REFLECTION

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THE BEGINNING

The beginning of the project was not a clearly defined program for a carefully chosen site. I embarked to explore a realm that was not that familiar to me, but that I could visit in person several times. There have been moments during the research process that I questioned myself if it was a smart choice, it has been a difficult and time-consuming process of digging into a totally new context, especially since there are barriers of languages and data access. Now I still don't know the answer, but I do not regret choosing the site but rather enjoying it, because it is indeed the site is too attractive to complain about the difficulties to understand it. It is also because I think the uncertainty and multiple possibilities of the choice are just like how I read from the landscape narrative theory: beyond conscious awareness or inherent in daily actions, it may be as mundane, varied, scripted, or open-ended as our own lives (Potteiger & Purinton, 1998).

THE PROCESS

The approach - relationship between research and design

The approach to the project was to build up a 'flexible' research framework that combined interdisciplinary knowledge and supported an open-ended design process. Through different scales, the research and design process have supported and evaluated each other back and forth. It is surprising to find out that this approach worked very well, as a mutual interacted system. On the one hand the theory provided a flexible framework to guide the complicated research process, and on the other hand, the exploration of the design, developed in a freer way, reflected back to the research methods.

In certain respects, places only exist because they have stories associated with them. But once they have acquired this story-based existence, the landscape itself acquires the power of "telling the story" (Potteiger & Purinton, 1998). Therefore, when dealing with a project related to an abstract topic like the meaning of the place, or a memorial landscape, etc., it is important that apart from a top–down rational process, also space is left for a bottom – up intuitional process, which will allow the site to speak for itself. In this project the three landscape narratives were not the starting point of the research, but came up during the exploring design process within the research framework. In the end the three narratives became the guide line for the overall project.

To conclude: I don't think this is a generic approach that can be apply in any project, the approach was based on the research question of this specific project, namely, to represent the landscape narrative of this fascinating heritage landscape.

The limitation of the project

It is a reality that I can only look at the Canal du Midi with the eyes of a stranger. I realize that local experts who grew up in the region, will have a different and much deeper understanding of the narrative and genius loci of the place. This is related to another limitation of the project; I have not really been in touch with the many stakeholders in the area, and due to this, local participation could only be mentioned as a regional strategy and framework.

Nevertheless, I was lucky to have the opportunity to talk with some local people and through short conversations and simple questionnaires, I already received a lot of inspiration from them. Next to that I have tried several times to get in touch with some relevant local organizations, such as the Voies Navigables de France, some website operators, etc. However, in the end, apart from the staffs of the museum and tourism centre interviewed during the investigation, there was no reply from the relevant units, which made the verification of the practical applicability of this project to be lacking.

The feedback from mentor

The feedback is an essential part of the whole process of the design. There are multiple times that the design is going in the wrong direction, especially for such a large-scale and complex project, there are too many topics that seem relevant and interesting, plus my personal uncertainty about the direction of heritage design. The regular feedback from mentors helps a lot to keep the research in the right direction.

The relationship to circular water lab and landscape architecture track

My graduation topic is a comprehensive landscape design about a water heritage – Canal du midi. This is highly related to my master track and studio topic: Circular Water Stories lab - Graduation studio Landscape Architecture: Flowscapes. The design has not started from certain problems or challenges but started with a topic about the traditional water systems with unique value. The design assignment is defined based on reading and understanding the knowledge embedded in the water system and its relationship with people and landscape.

The lab focuses on the water stories, encourages students to explore broad possibilities behind this topic, and provides a set of methods to study and design for the water issue. For example, looking at the climate zone and water catchment area, researching the circular water system, understanding the relationship between people and water, etc. By using these tools, my graduation project has explored and experimented with possibilities for the canal, looking at both the problems and the opportunities and trying to integrate the landscape narrative into a sustainable development plan. By doing so, I explored the meaning of 'Flowscapes' in landscape architecture, which is a view and method of looking at complex and dynamic spatial issues and making design decisions where there is no certainty, but the changing interaction and process. In the end, landscape design should contribute to a better future, by exploring different design interventions in this unstable context.

Applications of the results in practice

In the larger social, professional, and scientific framework, there are three aspects that I hope my graduation work will contribute to.

Firstly, the research and design methods used in this project contribute to the further development of landscape research methodologies. Especially the method of reading and designing a heritage landscape through multiple layers and meanings, based on the concept of landscape narratives, was explored in this thesis. To create a research & design framework based on landscape narratives is an interesting perspective that could be used in real projects as well.

Secondly, the research and design outcome could be of relevance for similar projects in which protected heritage needs to be modified to save it for the future.

Thirdly, the part of the design which targets to solve the water management issues have the potential to be adopted in the real world. Especially the techniques and methods that are proposed for the arid and semi-arid area could be relevant for practice. In the current circumstances of climate change water scarcity is becoming a world-wide problem.

Last but not least, in the relevant documents of the UNESCO, it is pointed out that currently the buffer zone of the

canal has certain limitations, and that considering expanding the scope is needed (UNESCO, May 12, 2022). In the Regional Regeneration Strategy Chapter of this report, some regional regeneration principles are proposed, and some areas are initially delineated. Although the area divisions are not accurately based on the limitation of research materials and time, the author believes that these frameworks and strategies can provide some suggestions and new perspectives for expanding the buffer zone.

THE END: IS IT AN END OR A BEGINGING?

Nowadays we often hear people talk about lost, loss of character, loss of identity, loss of meaning, etc. My intuitive impression of the Canal du Midi is also a lost heritage: on the one hand, it is still actively functioning and modifying, but on the other hand, it seems like it is now experiencing a huge transformation, and some of the historical contexts are becoming vague and invisible, triggering the risk of being forgotten.

I realized that in large parts of the thesis I recorded the information of the canal in detail and in many layers. They show an intention against loss, because the simplest way of fighting with forgotten, is to write it down. Thus, the process of research and design is also a process of writing a note or mapping and picturing an image of the Canal du Midi in a way that it can be read, seen, and remembered.

Facing a heritage like the Canal du Midi, nine months is too short, the "notes" I am writing so far are only a small piece of the whole story. Additionally, the landscape narrative is such a complex theory that not only needs reading but also demands experimenting and involvement which should be a long-term process. Until this stage, there are still a lot of materials that I hope to catch, and a lot of possibilities to adjust and improve the design. At the end, I believe that I've used these nine months to try as much as the possibilities to answer the research question: How to articulate the main stories of the Canal du Midi through a series of spatial interventions that supports the sustainable development of this water heritage and the territory?

But maybe it is the topic that I am dealing with, or maybe it is the limitation of the capability, the result of the project 'the Canal Story" seems more like a start, offering a ticket to enter the world of infinite possibilities to bring alive this water heritage – the Canal du Midi.

REFERENCE
Potteiger, M., & Purinton, J. (1998). Landscape narratives : design practices for telling stories. New York: J. Wiley.
UNESCO. (May 12, 2022). Canal du Midi. Retrieved from https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/770/en/list/770/