



The Agora of the 21th century

a gathering place as continuation of the Belgrade Waterfront Project

INTRODUCTION

Before I start this reflection, I would like to stand still and reflect a bit on my journey during this graduation year, or year and a half in my case. Like I mentioned in my previous reflection, I stepped into the graduation studio of Methods without any knowledge about the chair nor the city in which the graduation project would take place. By doing so, I wanted to lay the foundation for my future career in the field of architecture. Not only to see where my interests lied or to see if I was able to correctly fulfil my graduation project, but to experience how I would respond as a 'future' architect to a situation that is completely unknown and to see whether I would be able to create a grounded opinion on what kind of architect I wanted to be.

But throughout this process, it became clear that I did not yet require the skill, nor the knowledge to complete such a complicated task, resulting in a no go for my first P4 attempt. And to be completely honest, this was tough because it was my first true experience with 'failure'. My bachelor in 's-Hertogenbosch, pre-master and first two design studios in Delft went super smooth so to experience the fact that you really don't know anything (YET) about architecture in order to succeed was a hard task to overcome. And I place failure here between quotation marks, because I know I did not fail my projects, nor my tutors or even myself. I simply did not have the experience or the knowledge to create a mindset or workflow that would allow me to truly grasp the complexity of designing a full fledged graduation project.

So after a much needed summer break in which I could truly clear my mind and question myself what I wanted, I came to the conclusion that I really wanted to continue with architecture and to do so I had to make all the effort to achieve this. To do this, I have been analysing buildings and architects to broaden my architectural knowledge resulting in a building catalogue, I have been drawing buildings in my surroundings to see what sparks my interest and what not, and slowly but surely my graduation project started to take shape. And this time it did not completely fell out of the sky on a plot that I had chosen, but it became carefully designed, it was based on choices that I could substantiate with knowledge that I had obtained through research and I really feel that because of this continuity of trial and error I started to understand why some things I came up with made no sense at all and why others did. And this not only became visible in my design, but also in the way I could talk about my own project, with more confidence because I started to understand what I was talking about.

So to close this long introduction, this graduation trajectory has been a rollercoaster of emotions, with lots of downs at the beginning that through hard work and dedication transformed into more and more ups so I think I can say that I am quite proud of how I picked myself up and how I continued with my project. I feel that I still have so much to learn and I am far from there, but luckily architects almost work until their eighty years old so I have enough time to do this.

APPROACH

For the continuation of my project I chose to keep the plot that I had for my P2, but changed the angle in which I wanted my project to land in the given context. For the project, I have chosen to dive into the development of the Belgrade Waterfront Project. Situated at the junction of the historic right river bank of the Sava, this questionable development project completely fills the bank with its towers and in doing so disregards the need for public space at the waterfront. This set in

motion a profound interest in how my project could offer an alternative to the continuation of the Belgrade Waterfront Project.

Upon my previous explorations of the city and the plot, I tried to grasp this task by trying to connect the now empty plot to its four surrounding sites: the Waterfront Project, the Belgrade Fair, Bulevar Vudro Vilson and the newly developed Riverfront Promenade. I provocatively tried to continue the Belgrade Waterfront Project and show possibilities of how such a big plot could be developed without completely disregarding the given context of Belgrade. The political need for modernization in Serbia resulted in this huge project that is there and definitely has its positive sides, but with my approach I tried to come up with an architecture that in some ways connects more with the given context and exists of one that tries to have this aspiration of expanding on this empty plot. So I tapped on to the already existing idea of expanding on this plot, but proposed an alternative solution on how to do this.

