

REFLECTION
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EXPLORE LAB 37

PROFOUNDLY URBAN

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Msc3- Master of Architecture, Urbanism
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Reflection

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

The progress and process of this graduation project, from the beginning of this academic year, have been continuously surprising, in the most rewarding of ways. Through the freedom of Explore Lab, I have been afforded the opportunity to delve into ways of knowing, divergent to what I was previously comfortable with. My project relates to the master programme in this respect. I have designed from a position of productive discomfort throughout my two years here and in this way I have been able to gain the most. While I have been challenged as a student within Architecture in the process of the design, I believe the project has been developed in a way that responds to the expectations of such a track, being contextually sensitive and considerate of the needs of its users in the way it functions as a space. In the Architecture track certain things are assumed to be known when you enter the programme, whether they relate to technical design or process, yet the format of each project and the graduation in particular challenged the very notion of something being standard or universal. Thus, my intervention in Mexico City, at the corner of Glorieta de Insurgentes for the community of Otomi women, is highly specific and becomes a way of questioning the way standardisation and universalisation harms people that sit on the margins of these means of measurement. And while the project became increasingly specific, to the conditions I was researching, it remained broader in scope. The proposal is architectural in character, nevertheless the urban scale and the detailed technical solutions have informed my design practice. This has all been possible due to the diversity of perspectives provided by my tutors but also my peers that are part of the programme.

2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

My research trajectory revolved around systems of oppression as experienced by the community of indigenous Otomi women that live in Mexico City. This required me to understand those very systems, systems relating to the justice system, government housing, informal market flows and other processes which contribute to the bind experienced by Otomi women. I approached the research with decolonial, feminist and class lenses which became frameworks for the choices made in the design. Broadening the scope from Otomi women to Mexico City, I wanted to understand the role of these three lenses on the city itself. What would be the convergence of a decolonial, feminist and class inclusive proposal for the specific issues of Otomi women in the context of Mexico City?

Understanding the spatial implications of the analysed practices, the way they transpired in the city pavements and streets, I was able to later expand them in the site itself. For example, the selling of products for an Otomi woman would require for her to find a pavement that has high traffic (to increase potential sales), is shaded (to protect from the sun and the heat), be decently wide (to afford space for her selling tarp and herself without obstructing people's movement). This form of analysis of the research outcome became my own guide to the design. This referred to the co-optation of urban space informally by one woman, however, my research also involved seeking examples of the way the Otomi community lives, their formal spaces. This allowed me to understand the methods of building

that are typical within the community, which materials they use and what they have access to. In this way, the research came hand in hand with the design; the use of brick, corrugated steel, and light wood structures are all present in the existing Otomi structures around the city. This would make my own proposal accessible to the community, in both terms of budget and method. Questions that arose in the process of designing, such as the material conditions of living in Colonia Roma helped me establish other research connections between the community and the city.

3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

My interest always lies in understanding the systems and structures of injustice, in any given context, that influence peoples' lives and learning how contextually specific resistance movements work and become successful. I wish to become aware (always, as a never ending practice) of these processes. My use of decolonial and feminist frameworks serves this purpose. In the research phase of the projects I felt as though the work was valuable because I was able to learn about contextually specific issues, relate them to larger theoretical concepts and engage in this process of becoming aware. The research methodology allowed me to construct a wider image of how systems from micro, to meso and macro scale work within assemblages. These were processes that I had not engaged with in the past.

As a designer, I did not wish to impose my own aesthetics to a degree that they were inconsiderate of the realities of constructing in Mexico city and for a community such as the Otomi. I wanted to ensure the design was manageable, not requiring expensive materials. The proposal includes spaces for rest, amenities and services like toilets that are not readily available in the city for everyone, more secluded spaces for Otomi women to engage in their practices that require shelter, storage and privacy and a landscape strategy that becomes an active agent in addressing urban issues of pollution, flooding and lack of green spaces. Colonial systems are still inhibiting the functions of the city, a core one being infrastructures and management of water. Researching the lack of clean, usable water in Mexico City and the increasing privatisation of it (being one of the core issues the Otomi women are resisting against) evolved into a design strategy that would allow for a passive system that would provide a valuable resource to the community fighting for it.

The value of the research and design approach lies within identifying the subjects that are marginalised in the case of Otomi women or neglected in the case of non-human actors such as trees and water in the current urban environment and designing a bio-diverse and inclusive space.

