

# CROSSING THE RIVER: NATIVE SPACE / STRANGER SPACE / URBAN SPACE

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## **Abstract:**

The main idea on this text is that we need to redefine the common meaning of some key words when we are talking about the phenomenon of migration (space, frontier, language, guest, host, proper, stranger, the other) in order to cope with the questions that arise in the space of the cities of reception of migrants. The final aim being to build a new political space that we could call space of seclusion where each individual could define its proper space trough the space of the others not in opposition but rather in active coexistence.

## **Key words:**

space, frontier, language, guest, host

## ***Part one: crossing the river***

1.

As the main title shows (although in certain elliptical ways), we want to speak in this text about what happen when a frontier appears in the space (and then about what a frontier is and what a space is —*a* frontier but also *the* frontier: *a* space, but also *the* space—), about what different types of frontier did exist and where, and, necessarily about how the tracing of that frontiers defines who is an immigrant (and in which different ways we could say of someone that is a immigrant), and how the different spaces in which the immigrant and the native (who is not necessarily the opposite of the immigrant, because the native is not an immigrant *now*, but had been *before*) lives are related to each other in the bigger and comprehensive space of the contemporary city (both the physical *and* the communal space of the city). And finally, about how this complex relationships are shaping our cities today (or at least must do it), in terms of political action but specially in terms of architectural action.

Of course, all of them are apparently well known concepts, with common and accepted meanings, with a certain stability through time and in different languages that enables us to use them in written and spoken discourse, but precisely for that reason, we need to make an effort to approach them as if they are new, and in certain ways transform and/or subvert its common use to sharpen its analytical potential. Because if we are trying to understand the main aspects of the general phenomenon of migration today in relation with the urban development and with the urban space, with the space of the city, with the space of the cities in which we live (and it is not only a first world phenomenon) we need to reshape the ways in which we understand what a frontier is, what a frontier joints and disjoints, where a frontier is deployed (in space: but what space?). And for doing that, we have to re-think this apparently well known concepts (and some others) and expel certain accepted misconceptions and plain statements. At the end we need to make an effort to develop a new theoretical approach, or at least a fresh one (it probably will be very optimistic to say that we could create a whole *new* thought, based as it is in known philosophical discourses, but we think we need, at least, a new attitude toward it, free of common places and second hand ideas) to try to understand the actual movements of population through a globalised world.

And for doing that, we need not only the tools of architecture and urbanism (both theoretical tools and operative tools, so to say *designing* and *building* tools), the analytical and empirical approach of a positive science, but a more comprehensive approach that includes research from other disciplines. A thought that restates through philosophy and contemporary thought on language, but also through a new thought on architectonic space and aesthetics, the main points of what we could call the native and the stranger: of what is our own space and of what we perceive as the space of the other (rather the Other). And how both kind of spaces could (or should) be mixed in one bigger space, the urban space of the title. Not only mixed: interrelated, traversed and crossed, weaved and sewed, without losing its own characteristics, but creating a new realm in which we could incorporate (and the relation with the Latin word *corpus* is nothing but casual) the Other as a part of the own (or the self) without losing the individual characteristics of both, like the textile pattern created in a loom. A new approach to the new configuration of the different spaces that create our cities, not only populated by the addition of different people but created through the different spaces that all this different people carry with themselves, the spaces of their native languages.

## 2.

The space of the city (the space of the metropolis or the *multicultural* city, though this is a word that has different meanings, and not all of them related

with what we are talking about: it is a word that in some ways is *abused* in the political jargon today) should be, therefore, re-thought in order to be re-lived beyond any border and any frontier (beyond but also before), including the frontiers of the language: creating or re-creating not an original common language (Babel), but rather developing what we could call a *Pentecostal* space, in which the different languages and spaces of each individual and of each community that conform the city could be understood by all its inhabitants but without losing its specifically different characters, its individual and idiosyncratic ways of confronting the other, of living with the other: in different words, its strangeness (*étrangeté*).

