FOAM

ABSTRACT

In this essay I will address a reading of society that is profoundly different from one that is commonly heard today. I will contrast the reading of society as Gemeinschaft, or a gathering together in spite of everything that separates people to Peter Sloterdijk's interpretation of society as metaphorical foam. I will start with an introduction of the relevance of this topic: why do we need a different definition of society? (.1). Next I will explain the prolific possibilities that Sloterdijk's imaginative metaphor contains (.2), and finally I will discuss the relevance of this topic for the architecture of dwellings (.3).

.1 DIVIDED SOCIETY

The city of Berlin shows, even 21 years after its formal re-unification, signs of social, physical and cultural division. While the old dichotomy between east and west has silently shifted to the background, its underlying structure is still intact. Newspapers, political preferences and economics are but few of the signs that indicate a hesitation to merge[1]. One of the more visible indicators for the east-west divide has become the spread of immigrants throughout the city. Whereas a hardly significant number of immigrants live in the former east of Berlin, in some areas in the former west immigrants constitute the majority of inhabitants[2].

Rather than emphasizing the old division line, the integration of immigrants brings its own problems of division. Immigrants often occupy disadvantaged positions in the housing market, and have limited access to economic resources[3]. Of the many consequences, one that has particular interest in an architectural debate is the residential separation of minority ethnic groups and their resulting disability to participate in society[4]. However, the dwelling of the 21st century has to address deeper issues of "living together", issues that deal with a reduced sense of co-habitation. Ethnic segregation forms a perspective from which I will look to this specific problem in the re-unified Berlin of the 21st century.

As the example of Berlin shows most vividly, a city cannot so easily be regarded as an urban entity. In any urban context arise issues of disjunction. Diversity, whether it is ethnic or otherwise, plays a role

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[1] See, for instance, Mayer, 2006, Schneider, 2004 and Ellger, 1992
[2] Balbo, 2005, p. 54, shows that in 2002, 13.3% of Berlin inhabitants are foreigners; in the former west this number is 17.7, whereas in the former east it is 5.9%.
[3] Özüekren and Ergoz-Karahan, 2010, p. 358
[4] Ibid., p. 358-9

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in these issues, but the more fundamental condition that grounds this fact is formulated by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk: a city is principally an artificial way to live together[5]. A city provides an environment where strangers live among each other. That is to say: the people we are likely to meet in a city are strangers to us[6]. They are strangers not only in the sense that we do not know them, but also in the sense that we are not familiar with their habits, background or culture. The more diverse a city is, the more apparent unfamiliarity becomes.

Ferdinand Tönnies has stressed this characteristic in his distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*: in the former people stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in the latter they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them[7]. Technology and consumerism have enhanced the ideal of valuing individuality and evading public accountability. Estrangement and artificiality are the primary occasion for topical attempts to think of live as a controllable shield, permeable when possible but locked when necessary. In this light Peter King has stressed that dwelling is about placing a boundary around one self, regulating its porosity, controlling our relations with the world, to ensure a secure boundary behind which we can be free[8]. Lieven De Cauter likewise defined the condition of *hyperindividualism* – the inescapable refuge into one's own private world or a flee from the accountability that belongs to a shared society[9], as the new measure for society, a process that leads to reduction, exclusion, and self-containment. Its image is the capsule - the ultimate architectural consequence is Kisho Kurokawa's Nakagin Capsule Tower.

De Cauter sketches the consequences for such a society in his book *The Capsular Civilization*. Capsules – especially in a capitalist society – need to be sustained from the outside: all life-support exists in the periphery[10]. A society based on polarization of individuals – of you against me, together in spite of our differences, as *Gemeinschaft* – cannot be sustainable, because we cannot exist as independent capsules. But this image of society has a more fundamental problem to it: "to withdraw entirely, out of anxiety or even fear - to use dwelling to hide behind - is to become entrapped"[11]. The problem of segregation emerges as an underlying condition for the kind of society based on an individualistic – or capsular – principle.

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[5] Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 946
[6] Sennett, 2003, p. 48
[7] Avermaete, Havik and Teerds, 2009, p. 22
[8] King, 2007
[9] De Cauter, 2004, p. 80-94
[10] Ibid., p. 42
[11] King, 2007, p. 9

.2 A COUNTER-IMAGE

Peter Sloterdijk refers to these capsules as immune systems or, metaphorically, spheres. Immune systems keep us alive, in spite of the environment to which we are exposed. Spheres, in Sloterdijk's topology, extend from the microclimate of intimate mother-child relations to the macroclimate of climate control: spheres produce climate zones, in which metaphysical temperature can be regulated, but their inevitable instability is troublesome[12]. Sloterdijk refuses to think of immunological spheres as singular, individual or monadic: every life experience is always in and in front of another, any space is always occupied by a twofold, bipolar quantity[13]. Microspheres can appear as couples, households, companies or associations; they are spaces of resonance *between* people in symbiotic relations. Sloterdijk's terminology is prolific, because it focuses attention on social interaction rather than the entities that stand on either side of a line of communication.

