

Reflection Paper P4

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Project title: Alamar Cooperative Auction for Urban Agricultural Produce
Studio: Complex Projects
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INTRODUCTION

With the fall of the Socialist block in 1989, the Cuban national economy collapsed, followed by a severe scarcity in gasoline, materials and especially food. Of Alamar, a New Town socialist housing project under construction in East Havana, only the areas dedicated to dwelling were finished, leaving the neighbourhood without a defined public space or economic centre. Due to the limited transportation possibilities and the distance to the inner city, Alamar became relatively isolated from the rest of Havana. In order to ensure their household's food security, the inhabitants started to cultivate vacant areas between building blocks.

More than twenty years later, this practice is not only still an important source of employment, income and food security for the community, but Havana, and Alamar in particular, has become internationally known as a frontrunner in sustainable urban agriculture. However, the development of urban agriculture is in danger, mainly as a result of the single-sided support approach by the state, a centralized distribution and marketing system that offers little material incentives or economic freedom, and the looming risks of an inevitably drastically changing social, political and economic context.

Research question:

How can the introduction of a new economic platform for the distribution and marketing of urban agricultural products protect and facilitate the decentralization, democratization and re-urbanization of Alamar's local food system?

Ambition:

Creating a resilient sustainable community based food system

Intervention:

Alamar Cooperative Auction for Urban Agricultural Produce

THE RELATION BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN

After its development has been frozen for in time for decades, it is clear that Cuba is now on the brink of drastic social, economic and political change as the result of decentralization and privatization processes accompanied by the re-enforcement of international relations.

To be able to speculate on the consequences of these inevitable changes, and my role as an architect in facilitating the already started transition, the first stage of my research focussed on gaining a general understanding of Cuba, Havana and the local urban conditions in Alamar. From this research it became clear that due to a lack of democratic platforms for public economic and political initiative and participation, there is a high risk that political and economic power will shift from the current centralized state system to foreign capital instead of the Cuban people. Areas in inner Havana, will profit from these international interests, while neighbourhoods unattractive for foreign investment, such as Alamar, will suffer further neglect and degradation.

From this research clearly spoke a need for the redefinition of the future relation between Alamar and the rest of Havana, in which the self-sufficiency of the neighbourhood must be improved while strengthening its value for the surrounding urban region. This research resulted in the shared group ambition of transforming Alamar into a more resilient community that embraces the local achievements of the last decades while introducing a range of new economic, social and cultural opportunities for its inhabitants.

Based on the research and the excursion to Alamar, I considered the existing local Urban Agricultural practice to be the main potential catalyst for the further development of Alamar as a resilient community and vital component in a larger regional network. Making use of interviews and literature, I focussed my research to further investigations into the history, practice and current status of urban agriculture and was amazed by the level of professionalism, institutionalization and integration in all aspects of Cuban life. However, it also became clear to me that the further development of Urban Agriculture in the whole urban region of Havana is in danger, mainly as a result of the single-sided support approach by the state and a failing centralized distribution system that offers little food security, material incentives and marketing opportunities for the Cuban people. The urbanization of the production of food might be unprecedented in the world so far, but by neglecting the possibilities in other chains in the food economy, its future remains fragile. Due to the evident problems within Cuba's current distribution and marketing system, and the possibilities and risks provided by an economy in slow transition, I decided upon the earlier mentioned

research question, ambition and design proposal.

For my typology research I had to depend on international references, since the proposed program has no precedents in Cuba. This forced me to not only reflect on the situation in Cuba, but also on the status of the relation between cities and food all over the world. Almost all of latest architectural projects on the wholesale of fresh produce showed a total disregard for the urban context. Furthermore, these complexes have become logistic suburbs that have no consideration for the central essential role that the marketing of food once played in the public social and political daily life of cities. They are sheds in an uninviting landscape of parking lots, sometimes decorated with a colourful roof, referring to the products traded inside. However, this research was very useful for understanding the spatial and technical requirement for my proposed intervention and defining the more logistic programmatic elements.

