

Final Reflection Thesis

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Chair of Architecture, Graduation Studio: "Complex Projects"

Reflection Thesis "Reshaping NYC"

INTRO

Offices located in Midtown Manhattan are on the move towards new developments on the river banks, leaving their old residencies behind. Because of this phenomenon Midtown is experiencing high vacancy rates in its obsolete building envelope. This transition can be seen as a threat or an opportunity for Midtown's future. It happened before and will most likely happen again, but the question is how we can deal with these kind of issues. The Rockefeller Center complex, for example, is part of the generation of urban renewal projects that helped to revitalize Midtown Manhattan at the end of the 20s and part of the more recent re-developments in the 60s. Still today, by being the largest business district in the world, Midtown remains the corporate center of Manhattan.

Now, revitalization projects from the 60s have reached their lifespan, and many of these office building become vacant. Therefore, the offices in Midtown are starting to decline. Yet, big development projects being completed. Hudson Yards is one of those projects; a real estate development under construction. A great example of how the city is facing the changing demands and dealing with a new urban challenges.

The office building Park Avenue Plaza, previously leased by BlackRock who is now moving out towards Hudson Yards, lies in the center of financial business district of Manhattan. In this graduation project the building will function as an example to evaluate how to unlock building values that lie within the existing building stock in Midtown. With the refurbishment into a Life Science (Li-Sci) Center, financially supported by Deerfield Management, the building will pioneer and set an example for other sidelined buildings in Midtown.

ASPECT I

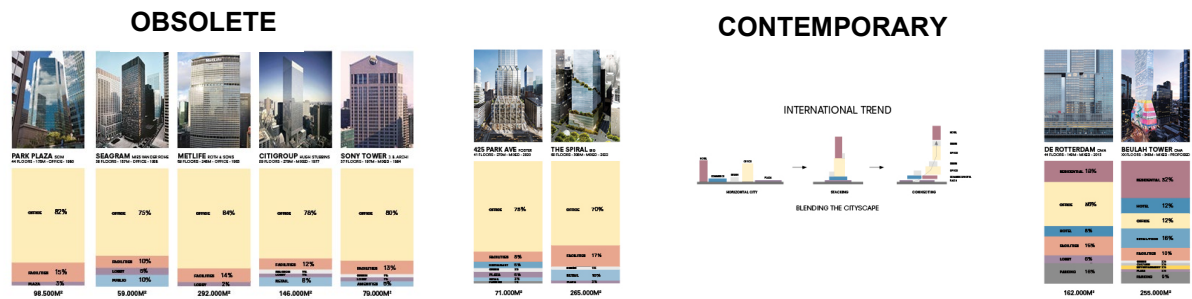
"The relationship between research and design."

The graduation studio Complex Projects focusses on the preliminary research. The chair is known for its research based approach on their design projects. While including conventional practices of urban analysis and the study of precedents the research concentrates on wider socio economical forces. Research concluded that Midtown was in a state of decay. Found in real estate sectors like retail, housing and offices; shopping corridors become empty due to e-commerce and high rents, a housing market being taken over by Airbnb and rich aristocrats buying up apartments as an investment. But the biggest issue can be found in the office sector. New developments that out rule the older offices in Midtown are causing vacancy rate to rise dramatically. With Midtown consisting mostly out of office space the question raises: "How to deal with this situation?"

With Manhattan being in this transitional state, where tenants are moving out of their old residencies towards new developments. This is where the emphasis of the project is put on with the research question as follow: "How will new developments, like Hudson Yards, influence obsolete office buildings in Midtown?" - With the objectives; to find new purposes for the superseded building inventory, see how the vacant office buildings can be re-used, and to create a future potential, making the buildings 21th century proof.

Investigating the spatial layout of the obsolete precedents and new developments, two characteristic typologies can be found; the 'monofunctional' and 'multifunctional'. The precedent office buildings mostly consist out of one function, that are build-up out of generic floors slabs, a detached plinth from its context and operating from 9am to 5pm making them 'monofunctional' type buildings.

