Rituals of Control: Tale of Two Walls

Ola Sobczyk

'Borders—observed as three-dimensional devices, as symptoms and results of the dialectic between the energies of flows and the enduring power of local identities'.1

In this sentence, Stefano Boeri refers not only to the border itself but also to the idea of the periphery—the area where rituals of control take shape.

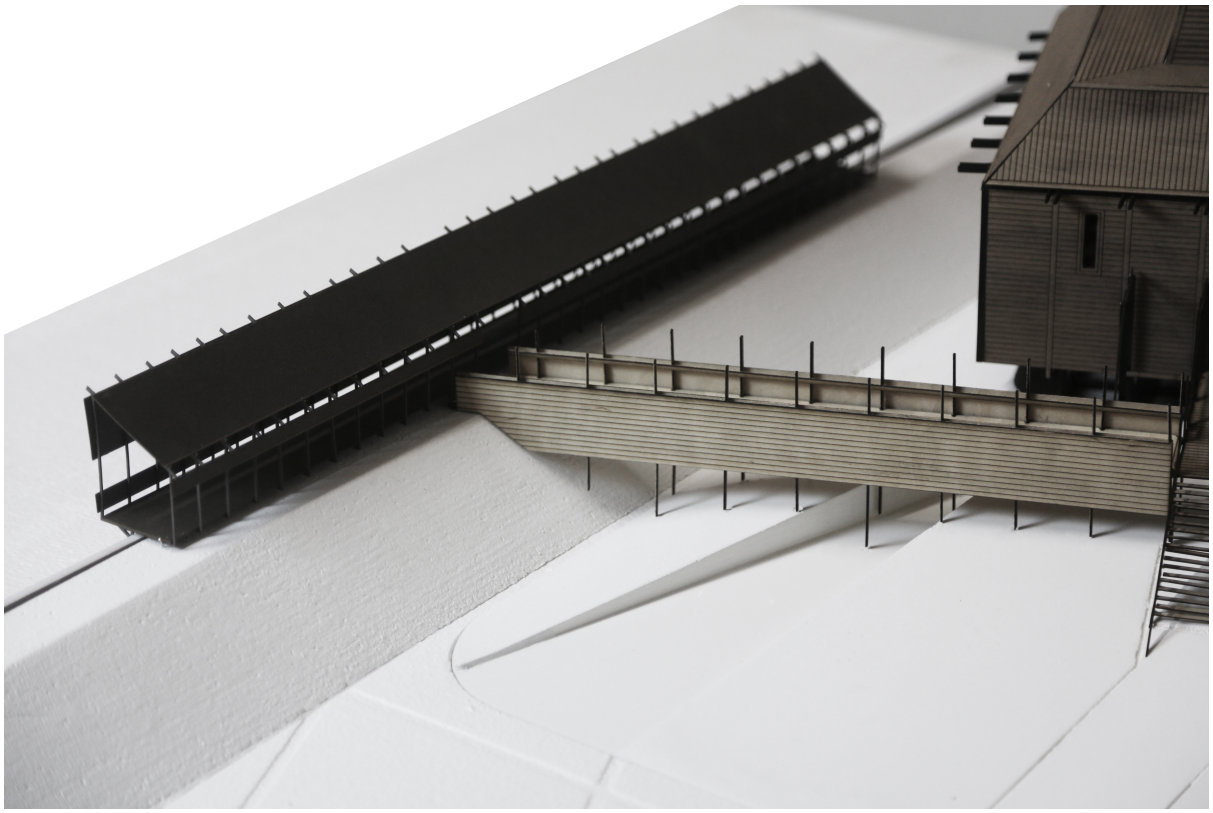
I travelled to the Occupied Territories in November 2019. I was studying architecture at the time and was interested in the language of security in space. The relation between the human body and the architecture of oppression. I've been connected to Jewish culture through my Polish heritage so I naturally chose the Israeli-Palestinian border as my first case study. I wanted to research all the issues mentioned above in the zone of the Israeli wall in Bethlehem. I called it the language of security in order to discover the extreme example of the boundary and periphery within Jewish community closely bound with oppression. I used a GoPro camera as a method of filming for crossing the periphery. I was trying to keep an objective eye, but shortly after I discovered the mechanisms of oppression and I managed to film the rituals of control performed by unconscious participants of this tragedy, with the Wall in the middle and me with the invitation to gaze. Digging further into the case, I needed to answer the question: Who is walling off whom? Is it the Israeli side trying to lock in the Palestinians or do the Palestinians want to protect themselves? In order to answer this question, I took a closer look on the Jewish community in Stamford Hill, London. The extraordinary feeling created by Eruvs***2*** —the smooth delicate threads making almost invisible boundaries for the houses intended to escape the strict eye of God—caused the strange ambiance of exclusion. The very elusive nature of Eruv makes rituals of control quite vague here. This case study was chosen in order to consider the cultural aspect of spatial language of security expressed by elements closely related to the culture—objects of rituals. Again, I used a GoPro as a method of filming, close to the body. The feeling of exclusion was reinforced even more by the cultural differences resulting from the clothing, behaviour and customs of the Jewish people living in the area. The reception is neither negative nor positive—just feels a certain way, even for me—a person that knows and lives the culture. It is as if there is some invisible magnetic field pulling me away from the centre to the periphery. To observe, but not to participate. Just like in Bethlehem, Occupied Territories.

