

P4 REFLECTION

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PROJECT

'Centro de Cuentapropismo'

Complex Projects, Havana Studio 2017

Vedado group

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Introduction

This is a reflection paper on the process followed for my graduation project, in the Complex Projects studio of TU Delft. The project focused on the design of educational facilities and commercial spaces for Cuba's emerging micro-entrepreneurs, which are considered by many as the face of Cuba's growing economic prosperity, and forerunners of change. The aim of the project was to derive a highly contextual proposal rooted on relevant thematic research both in Cuba and abroad.

The relationship between the theme of Complex Projects and the study of micro-entrepreneurship in Cuba

The 'Complex Projects' studio of TU Delft is engaged with investigating settlements around the world with specifically ambiguous development that deal with complex issues. The studio encourages students to study multiple layers of the urban conditions, under the argument that contemporary architects need to be ready to operate within different scales / cultural contexts and observe the world through many lenses – as planners, politicians, economists, philosophers, humanitarians, visionaries.¹

The Caribbean Studio / Havana was focused on Cuba's capital, specifically for my group the area of Vedado – the more affluent area of Havana.

Havana poses a specifically interesting context for such research due to its unique situation across many themes. Being one of the few remaining socialist states, since its 1959 Revolution, it has experienced development that is highly specific and hardly comparable to many countries. During the last few decades, it has experienced crippling economic crisis and shortages, leading to decay and decomposition. Only recently, boosted by a boom in the tourist industry and its gradual opening to the world economy, the city is ready to upgrade. Questions arising however, include how to modernize without neglecting the rich historic layers, and how to develop sustainably while avoiding the sweeping effects of capitalist development.

Despite what the name of the studio suggests, its aim is to comprehend the multiple layers of complex contextual information and derive a simple and well-targeted architectural proposal. My research was focused on the **growth of private entrepreneurship** in Cuba, a previously vilified topics under the light of socialism, which only recently is being viewed as a

¹ Description derived from website of Complex projects, TU Delft

significant gateway to Cuba's economic prosperity. The specific questions posed were how to promote socially responsible commercial activity in this context, and how a flexible design can address the problem in its current condition as well as in anticipation of its future.

With my focus on the rising private entrepreneurs (the 'cuentapropistas') I aimed to develop a proposal targeted to a specific group of people, for a specific situation - the rising will to start-up businesses. Through this research, I tried to expose wider contextual issues, including the soulless commercial development of Havana, the stigma of micro-entrepreneurship leftover from socialist ideologies of the past, in addition to wider architectural themes of temporality and flexibility.

The relationship between research and design

Initially, the research was focused on retail in both Cuba and worldwide, in order to understand how the system and its spaces work. This typological research was aimed to provide a background of a wider context in order to be able to compare and contrast the situation in Cuba.

The research was then switched to more thematic and contextual. Looking into Cuba's private entrepreneurs, the aim was to understand how they operate, the spaces they operate from and what is limiting their growth. Among other topics, this included the historic development of private entrepreneurship, regulations around it, personal stories and physical spaces.



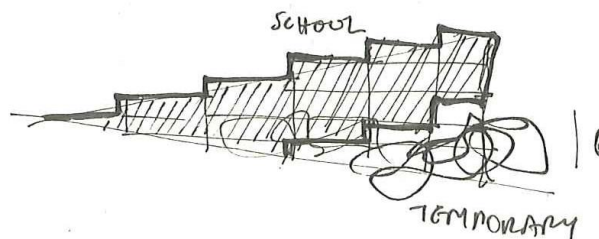
Figure 1 Example of spatial study performed on the spaces where micro-entrepreneurs operate from

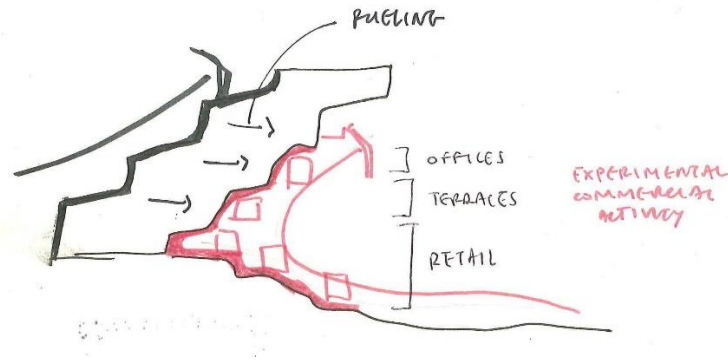
The main results of the research were primarily that what is limiting the growth rate of private entrepreneurship, stems from a fundamental lack of entrepreneurial culture and education. This resulted due to the country's socialist background with its restricting policies against private businesses, and social stigma against entrepreneurship. Additionally, despite the recent liberalization of micro-entrepreneurship, the deteriorating urban fabric and highly inflexible regulations for commercial space, force these cuentapropistas to operate from unsuitable and restricting locations such as from their own houses or the street. Seeing this in a positive light, these restrictions have resulted in highly inventive solutions which express the energy and will of Cubans to start their own businesses despite the hardships they face.

