Architecture & Exile: Loss and Discovery
Through the Design of a
Refugee Facility
My thesis will examine the relationship between exile and creativity through the design of a refugee center for learning and temporary living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

I plan to design a setting for refugees who are adjusting to a foreign environment and are living in the undefined space between homes.
The project premise is to give life and freedom to refugees at a point of transition between the loss of their home and discovery of their new homeland.
I have framed my thesis with the familiarity of thresholds and dwellings, and by doing so I connect them to the backgrounds of architecture and our shared experience of the world.
Heidegger was a German philosopher focused on phenomenology. He described dwelling not only as a place that people sleep but as a place that allows them to build. Dwelling and building are never alone, to dwell one must build and for one to build one must be able to dwell. Dwelling is seen as constant, not something you achieve.
Looking back in history we see many philosophical concepts related to the ideas of dwelling, exile and creativity.
For example: the story of Cain and Abel we see God sending Cain into exile from his homeland. He could be the first nomad. But not even Cain could wander forever; he needed a place of dwelling.
Exile is not limited to just this understanding; there are people who choose to leave their homes and the things they know behind. Here we look at both those who welcome exile and those who have no choice. Today, refugees are exiled due to political problems, war, and natural disasters.
Refugee camps are intended to be short term, but some refugees can remain in the camps for many years. For instance, there are examples of people living for over sixty-five years in the refugee camps in Palestine.

Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal are two architects working with the Palestinians that are stuck waiting to return to their homes. The two architects learned that tents are used as a symbol of transition and of being ready to leave at a moment’s notice. After the architects proposed a design for schools and a plaza, the refugees made it clear that there should be no roofs for the plaza or the schools. They see the act of building a roof as setting roots and as the first act of dwelling.
Edward Said describes the tragic side of exile in these words:

“Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and its true home: it’s [sic] essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in the exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.”

-Edward Said
Although exile is in some ways a very tragic state to live in, certain personal truths may only be realized from within a state of exile.
Vilém Flusser welcomed the life of exile. Flusser was a philosopher who lived a life of exile due to his flight from the concentration camps where his family was murdered, but also because of his own relocation for jobs and other adventures. This life of exile was far from crippling. It did not leave him estranged from his true home, his place of dwelling. On the contrary, it liberated him to see things he never would have known. Flusser does not ignore the pain of exile but rather explains this pain as setting him free.

“I experienced freedom while anticipating the coming horror of humanity in the concentration camps.”
-Vilém Flusser
“Only when we are separated from something can we truly discover the thing we are separated from in its entirety.”

-Vilém Flusser
Flusser deliberately uses the term “expelled” and not “refugees” or “immigrants” since he does not want to confine himself to one specific form of forced migration. Instead, Flusser points to the entire scope of expulsion, regardless of whether the migration is personally, politically or even artistically driven. He does this to emphasize the similarities between many forms of exile and displacement experienced by many different types of people.
It is only through exile that one finds an understanding of creativity, for the idea of exile is of loss and discovery, a constant balance facilitated through transitional spaces that allows for creativity. For creativity to take place one must give up what he knows to see things anew. The expelled are given the choice to live in a world forever lost and leading to death, or to discover the new and beautiful in things that are ever-changing.
Dwellings were once places that held great value but were not always permanent in the sense of today’s age.
Tent structures of early nomadic societies, just like the tabernacle symbolize not just the individual but also provided a threshold that connected the individual to the social, political and religious beliefs of the people.
Likewise, permanent and temporary Triumphal arches are symbols of thresholds and the making of boundaries and crossings that provided places that connect to the larger culture. In the same way, I see my design for a refugee center being able to provide an in-between space between loss and discovery, between transition and belonging, on an individual, social, political and symbolic level.
My architecture is a threshold from one home to another. The refugee facility will be a place that gives refugees insight into their new homeland while allowing them to discover and create within a flexible but permanent space.
The architecture acts as an ephemeral space similarly to the triumphal arches. A concrete yet temporary space which allows one to both reflect on the past and move toward the future.
During this design process I created an artefact to help guide the design. The artefact is an interpretation of the ideas of exile. Through explorations of the making of an artefact I learned some of the qualities the architecture should embody: for example, the ability to be a permeant place yet still temporary. The architecture should allow for the sharing of stories and the ability to be contemplative. It should embody the ideas of the past while discovering the future.

