

Reflection Paper

Methods & Analysis
Constructing the Commons
Valparaíso, Chile

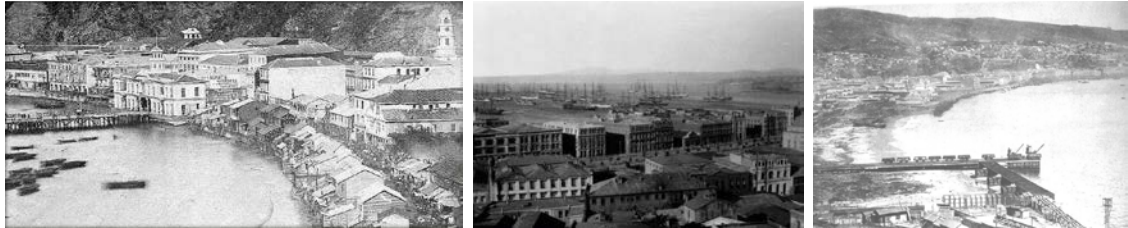
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The initial phase of research prior to and during the trip to Chile was important in preparing the groundwork of the project, in familiarising myself with a foreign context. Working within such an unknown situation has been one of the most significant challenges of the project: having little background or contextual knowledge has demanded a continuous process of re-evaluation in order to determine whether avenues of investigation are relevant. The preparatory work we undertook as a group helped in this regard, exposing ways of looking at Valparaíso with a strategic overview. We considered the city through a series of frames, formed by the landscape and by architectural and urban elements. Within these the hill and the ocean remain constant waypoints, visible throughout the city, acting as strong orientating elements, always reminding one of one's position within the larger city and landscape beyond.

Valparaíso is a maritime city whose history, culture and economy is inextricably linked to the ocean. Its very urban structure, architecture and society is the result of centuries of migration, commerce, production and recreation on and beside the water. Drawn to this heritage, my research began with the urban development of the plain that forms the centre. In contrast to the steep, undulating hills which ensconce the city, the plain is largely a man-made terrain, the consequence of a series of land reclamations and extensions that were undertaken from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. These notions of strata of ground accumulated over time, the possibilities of stripping and remaking this ground, and perceptions of the man-made and the natural, have developed as key aspects of the project. Understanding the city's development through the effects of geological, physical and biological processes ties the proposal inseparably to the wider urban setting, and has guided the design process.

The recognition of the current situation, in which the port's activity is expected to decline as trade flows increasingly to San Antonio, led to the consideration of other actors working across the land-sea border. An 'archipelagos of oceans' can be said to exist in Valparaíso: the sea hosts virtually as great a variety of activities and uses as the land, those of scientists, fishermen, sailors, tourists, merchants and others. Among these, academic communities were identified as playing an important role in the public life of the city: Valparaíso hosts four major universities with an institutional presence across the city. The notion of knowledge as a common came to the fore, particularly considering the transformational role academic communities have in stimulating activity in a wide range of fields. The proposal hinges on the idea that a university can act as an anchor point for development and learning within the city. The Marine Sciences Faculty of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso offered a chance to reconsider what might be the spatial and organisational relationships between a university, citizens and the city.

The large-scale alterations to the city/sea edge had an impact not only at the urban level, but also at the level of social experience of the city. The project deals with the changing relationship between the citizen and the water, both terrestrial (the quebrada stream) and marine (the Pacific), which has been characterised by a gradual separation through increasing physical distance, infrastructural barriers and changes in patterns of activity. The proposal incorporates water at its heart, uncovering once-natural streams that were channelled and covered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a gesture intended to bring to the fore once again the centrality of the landscape and geography in shaping Valparaíso.

