

Room(s) for Manufacture

Co-owning neighborhood regeneration

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Reflection Paper



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Context and leading interests

The city of Valparaiso, where the project is located, is characterized by a strong topography that divides it in three parts : the ocean, a narrow strip of flat land and the hills that enclose this latter.

These features led to specific patterns of urbanization belonging to the whole territory.

The hills , steep and difficult to be urbanized in an ordered way , present a concentration of residential constructions ; whereas public spaces and facilities are concentrated in the plan.

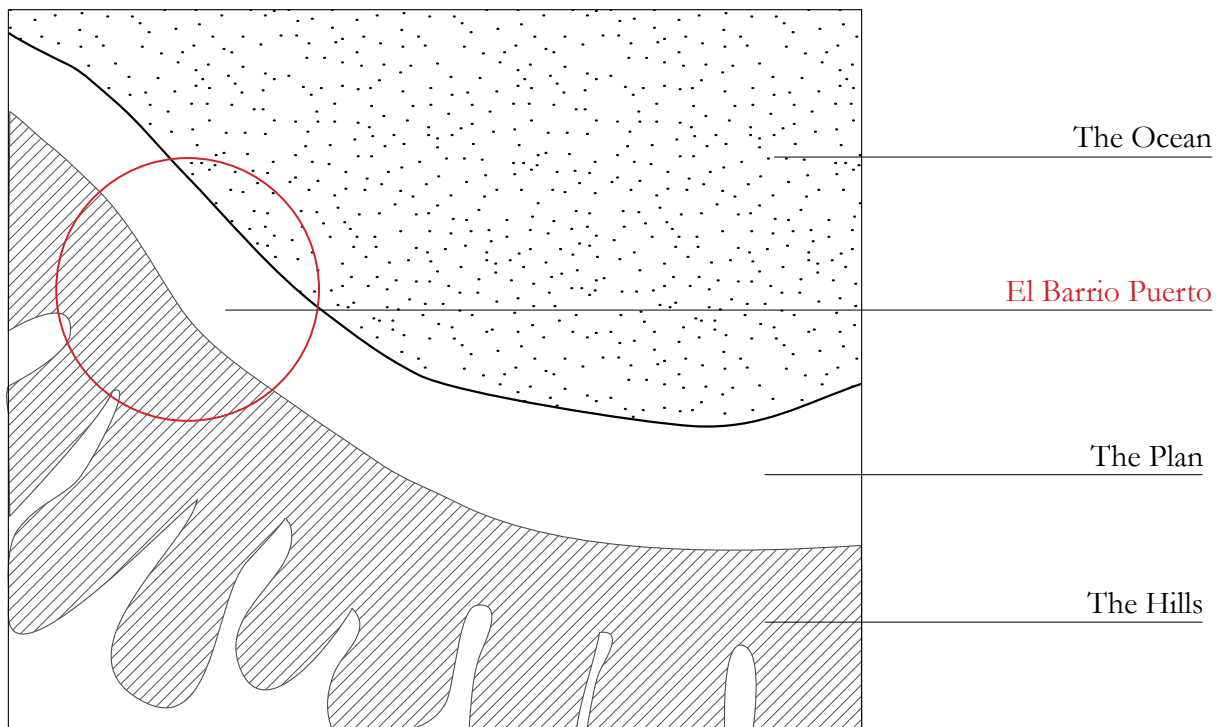
Even before the fieldwork I started addressing the city by focusing in the area of El Barrio Puerto, the foundational neighborhood, comprehensive of the flat strip of the port and the hills behind it.

In the XIX century, when the port activities were extremely flourishing, the hills behind the port were inhabited by a thriving community of workers. However, along with the progressive loss of economic value of the port , the whole area entered into a process of decay and abandon.

The miserable conditions of the built environment were indeed mirroring the ones of its inhabitants. The area was recognized as dangerous and unsafe and so it is nowadays.

The main force driving my fieldwork was indeed the interest in understanding the paradox of the foundational neighborhood, core of the heritage character of the city, being associated with such negative perception.