One of the main challenges of my graduation process was translating research into design. However this challenge is a primary component of Complex Projects, since it is focused on tapping into existing contextual (often non-architectural) issues and deriving relevant architectural proposals. For my project, translating research of micro-entrepreneurship challenges into a design can be categorized in three aims:

- a) Develop a combinatory program that addresses the lack of entrepreneurial culture as well as the lack of commercial space
- b) Design for the current situation of highly inflexible commercial spaces as well as in anticipation of future changes
- c) Incorporate the energy and inventiveness of cuentapropistas' current operations

A general aim in line with the studio's focus on simple responses to complex situations, was to develop a clear design, highly expressive of the program and the issues it addresses. The proposal would have to be a clarified manifestation of a highly ambiguous background.





The resultant program of my project combines entrepreneurial education with flexible commercial space. Education was seen as the more **permanently** effective aspect in boosting entrepreneurial culture, and the provision of commercial space as more **transient**. This concept of combining permanent/transient was implemented in the design's form and construction.

The building is located on what is described as Havana's main commercial street (calle 23). The form of the building is informed by this 'commercial' frontage: the permanent elements (education) of the building are lifted up to create a stepped building, revealing the underside of it which becomes space for experimental and flexible commercial development. The raised school is what directly provides shelter (literally and metaphorically) to commercial activity, since the permanent structure holding it up is what provides the infrastructure for temporarily constructed space underneath. The temporality of the construction on the underside allows for pop-up shops/offices that can incorporate the flexibility and innovativeness that characterizes the *cuentapropistas*. This clear separation of temporary construction maintains the potential to be stripped down and be used as a sheltered public space in a future when commercial space becomes widely available elsewhere.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