Sloterdijk's metaphorical vocabulary reveals the mundane paradox within the individualistic tendencies that face our society. We live not as individuals; we live together. Society, therefore, is an "aggregate of microspheres [..] of diverse size, that border each other just like separate bubbles in a foam, and lie in layers on top or under each other, without being really accessible for each other, or effectively separable"[14]. The metaphor of foam provides an intuitive base of Sloterdijk's notion of society. It specifies society as a thin membrane around air-injected, instable multi-chamber systems, consisting of spaces formed by gas pressure and surface tensions, which restrict and deform one another according to fairly strict geometric laws.

In foam, people live in connected isolations. The metaphor stresses the key notion of co-isolation or "co-isolated associations": each cell is separated from others, but since adjacent cells share the same wall or boundary, they are characterized by co-fragility, and the dissolution of one cell will affect its neighbouring cells[15]. As strangers in a city cannot ignore their respective presence, so a citizen cannot ignore his neighbour. In foam, we necessarily get in touch with each other, but not through direct communications, as we continue to live within the private climate zones of our microspheres (and intimate contact can only happen within intimate relationships). Instead, between bubbles in foam only mimetic relations can exist: imitation is the process by which we communicate to others in

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[12] Sloterdijk, 2003, p. 37. I have used the Dutch translation that provides the threefold project in two volumes: ibid. and Sloterdijk, 2009

[13] Sloterdijk, 2003, p. 32

[14] Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 39: "Wij verstaan onder 'samenleving' een aggregaat van microsferen [..] van verschillend formaat, die net als de afzonderlijke bellen in een schuimberg aan elkaar grenzen en in lagen op of onder elkaar liggen, zonder dat ze echt voor elkaar bereikbaar of effectief van elkaar te scheiden zijn." The translation into English is my own.

[15] Borch, *Organizational Atmospheres: Foam, Affect and Architecture*, 2009, p. 4

society, by means of ideas, gestures and fashion. Indeed in cities our communication with others moves hardly via direct channels – an accidental conversation, accosting someone in the street, in spite of the relative ease with which such communication could be established. Passive (or rather: indirect) communication has a much higher impact on our daily routines[16].

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[16] See Sennett, 2003, p. 64-87 for an interesting reflection on this theme in eighteenth century bourgeois society.

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.3 ARCHITECTURAL CONSEQUENCES

Architecture of residential projects necessarily reflects on the way that society is constituted, because dwellings form the explication of living patterns. This is particularly true of modern architecture, as large scale housing projects have left an indelible mark on, for instance, post-war neighbourhoods. In reflection on society, architects should be aware of the imaginative powers that their craft has.

To imagine architecture for a society that expresses itself in terms of exclusion and self-containment is to deny the complex relations that exist between people living together in increasingly dense areas. Because we live among crowds, we have become interdependent upon our neighbourhoods; density is a precondition of the modern city[17].

The notion of co-isolation reminds us of the possibilities to transmit affective states through indirect communications, and therefore also through architectural means; for instance through specific lighting, odours or climate control. It also reminds us, however, that home is not homogeneous and empty, but imbued with meaning and association, history and myth. Precisely these characteristics determine the mimetic relations that form society.

Architecture that wants to answer to these characteristics has to take into account two directions of research. First, a psychological investigation of the inner associations of the private immune sphere, for instance through a poetical reflection on its appreciation: "A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. [..] A house is imagined as a vertical being. It rises upward. It differentiates itself in terms of its verticality. It is one of the appeals of our consciousness of verticality."[18]

Secondly, architecture has to investigate the hidden structures of co-habitation: the thin membrane that separates diverse private spheres. These should be made explicit, when their implicit functioning is hampered. A society that struggles with ethnic segregation experiences such obstructions on a daily basis. In such a context, architecture needs to explicate the borders between private spheres, in order to articulate the precise boundaries of co-habitation, but also to provide these borders with the possibilities for co-isolated, mimetic relations. The public exchange that can take place at these borders is a first step towards the mitigation of differences that exclude segregated minorities.

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[17] Uytenhaak, 2008 offers a concise analysis of the problem – and possibilities – of increased urban density.
[18] Bachelard, 1994, p. 17

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