

P4 Reflection

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Methods and Analysis

Graduation Studio 2017-2018 | Constructing the Commons, Valparaiso

My final Graduation Project proposes a series of co-working spaces in the Cerro Cordillera, the oldest working-class neighbourhood of Valparaiso. The spaces are located around a central path which represents the spine of the project, the public core of the design. This path has a double role: on the one hand, to physically connect one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Valparaiso with the more developed area of the *plan* and to the gentrified and touristic neighbourhoods of Cerro Alegre and Concepcion; on the other hand, to socially connect locals and tourists, thus becoming a *place of encounter* between people with different expertise and backgrounds. Stairs and steep paths are an unavoidable experience in a city like Valparaiso characterised by its strong verticality. From the beginning, I understood that one of my desires was to transform an ordinary path into something extraordinary. A more intangible and meaningful function lies behind the program of co-working: **my project is first of all an open museum that speaks about empowerment through work and the importance of collaboration and mutual exchange in our society.**

Looking more specifically at the project, my design process has constantly and simultaneously shifted between three different scales: landscape, architecture and construction. The confrontation with the first one was definitely the most challenging part of my design process, as I am dealing for the first time in my academic career with an extremely steep site. However, it has been an important learning experience because it pushed me out of my 'comfort zone' and it stimulated me to find new and original solutions. Indeed, the final design solution only arrived when I started to see verticality as an opportunity instead of an issue. The landscape design takes advantage from the site and proposes a series of elevated terraces, connected by stairs and paths, which follow a loose grid of which the boundaries and extensions are decided in close relation to the natural environment of the site. The working spaces are then flexibly located on top of these platforms and they represent the final outcome of my architectural research, both in terms of materialisation and use. Finally, the most consistent part of my design research is probably represented in the structural design. The final outcome is an extremely simple and flexible structure, designed in such a way that it can be easily built, adjusted and dismantled over time.

Throughout this year I also became more conscious about my personal approach towards architecture. To better understand the final outcome of my design, I will briefly explain in the following chapters some of the aspects that characterised my design process.

Empathy

During the field trip to Valparaiso, in October, we were asked by our tutors to write a postcard revealing our first impressions about the city and the future intentions related to the Graduation Project. Looking back at that postcard, written seven months ago, it is a good way to start reflecting about this year and to realise how, and to which degree, those early desires and ambitions are spatially translated into my final project.

In that postcard I expressed the desire to continue the research I have carried out during my last year of Bachelor about the concept of 'taking care' in Architecture. A concept which was extensively discussed by important philosophers and architect, such as Heidegger, who spoke of *architecture as an act of taking care*. For me *taking care* means to develop and preserve relationships towards things and human beings; it requires observation, knowledge, dedication and affection. It implies an empathetic attitude to understand and especially predict other people's needs.

Throughout the past months I understood how my personal predisposition towards empathy is also strongly reflected in my design process, which is mostly based on a continuous and challenging learning process aimed to comprehend the reality around me. My personal desire to understand the shades that composes our geographical, social, economical and political environment is reflected in all the different stages of the design process: from observation sketches until detailed technical drawings, from studies about urban social practices until individual and personal practices.

Being empathic is for me not only *the ability to understand and share the feelings of another*¹, but also to project and predict needs, desires and uses of others. Indeed the architect has, in my opinion, a prophetic role in the sense that he somehow anticipates future possible scenarios. **Empathy becomes then a crucial architectural tool in order to fulfil better the needs of the users.**