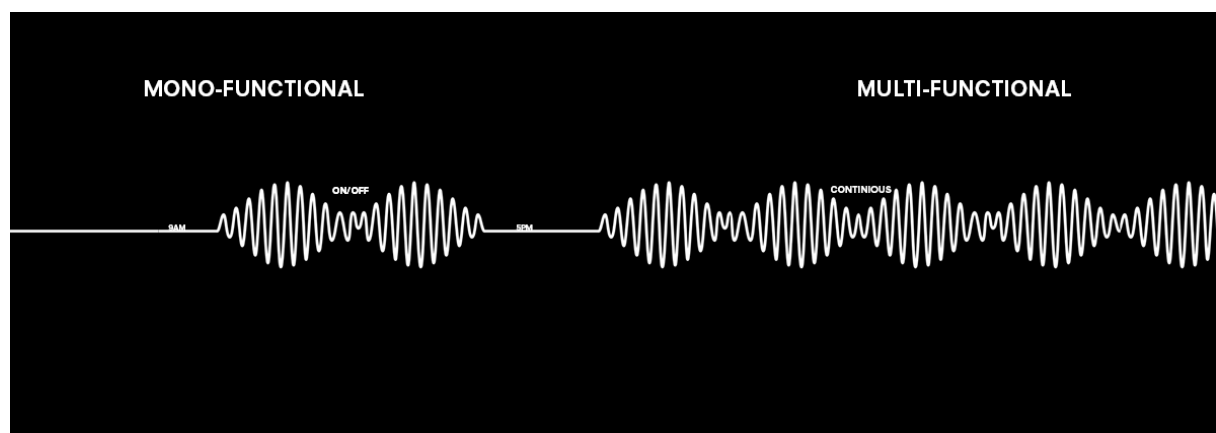
The examples of contemporary developments consist out of multiple functions stacked on top of each other. Where voids link internal levels causing more interactions. Connected to the urban fabric by an lively plinth containing lots of public amenities operating 24/7, making them 'multifunctional' type buildings. The examples of the multifunctional building typology became the basis to unlock the potential values in Midtown's obsolete buildings envelope. In the final stage of the project materials and architectural details were developed based on case studies of laboratories buildings with their functional and hygienic requirements of a Li-Sci Center.



ASPECT II “the relationship between your graduation project topic, the studio topic, your master track and your master program (MSc AUBS)”

Complex Projects investigates settlements around the world and within areas that are ambiguous in their development and embedded in the process of change. The aim for this year's project is 'Midtown Manhattan'. For centuries the lower Manhattan had dominated the city's economic life, but in the 1920s the area we now call Midtown transformed spectacular into the largest Central Business district in the world and houses part of the most expensive pieces of retail. Midtown is dominated by its typical high-rises that arose in the beginning of the 20th century. Today the famous Midtown opposes new challenges; many buildings have reached or overreach their lifespan and new mega developments along the banks cause added vacancy. The studio started from a hunge that Manhattan was dealing with a lot of real estate issues and that it needed some further investigation. Based on a fascination and an extensive research each student was able to formulate a strong narrative for their design project. For me this is the vacancy of obsolete office buildings in Midtown.

The project location lays in the middle of the Midtown business district, an area that is being affected the most by the shift in the financial sector towards new developments along the banks like Hudson Yards. What was once the heart of the financial district, is now experiencing huge changes. Vacancy rates grow bigger and Midtowns building envelope becomes obsolete. The alignment of the topic with the studio is what intrigued me most throughout the process. Going from the urban scale to actual typologies of high rise towers. I test to bridge the shift from urban to architectural scale by implementing a multifunctional program of a Li-Sci Center into the superseded typology.



ASPECT III Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work.

New York City is a place where a lot of quantitative data can be found. Exploring the topic of vacancy by looking into the open source city data, browsing real estate market reports and reading numerous articles. On an economic scale Manhattan functions within a formula where Form Follows Finance. Where quantitative data shows that Midtown Manhattan is undertaking no state of deterioration whatsoever. Therefore, on paper Manhattan seemed fine, but in news articles (e.g. New York Times) they claim that Manhattan's buildings are in a state of decay and that the city is losing its quality of life. This leaves us with a contradiction where on the one hand the city is some sort of utopia for the developers. But on the other hand, the city's building envelope is deteriorating.