In this effort, we have to comprehend in a more deeper way what a frontier mean (the word *and* the physical one), and, more important, we have to think in new ways the plural and singular space that a frontier is, because frontiers are, always, *many* frontiers, all them interrelated. And the city is formed by the constant crossing of this frontiers. A frontier that, of course, and the title suggest it from the beginning, is not (or not only) a line on a map, but, as any limit, *is* (also) the space that surrounds *that* line: the line, then, *and* its crossing.

But also, if we are speaking about frontiers and about the space of the crossing, then we are talking about people, the different people that crosses those frontiers (and in that category we have to include very different kind of people, but always having in mind that a certain violation and a certain imposition always happens when the decision of crossing a frontier is made) and the people who live at the other side of the frontier, the people who is native or have certain rights precisely for living at one side of the line and not at the other. And then, necessarily, we have to talk about hospitality, about the *guest* and the *host*, about the familiar and the un-familiar (the uncanny, but in a broader sense of the word not restricted to the psychoanalytical meaning), about the foreigner and the un-foreigner, the citizen and the non-citizen (and all the political rights related with citizenship), and specially, about the private and the public, specially about the private law and the public law: about the law of the hospitality. And yes: it did exist, the law of hospitality, the imperative law that oblige both the guest and the host, the very estrange twist that, in a kind of double bind, transforms the host in the guest, the native in the stranger and the stranger in the native. Because both of them need the other to assert its own individuality.

### 3.

There is an old story about it, a story about a word an a war, an the word is *schibboleth* (see *Judges*, 12, 1-6). The tale is well known: In the time of the civil war between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites, the Gileadites used this word in

order to distinguish between them and their enemies, because the Ephraimites couldn't pronounce the word *shibboleth* correctly. Then, as the Gileadites took the passages and bridges over the river Jordan before the Ephraimites, they asked the men that escaped and crossed the Jordan if they are Ephraimites or Gileadites. If they answer that they are Gileadites, to probe they are saying the truth, they asked them to say *schibboleth*, and if they say *sibolet*, they killed them immediately: obviously, since the Ephraimites couldn't spell the word correctly, their misspelling identifies them as enemies. The life of each one, then, depends on something as fragile as the spelling of a word...

Here, in this old tale from the Holy Bible, we have the main points in which we want to focus this text: the physical frontier (the river Jordan), the virtual frontier (the impossibility of speak correctly a language), and all the intricate but at the end banal distinctions between the stranger and the native (since both Ephraimites and Gileadites are Jews, it was a civil war—and the word *civil* is nothing but neutral—), all of them related with a expanded definition of space: the space of the tribe (the *genos*), the space of the language, the natural and build space of the river (the natural and build frontier: the river *and* the bridges that cross it). Because we could not forget that the war between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites was a civil war, a war between different tribes of the people of Israel, a war were both tribes had (supposedly) the same rights over the same place, a war where no one could refer to any right upon the soil different than that derived of the use of power, a war where no one could say I'm the native you are the strange except by the sound of a word, except by something that apparently doesn't belong to the realm of the space (but of the time). But this is precisely what happens in any time and in any place, that any space marked by a frontier is divided, excluded only by an act of power and an act of speech. And then, necessarily, to cross a frontier is always an act of power and an act of will, both in terms of space and language: the power and the will of crossing, the power and will of letting cross. And its, always, a question of language, a question of spelling, a question of the space of the language. The language *and* the writing, of course (but the space of the writing is not only the material space of the support, the stone or the paper, but the space of the meaning, the space of community, the space where the distinctions between the native and the foreigner could be made).

*Schibboleth*: a word that speaks about crossing a frontier (and dying in this effort) and the rights of possession upon a country (we couldn't forget that only because the Gileadites took *before* the places trough which the river could be crossed they took possession of the country: remember, they took the passages, the places that linked both sides of the river, the real place in which the frontier is made visible, the border itself so to say), a frontier that is, at the same time, a frontier of the natural space (the river exists from ancient times)

and of the build space (the passages and the bridges, but also the space made visible by the imprint of the human presence). And that frontier, the frontier that is a *river* and that is a *word*, the frontier that separates us from the rest of the men, is then what give us the right to our own life. And the river is the Jordan. And of course, it marks a straight line that defines what is what we call a stranger, a foreigner, and what we call a native, and that divides the immigrant from the native (but what happen when the native, for example the people of Israel, had been the immigrant, the arriving people at the promised land?). And that word says who have what rights, the rights of living in some place, the rights of cultivate what land, the rights, at the end, of being alive.