Non-knowing

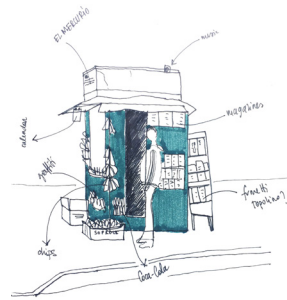
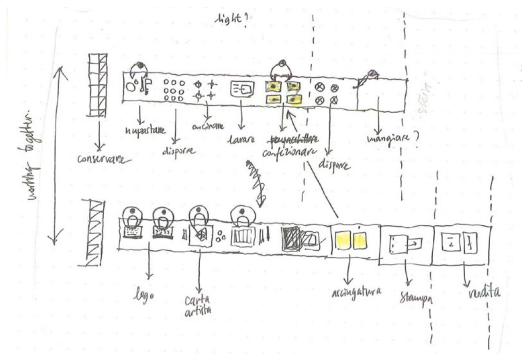
Furthermore, being empathic also implies, in my opinion, a natural predisposition to *unlearn*. In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard describes the process of learning as *an equal capacity to forget knowing*, therefore *non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge*². This condition of oblivion leads me to constantly question myself both about the essence of my design.

After collecting big amount of references (architecture, paintings, pictures, books, movies...) from my didactic but also personal experience, I start to look at them in a critical way, as I would seen them for the very first time. Which are the specific elements that fascinates me? Which are the qualities that grabbed my attention? Which atmosphere I would like to recreate in my own design and why?

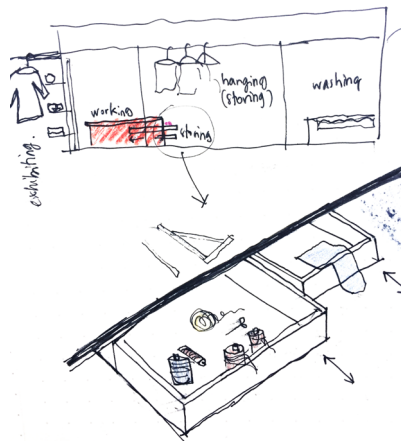
This part of self-reflection is often revealed in the form of expressive sketches, in which I interrogate my self about the role that architecture plays in creating certain kind of atmospheres and qualities and how can I translate them in my own design.

¹ Oxford Dictionaries

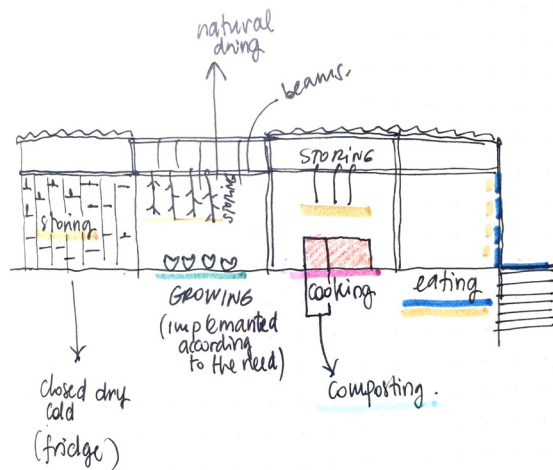
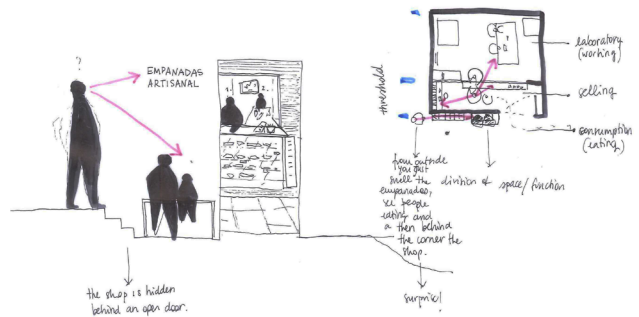
² J. Lescure, *Lapique*, Galanis, Paris 1956, p.78



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Diagrams, sketches and models are some of the tools used to study and understand social practices.

Hues

Related to aforementioned concept of '*non-knowing*', is the one of antonyms. Throughout my learning process I have realised that I am constantly attracted by opposite concepts, indeed antonyms, namely a *word opposite in meaning to another*³. I am interested and fascinated by the hues that separate them, because I believe that by looking at the in-between I can grab a broader and more accurate picture of the reality.