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

My academic experience has been mostly focused on western knowledge systems, through my research and my proposal I wanted to diversify my understanding of how the world can be understood and approached based on other cosmologies. Part of the problematization of the indigenous experience in Mexico related specifically to the imposition of colonial, western ideologies on the development of the country with a consistent sidelining of indigenous knowledge. During the research phase I was able to learn and engage with alternate ways of

thinking and doing. So, within the specificity of myself, I am incredibly grateful and recognize the value in this opportunity to learn an *otherwise* because it broadens the spectrum of what architecture can do. In the face of systemic injustice, it often felt inappropriate to position myself and assume I would be able to contribute productively to the complex situations that cause Otomi women to resist. The issues felt too broad or outside the scope of architectural intervention. I tried to narrow down the research and design to more tangible elements of analysis. The practices of resistance are ways of being in urban space and they become instrumental in understanding the capacity of the city to respond to the needs of its residents. This capacity is of course influenced and skewed based on the influence of its residents. Specifically, my research questions “*In what ways do the practices of resistance of Otomi women in Mexico City counter the infrastructures of marginalisation?*” and “*How do situated knowledges and practices establish spatial dynamics that make liberation movements successful?*” were focused on creating space for these practices. Another way of being in the world, challenging the conditions of marginalisation and in that process preserving customs of cultural significance that relate to indigenous knowledge.

The proposal is one that although is open to external users, points of entry are limited and the spaces are designed in such a way as to create layers that would inhibit the completely free movement of users. The way that the space can open and close gives ultimate control to the Otomi women for which it is centrally intended for and in doing so, it challenges the conditions of marginalisation that they face. However, the space is only able to function given their participation with their urban practices. Their practices are turned into practice and in this way the space can work. Embedding the indigenous Otomi practices that are imbued with so much history and knowledge within other mundane activities not to take away or undermine their importance but as a way of demystifying them. Representing them as an *other* rather than completely foreign.

5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

In my visit to Mexico City, my interaction with indigeneity came either through commercial exchange or in museum displays. Of course, in my short time there I was not in a position to fully absorb the many layers of indigenous and colonial and mixteca culture. This design is an interface that encourages exchange, the transferability follows the thinking that such exchange can be productive in further admonishing cultural stereotypes that sediment Otomi women in society's margins. The diversification of the cityscape and the context in which elements associated with indigenous culture can be seen can combat the sensationalization of indigeneity. The demystification of cultural indigenous practices will hopefully contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their value. My intentions throughout the project have changed but I believe that by creating an interface that is safe and prioritises the boundaries set by Otomi women themselves will foster feelings of collectivity. It is the notion of *resisting through re-existence* that I think will make the project transferable. Going back to the research questions, practices of resistance are not solely referring to Otomi struggles, the activism of Otomi women goes far beyond the struggles directly affecting their own community. Their solidarity with other movements against oppression reflects a general attitude towards communal justice and care for others. The space begins as an invited space, where people are welcomed to use the facilities and turns into an invented space, one of exchange of knowledge that could spur conversations that will re-imagine the urban.

We also expect you to develop 2 reflection question yourself which relate to the content of your work

The point of origin for this project has come to be the garden or rather the landscape strategy. One of the questions I have been using to further my design has been: “In what ways does the landscape become a decolonising instrument?” I underestimated how important the landscape interventions would be purely as decolonising tools. Given the large scale of the site there was great potential to introduce a variety of plant and tree species, native to Mexico City that could help in purifying the air, retain water in their roots, provide medicinal herbs that are an important part of Otomi life and provide shaded restful areas. Even the soil is layered with varying grains of sand, gravel and porous fabric to allow for the filtration of rainwater over the large area of the garden before it gets disinfected and stored in the central storage tank. The larger system of rainwater collection and filtration further ensures that large quantities of clean water are available to use during the dry seasons of the year, hopefully fighting water insecurity. All this to say, the Otomi community have been advocating for generations for the protection of the environment from exploitation and misuse in Mexico City but also in Hidalgo and Queretaro, their resistance has been often met with contempt and violence. The ability to have systems that work towards creating a sense of security when it comes to access to water and improving the air in the heart of the dense capital becomes an anticolonial measure.

“Was Mexico City an appropriate choice for this project?”

In the beginning of this graduation project I did not have a site in mind. I began with a general interest in Mexico and slowly narrowed it down to Mexico City and the site of the Glorieta. Of course the research and the decision of the site came in parallel, one informing the other, the questions and problematization was specific to the area. Regardless, the urban character of Mexico City, its relationship to the environment, the “negotiation” with the original fresh water lake, the occupation of the streets by its residents, the activism that is visible on every street corner and the resistance that claims space by people that are refused it, make Mexico City latent with research and design possibilities. I may have chosen to focus on the Otomi community residing in Colonia Roma, however, practices of resistance are part of the way of life all across Mexico and in its capital. The city is diverse, populous and extremely vibrant and I believe that learning about the specific practices of resistance of any group can strengthen processes of change. By extension, co-optation of urban space for a space to rest can work towards challenging the “productive” cycles of the city.