We know, and this is the important fact we couldn't overestimate, that this line, that frontier, is a line in the realm of the natural space (a river), but also in the realm of the political space (the river *Jordan*) and therefore in the realm of the city, of the *polis* (but here *polis* is related to *genos*), and finally is a line in the realm of the aural space, the space of the spell, the space of the correct spelling of a word (a word that has at least two different spelling for the same meaning, an indecidible word because we cannot recognize its power of life and death trough its writing, but only trough its spelling by a man), the realm of the language, that of course is also a political space. So, when we use the word space, it seems we are addressing a more wide field that is supposed if the precedent reflections were not made.

#### 4.

At this point, we want to make an statement: of course, the language (the spoken language *and* the written language, although in very different ways) is the *only proper* space of the foreigner, of the stranger, of the immigrant in foreign land, but also, it is a space of exclusion, a space that he or her needs to open and relate to the space of the new language in the new city in which now is immersed, in order to transform it in what we can call a space of *seclusion* (Soriano, 2007), a space interrelated with the other's language space, a kind of mixed space where the migrant could still recognize its own space, live its own language space, but also recognize the language of the host as its language, as a language not only to communicate with, but a language in which to live, beyond the frontiers established by the spelling. At the end, the two languages, that are always more than two, are going to map the same territories, the space of the city and the social community, each from its particular and different point of view, but each at the end making the whole community richer, creating a new space of interrelation where the guest could become the host and the host the guest (a kind of ghost space, then). Because always the relationship that is established between the host and the guest derives in a kind of inversion of the roles, and the host becomes a kind of hostage (Derrida, 1997). The owner of the house (the

city) only becomes a real owner when a host is accepted, sheltered at the heart of its house. And then the immigrant, the guest (being desired or not, that its not important now, or not as important as it seems, because always a guest is desired, always a kind of necessity happens at the presence of the stranger-guest), becomes at this point the host of the host. Guest/Host/Ghost, the complete sequence being *hospes, hostis, hostage, host, guest, ghost, holy ghost* and *Geist* (Derrida, 1986).

We said *proper*, but now we could not forget that the proper is at the same time, the correct, the suitable, the convenient *and* the private, the one's own; the peculiar, the characteristic, *and* the natural, the original. Then, when we say proper, we are referring to a double instance, we say it at least in two ways that seems the opposite to each other, because if in one side the proper is the correct and the suitable, in certain ways the common, at the other side it is obvious that the language of the immigrant, his (or her) original language, comes from another space, and it is not the correct language in which to communicate in the place (city, country) of arrival: definitively it is not the convenient. And if 'proper' establish a relationship with the private, the one's own, the innermost space to which one could refer, it precisely informs this space of the intimacy that obviously excludes oneself from the realm of the common, of the correct, of the convenient in the political space of their host. Again, when we refer to the proper as the original, we are referring both to what is natural, to what is related with the origin, but also to the peculiar, to what signals the immigrant as a man that comes from another place, and, more important, to a man that is still in another space, the innermost space of his or her language, because it speaks in a peculiar way, because couldn't spell correctly *schibboleth*.

On the other side, that social space of the language, both private and communal, its what allows the immigrant to establish the origin of a new community in foreign land: the community made trough the language with the people that comes from the same country or the same place that himself. And that's important, because one of the more important thing that a country or a city as host of people from different places must do is allow them to establish this initial community trough language: it is necessary to admit the guest with its own *proper* language, with its particular characteristics and recognize them, precisely, as guests.

