

Thesis

Reflection

Studio Topic: Migration

Thesis Topic: Food as a culture carrier



Complex Projects Graduation Studio
Mikolaj Strzelczuk
4939999

ASPECT 1:

The Relationship between research and design.

What is significant about universities like TU Delft, is its core approach towards designing through research. As much as the final idea almost never emerges in early stages, it is still certain that no matter how clear the initial idea is, it needs a prior research in order to anchor a project not only in the built context, but also as a successful story. This year's studio topic was broad and challenging, yet familiar to many, thus it feels like everyone could relate to it and approach the research from many angles – from an own perspective, but also through people who wrote the history of this country throughout years of migrations. There were several questions regarding sensibility of the process – how to approach a site which already positions itself on Rotterdam's industrial heritage map. Both industrial and socio-cultural identity of the site had to be considered, as the building of my intervention has become a strong landmark in the past few years; a warming topic of debates as well. The fact, that my design proposes a food market just like the previous Fenix building did, is not making the task easier, but in fact, imposes a lot of challenges about relevance of a similar investment and its success factors, which need to be accomplished. The research process helped me to indicate a target group and tailor the design, so the concept would not be simply reproduced, but rather reinvented in a new form, program and environment.

ASPECT 2:

The Relationship between graduation topic and studio topic.

The theme of this year's studio, 'Migrations', refers to all spheres of human life – from very literal and spatial, to almost intimate, personal journeys. In fact, each of the approaches can be interpreted in many ways. Food, for example, is a carrier able to bring together distanced cultures. One can say that it has power to enrich a country's non material heritage, telling history through its tastes and cuisine. But there is also another side of the coin. Food is a factor that allows people to feel at home. It defines a sense of cultural belonging and by travelling with a person, may comfort them and create an environment which they know and trust.

Looking at Rotterdam as a port city, it becomes clear what a significant role it had to historically play. As a gate, for many the city

became a first contact with a country, or even with the European soil. It is understandable, then, that it absorbed foreign influences, amongst which was the international cuisine. Until today, Rotterdam remains one of the most international cities on the old continent and demand to welcome new generations of immigrants is still accurate, if not stronger than ever. I found this topic inspiring and potential to reinvent it on my own terms.

ASPECT 3:

Research method and approach chosen in relation to the graduation studio.

The evaluation of the project aligned in time with the global pandemic, making the research method limited to digital tools. Nevertheless, the current situation helped to appreciate the relevance of places such as food markets and the role they play in the socio-cultural life of every person. Thus, the approach towards my project had to be positioned within a framework of needs, limitations and the future of physical places in a digitalized reality.

I wanted to examine an importance and relevance of an institution, whose ultimate mission is to offer a platform for more vulnerable and excluded groups of people to become an important voice and influence on the city's scene. Such ambitious approach makes it challenging on a global, capitalistic market, where things are subject to gentrification and capitalization. My intention was to improve livability of the neighborhoods through an innovative model, which, on the long term, would create value in human resources and allow them to have a good start in a country which is sometimes so unfamiliar from their roots.

The research was based on literature review in order to understand the migration history in Rotterdam, city's limitations and demands. However, a further benchmark was performed to learn about innovative models, which allow institutions to be socially and economically just, democratic and accessible, but also beneficial in order to have a reasonable voice.

One of the elements of the research was case study of existing food markets, their spatial configurations and forms that follow trade habits in different cultures. However, due to pandemic restrictions, it was not possible to perform on-site interviews with immigrants in order to learn about their habits.

Another crucial method was mapping of data. It allowed for visualization of spatial distribution of people and food-related services. In the conceptual stage, such knowledge was necessary to justify some of the decisions regarding program and area of influence. Positioning the project in a multilevel context was also essential to tight it up with the city of Rotterdam as such. As much as the project is aimed towards immigrants, the fact that the building is positioned in the heart of the city makes it impossible to ignore all future connections it will create with other target groups.

