Temple in a House

Over the last years, according to Cramer and Breitling in their book "Architecture and Existing Fabric", conversions and upgrades account for 50 to 70 percent of all construction works. Socio-economic trends, the real estate market, immediate economic interests, and increased mobility, have accelerated dramatically the demand for interior design adaptive projects. It is in this context of crisis between the physical and costly constraints of architecture and the dynamic nature of content cycles that adaptive practice become a critical strategy towards sustainability, and that the field of interior design which is a mediator between the two worlds, stands at the forefront of the architecture discipline.

"Temple in a House" is a modest interior design proposal that deals with architectural and cultural aspects. It presents an intervention that realized a significant design challenge: that of trying to reconcile a radical change of program, use, behavioral patterns, cultural references.

This project was triggered by the International Institute in Buffalo which is a nonprofit organization helping to integrate refugees and other immigrant groups in the community. They introduced us to the Burmese community in Buffalo's West Side. Buffalo is a post-industrial city belonging to the "rust belt" region which is facing a proliferating amount of obsolete and vacant buildings.

In 2011, 15 families of the Burmese refugee community on Buffalo's West Side collectively purchased a second house in Arlington, they wanted to convert the house to a Buddhist temple and residence for three monks.

We participated in a number of discussions with the community regarding the scope of work for the conversion primarily consisting of basic heating improvements, insulation, electrical upgrades, painting and demolition of select interior partition walls.

We were moved by the Burmese hospitality and the unusual enterprise of the community, we designed an installation inspired by traditional Burmese weaving techniques consisting of a series of wooden frame combs suspended from the ceiling at different heights throughout the space.

We chose red, because it is the sacred color in Tibetan culture and it is believed to have protective qualities. The simplicity of materials makes for an economic solution. The repetition and the overlaps of the string planes result in a radical change of program, use, behavioral patterns, cultural references, and the overlap of the existing domestic environment and the envisioned temple result in a very rich and unique palimpsest of cultures and temporalities.

This interior design intervention enables the building to perform as a time-specific communication and a socialization device for the Burmese community in Buffalo, NY. A succession of transformations of space constructed by different authors, over time can lead to spatial qualities which could not have been imagined when the building was first designed.

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