Knowing what I did not want, I turned to literature for inspiration of how to re-urbanize the marketing and distribution of food. Especially "Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives", by Carolyn Steel, provided much insight on that subject. From her research I concluded that the most important premise for successful integration in the urban context of Alamar would be the re-integration of the public character of the trading of food. This has been translated to multiple layers and scales of my design, with the covered central public market square as the centre of the entire project. To the standard program of the auction also additional public functions have been added, such as education, event and promotion facilities, a theatre function, public spaces for political and cultural expression, catering services, the autoconsumo, a food bank and other community services. Urban guidelines, the local climate and the balance between the local and regional character of the program have been crucial for the layout of the different design components. The building construction, climate design and materialization are all inspired by the local building tradition, which is dominated by the use of prefab concrete building elements and terracotta breeze block walls for natural ventilation.

As explained earlier, the outdoor public market is, both physically, symbolically and in the overall intervention strategy, the centre of my design proposal. However, due to its scale and complexity, the greater part of my design research has been dedicated to understanding the daily processes, the programmatic components and the spatial requirements of the auction program. This research is based on information from the typology research, research in general requirements regarding circulation of vehicles and products, and an excursion to the Zaltbommel Fruits and Vegetables Auction. Contrary to a more traditional design process, in which one starts designing on the urban scale and slowly moves down to the building scale, I started designing on the urban scale and experimenting with different 1:100 plans and sections of the interior circulation and the layout of the different programmatic elements almost simultaneously. I deliberately chose this method to have more control and better understand the consequences of my choices on a larger scale for the logistics of my building and the other way around. I think that this allowed me to make more realistic design decisions and has allowed for a better integration of the different spatial requirement and a logical flow of products, people and vehicles within my building. It also forced me to keep in mind the human scale of what has become quite a large project.

However, this method can also be a trap. In retrospect, I would

force myself to spend more time researching my design on the level of the building ensemble. Especially in the beginning of the design process struggling with problems on a small and isolated scale can blind you from more structural solutions and possibilities on a larger scale. This can also be at the expense of a more coherent building ensemble. Although I have always designed this the presence and symbolic role of the central market square in mind, I regret not including the design of this market earlier in the process. In the last phase of my graduation process I would therefore like to continue researching the coherency between and borders of the different design elements, both on the level of the ensemble as on the level of the building detail.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE GRADUATION TOPIC AND THE STUDIO

The Complex project studio investigates the development of urban areas around the world in order to expand our knowledge of the complex forces, the contradictions and the different scales in which they manifest themselves and in which we have to position ourselves.

Within the studio the student is encouraged to think critically and not only approach the issue at hand as an architect, but also as a planner, politician, economist, scientist, philosopher, visionary, and any possible actor involved in urban development. What will be the cultural, social and economic consequences for the city of Havana, and Alamar in particular, now Cuba is starting to re-establish relations with the rest of the capitalist world, after its development has been frozen in time for decades? Within the philosophy of the studio Havana of course provides a unique and interesting context that invites for much, sometimes almost ideological, speculations on its future, especially regarding politics, economy and identity.

With my intervention I have adopted critical attitude towards the risks and potential of the upcoming change in Cuba and have taken in an active position in facilitating this transition. Although the final product is an architectural object, it is the result of a much broader research and proposal into the protection and development of resilient community driven bottom up economies in a globalising world. It aims to be much more than a trading platform, but connects producers and consumers, the city and its hinterland, the local and the regional, it promotes education and encourages public participation and self-development. The project does not only reflect on the context of Alamar, but is a critic on the relation between food and cities all over the world.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE RESEARCH AND THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDIO

The chair of Complex Projects advocates a research-based design approach. The first phase of the graduation process is dedicated to gaining a broad understanding of the complex physical, cultural, economic, historic and political context and the different urban scales and conditions in which one is about to operate. It is this especially this approach that motivated me to graduate within this chair, since it allowed me to combine my fascination for a wide range of urban themes such as architecture, history,

politics and urban culture and gain more experience in how to translate this research into a well-defined design project.

