. One objective is to spur discussions that will help stakeholders to mediate between idealistic aspirations and realizable solutions.

Four scenarios frame the workshop. Each one pairs a specific site at the periphery of the capital area with a specific issue: localized harvesting; flexible "co-living" and hybrid dwellings; water management based on storage; "slow" traffic networks. The selection of half-developed peripheral sites is important, as it is seen as a way to generate discussions on matters of urban density and sprawl generated by previous conditions of abundance. By focusing on areas that are specially affected by problems of resource allocation and flows, the workshop seeks to address issues of regional fragmentation and the value of open space in various configurations of urban development. Each scenario initiates a dialogue across scales: plot, neighborhood, district, and capital area. A unifying theme of the four scenarios, in addition to sustainability and scale, is human health. It is remarkable to note that, despite its comprehensiveness and length, the Vatnsmýri competition brief fails to draw attention to this primary issue. Workshops like this one remind us of the core concerns of living in cities. How can urban development actually improve our health?

The methodology of the workshop includes both analytical and design operations. In the first week, research groups develop analytical mapping strategies related to their theme and site. Furthermore, students are introduced to actors that have driven unconventional practices or that are now innovating the field under new economical conditions: the bik-

ers' representative; the woman who teaches people how to grow their own food; the anarchist who squats; the farmer who operates on the outskirts. Texts identify design methods and articulate a clear role for analysis in the design process. In the second week, research groups develop proposals for development for the given sites based on the preceding analysis. The charrette-style process frees participants from the trajectories of normative design projects, and the development of critical and innovative methodologies that escape normative modes of education is a primary objective of the workshop.

EVER AFTER

The next step for me is to incorporate the lessons of the SCIBE workshop in Reykjavík into a design-build studio. The valley of Bjarnarfjörður in Northern Iceland is seeking an architectural design and a construction strategy for a community thermal pool complex. The typology of the thermal pool is essential to Icelandic identity and culture. Every community in Iceland has a public thermal pool that acts a social hub. In the case of Bjarnarfjörður, a stunning pool is present, but it lacks basic support structures, such as restrooms, changing areas, and service areas. At the beginning of the semester, students will travel to Bjarnarfjörður and hold community workshops that develop design ideas and evaluate potential construction processes. The lo-

cation of the community in an especially remote area of the nation limits the extent to which materials and equipment may (or perhaps should) contribute to the process, and the intent is to allow the community to construct the project itself through simple but rich tectonic and material processes.

While not fully embracing the urban ecological concerns of the SCIBE workshop, the Bjarnarfjörður pool project is a realizable community-based project that addresses many of the same issues, albeit at an even more modest scale. Iceland offers us a unique environment in which to develop an understanding of our place on the planet and architecture's ability to engage the technology as well as the symbolism of the ground. It is an existential environment in which we may discover attitudes about design that may migrate to unexpected locations. In this sense, it holds the promise of a different kind of globalism – the exportation of small-scale initiatives that challenge our assumptions about how architecture and urban planning affect our lives and our planet.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Vatnsmýri, Reykjavík: A Call for Ideas (2007 competition brief), p. 2.
- 2 W.H. Auden and Louise MacNiece, *Letters from Iceland* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 26 - 27.
- 3 See, <http://www.scibe.eu/>



Figure 1. Þingvellir



Figure 2. Þingvellir collage for City of Seams



Figure 3. geothermal pipe network



Figure 4. Ráððhúsið

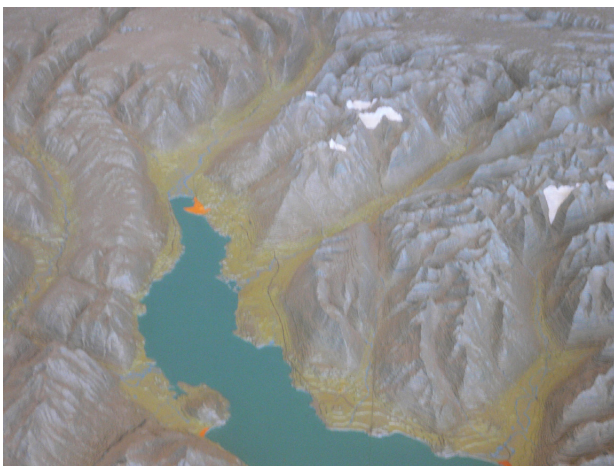


Figure 5. map detail in Ráððhúsið



Figure 6. Figure 6: map in Ráððhúsið