I wanted to comprehend to what extent this image was real and to depict the effect of the decay both from a spatial and social point of view. Thus in which ways the different stakeholders , such as inhabitants, privates and public institutions , were trying to react to that.



Diagrammatic visualization of Valparaiso and El Barrio Puerto

The research

Concerning the social aspect, the main tools used in the research were a set of interviews conducted with the inhabitants of those hills, more or less involved in the revitalization of the area.

Those were crucial to grasp the role that different actors were playing in the upgrading process, but also the common enemies of the community, their priorities, their beliefs and so on.

On the other hand, the experience of the area from a spatial point of view helped me to recognize the physical elements responsible for the unsafe feeling.

Those were mainly features of a struggle for an urbanization otherwise not supported from the government, leading to an architecture of improvised materials and thus extremely vulnerable.

Therefore, among those features, there were not only the poor condition of the standing buildings but also the ruins of other collapsed after the frequent earthquakes or fires.

Another critical moment of the fieldwork was the meeting with a group of architecture students. They were actively working for the requalification of a site currently inhabited by the ruins of a collapsed building, hence a scar of the informal way of constructing.

This led me to the pivotal consideration, synthesis of both the social and spatial research, of how valuable a flat land could be in such a context, thanks to its intrinsic possibility of being easily appropriated.

This first phase of the research, extremely context led, brought me to the following statement:

The negligence that the government had shown towards the area of El Barrio Puerto has produced on one hand a thriving and cohesive community, willing to be actively engaged in the neighborhood, and on the other an area littered with ruins, scars of the scattered informality.

By means of turning these two aspects into resources we could produce a constellation of commons, germs of a regeneration able to change the image of the neighborhood while fostering its vibrancy and safety.

The main themes to address with the help of the literature were indeed extracted from the statement. In the third part of the research, concepts such as urban interstices, ruins, ownership, constellation and others have been studied through the works of Harvey, Tonnelat, Edensor and most of all Stavrides, whose books allowed other essential themes to arise.

Nonetheless it is important to underline how the context led part of the investigation was constantly informing this third phase, fostering in such a way a dynamic process that was going back and forth between abstract scenarios and the real one. A process meant to ensure an equal consideration of both aspects by means of challenging the validity of the chosen theoretical framework in a specific urban context.

The gained awareness about the physical criteria that I was looking for led me to the last step of my research process: the selection of the site, which in my case happened to be a collection of ten “urban interstices” inhabited by ruins and located along three different axes, connecting the flat part of the port with its hills.



Pictures from the fieldwork showing the community initiatives for the upgrade of the area

Strategy : co-owning neighborhood regeneration

The spatial issue that the project wants to address has been recognized, thanks to the interviews and the fieldwork, as the result of a lack of trust, and thus of proper ways of collaboration, between government and citizens.

The poor conditions of the built environment are indeed the results of a broader problem but they could also become the medium through which this latter could be solved.

It is from this belief that the project arise, intended as *a strategy aiming to convert these sites from scattered scars of former informality and negligence to germs of a new type of positive urbanization , produced together and thus co-owned.*

The built environment becomes then the main tool through which government and citizens can learn how to express themselves in a shared and understandable language.

Another key element of the developed strategy was the economical matter , essential to let the project be grounded in reality.

The spatial upgrade of a neighborhood , and the relative production of formal spaces, requires investments. However , even though in this case the main funder of the project is the government , interested in the wealth of its citizens, it is also important to provide him with the promise for a future economic growth.

Therefore a third category of actors was needed in the process : the tourists.

This is because the area of El Barrio Puerto, located in a strategic position, next to the most touristic hills of the city, can identify in this sector the main source for a new financial prosperity.

Nevertheless this represents a controversial topic in the context of Valparaiso, since the inhabitants fear that the potential investors, mostly privates and blinded by greed, would focus only on this category of users without taking into account the citizens and their local identity.

My question was then :

How to use the potential role of tourism as a pretext to make Government and citizens being interested in a collaboration for the upgrade of the neighborhood?

