

REFLECTION P4

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May 2019

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project is located in Armenia : the corner–exposed neighbourhood of Teusaquillo, the district of Bogota. Both the theoretical study and research carried out on site lead to the discovery of certain problems the area is dealing with. Due to security issues the citizens tend to find the easiest but not necessarily most fit solutions to provide themselves safety. The amount of entirely closed off, fortress–like private properties is growing, creating extremely inefficient public spaces. Those ‘in-between’ areas paradoxically create less safe environment putting the inhabitants in dangerous, ghetto-like environment the moment they leave their ‘safety bubble’. This introversion of the area has an immediate impact on the quality of social life causing mistrust, lack of sense of belonging, co-ownership and shared responsibility. Armenia is an example of this kind of introversion both on the scale of a singular building and the district: located in the corner, it is totally cut off from the rest of the city by high speed roads –Avenida Caracas and Avenida El Dorado. The process of city planning seems to have prioritised the fast and efficient car transportation leaving Armenia left out and neglected.

Given the present state of the area the project attempts to open up the neighbourhood of Armenia, making it the gateway, entrance to Teusaquillo. The exposed corner, marking the border between the introverted neighbourhood and the rest of the city, is planned to accommodate elements working as an invitation, incentive attracting visitors from the centre.

The plot on which project is located could be interpreted as a hub mediating between different states with different forces acting on them: busy city centre under constant and intense development, calm enclosed residential neighbourhood, busy traffic infrastructure and continuously multiplying commercial areas.

The main goal of the intervention is to achieve increased permeability and porosity, including both visual and physical access, allowing potential users from those different realities to have increased awareness of the potential lying within neighbouring, yet so separated states. The primary tools used to achieve it include working firstly with the urban scale: questioning the feasibility of some of the existing structures, mainly car parking areas, garages and other seemingly temporary structures facing Avenida Caracas. After thorough research they proved to be of cheap, fast and easy construction with very low density to floor area ratio which allows for speculation that they are working as temporary place holders awaiting better and more profitable investment. Being poorly maintained with no architecturally attractive or historically valuable features, the structures were decided to be removed. This treatment provided much needed open area potentially functioning as a forecourt or piazza in front of new building.

The next step was to move on to the smaller scale of a singular building block: for the majority of the duration of the project the design strategy included intervening within seven existing buildings constructed around the 60s. The approach included learning from its existing qualities like space, dimensions, proportions and analysing thoroughly all important features (façade, structure, positioning within the context). After arriving to the final strategy however, the validity of utilizing existing building faded, resulting in a dilemma whether to continue working with the existing tissue or let go of it allowing for the development of the completely new object. Because the primary research interest was always the study of innovative typologies of public space, not necessarily the exploration of the renovation techniques, the decision was made to let go of the existing building block and replace it with new structure designed from scratch.

New building comprises of multiple boxes stacked on top of each other and enclosed within structural frame. The solid, closed elements are elevated above the ground freeing the space underneath, where pedestrian circulation takes place. The ground floor level is completely open, accessible and unrestricted, working both as an extension of the building and as part of urban public space merging those two entities. Although enclosed within regular grid the assembly of elements is quite dynamic, providing variety of spatial experiences. The tallest and most dense areas of the building are located above the busiest pedestrian routes responding formally to circulation taking place on horizontal plane. The building gradually dissolves from its highest point towards the grounds surrounding it, touching finally to the pavement surface with the usage of platforms, allowing to access the building from different sides directly from the urban public areas.

Circulation among the boxes placed on four floors is provided by open air suspended walkways and platforms, creating unpredictable and rich in choices landscape of possibilities, allowing users to program their own experience within the building.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND GOALS

The research process begun with posing the research questions: how to counteract the discovered introversion of Teusaquillo with available design tools? With usage of which spatial treatments it is possible to introduce new redefined, location–specific public spaces? As the project progressed the main inquiry shifted as well, focusing more on the various typologies of public space with the main interest being exploration of the potential social change powered by those spaces. In the final stage the research evolved around defining different levels of publicness –the concept understood as a condition both within urban area and in the scale of a building. Condition became a crucial descriptive term, with time as an important defining parameter on top of three major elements: appearance, quality and working order. The research continued with the exploration of the notion of the boundary and boarder, introducing the concept of a frontier as an alternative understanding of the condition mediating between opposite states (closed off and open, public and private).

Along the research process the design assignment started to gradually clarify: main goal became defining specific design tools methodologies and types of interventions allowing for extroversion of both: a singular building and an entire area (Armenia). Another important task was to redefine the notion of a boundary and a public space in case of an introverted area, and finding out how could those new definitions be expressed by spatial qualities. Since major goal included mediation between different realities which had different functions, spatial demands and levels of allowed access, the notion of influencing user’s behaviour with the spatial expression was also studied: how to signify areas of openness and restricted access without using traditional aggressive boarders – walls, fences, gates, barbed wire etc. All the research and design assignment were implemented into a specific example – one building block - but with a plan in mind to

learn from this specific case study and create a catalogue of possible solutions to be implemented elsewhere, in order to counteract the introversion of the built environment.