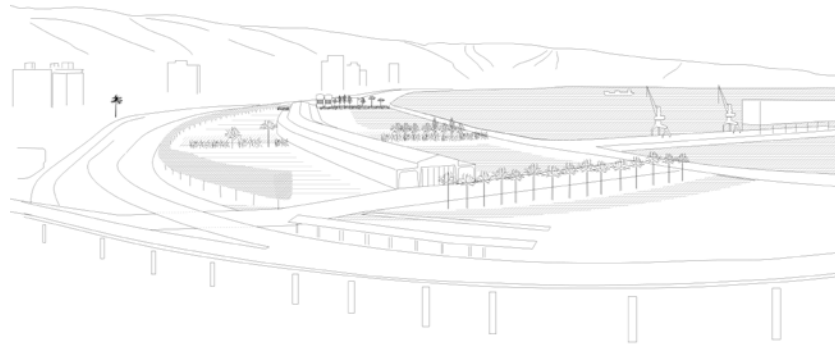


The site selected for the project—a large pocket of former industrial land adjacent to the sea and dominated by the curving form of a twentieth century warehouse—presented the possibility of addressing the relationship between city and sea at a landscape scale as well as an architectural one. This dual approach has been perhaps the most significant challenge throughout the project, requiring a repeating shift between scales, seeking to integrate a strategy for a new coastal park with that of new academic buildings. Beginning with a strategy for a new landscape, I gathered as much information as possible from historical sources (photographs, maps, textual descriptions, drawings) in order to build a picture of an outwardly barren site. Seeking out these concealed features of the site rather than considering it a *tabula rasa* was key to my approach. The warehouse, water towers, topography, historical land reclamations and culverted streams running down from quebradas all offered guiding constraints which are intended to allow the proposal to rise from the ground, rather than being superimposed from above. For example, the reopening of the hidden streams would not only provide water to the site, but emphasises the direct connection to the hills that distinguish the neighbourhoods of the city, marking out the site as a point of physical and social confluence.

In developing a landscape strategy, Karl Kullman's *The Usefulness of Uselessness: Towards a Landscape Framework for Un-Activated Urban Public Space* (2015) was a key source. Eschewing an overly prescriptive public space, the proposal instead employs topography and framing in order to define its character, as described by Kullman:

Landform and frames are two elements primed for this role through the enabling of a landscape-specific uselessness. Topography exhibits particular potential for creating Lynch's plastic forms that do not dictate specific uses, but are suggestive of an inexhaustible supply of possible spontaneous behaviours. Semi-permeable framing, which permits access without being completely open to the city, provides the resistance to inundation through over-use. (p. 170)

While the landscape in my proposal offers elements related to the education and research of the Marine Sciences faculty, their appearance also presents a multitude of possible uses by all members of society. In this regard, as a public park, the proposal is not restricted to a particular group but open to all. The use of topographical variations and the park's face to the city along its western edge embody the methods suggested by Kullman in order to make a free space in the city.



Moving to the architectural intervention, the method I employed seeks to integrate building within landscape programmatically, materially and physically. After initially consolidating all the functions of a Marine Sciences faculty under one roof, it became clear that in order to interact more closely with the new land/waterscape it was necessary to organise the various laboratories of the faculty in a constellation of satellites scattered across the site, connected to a central building by a network of paths. Not only does this allow the laboratories to have a direct connection with a live test bed—in the form of fresh and saltwater pools—it also breaks down spatial barriers between the academic community and the public: the entire landscape becomes at once a scientific test ground and a public park. In this endeavour Luis Callejas' aquatic centre in Medellín, Colombia, served as an important precedent in its use of topography and routing to overlay different functions within the same space and to create spatial interest, tension and delight. The play with levels of height and of visual and physical proximity or separation from water has been a consideration throughout the process of landscape and building design.

The design vocabulary I employed in the landscape is intended to carry through into that of the buildings. Considering the landscape as a plain of carved, sculpted forms—a reworking of the original act of reshaping the land—the play of level changes, banks and berms lends a more expressive articulation to an otherwise flat landscape. Similarly, the academic buildings are situated within the landforms, carved into or building up the ground mass. The stepping roof of the main building, echoed in the forms of the laboratories, is a physical continuation of this ground surface, becoming a higher mound and a point at which one can turn back and gain a new panorama over the city. As the landscape is intended to be an open network of pools, channels and fields, so the central building has a porous quality, bisected by a slipway connecting the warehouse to the sea. The siting of the building at the confluence of two streams descending from the hill surrounds it by water, and the open lower ground level embraces this proximity. With publicly accessible space passing through and over it, the academic building is embedded in the public realm of the park, rather than being a distinct and exclusive entity. As a central gathering place for the members of the academic community, it is

programmed to draw together disparate disciplines, its interior offering space for chance meetings and discussion.

Looking ahead, my intention is to pursue further the social interface of the landscape and network of academic buildings, to imagine more precisely moments of interaction. Having focused largely on the seafront of the site, the city-facing edge could be investigated in more depth, to better understand how the park—an anomaly in the centre of Valparaíso—might enmesh with its surroundings.