

His House Was Somewhere Else / 2007 / Gropiusstadt Berlin, Germany / Proposal for an intervention on illuminated sign



ABOUT GROPIUSSTADT...

Sandra Nakamura

Gillian Rose, in *A Place in the World*, explains that identity or what we call a 'sense of place' is a complex system of interrelated factors rooted in personal experiences and feelings. Not only is identity strictly limited to specific locations, but also encompasses other variables such as collective memory and power structures. Although Rose uses different geographical scales – local, regional, national, global – to describe the levels at which identity is experienced, it can be said that identity is not embodied in a physical location itself, nor it is a fixed, permanent notion (For a variety of reasons, then, identity and a particular place may have little relation to each other. – p.96).

Gropiusstadt, a residential complex designed by Walter Gropius in the outskirts of Berlin, has since its inception been deeply affected by political and economic changes, which largely determined its overall structure. Gropiusstadt was devised during the reconstruction efforts after the Second World War to provide affordable yet modern, state-of-the-art facilities for the middle class. Also, a large percentage of its living spaces were subsidized and made available for people of lower income through social housing programs. But with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1969, the availability of land and public funding was sharply reduced, compromising the integrity of the original design. Buildings grew much taller than expected and many spaces reserved for community activities and organizations were eliminated. Therefore, when Gropiusstadt failed to provide the living conditions it had promised, it lost a large percentage of its residents and the abandoned facilities quickly deteriorated. Here, a collision between the image that Gropiusstadt projected and that which it actually offered, the gap between the sense of identification residents imagined and their actual experiences, rather than the quality of the facilities themselves, is what accelerated its downfall.

Most recently, Gropiusstadt has undergone another set of transformations. Shifts in municipal policies and the rise of the real estate market in Berlin, has attracted immigrants in search for affordable housing to Gropiusstadt. In this sense, immigration is also transforming the structure and populations of other Berlin neighborhoods, many cities in Germany, and several countries in Europe. As much as “senses of place can be seen as a result of underlying structures of power such as colonialism and imperialism” (Rose, p.100), so is identity now influenced by immigration, especially with immigration resulting from the exercise of colonialism and imperialism.

When writing about 'not identifying,' Rose states: “Another reason for feeling little about a place is because you are a stranger there. This is a feeling often experienced by migrants.” In the case of Gropiusstadt and its migrant population, it is this very same feeling of being a stranger, but experienced in collectivity, what constitutes the basis of identity. This is a vivid example in which identity is not necessarily related to a particular location.

These shifts in how residents in a specific context and timeframes related to the Gropiusstadt neighborhood despite the relative stability of its physical structure, made me reflect on how fluid the concept of identity is and how it is expressed by all involved parties. My initiative to interfere with the illuminated sign 'Gropiushaus' that sits atop one the main buildings in the residential complex was a way for all to have a say on how a building was labeled and what this label meant (or not) to them. I thought of it as a gesture that would also challenge the power structures in place, the relationship and conflicts of interest between the companies who manage the buildings and how they market them and the interests and necessities of those who live there.