RESEARCH METHODS USED

MONTAGE

After discovering multiple similarities between film making techniques and architecture (built environment being perceived as a sequence of consecutive frames and views) it seemed beneficial to learn from this approach and implement it into the project. Main tools obtained from montage included: reading architecture defined as a process of movement - discovering view after view and learning from juxtaposing different objects and sites; combining and collaging different design tools – exploration determining the full capacity of those tools and enabling their full use in further project stages. The crucial element was also defining the moment of collision of frames as more meaningful than the content of a singular frame itself, which led to deeper understanding of future user's perception of the designed space.

All those findings were implemented into the design process, for instance, when studying the transitioning between areas of different levels of restriction – action being perceived as a gradual process, a journey, with time and distance as an important parameter. Montage also changed thinking of space: from a constant, passive phenomenon into entity that is continuously evolving in time, being subjected to climatic and environmental factors. Those observations led to implementation of temporality as one of the tools to signify transitioning between areas of different levels of restriction. Another important element derived from film making techniques was the idea of journey and path provided for potential users, which later on turned into a landscape of possibilities – a result of letting go of the desire to control users' actions, providing instead the opportunity to choose one of the multiplicity of options offered by space. Final and paramount value resulting from this research method was the decision to allow people to build their own experience within the space, by simply providing the collection of elements they could choose from. The final effect of such experience would be a montage of views and collection of perceptions being a result of user's choosing rather than the designer's imposed vision of space.

SPECULATIVE RESEARCH

Another research method used for the project was speculative research. This method was prioritized over standard analysis, mostly because of its more engaging and eye opening qualities: it allows not only to analyse what is already there but what may be under hypothetical conditions. It allows to explore the power behind certain design tools in abstract situations and exaggerated scenarios. It provides extreme freedom of exploration and it is not limited by the conditions of the reality.

Usage of that method allowed for reflecting on all explored design tools, previously studied in hypothetical and exhilarated conditions, leading to implementation of them in a more subtle way, with more awareness of their effect and potential. Using those tools with such knowledge allowed for more informed and suitable design. Such treatment could be seen in the majority of the design choices made in the project, one of them being for instance the decision to remove the buildings facing Avenida Caracas in order to provide a piazza in front of the new structure. Some questions like that – weather it's worth it or even possible - seem exhilarated at the beginning, but when studied more thoroughly lead to realization of how huge value and improvement in functioning of the space such radical choices can bring. Sometimes the risk of being bold and maybe a bit unrealistic in the first stages of the project pays off later, by unlocking certain design solutions which were unthinkable before.

ESTABLISHING THE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AN ARCHITECTURAL OBJECT AND A USER

Another research approach utilized throughout the project was the attempt to define and establish a communication on the line: architectural object and a user being exposed to it. The means to achieve this was the application of techniques from outside of the field of architecture, like semiotics or architectural psychology. Primary focus throughout the research process was answering the question: how to embody a message in/ control the meaning of an architectural object. Knowing which treatment influences a user in what way would undoubtedly enable creation of more informed projects, allowing to propose more appropriate solutions for specific functions, situations and target users' groups.

The way this approach was implemented into the development of the project may be best illustrated on the example of working with different levels of restricted access, when talking about mediating between different degrees of publicness. The goal was to signify the change of the level of allowed accessibility with the usage of new typology of informal boundary, without the implementation of more conventional, aggressive signifiers like wall, gate, locked passage barbed wire ect. By studying which design treatments could be read by potential users as such informal barriers, the project attempts to separate the areas of different degree of desired accessibility in a way based on spatial perception, preventing the introversion of the environment, producing more inclusive and socially productive spaces. Diagnosed in such a way tools could serve the purpose of gradual transition from unrestricted/ entirely public area into more restricted, private one. Such mediating condition could be described as a frontier – an area or state responsible for transitioning between opposite realities. The resulting tools which could be used to achieve such a conditions were subdivided into two categories: atmospheric and physical. The first category could include, among others: change of spatial scale – limitation of height and openness, limitation of direct sunlight and/or rainfall access, rainwater collected and directed in a certain way, vegetation patch as an aftermath of the rainfall – a treatment additionally dealing with the concept of time and temporality. In the category of physical elements we could include: change of levels - full floor or just one step, change of surface, materiality or acoustics achieved by spatial means. All those elements are used in the design as carriers of certain meaning. By perceptual progression through those elements, with their order and the way they are arranged being an important factor, a valuable message can be signified. In the case of this project the message aimed to be achieved is gradual change of the level of privacy and publicness.