The language is the space that surrounds and covers the immigrant, that, as a suit, like a costume and habit, but also like a gown, clad and builds his (or her) own space. The mother language, the language that one carries with itself, the space in which the communication is possible trough this mother language is always on our back, but also we must say that this mother language is always the language of the others, a language that I learn from the others, always the language of the stranger and always the language of the future, of the time to

come. There is always a kind of expropriation in our language, in the language of our ancestors, a language that is always imposed, a space that always comes from the outside, from the other side of the frontier. We always *wear* our language as the language of the other, but also we are always living in our home, in the space of our home and of our family: the language is a kind of second and mobile home in which we could rest, and then, when is confronted with the language of the host, when is inserted in a bigger space that is not our own, its is necessary to reserve, to maintain open at least part of the space for those language of the others, for all this other's home that are, guest/host/ghost, also our own homes.

## 5.

Now: how is interfering that space of the immigrant (of the language of the immigrant) with the city space defined by another language, in another country, in another natural and political space? How could be defined this space of seclusion referred above? And how through architecture, trough the physical construction of the city and trough urbanism, trough the designing of the city (but architecture and urbanism both interrelated as the special thought about the city) could be enhanced this intricate relationship between the space of the host and the space that guest bring with himself?

And, more important for us now: how the spatial deployment of the city, of the modern city (the metropolis), of the city of reception could be considered a space of his (her) own without having his (or her) language as the main political sign of identity? In what political and build space the immigrant and the host could find a kind of common language but maintaining its mother languages in order to define a common political space? Put in other words: how should be planned and transformed spatially the build environment of our cities (*polis*) to incorporate the space of another languages, to develop a new city in which nobody has to cross any river at the risk of their own life to enter the realm of the social, of the political? And what about that *architecture*?

We think that the real challenge that we must confront in our cities is that: to make possible trough the physical configuration of the space the interrelation of the different spaces (that correspond to the different mother languages, to the potentially infinite language spaces) the perpetual movement of the circle defined by the dialectic of the *host/guest/host of the host/ghost*. It is necessary to build the social spaces where the laws of hospitality, the laws that obliterate the frontier between the proper and the foreign, between the rights of the own and the other could be deconstructed, could be inserted in the movement of the *différance*.

And for doing that we need to recognize not only the political rights of the immigrant, but also what we could call its spatial rights, the rights to its own

language and the rights to open the public space of our cities, again, to the political, to the nucleus of the *polis*: to the active participation of the immigrant in the building of the social space.

### ***Part two: native space / stranger space / urban space***

#### **6.**

*Schibboleth/sibolet*: we already know the difference between them. In the precedent words we have just found it. *Schibboleth/siboleh* or the difference between the voice and the letter, the sound and the character, the sound and his image, the ear and the eye, the intangible by the eye, the intangible by the ear. Actually the difficulty about how to pronounce the sounds in the right way, to speak well, not only knowing the language, knowing the law, knowing how to speak, but knowing really speak. This way that provide right, the law that provide a signal, a kind of signal that speak about a brand, something near to the idea of a stigma, something that it's able to give us life, saving our life like if we were Ephraimites. Some kind of brand that determines the way of making sounds, our way of pronouncing or, in the other side, some kind of brand that spells our end branding, our origin, a brand that determines our port of origin, our original place, the place where we were born. The place by birth, a piece of land that witnessed our birth, a piece of country where we were born, all of these are things that we understand like a piece of land that is natural for us, it is our piece of land, it is the piece of land that allows us become natives, indigenous, or vernacular. And we say land with the idea of being a noun that probably includes many others, those that while they are spelling they are revealing us their fundamental meaning:

- Earth as the planet where we live.
- Land as the place where we were born, place of birth, place of beginning, original place.
- Land as our country, the country we belong to, the country which we are members of, land that we must defend and protect because it is ours, because we have made ours. It is our country because we have delimited with some kinds of signs: physical, political, legal or administrative boundaries.
- Land as a piece of place that refers to a previous time that talks about a previous acquisition. We go from a time when there were no landowner to another since the land begin to belong some owners, so it is to say the property of this land is marked as the mark that shows the way the Ephraimites speak. Like this sound is recorded, the owners register their property over their land. It is the time of establishing of some kind of duties and dues, the birth of the law over this land. And since this moment we , as owners, are the defenders of it.

- Land as a place to defend from. Land with defender as the male leader in the pride, defenders as our ancestor chief in the tribe. Defenders of this land that, such in this way many times unspoken, is delimited.