The Jewish community in Stamford Hill deals with higher and higher rents and their traditionally big families need more space. I learned from the community in London that they are slowly migrating to Canvey Island in Essex, where the River Thames meets the sea. This not so casual procedure was filmed by BBC in the documentary Canvey: The Promised Land by Riete Oord. ***3***

'(...) far from being a clash of cultures, the Haredi and Canveyite communities are finding plenty of shared history.' 4

I decided to design a synagogue for the dispersed Jewish community in Canvey Island. It is designed to be a ritual place and community centre and is created as a set of boundaries. It is a focal point of the community that they don't yet have there. I chose a secluded spot (by the River Thames and the sea) as the synagogues were placed like that traditionally.

Canvey Island is a small Essex town in East England. Geographically, it is not really an island—it was connected by a series of canals in the past, but now it is just a peninsula inviting the River Thames to the United Kingdom. Because of its position in a land depression, the town struggled with the sea levels for centuries. We can say that the whole town life circulates around flooding issues. In Roman times, Canvey Island served mainly as a large salt-making industry.



Ola Sobczyk, Jerusalem grid — Synagogue in Canvey Island, 2020. Foam (CNC), oak wood (lasercut), cardboard (lasercut)

So-called 'Red Hills' provided a significant amount of the product.5 Extensive archaeological research in the 1960s provided a historical sketch of the Romans who settled in the area and, using their salt industry, were also involved in cheese making and shepherding. In the 17th century there was a first ever recorded6 attempt to protect the village from the sea, which also meant reclaiming the further flooded lands for agriculture. It is believed that the project was supervised by Cornelius Vermuyden, a Dutch engineer, and was built by around 300 Dutch men settled in the area. The very first system of dykes and sea defences was constructed with oak piling foundation, local chalk, limestone, heavy clay of the marshes, and faced with Kentish ragstone. The wall helped reclaim an area of around 15 sq km.7 Moreover, the new seafront Esplanade was established and boosted Canvey Island's popularity from the Victorian era. The Dutch presence—people, architecture, Dutch cottages and language—helped to develop the tourism industry for visiting Londoners. Construction of the sea wall led to a peak in popularity in the 1920-30s.8 The newly built East Esplanade hosted not only the walkway along the coast, but also attractions such as the Canvey Casino with amusement arcade, Labworth Cafe—a modernist building designed and constructed by Ove Arup (as the only existing purely architectural design by this established engineer), the Monico pub and hotel, and The Lobster Smack Inn, mentioned by Charles Dickens in Great Expectations.9 In 1953 the great North Sea Flood hit Canvey Island, claiming the lives of 58 people, mostly tourists staying near the seafront. The only area of the village that survived was approximately 60cm above sea level.10 The island is extremely flat, reaching 3m below mean high water level, so following the disaster, a new wall was erected, finally opening in 1982. It covers almost 75% of the perimeter (24 km) and is about 3m high. It is followed by a system of dykes and wetlands, flood sirens and emergency flood metal gates. The sea that gives opportunities to Canvey Island also takes what it wants. This love-hate relationship established the inseparable connection defining the town and its inhabitants.

Following my inquiry, I started my design with the objects of rituals in the synagogue.



Ola Sobczyk, Jerusalem grid — Synagogue in Canvey Island, 2020. Foam (CNC), oak wood (lasercut), cardboard (lasercut)

I chose to design the Aron Hakodesh—the case for the Torah rolls, the Bima—a stage for the Rabbi in the centre, and the decorative ceiling. I am organizing those elements in the space according to the boundaries and rituals, acting like a set designer working with stages, walls and openings, with regards to the local community, the materiality and the characteristics of Canvey Island in order to create a modern shtetl based on the symbiosis between the cultures.