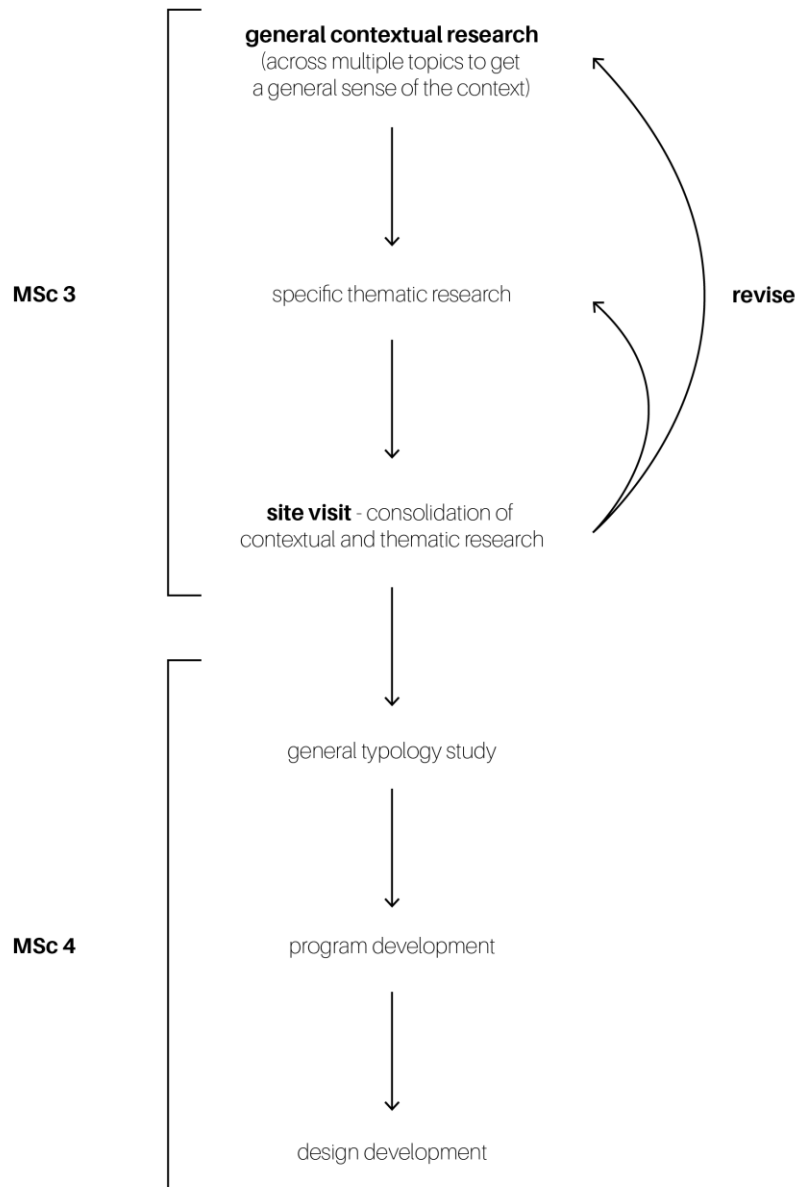


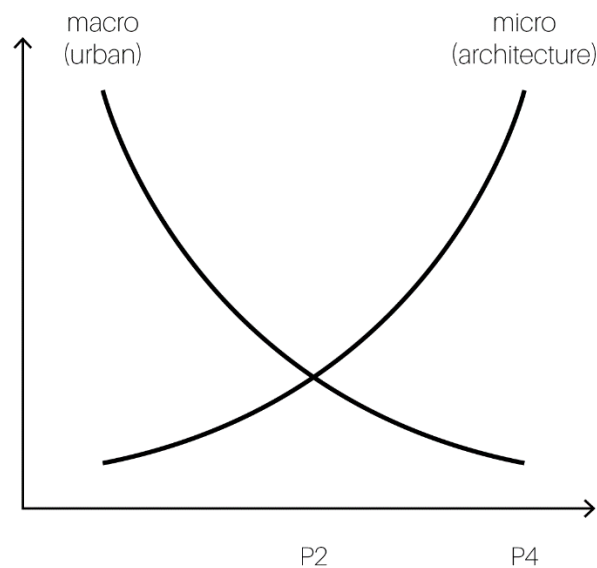
Figure 2 General process followed by the studio

The studio is highly structured with clear checkpoints and lists of what should be achieved for each one. This is fuelled by intermediary presentations between each formal presentation (P0.5, P1.5 etc), with clear requirements for each. The only point where my process has slightly diverged from the studio's was in somewhat extending the time devoted for the thematic research in Cuban' micro-entrepreneurship. The reason for

this is that the more I read about the topic, the more I was tempted to revise my proposal. In a studio that attempts to be so highly contextual and relevant, it became difficult to set where the line is drawn between actual research and assumptions.

What was fascinating in this process is that in all my student projects so far, contextual research has always been a first step but not an integral part of design. However with the methodology followed in Complex Projects, I feel like I have gained a deep understanding of various situations in Cuba, despite it being completely foreign to me beforehand. This gave rise to very specific questions that I would have otherwise not encountered, and has given me a confident perspective to critically assess Havana's development.

A strength of this process, which is one of the aims of the studio, is that it allows for the construction of a well thought of narrative to substantiate design decisions. The process of starting from a macro/urban scale research and gradually moving on to micro/architecture proposal also helps build the narrative in this way. The storyline of the design process usually originates from non-architectural issues, however through this gradual decrease in scale and increasing focus they result in programmatic and architectural responses that are highly based on their contexts.



One limitation I encountered in following such a methodology is that the strong emphasis on responding to contextual issues has resulted in a design that is mostly based on its program with less emphasis on its architecture. This approach of developing a highly specific program and then deriving an architecture based on that program has limited me in focusing on architectural expression as much as I would have hoped. This for example includes material experimentation, detailing, façade design or qualities of the interior spaces.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

a. Thematically, the project has given me the opportunity to question **typological design**. Through the deep research in Cuba's micro-entrepreneurship, education and retail, combined with a general typological research of worldwide retail spaces and educational facilities, what became obvious for me was that I should avoid direct translation of a generic typology. A big part of the process became the customization of these typologies researched (in my case education and retail) to suit specific situations in Cuba. This has forced me to extract their essence and try to adapt them to a new social context - a useful transferrable skill.

b. Cuba's fluctuating situation signifies the importance of **temporality** in architectural design. In such an uncertain context that has been through significant changes in the past few decades, it becomes more relevant to attempt to incorporate both the current and the future situation in design. Flexible, transient and informal design all should become crucial parts of an architectural proposal. Even in less flexible contexts, providing temporally variable aspects of designs has the power to give users higher control over their spaces, while allowing for the project to remain relevant for longer.

However, as a closing remark, I feel that the relationship between my project and its wider social context is not so much thematic as it is about the process followed. What my experience in Complex Projects has given me is a strong understanding of how to approach complex contexts, and managing to derive relevant, clear and focused architectural proposals.