## 7.

In such a way the limit appears, there is a border that separates our land from the adjoining, the boundary. ¿Is it physical or not? ¿Is it natural or man-made? ¿is it political or administrative? Anyway, then we are talking about some kind of land as a country which refers to defenders, as a nation which deals to history, customs, language, as a state that talks about government. ¿What can we find in all of these definitions? Something that deals to law, to a language, to same customs, to same history and many times, to same faith.

But what we are interested on is in the idea that we can draw: there is always some kind of mark that justify this limit, the border, a defender mark, a territorial frontier that we read like a boundary. A boundary that is some place where something is going to finish in such a way that this allows something become: something that is going from the being to its end, something that allows another thing its travelling from its birth to its becoming. Boundary where the end and the beginning were stretching each other. The end and the beginning are spreading over the stretch of land, over a boundary that at the end means the beginning of change, the change arrival. And all of this is going on in this space in between. The space in between where the beginning of meaning is born, the space in between that is the place of birth of the meaning. Meaning that identifies memberships. Meaning that reveal the belongings. Meaning that actually tips off by the way of speaking.

This boundary identifies the residents, the members of the club, the members of the country. This boundary identifies the properties of them, the properties that prescribe they are original from, they are natives because they were born in this place delimited by this boundary. This place where their birth happened, where their birth takes command. Their birth that takes place naturally. Because of this they, as members, are named natives, because they were born in this place in a natural way. Thereby, being born in a place we could associate with the idea of natural place, of our natural place, the place that is natural for us, the innate place, our innate place. So we could talk about native as the innate, the natural, the self, the keeping with the own nature. Even we could say that native is that human being that the belonging to his place makes him become the ownerland and, back to front, being the ownerland determines his belonging to this place. Native as the natural inhabitant of this land and because of this inhabitant protected by the natural law that this belonging provides. And we propose another meaning: native as the original inhabitant of this place, that is to say indigenous, because his origin take place there in his

place of birth, inhabitant that owes this place his origin, his origin is due to this place. And another meaning is possible: native as aboriginal, native as primeval, like the thing that started in the same place that it is now, in the same land. Native that find his definition in his birth related to this place. This piece of land, this place that has been able to support him, his witnessed place of birth that plays a role. Like a womb, this land could be seen like an egg shape from which the oviparous is born, a primeval egg that refers to some Brancusi proposals in the sculpture world and some examples of Tadao Ando architecture. The egg as the beginning, the image that the presocratic Greeks associate with the beginning of the world, with its origin. But we could refer it to the image of the seed that sprouts or even with the flower blooming. In other words, we could find some accommodation between birth and his image like the capacity of supporting life, the ability of coming out from an interior place that is able to support this life until this being has life enough to face an exterior place an meeting it. In this way this place looks this event like we could see the sun rises up each morning, like we could see the spring of water in a natural fountain. This land that is the place of the native, is possible to be seen like the primeval egg but from another point of view we could see it like the passage we have to cross to be born, like the image of the seed or that of the flower, with the meaning of to cross, to go through, to come from in order to go out and enter in another place, and with the meaning of changing a state, from an [in]-shape to an [out]shape, the passage across a border, a limit, a frontier. And finally, the third image we propose is that of the sun rising, or in other words, the water springs. Images that talks us about a way of overcoming, a way of making an effort in order to pass to another upper state. All of these images have something to do with our way of understanding the native space that, metaphorically speaking, talks about architectural space.

## 8.

But we want to talk too about the stranger space. In order to this, we are going to use that image of the birth an the original. We can talk about the original as related to something or somebody that provides origin. From another point of view we could say that original is something that takes his origin from some place. So we could say that something provides origin, with the meaning of supply, or even producing, and at the same time we could talk about that something takes his origin from another place with the meaning of moving, even transferring. And we are interested in all of these meanings, those of supplying and producing, those of moving or transferring as translation. We could say that they finally are talking about the idea of change, the idea of translation, the idea of mutation, the idea of metastasis, those ideas that have served like slogans, such as *leit-motivs*, for many of the main proposals in the last architectural

examples from Koolhaas to Nouvel, from oriental to occidental architecture where we can't identify their original place with an exact situation in our nowadays. From this situation thinking about the stranger in our world is so complicated. ¿What could we understand about the stranger?