I have done so in the artefact through the making of these panels that allows for transport them to many different locations. They can be set up to create a space within a space, allowing for solitude and the ability to share all at the same time. These panels allow for a distance in the way shadows dance across the screen. It is the displacement of the shadows that reflect memories of the past.
It is from this exploration of the artefact that led me to the site location. The site is located in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the intersection of Cedar and Fourth Street, the site was chosen since the surrounding neighborhood is one of the most diverse, multi-cultural areas within the Midwest.
It’s the multi-cultural population that strengthens the site location by the opportunity to transition from one culture to another. In some way forcing one to abandon their own culture to discover the other positioning one in a state of exile for the pursuit of discovery.
The site itself is a space of transition; situated in-between private homes of residential neighborhoods and public spaces of downtown. The state of transition points to the past while discovering the future and being in-between the private and public, past and future. It is in this state that one is able to see the beauty of the past and allows for the discovery of the future and the beauty of exile to be revealed.
The entire building is designed as a threshold – containing spaces of transition between past and future, loss and discovery.
Earlier I stated that my architecture would address transition and threshold through the individual, social, political and symbolic. These are the four main areas within the building program.
Gathering space is for hosting many different types of events. For example times of sharing stories, meals and different types of cultural activities. It is here that I believe the social and political will take part.
Voids are spaces that are not programmable and are located in-between the three main areas. It is within these voids that I believe the symbolic is revealed through transition. This space allows for the reflection of the past and the discovery of the future by remaining open to the living, learning and gatherings spaces. One may dwell in the void to both reflect through stories of their past and make a visible connection with their new place.
The learning space is designed to help embrace a new culture on a personal and political level. One may transition back and forth between different programs as well as between a memory of their past and a view back to the city.
Private living areas allow one to remember the past and engage in more intimate social dialogues.
The first and primary building threshold is the entrance, which is composed of a large curtain wall followed by layers of towers which allow visitors a glimpse of four primary building programs. Private living areas, Learning, Gathering, and Voids.
Moving through and in between, the building towers are intended to heighten the sense of transition, since they are constantly revealing and concealing a variety of views throughout the building. On the ground, level one is constantly caught in a contrast between stability of the towers and the ephemeral views beyond. The main atrium functions like the triumphal arch surrounded by places of memory a threshold between past and present.
Travelling the length of the bridge into the dwelling area passing along the learning center, crossing over a void, arriving at the entry of the dwelling; is one example of the many transitional spaces allowing for the duality to take place between the loss and discovery of the past and future.
In the private living area, the residents will have a place where their past and present situations are brought together. It is through the views to the surrounding city that look toward the residential area where the towers simultaneously draw about the sense of security through the concealing of views and residents are called into a state of reflection.
These small more intimate spaces allow one to express their past privately as well as to present it through a transparent layer to the city beyond.
Moving into the learning area, towers are intended to heighten the sense of transition between past and future. The materiality of the towers are in contrast to each other, the concrete gives one a sense of strength and protection while the layering of bricks are a reflection of the layering of memories from the past. The views that are revealed are of public works and schools encouraging the discovery of a new culture.
Private spaces allow for remembering while public spaces encourage discovery. The learning area is where the past and present situations are brought together; with this interplay between public and private, revealing and concealing, the design is intended to allow for reflection and the discovery of a new culture and home.

The learning area will provide opportunities to discover the new culture through language class, driver’s education, along with counseling and other important basic skills for new Americans. The architecture will facilitate these basic skills through areas that allow for computers, classrooms and counseling. The counseling areas are adjacent to towers which give a sense of protection. The computer clusters are positioned next to the curtain wall allowing for views to the downtown area. The classroom views are concealed by a secondary façade for the purpose of protection from north winds and concealing of views.
It is through the transition into the gathering area one becomes aware of the ground and sky in position to the body. As the body is positioned just below the ground in the gathering area, it is intended to evoke a sense of memory, while allowing for the sharing of ideas in a new location.

The gathering space will be used for sharing of stories and memories of the past. Different cultural meals will be shared for the transition between many different cultures and the discovery of something new.