And then , which are the elements that could be used in order to achieve a balanced and mutual exchange between these two stakeholders throughout the upgrading process?

In order to answer to the queries I did the exercise of writing an hypothetical “call for proposal” , crucial in the definition of those elements and consequently of the program .

The resources that the inhabitants could share with the government were identified in their low tech skills, transferable in a local manufactory attractive for the tourists, together with their strong motivation in investing time and energy in their neighborhood, thus the will to run a business or being engaged in a physical way by building, cleaning from ruins and so on.

The role of the government , on the other hand, was to provide the citizens with the lands and the construction materials , to help them identifying their skills and the possible businesses to run and eventually to imagine counterbalanced functions for the community to be accommodated in the same spaces.

This last point was related to the fact that the proposed type of partnership would have also generated a distinction between the inhabitants : the ones actively involved in the initiatives and those passively absorbing the beneficial effects of it.

The project however aims to produce fruitful and valuable spaces for both these categories, ensuring a balance between the community life and the focus on the economic growth.

Each one of the selected sites was indeed meant to be imagined as a different room of the same manufactory building, intended as the entire area of intervention where different activities, grouped under the same leading theme of manufacture, takes place.

The proposed strategy takes place in three steps:

- Identification of the inhabitants skills,
- Identification of a leading theme able to group them all (which in the explored hypothetical scenario happened to be "cooking");
- Division of tasks in skills groups and consequent allocation of the rooms for each group, according to the type of space needed for the function.

In this way, while working with the scattered character of the sites, formality and order are meant to be introduced throughout the whole area in a punctual but connected and coherent manner.

Metaphors and Architectural Features

For the development of the architectural proposal I decided to focus on only one of the three selected axes (Cajilla) and the four sites situated within it.

The idea was to design something unique for each site as well as scalable among those, to imagine a system able to answer to the constant tension between adaptability and spatial peculiarity.

In order to do so I had to develop analyzing strategies and define specific lenses through which carry out the study of the sites.

These lenses happened to be metaphors.

The first one was the analogy between the sites and *the ruins of heritage buildings*.

From this it easily emerged the theme of the boundary, which became the main lens of the analysis. The study of the materiality and the type of edge encompassing these empty spaces became the main tools to identify analogies and differences among them, first step towards the definition of a set of rules informing the design and its different elements, from structure to alignments and so on.

A set of models was also produced as an instrument for the analysis. The focus on the boundaries was there translated into the decision of having hand drawn facades, in order to highlight their difference in materiality hence the relation between the "unintentional" facades and the new intentional ones.

This allowed the second metaphor to emerge: *the interstice as a theater*.

The inhabitants of the surrounding houses, drawn with no specific goal, became the permanent audience overlooking these empty spaces that, deeply embedded in the tiny scale of the street, appeared as stages. This second metaphor was translated into the spatial intention of having multiple stages within one, leading to architectural features such as the urban terraces.

The last figure of speech, fundamental in my design, was the one related to the sites as *different rooms of the same building*, already mentioned previously.

This latter informed the necessity of having a shared and coherent architectural language translated into specific elements of the projects such as the filter façade between the street and the site, aiming to provide both distinction and uniformity.

The use of metaphors was indeed the first step in defining architectural intentions then translated into specific spatial features, shared among the four interventions.

By means of decomposing the project into elements, embedding those identified objectives, I managed to handle the dichotomy between general and specific, providing a system characterized by a coherent and recognizable architectural language still informed every time by the peculiarity of the sites.

Personal Reflection

The journey that led me to the development of this project goes parallel with the progressive and ongoing process of understanding what the field of architecture represents to me.

The freedom that the chair of methods and analysis left me in the definition of my own brief was the most challenging and exciting part of the whole process and I believe that there is where architects are able to impact the world. I challenged myself, as an architect, to see how many and different scales could have been involved within a single intervention, both in terms of space and different fields of impact involved.

What I learned is the immense power of the built environment as a medium through which different domains and actors can be brought together. I realized the role of space as a tool to learn how to coexist, cooperate and communicate. A role that consequently shapes our own as architects and defines our *"position in practice"*.