The materialization of the concept happened through physical and digital modeling. The new form of my building was as much important as its function, thus, I tried to research forms to see their spatial consequences and how a proposed volume can create interesting visual qualities, serve its function at its best and also respect the old and new context of the surroundings.

ASPECT 4:

The Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific relevance.

While starting the Complex Project graduation studio, it couldn't have been known that the global pandemic would redefine the importance of places of gatherings in the cities. The current situation proved two things: that the gastronomy sector is essential and irreplaceable and can be manageable on different, remote terms. On the other hand, though, the closing of many public spaces left a scare on people's social life. If the lockdown was supposed to examine, if less expansive and consumptive reality is possible, it surely showed that places for social, cultural and economic exchange are necessary to maintain a healthy society.

Trade in particular suffered significantly, but there were many reasons why interest in consumption decreased, and one of the reasons was due to safety and personal insecurity. Although the delivery system had to be brought to a different level, people still prefer spaces of exchange and a physical contact over door-to-door contactless services. Physical places of trade and food consumption, at least for a couple of generations, will still remain desired and hopefully, appreciated more than before.

The project is of a high professional relevance as it depicts a place of exchange and consumption in a new light. Knowing new limitations that follow such an unpredictable even as a global pandemic, there are numerous factors which will need to be taken into consideration in the future in order to design flexible and adaptive spaces for unknown times. The project has its limitations but also the scientific relevance, as it demonstrates, how architects in particular were thinking of particular designs before they even imagined, that a redefinition would be necessary. In that sense, the project is a documentation of a pre-pandemic approach, and the evaluation and the way it changed, says a lot about the ongoing need of staying careful, sensitive and adjustable to a dynamically changing present.

ASPECT 5:

Ethical issues and dilemmas encountered during graduation.

From the very beginning, it was clear that the studio is tackling a site which is inevitably (and intentionally) becoming a new centrality in the city of Rotterdam. Keeping in mind the neighboring investments and the strong landmark formation in the neighborhood, Katendrecht's increasing value became a difficult site for social projects. One of the main struggles, also pinned in the essay on the research methods, was the problem of gentrification. When is it a chance for improvement, and when it starts to play a destructive role against vital, city-making initiatives. That's why I started to look for innovative functional models which would justify a social project like this in a top location with a huge future waterfront potential.

When dealing with more vulnerable groups of people, I wanted to prioritize ethical, just and democratic approach, in which I'd introduce equality and inclusiveness of spaces. Yet, I was also aware that social projects may turn either positive or problematic. I wanted to create an open, welcoming space for everyone but I was also concerned, if inclusiveness would not lead to degradation after all. On one hand, as Jane Jacobs always stated, vital places naturally become self-controlling as people tend to take care of each other. On the other hand, though, I also knew that social projects, due to their unique nature, may become a scene for undesired situations, a place of squatting and dwelling, and further – mentioned destruction.

Despite these dilemmas which were a part of all the design stages, some decisions were necessary. Sometimes prejudice towards possible negative scenarios keeps the city from development. While keeping in mind my doubts and concerns, I tried to find a balance between the idealistic scenario and realms of dysfunctional patterns of behavior.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Have you ever wondered what the food you eat everyday can tell you about where you come from? Have you ever wondered why people from different parts of the world eat different types of food? There is more connection between food and culture than you may think. On an individual level, we grow up eating the food of our cultures. It becomes a part of who each of us are. On a larger scale, food is an important part of culture. Traditional cuisine is passed down from one generation to the next. It also operates as an expression of cultural identity. Immigrants bring the food of their countries with them as cooking traditional food is a way of preserving their culture when they move to new places. With the influx of immigrants, cultural diversity in the city of Rotterdam has increased since the 1980s. More and more places, where one could try foreign culture, began to appear. It is greatly reflected in the character of the Hartmansstraat Street, which is home to more than 34 different restaurants offering cultural experiences from different countries. This is Rotterdam, the city of diversity, the city of immigrants. The latter add both cultural richness and social encounter to the town. But as time goes by, exclusivity in the City Centre also progresses. Hot spots in Rotterdam are becoming more and more exclusive, what results in a slow displacement of cultural diversity. So I started wondering how the city of Rotterdam can embrace multicultural background to connect different people in a better way? My analysis and observations started from zooming into the carrier of the culture - immigrants. Who they really are, what brings them to Rotterdam, but most importantly - what vanishes their own, unique culture from the City Center.