In the graduation process I have tried to adopt the methodology of the studio of Complex Projects as much as possible in order to open up to alternate and more structured methods than those I have developed myself through the years. The methodology of the studio focuses heavily on interdisciplinary research, study of precedents and learning by doing. Literature was reviewed at the initial stages of research and later compiled into a research book – a reinterpretation of research findings leading to P2. Shifting through large amount of data and articles, mapping, redrawing demanded a lot of time, but has made the design decisions a lot faster in the later stages. The typology characteristic analysis was nevertheless still heavily based on production and learning by doing. Models are used extensively as tool for architectural design. This approach often uncovered a lot of problems early on, before any kind of drawings were made.

In my opinion the focus of the studio's methodology of 'Complex Projects' is very educative and inspiring. Not keeping it to one scale, but looking at it from a multidisciplinary level with architectural-, urban development, economic tendencies, societal and technological changes central. From my perspective this way of looking at things has been a good way to deal with the growing complexities of urban and architectural questions.

ASPECT IV Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.

In my graduation project I address the issue of vacancy by seeking for a future potential by refurbishing a vacant office tower. The project becomes relevant regarding the wider social context and current zeitgeist since it addresses many of the big questions cities worldwide are facing nowadays. The world-wide increasing population, urbanization, climate-change and congestion and of course vacancy problems are issues we as architects need to address. It is the strategic urban and architectural projects that have to deal with these issues. Providing new, innovative approaches and solutions are of crucial importance. Not only the design then matters, but just as much do the strategies of implementation & realization. Especially in a scenario when looking at big shifts in the urban fabric like New York City, effects are tremendously amplified by the size of projects. Leading to huge amounts of vacancy caused by it. It is crucial to get a grip on how to deal with important issues like these in large scale cities.

ASPECT V Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in (i) doing the research, (ii, if applicable) elaborating the design and (iii) potential applications of the results in practice.

Reflecting on the way how Complex Project looks upon urban problems, you could argue that how the students do their research is done in a very etic approach. Quantitative research leads towards broad statements, based on figures, personal interpretations and not real human interaction. Doing a quantitative research you're basically looking back in time. Looking at outcomes of previous years, which tells you nothing about what the current demands are.

Henri Lefebvre saw a connection between architecture and sociology. He wrote: "(Social) space is a (social) product." As an architect we can learn a lot from other disciplines and improve our designs. To make a built environment that is sustainable for its users.¹ According to me the social aspect is something that has been slightly underexposed in the overall research.

When working with typologies one could see the transformation of a building over time. But it does not tell you a certain direction a transformation is going. Of course one could say that there is a trend which shows a path that a specific building type is going. However, this prediction doesn't give you the direction it is heading. That is because it was *you* who did the research, with *your* own narrative, therefore your *own* interpretation. So whenever you design something based on a typological research it is already colored with your own research based state of mind.

The statement above is not meant to talk down on typological research, only to make one aware on what he or she is doing. That's because an architect, throughout his/her career, is called upon to design buildings of every conceivable purpose, most of which contain a program never before heard of before. Take for example train stations of all kinds, churches with salons, hotels on a scale that no one ever thought of, public libraries with a totally different service than the conventional, office and trade structures, school buildings with other necessities. Nowadays you'll be asked to design ice rinks, theatres, exhibition buildings, casinos, prisons, town halls, concert halls, apartment complexes and all the other structures that fall under the heading of modern society that make up a big part of the architect's agenda. In order to deal with modern society's demand of new building types, one should construct plans with great consideration, wherefrom elevations will grow, whose essential character, when purely composed, cannot have a precedent in architectural history. And therefore making each building unique, based on their context and Zeitgeist.²

So, if one wants to design a building in the modern day, one should not only study previous types, collect quantitative data and investigate the context. But a modern architect should also research the public values as well as the social aspects in that specific area, in order to come to a sensible design solution. Only then a design will fulfill its initial intention, where it will connect with its users and create more public value in the city.

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. (1991) In Jen Jack Gieseking and William Mangold, *The People, Place and Space Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2014)

² Nikolaus Pevsner, *A History of Building Types* (Princeton University Press, 1979).