This solution quickly transformed into this idea of 'the agora of the 21th century' which is basically a gathering place that allows for different forms of interaction to happen. With this overarching theme in mind, I created three fundamental elements that I wanted to fulfil with my project and those where:

- Giving as much public space possible back to the city of Belgrade
- Trying to integrate the natural context of the plot into the building/site
- Using this plot to really stitch this intersection of the Waterfront Project together

CHALLENGE

I think the aspect I struggled with the most was to come up with something on this huge empty plot that had literally nothing on it. As I mentioned in the introduction, having very little design experience made this even harder and I think that the main reason my first attempt didn't succeed was the fact that I really had nothing to hold on to or fall back on which made it impossible to land my project in any direction. And because I wasn't thinking enough about what I wanted for my project, what it would look like, what I wanted to achieve with it, how I wanted it to function in the context of Belgrade, I created this never ending spiral of projects that changed every week. So what I did during the summer to from the start guide my project in one clear direction, was digging through everything that I had been doing and trying to find some similarities that could form this overall goal of my project.

By doing this it became clear to me that the fact that I was this interested in the waterfront of Belgrade was because of the contradicting image that the Waterfront Project created which completely opposed the image I had gotten from Belgrade through our study trip. And instead of approaching this by saying that the Waterfront project was 100% bad because it completely disregarded the opinions of the citizens in its development, or because it had a huge effect on the environmental issues already present in the city and wanting to solve these big universal problems with one flick of my wand, I looked at the essence of the problems I found which was

The lack of Public space and buildings that allow for these spaces and interactions to happen

The creation of a 'gathering space' is something that comes back in the architectural vocabulary in many shapes, the agora, the convention hall, the civic centre, the community centre or as a public square. I think in times where local governments want to use all the public space we have and fill

this to attend the current housing crisis is a topic that will be very important when it comes to the development of our cities and therefore is a valuable topic and I am very happy that I have been able to touch upon a very tiny aspect of this huge question.

METHOD

As I mentioned briefly in the introduction, one of the main things that I started doing was analysing buildings over and over again and collecting these in what I call my 'building catalogue'. I noticed that my general knowledge of buildings and architects was very minimal compared to other students. So I went up to the first floor at the faculty, made a picture of the board that has all the different architects on it (above the orange hall), went to the library and randomly chose seven books of seven different architects that I didn't know and started analysing. By doing this I quickly started to notice aspects of designs that I found interesting or beautiful, for example the overall composition of the Kimbell Art Museum by Louis Kahn, or the magnificent structure of Lina Bo Bardi's Museum of Modern Art in Sao Paolo and these interests could be used when having conversations with my tutors during tutorials on what I wanted for my project and how I wanted it to function or look like. And when one of the tutors suggested that I started to look into the concept of the Agora, that is when the ball started rolling.

I have to be completely honest and acknowledge that when my project developed further I haven't spent as much time on my building catalogue but this is surely something that I want to continue when leaving Delft.

After an In depth analysis of the ancient Agora and its development through time I rasterized my plot in order to comprehend its gigantic size which allowed me to create an integrated zoning system that connected to the river, to the waterfront project, to the Belgrade Fair and the newly created access road on the South side of the plot. Resulting in a monumental strip of architecture right through the middle of the plot that consists of three squares, one to the city, one to the river and a central square that is covered by a huge gathering hall. This sequence of spaces has been developed through a series of mass models and of course the analysis of the site. In order to make sense of the relationship between the three squares the elements of 'proportion' and 'overlapping' have been key elements on which my design is based.

CONCLUSION

So looking back now, I think this reflection is a bit more informal than the previous one where I correctly tried to tick all the necessary boxes just to have what was required of me, this is also something that came up during one of my tutorials where instead of truly trying to design on a imaginative or playful way, I simply tried to solve all the problems that were attended by my tutors instead of 'designing'. This is something I still find difficult to allow myself to design boldly or imaginative and knowing how to substantiate this instead of saying I that I designed something in a particular way because I think it is ok this way.

For the project, I think it has become a response to the current rapidly developing city of Belgrade, which is a good thing, but offers an alternative way of doing this that makes you rethink the concept of creating big individual residential towers as form of densification without appreciating the space around these towers that are going to be used by the public. It is funny because throughout the project I started to see similarities in my hometown Rotterdam, where the big skyscrapers are pushed out of the ground like trees on positions that are lively and rich and most of all loved by the

residents of the city. So it is a good think to think about these public spaces first before building on top of them.