Immigrants in Rotterdam are a group of multi-ethnic origin, representing almost half of Rotterdam's population, and in the near future will exceed this barrier. The vast majority of them are people seeking to improve conditions, but with a low level of education.

They are looking for employment mainly within various branches of the retail and catering industry. They mainly live in the southern part of Rotterdam, where the rental fees are relatively low compared to the central and northern part of the city. This has made it natural for the spirit of the center to disappear from year to year and to move the gravitational point of diversity southwards. The development of the city center did not help either. Through investments such as the construction of the Erasmus Bridge and the Kop van Zuid urban concept, it has become clear that the last and oldest diversity district in Katendrecht (Chinatown) has begun to turn into an exclusive location. The district is on the edge of the informal cultural division of the city of Rotterdam between the Dutch and immigrants.

How to reverse the trend of cultural vanishing ? The potential solution is the space equalization, creating a space that are equal and approachable by everyone. The other is creating a reason for people to come back. That is why I propose combination of both solution - multicultural food market with educational institution - two places mostly desired by new comers. The concept would support new-comers by offering to those who cannot afford, a normal education and a place where they could make their first steps in small businesses. For the others, it proposes the remarkable occasion to encounter different cultures.

An important element in the design of any building is its relationship with the surrounding area. When choosing a plot of land on the Katendrecht, a place that is becoming more and more exclusive and where most immigrants from city center live, I had to take into account several factors . My goal was to make the reinterpretation of the historic Fenix 2.0, a building which is no longer structurally stable. An important aspect was both existing and new footpaths, created by the future bridge between Katendrecht and South Rotterdam, which in natural way will determine the axis of interest and, consequently, would frame certain parts of the city's waterfront with the building. The complicated location of the plot requires sensible urban treatment through complementary construction which will both blend in with the existing urban tissue and emphasize valuable viewing axes.

Based on the analyses, I started working on the form that could work as an urban framing tool. Functions initially inscribed in the place of the existing building resulted in variations of the monumental forms

cutting off from the rest of the district, creating separate courtyards facing the water. However, the form has evolved into a minimalistic massing, taking into account the equal importance of two parallel facades (northern and southern). This formal treatment could visually connect not only Katendrecht, but also the rejected and neglected South of the city.

The program of the building is based on the number of possible users. I was trying to estimate the possible interests analyzing the existing street and flea market in the Rotterdam city. The building would be divided into 3 horizontal different parts.

The first level is focusing on the sale of goods and the serving of diversified food, the second is the division hiding inside the restaurant part with the points where it is possible to admire the waterfront of the city. The third is strictly dedicated to educational facilities.

The Fenix 3.0 consists of different elements which form a complete structure. One of the main characteristic is the big cut out void which works as an entrance from the Kop van Zuid direction, catching the audience's attention. The entrance would lead us to the central part, the atrium - a place with open market, where both local residents and immigrants could use it free of charge to sell their products. That space can also be used for various gatherings that require direct access to the first floor.

By designing Fenix 3.0 I create a place and a reason to come for people with different background. A stop for tired travellers and tourists to taste Rotterdam. A neighbourhood friendly place that would encourage and connect people of different cultural backgrounds to preserve what the city of Rotterdam is well known for – Diversity. With this project I wanted to be part of our urban concept recreating the identification of the Kop van Zuid sub-centre and to activate the unused interiors of the southern Gulf of Rotterdam, while providing more shared spaces, as well as a multitude of functions that could be used by local residents and southerners.