

OVERVIEW:

I chose Complex Projects because I felt that I wanted to research and design as well as conceptualize on a higher level. The heavy focus on laying a solid research foundation for my graduation project was very compelling.

I also have a great interest in the unique situation politically and economically for Cuba, a cold war state frozen in time. The contradictions of this country and the many challenges it faces combined with an architectural viewpoint was perfect as a challenge for my graduation.

The research finalized into the approach presented during my P2 where I chose to focus on the specific area of my design's (Vedado, Havana) physical lack of social and public space, due to its mixture of a modernist and suburban grid made for automobiles in a city with very few automobiles. I also looked into the strange band of luxury hotels bordering the seafront in the area, remnants of an earlier golden era of entertainment. These hotels now sit with luxury suites in an area without visible Cuban street life nor other things that would mark the experience as "Cuban", but also far way from the typical beach front that would demarcate a luxury visit in the Caribbean. As visible from the hotel I chose's (Melia Cohiba) web page, business is struggling with permanent 40% discount.

My approach since the P2 has then been to bridge the gap between the Cubans left without a public and social space on the one hand, and the tourists lost in a sterile luxury far away from the attractions of Havana Vieja on the other hand, through an architectural intervention.

I think in retrospective the choice of studio has been a good one, I think the research gathered and conceptualized was fruitful for me and provided me with a clear concept and approach. Something I miss from the research was perhaps more research tools/methods to work with, it was at points a little bit unclear during the research phase what our method was.

THE RESEARCH

Much of the pre P2 research went into defining how the area of Vedado functions as a city, its grid structure and composition of functions. It turned out to be heavily residential with fenced off neighborhoods. A small offset on every block was supposed to give public space for street life but it is merely 1 m wide and such completely useless for the objective.

After my P2 my research went deeper into what constitutes Cuban social and public use of space. I retraced many of the activities found throughout Havana in the street and outside in use of

space and created a literal uncatalogued of activities, divided into four distinct categories as well as sizes.

These categories are broad but encompass four different set of Cuban activities that one would find throughout Havana Vieja but not in Vedado, and this research then would be implemented into an architectural intervention. These four categories are SOCIAL, CULTURE, RETAIL and SPORTS.

In reflection the approach to defining what constitutes a Cuban social and space was very interesting but also problematic in some aspects. First of all the four categories, while very useful, of course have overlaps. A space can of course both host a cultural and social function. In these cases, I chose to define what the overall pattern of activity was, which sometimes could lead to some more coarse definitions of activity. I still believe this was the correct way to go about this catalogization since at a certain point, these things must be defined and it will probably never be 100% accurate but my aim was always to go as deep as possible into mapping every space.

The aspect of luxury tourism in Cuba was also very interesting. The lust for foreign capital and emerging openness to American tourists has been expected to lead to an increase in tourism. However, the emergence of Air BnB and similar ventures where tourists are put in close contact with Cuban reality while still retaining some privacy has been hugely successful and, as in many other places, offers a more exciting alternative to traditional tourism. The absence of cruise ships into Cuba also means a loss of wealthier tourists. My research conclusion on this part is that the increase of tourists generally leads to more tourists living close to what they expect to be a Cuban experience, namely converted homes close to the city center. The embargo and it's ban on many goods as well as government policies on what is produced nationally in Cuba leads to a failing "luxury" experience. For tourists looking for a luxury experience, these people already have the capital to go to Dubai or a Caribbean beach paradise rather than a sleepy concrete block outside Havana's city center. This part of my research prompted the decision to intertwine these failing hotels in Vedado with the absence of Cuban activities.

RESEARCH INTO DESIGN, A REFLECTION

The idea of my design is to anchor a vertical infrastructure into the Melia Cohiba, creating a link between the hotel and the new intervention. This intervention I call "The social tower", portraying the idea that this infrastructure allows then for both temporary (built by Cubans over time) as well as permanent spaces for Cubans in Vedado to finally create their own social and public sphere outside of their overcrowded homes while at the same time creating a unique draw for tourists looking for a new way of experiencing Cuban culture.

The idea is that first a vertical structure of slabs, each connected to Melia Cohiba's floors, is put in place on the western side of the hotel. A rigid system of generously sized columns provides

both the technical infrastructure to create a grid for inserting temporary structures on every floor as well as giving homage to the colonnades and terraces visible in the traditional Havana city center.

Any number of Vedado residents can form a club or association and together build a temporary structure within the tower, belong to one of the four categories. This will be financed by a microloan from the hotel association, which will then be paid back by the money generated from having tourists partake in these activities if they so chose. In order to ensure a mixture of street life within the tower, each floor's edge constitutes a 2 m offset street which cant be built. The slab is then built progressively until 70% of the slab area is filled, then another mezzanine level can be built on top of the first level structures. This creates an exciting network of activities and circulations on each level, simulating a Cuban neighborhood.

The temporary structures themselves are very simple in their initial construction, the residents can choose either a wood or hollow brick module frame of 4m x4 m and upwards to construct their own space. The idea is to provide a simple framework to be improved upon by the Cubans to make their own space. The module frame provides a first frame of either wood or hollow brick walls, with openings related to the activity(retail would have larger openings for example). The residents may then either put in the same kind of wall as a second skin or choose a different material, regardless creating a second skin system which promotes natural ventilation throughout the building and removing the need for HVAC in large parts. The facades may be painted in Cuban pastel colors and details such as railings, opening frames and surfaces may be customized by the Cubans as time goes by. In essence I once again provide an architectural framework that will then be used by the Cubans to create their own space within the city.

The permanent structures are made one for each category, the idea being to add a permanent value to the building as well as providing a different means of circulation through these structures much like walking through different paths in a city. The permanent massing are a Sports hall, a Night Club, a Tribune/Viewing deck and a Market Hall, with the market hall being the ground floor of the building.

Fast circulation is achieved within the tower through either elevators(whole building) or escalators(most floors) which allow for a sightseeing through most of the building.

Reflecting on this project, I really liked where the concept and idea landed and also many parts of my design. I do think where I've struggled is to make the design coherent but I also realise that the reality of Cuban social and public life is not one of coherence but rather of exciting mixtures and meetings of different age groups, activities and cultural expressions.

As such, I will for the P4/P5 try to show the zoomed in results of this framework as well as on a larger scale rather show how the system works in itself.

Another thing is that I think this is one of the few projects where BT has been less of a limit and more of a design help, in the sense that it has opened up interesting variations and possibilities when I have at time struggled with where to go.

My initial expectation of a graduate project was one of more creating a specific building and only that, looking at every space and corner rather than a system of architecture. It has been quite an uncomfortable experience at times since it's a new way of thinking about architecture for me but in the end, I chose this studio to learn something new and that I have, so in that sense it's a nice end of my studies. I learned how to design these systems when looking at details and spacial qualities and as such still keep a designing hand over the project and as such I feel pleased with the end of my project.