Indeed, it is possible to read in my design a constant tension between several antonyms, such as:

- generalisation / specificity
- freedom / control
- order / chaos
- flexibility / rigidity
- individuality / collectivity
- working / living
- idealism / realism

In my opinion, the final project is a personal attempt to find, what I have called, a *delicate balance*. By softening their boundaries the project is able to take advantage from all this opposite aspect. So, for example, I have tried to go beyond the dichotomy generalisation/specificity by proposing a modular grid that constantly adapts to the specific conditions of the site.

Ethical responsibility

Finally, another important aspect of my architectural approach is the one of *ethical responsibility*. I strongly believe that architects cannot avoid to confront themselves with ethical issues.

My ideas regarding this topic can perfectly be summarised through the words of the Italian architect Giovanni Michelucci who, in 1948, wrote: (before being an architect) "*...I am first of all a responsible citizen in all my actions and in every moment: morally, economically and socially responsible. Because if I don't solve the formal issues within those terms, I am out of time and place in which I live and in which and for which I work.*"⁴

Being ***morally, socially and economically responsible*** means to me to be aware of the impact that every 'formal' decision causes to other people's life and to the natural environment; being aware of the agencies involved in your project and knowing "*how, under what conditions and human difficulties your work is accomplished.*"⁵; it means to be aware that Architecture is not only a pure formal exercise but an act which could have a strong impact in the local economy of a neighbourhood and that has a fundamental educational role in empowering communities.

³ Oxford Dictionaries

⁴ G. Michelucci, *The Happiness of the Architect*, open letter to the students and professors of the Faculty of Architecture in Florence, Firenze, 1948

⁵ *Ibidem*

The project

I believe that empathy and ethical responsibility were the driving forces of my design and that the project reflects in some part this approach. For example:

1. **Simplicity** was one of the key aspect of my project. I wanted to keep the structure of the co-working spaces as much simple as possible, in order to allow the users to build their own space and change it according to their needs. All the structural elements, from the columns until the rafters, have the same dimension so that it becomes extremely easy and fast to build the volumes. Once the structure is completed, prefabricated modular panels made of clay and straw (in Chile known as *quincha*) are manually fixed to the column.
2. **Sensitivity** towards the existing social practices and natural landscape. The project is located in a neighbourhood with a strong a long tradition of appropriation that started when fishermen and farmers, the first inhabitants, appropriated some empty buildings left by the upper class. The advantages of having such a simple constructive system are also that the structure can be easily implemented and modified. It allows people to appropriate and change the space according to their needs. It allows a certain degree of uncertainty which is necessary if one wants to design an inclusive space.
Furthermore, the project is sensitive in relation to the existing qualities of the site, by trying to preserve and give value to them. First of all, the existing condition of *mirador*, viewpoint, is taken into account and the volumes are located in such a way that they don't obstacle the view towards the ocean and the city. In addition to that, the existing trees are preserved and considered as a mass with specific shapes and extensions. Finally, the sensitivity related to the existing resources is expressed by the use of local materials and techniques, such as the *quincha*.
3. **A domestic scale** is what I wanted to achieve in my project. After many observations, I believe that a domestic, intimate atmosphere helps to stimulate a sense of *belonging* and attachment to a place. If we feel part of a place, then we also immediately start to take care of it, we put our effort in maintaining and preserving it. Involving the community in the construction of the space is then an act of taking care that will ensure the long-term success of the project.
4. **Collaboration** is an unavoidable feature of my design. In my project I have tried to highlight the power of it and to understand which are its benefits. So for example, I have tried to understand how people with different expertise, such as a chef and an artist, can achieve mutual benefits by working together; or how architects can benefit from a hostile landscape topography and transform it into a resource for an entire community.

Final Reflection

This year was for me extremely challenging and enlightening. *Challenging* because I have encountered many difficulties in confronting my ideas with the reality of the site and to find a way to translate my desires into *space*. *Enlightening* because this constant shift between theory and design, between abstraction and realism, also pushed me to interrogate my own work more in depth and to understand and clarify my position as an architect (and as a citizen!) in the society. I believe this learning process just started!