Following the precedent argument, we could initiate these consideration taking here another time the idea of original as the proper, that thing that everybody understand as his own property, his characteristic definition, his fundamental definition, in architectonical words, his foundation, that system of elements that provide initial support to the building in the same way that we talk before referring to provides life. Original as the foundations talk us about the self, these characteristic that lay foundations of our self-being, the things that establish our characteristic definition. And here we could remind that etymology of characteristic that refers to character that, at the same time, relates to the language, the system of characters conforms the writing, the code that establish the image of the language. And we could take to this short account the etymology of the Latin word *idioma* (language) from the Greek term *idios* that is related to the idea of the thing that is typical, the thing that is the strict sense of something or even the thing that is the strict way of being someone to be named as it, its right to be defined as it. From this approach, we could begin to arrange and to find parallelism between language and that idea of the typical that probably is opposed in some fronts to that of the stranger.

Stranger is much more than the foreign, that from we are not accustomed. Stranger also refers to the idea of surprise. And what surprise us could be the opposite of the proper, the un-correct, the wrong in the way that it is not the kind of thing that we are accustomed to looking, we get used to earing-listening, experiences that our perception senses don't understand as typical, experiences that go out from our customs, experiences that are not our own habits, that does not concern with our place as inhabitant. In other words, we understand the stranger with those things that escape our residence, our home, our [*heim*] place. We identify the stranger with those elements that faced with the strange things, that things that are out because they do not belong to our home, and for this, we see it like our enemy, because we translated its difference as risk, we understand it as the [*unheimlich*], those uncanny things that we are not accustomed to, those things that do not happen because they have not take place. Undoubtly in this way we find the more attractive understanding of the stranger space, the stranger space like a *boîte a miracle* where everything is possible, where everything could happen and take place, the stranger space of the taking place, space for the place.

## 9.

And finally we approach to this taking place in a space where everything could happen. That's probably the best way of meeting urban space. Urban space has to control not only the original, not only the native, the indigenous, the primeval, the aboriginal but the stranger in such a way that provides life to the change, that allows the passing across the frontier, the travelling the whole length of the boundary in longitudinal and transverse sections. The spring from the inner space to the outer space, the cross of the limit. And today, probably one of the main question could come from the hard definition of the [in] and the[out], the inner space and the outer space because the space in between has taken commands at least in architectural language, because the frontier has break out, like a bomb explosion. Unless we avoid this question of lose of meaning, probably we couldn't establish a way of approaching. Initially we could say that from the inner space of the rural areas the human being pass his frontier to the outer space of the city. But on the other side and as time goes by the situation is actually the opposite: from the inner space of the city, from the urban space, the citizen looks to the outer space of the land, the rural space. And it is this urban space the main character of all the roles that take place in this play. From our point of view urban space will not be success if it don't propose to provide home to all of this ideas extended along this essay. In order to understand the stranger space like place of possibilities, in order to follow the break of the inner and outer world, in order to become the actually space in between, in order to remind us, our birth, our intrinsic characteristics, our foundation, our land which we belong to, the place where we are owner, in order to achieve all these premises the urban space has to provide the place for the door that looks for the origin, if this can be possible. Door as the word, door as the language when the language become a door and when the word become a broken limit, a blurred boundary, a fluid boundary like that of the Jordan river that through the word, the spoken word, the correct spoken of the word was the supplier of forgiveness, the supplier of living. And the river, the natural border, as the fluid boundary because of the nature of the water, remind us the blurred boundary, that image of the boundary, blurred border that today deals us to the blurred limits of the architectural space proposed by many of the main architects of the moment, Toyo Ito between them, and that we propose like the way to face the urban space design: native space become stranger space in order to be urban space as blurred space. That space where all kinds of boundary have disappeared, a space where to question is the law because it performs a big fluid shape, the blurred shape of a question sign: ¿urban space?

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