RELATION OF THE PROJECT TO THE REAL WORLD – RELEVANCE AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

While working on the project – focusing on specific case of Armenia and Teusaquillo – the goal was all along to develop solutions which would be more generic and could be implemented elsewhere, in areas dealing with similar problematic. Growing problems with security are omnipresent around the world and natural human instinct is to protect ourselves – this won't change – therefore the key is to provide well designed techniques to do so in a non-disturbing way. If proper spaces and treatments of mediating between public and private aren't established, introduced and taught to people we will always result in those unproductive 'in between areas' causing social issues. Furthermore, through my project I hope to initiate a discussion on what a public space actually means: who does it serve and who does it benefit in current conditions? Does it favour specific groups instead of being actually public and providing equality?

Social interaction, bonding, building relationships always takes place in a location and that location has a great power over shaping the quality of those relationships. This power behind the public spaces may fix problems instead of causing them – lead to social inclusivity, promote equality and acceptance, provide the feeling of belonging, co – responsibility, co-ownership and freedom. All those crucial for well-being elements may have their source in a productive, well designed and needs-accommodating public space. It is important to remember that those spaces often are the only grounds for people from different social and income groups, different religions, backgrounds and ages to actually interact and observe each other, which could be very beneficial for all parties.

The major dilemma I encountered during working on the project was deciding on the scope of intervention. It was a very important point in the development, at which a very radical decision had to be made. Throughout the first half of the project work progressed with a very specified approach in mind: implementing minor intervention, subtle but well thought through changes that can lead to a great improvement of quality, with no grand gestures needed. During the process though, I started to struggle with this ideology, because the research took me so much further than I have anticipated, so far in fact, that this approach started to work as a restriction. The decision making process concerned the idea of either keeping the building block that I had been working on for several months, having multiple design attempts with it, studying it thoroughly and planning to intervene within its tissue, or making a radical choice of clearing the entire plot and implementing all attained knowledge within a new structure designed from scratch. I choose the later.

Firstly, the main issue I was dealing with was removal of certain existing buildings within the context, which is always a difficult decision that impacts a lot of people, is usually costly and requires a lot of effort. In the end however, after a thorough study and weighing all advantages and disadvantages I decided that the outcome of that choice would be beneficial and is worth the risk.

Secondly, I had make a decision on aforementioned building block that I was working on for the majority of the project, being convinced that I will intervene within its 7 buildings. It was extremely difficult to let go of it after putting so much effort into it, so much studies and design attempts, but in the end it turned out to be more beneficial for the trajectory of the entire project. After revising initial research questions I realized that the primary focus has always been the expiration of innovative public spaces typologies rather than new types of renovations. This choice allowed me for exploration of possibility for innovation without unnecessary constraints of existing structure, with entire process being treated more as an academic exercise and experiment, which requires freedom of exploration. Furthermore the knowledge gained from work carried out in the first stages of the project was not lost and forgotten but implemented into the new design, making the first period widely extended learning curve.

COMPATIBILITY OF THE PROJECT TOPIC WITH THE TRACK OF STUDIES

The main reason behind the decision to join Methods and Analysis Studio was fascination for exploration of innovative methodologies of research and design in the field of architecture. I was always interested in implementation of interdisciplinary approaches into my work, especially appropriation of tools typical for different fields, therefore this studio seemed very suitable. Being a student of Methods and Analysis Studio for several months now, I see the strong connection between my approach and typical for the chair methodology: taking a certain position towards one's topic, using interdisciplinary methods of exploration and allowing professional curiosity to be the guide throughout research process. Seeing potential in application of techniques from outside of the field of architecture - learning from film making, semiotics, information theory, phenomenology or architectural psychology – enabled me to thoroughly understand phenomenon that fascinates me, at the same time allowing myself to discard preconceptions and look at the issue from different perspectives. I also appreciate very much the strong encouragement for experimentations and not having predefined fixed brief, which allows for unrestricted exploration of personal fascinations.

TOWARDS FINAL STAGE OF GRADUATION

For a long time the design goal of the project was to find an integral system that could be applied to both urban scale and the building structure. After emerging of the strategy of the landscape of possibilities (space allowing user to build up his/hers own experience by collection of perceptual elements) the main goal became to use that strategy to merge the three dimensional public space – the building structure, and the surface of the plot - surroundings of the new building in a continuous, uniform, yet facilitating specific needs of each scale, way. The next step to work with that approach will be to explore in more depth the process of transitioning through different levels of publicness with the focus on the scale- specific characteristics and spatial tools. Furthermore it is important to complete more detailed definition of specific urban conditions which are representative of those different levels of publicness.

The newly designed structure will also require more detailed treatment, with the focus on making sure that all design choices express the theoretical ideology also in regards to materiality (choice of materials, their function-specific implementation and combinations of different types) structure (also expressing the idea of different levels of publicness) and natural conditions in Bogotá (usage of rainfall, exposure to sun and season-specific atmospheric conditions used as an expression of time and temporality). The goal of final period of completion of the project will also be to overlay the decision making process with awareness of sustainable techniques available in the area, local technologies, accessible resources and economic feasibility.