How is the urban environment shaped and what effect does it have on cities wrought by conflict and polarisation?

A recent research project by Manchester Architecture Research Centre examined the complex relationship between architecture and socio-political conditions in Belfast, Beirut, Berlin and Amsterdam, four cities historically characterised by tension and conflict.

The team's findings were made public in a recent exhibition, The Urban Environment - Mirror and Mediator of Radicalisation?, first shown at PLACE, The Architecture and Built Environment Centre for Northern Ireland in Belfast. It is now touring the three other case study cities.

Underpinning the effect that architecture and urban design can have on tensions between ethnic, political or religious groups is the notion that form follows friction. Across all scales, from shops to rubbish bins, innocuous design features can become highly and irrationally charged. When choosing colours to indicate different parking levels in the new Beirut Mall, for instance, the architects took great pains to select colours that were not affiliated with any of the major groups in Lebanon's political struggle. In Belfast, houses tend to have large front yards (the reverse of normal UK practice) in order to spot potential trespassers more easily.

But architecture does not only reflect and react to conflict, it can also directly influence it. A new pedestrian bridge across the Westlink motorway in Belfast, for example, was intended to ease access from the city centre to the Royal Victoria Hospital. It did not take long, however, for sectarian youths to discover that its location and shape make the...
bridge a perfect spot from which to launch attacks with stones and paint bombs into ‘enemy’ territory. Here, friction followed form.

Similarly, the fortress-like appearance of a police station in Amsterdam’s Slotervaart neighbourhood was construed as a symbol of state control over users of a nearby mosque. Although authorities claimed the design was not motivated by such intentions, it nonetheless triggered conspiracy theories, rumours and unease among the local Muslim community.

A key lesson from these and other examples is that architects should strive to heighten their awareness of the fact that design is never neutral. It almost always has side-effects that could potentially accentuate existing social tensions.

But architecture can also do good, as shown by the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project in Belfast. Located at a formerly violent interface between nationalists/Catholics and loyalists/Protestants, the initiative’s centre has dual entries and exits, identical offices for groups from both communities, and neutral colours, all of which help to encourage civil encounters between former warring parties.

This does not, however, indicate that quick design fixes can quell conflict, let alone stimulate peace. Each situation is so specific that any intervention requires a detailed and enlightened understanding of all contextual factors. This highlights the importance of the design process - especially the involvement of future users - as a precondition for success. And though an emphasis on process implies engagement in messy debates and lengthy negotiations, in certain situations there is no alternative.

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