So when we are back to Canvey Island, we are in the exact location where the River Thames meets the sea and where the infamous Lobster Smack tavern is situated. As mentioned before, the area is very flat. It lies below sea level. I chose this exact place for its emptiness and beauty. As the most significant element of the surroundings is the sea wall, I chose a grid for designing my project in order to shape the synagogue as a systematic element as well. I use an overlay of the grid turned towards Jerusalem and the one along the wall. It creates the matrix of contextualism. Something from the Jewish, something from Canvey Island. The wooden synagogue with the three elements inside is connected by a passage to the viewing terrace that inhabits the wall. Its interior is dominated by the granite ceiling in which the numbers of openings refer to the important numbers in the Bible. The spatial layout follows the synagogue schedule that I designed in order to involve the local community in its activities, for example, designing with oysters on Thursday afternoon or communal gardening on Sundays. The foundations can be accessed through cut landscapes in the bottom. The viewing terrace is open to the public and sits on the Canvey Island grid in contrast to the synagogue that turns towards Jerusalem. It serves also as a lapidarium—an exhibition space of the rocks and artefacts found in the water. The overall design strategy focuses on the permanence and temporary motive related to the fact that Canvey Island is below the sea level and will become completely flooded in 200 years. The mentioned elements—the Aron Hakodesh, the Bima, the decorative ceiling, made from blue marble—will survive as the relics of the Jewish community on this land. Three stone elements will survive the ultimate flooding of Canvey Island, remaining like a ruin after the traditional wooden synagogue, its passage and viewing terrace are washed out. Standing as a 12 Ola

Sobczyk Stages #11 Ola Sobczyk, Jerusalem grid — Synagogue in Canvey Island, 2020. Foam (CNC), oak wood (lasercut), cardboard (lasercut) monument to the Jewish community that once existed in this land and the climate change that overtook Canvey Island.

This story raises important issues about the lesser-visible cultural implications that rising sea levels have, as well as the environmental effects. A nostalgic generation born on the lost land, the ideas of the void and aether, the Atlantis tale that suddenly becomes true. We tend to value our physicalities more than mentality. Paradoxically, we live in the digitized world but it is the tangible that occupies us first when an emergency arises. The recurring physical elements in this tale are only the walls—the strongholds of the mentioned societies—but in the end, they both fail. They fail humanity and what stays is the symbol for the future, the monument of what once existed here. It commemorates the people, but also the temporality. The effect is maximized in this project, but we need to be ready to see those 'monuments' more often as soon as the climate dramatically changes and sea levels rise, wiping out the whole communities. In this particular case of Canvey Island, the whole design approach is based on failure. It only works as predicted if the catastrophe comes. It is rare to find the notions of failure in a design process. Quite the opposite, they are usually cleverly omitted. Should we design for failure? As we continue to accelerate climate change, maybe we should shift to this design process.

'Those shtetlen are no more, vanished with a shadow, and this shadow will intrude between our words.' 11

RITUALS OF CONTROL PART 01: BODY

RITUALS OF CONTROL PART 02: OBJECT

1 'An Eclectic Atlas of Urban Europe'. The lecture delivered in Vienna by Stefano Boeri with Francisca Insulza and John Palmesino was based on issues developed in the following contribution, parts of which were previously published in Stefano Boeri, 'Notes for a Research Program', Mutations. Rem Koolhaas Harvard Project on the City, Stefano Boeri Multiplicity, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist. Barcelona: Editorial Actar. 2001, pp. 356-377, www.documenta-platform6.de/an-eclectic-atlas-of-ur....

2 'The eruv is a boundary that allows observant Jews to carry needed things in public on Shabbat (..) Having an eruv does not mean that a city or neighbourhood is enclosed entirely by a wall. Rather, the eruv can be comprised of a series of pre-existing structures (walls, fences, electrical poles and wires) and/or structures created expressly for the eruv, often a wire mounted on poles. In practice, then, the eruv is a symbolic demarcation of the private sphere, one that communities come together to create.' www.myjewishlearning.com/article/eruv/ [last accessed on 19 August 2022].

3 Canvey: The Promised Land, dir. by Riete Oord (BBC and Spring Films, 2018).

4 Joanne O'Connor, 'Shalom, Canvey! Welcome to the promised land', The Observer, 8 October 2017.

5 Warwick J. Rodwell, The Excavation of a 'Red Hill' on Canvey Island, 1966, *The Excavation of a "Red Hill" on Canvey Island | Roman finds and more | CanveyIsland.org* [last accessed on 19 August 2022].

6 Ian Yearsley, Islands of Essex 2nd edn, (Romford: Ian Henry Publications, 2000), p. 15.

7 Yearsley, Islands of Essex, p. 17.

8 Yearsley, Islands of Essex, p. 26.

9 Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (London: Penguin Books, 2001), Chapter 54.

10 Yearsley, Islands of Essex, p. 29.

11 Antoni Slonimski, Elegia do ma?ych miasteczek, trans. by Jennifer and Stuart Robinson *Writing the Holocaust*

Her particular interests are in cultural relationships and their mirror in society, rituals, history, design, human body and its parts, sexuality, digital and tangible crafts.

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Ola Sobczyk is a Polish architect, designer and artist based in London, UK. She currently works at BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group and mentors architectural students at PBL Lab, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Stanford University. She lived before in Warsaw, Strasbourg, Paris.
Ola graduated at Warsaw University of Technology in 2016 with Bachelor of Engineering and Royal College of Art in 2020 with Master of Art in Architecture. She collaborated with many designers, artists and places including Alicja Bia?a, Grymsdyke Farm, Pauline Batista, Kawaii Agency, RICH.LONDON.
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