As most of the already limited available information on Havana, such as demographic data, literature and maps, only concerns its famous historic city centre, it proved hard to collect the necessary information on the economical and historically seemingly uninteresting suburb Alamar. Prior to the excursion to Havana our understanding of the local urban conditions was therefore deprived from the organization and analysis of urban layers through satellite photos, the critical collection of information provided by state owned sites and blogs, and a broader investigation of the Cuban political, economic and social context.

Due to this lack of traditional information the excursion to Havana proved to be of great importance for the collection, verification and correct interpretation of the research. More importantly, on-site research allowed us to surpass the quantitative and physical character of the collected data so far and experience the sometimes unexpected urban qualities and lively informal street life of the neighbourhood and its future potentials. These have been recorded through interviews, poems, photos, mapping, video and sketches. Throughout the rest of our group research we have aimed to always show the contradictions between the “physical” and “mental”.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PROJECT AND THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

This graduation project researches the potential for the re-integration of resilient, community driven food systems in the modern urban fabric. As explained before, the search for an appropriate architectural and programmatic model forced me to not only reflect on the situation in Cuba, but also on the status of the relation between cities and food all over the world.

Throughout the ages the dualistic relationship between the consuming city and the producing hinterland has shaped our cities. However, never before have the two been so disconnected. Today, our modern western urban food system consists of a large globalised network of production, processing, distribution, storing and marketing. Food products from all over the world are available throughout the year in large quantities and at increasingly lower prices. Most of us are however unaware of the costs of this practice, which include social inequity, environmental pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, violation of animal rights, food monopolies, energy consumption, public health dangers, water stress and waste production. In the meantime our local food security is becoming increasingly vulnerable. Modern food production is heavily dependent on the use of fossil fuels for applications in pesticides and chemical fertilisers, processing, packaging, transportation and cooling. However, our access to oil is constantly subject to political unrest and in a few years we will reach peak oil. Oil production will decline, while demand will continue to grow due to the rapidly increasing world population and global urbanization, especially in third world countries. As world's largest consumer of fossil fuels, it is inevitable that this will severely affect our food security sooner rather than later. For all these reasons, many advocate the return to more resilient, locally-driven and sustainable urban food systems. In this context, the city of Havana offers an interesting learning

model for this future transition, considering that, with the Cuba was the first country to experience the consequences of its own artificial peak oil, followed by a severe scarcity in fossil fuels, food and materials, and consequently a standstill of most transport and agricultural production. Since then the Cuban sustainable urban agricultural practice has not only proven to be a very successful strategy in addressing the issues of local food security within extremely difficult economic conditions, but has become an important source of employment, income and neighborhood development.

Certainly one could argue that, considering the commitment of an autocratic government and the lack of competition and speculation on land and material resources, the island's Socialist political and economic context has eliminated some of the difficulties that would play a key-role for successful implementation in a democratic capitalist context. Every urban area requires its own definition of “local” and a different approach depending on scale, local potentials and risks, climate, and political, economic and social context. However, Havana has demonstrated the enormous potential of urban agriculture and learning from it could help creating resilient urban food systems that are more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and ethically appropriate. I hope my project can contribute to this research and encourage public awareness.

ETHICAL DILEMMA'S ENCOUNTERED DURING THE RESEARCH

In recent years, small-scale experiments in Cuba regarding of the uncontrolled marketing of agricultural products by wholesale cooperations have proven the enormous demand by the public for such platforms, but also the reluctance of the autocratic communist government to give in to the changing reality. When designing for a context as complex as Cuba, it would be impossible to do so without a certain amount of speculation on future developments. My intervention proposal is based on the assumption that the started process of decentralization, privatization and democratization of politics and economy will continue in order to allow for more economic freedom and the slow implementation of the principles of a free market. This graduation project aims to at one hand facilitate these changes, while at the same time protecting the achievements of the last decades.