

Delft University of Technology
Design as Politics Graduation Studio
A City of Comings and Goings

Final Reflection

Ecologies of Migration:
Metabolic Borderscapes and Relational Architectures

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Satellite view of the informal crossing points between Cd. Hidalgo (MEX) and Tecún Umán (GTM)

In order to reflect about my approach, it is not enough to look at the outcome of the project, nor at the process traditionally understood as a more or less linear sequence of steps taken to achieve such outcome. To do so would mean on the one hand to mutilate a still ongoing process just for the sake of framing, defining and fixing both a method and a complex issue, while on the other hand, it would have been almost impossible to make clear the presence of other agents (including myself, my mentors or the institution itself) as part of the process. In short, if conceived like this, the reflection would only have been a contradiction to the rest of the work.

Therefore, the best way to work this reflection was indeed to focus in the process, however, instead of being about re-tracing specific parts of it to make it linear and clearly defined, it rather had to be about mapping the process, not only with all its apparent contradictions and setbacks, but also making evident how the presence of other agents, circumstances and drivers shaped it in a particular way. Of course, this means that the reflection goes beyond the reductive dialectics of what worked and what did not, and rather makes evident the impossibility of understanding the process if it is not as relational, multidisciplinary and contingent. In other words, ecological. I believe that doing the reflection that way, even if it appears blurry or even contradictory at times, allows understanding the process and its agents as a *becoming*, while at the same that renders the necessary background of relations without which the reflection would end up as a merely post-rationalized description. Moreover, narrating the process in this way, allowed me to introduce the elements that moved from one discursive realm into another, bypassing not only the utopianism implied in problem/solution dialectics, prescription, normativity, idealism or reductionism of representational thought and practices, but materializing directly as it were, into spatial, territorial, and architectural difference. In other words, the reflection is about how the approach moved beyond from conventional design methodologies not *only* on the discursive level but also (...).

Of course, to map all the processes of ‘becoming’ that took (and are still taking) place in relation to this graduation project would be far too extensive and out of the scope of this reflection. What I believe more relevant to map are the concepts or components that, in their becoming, reached critical points that provoked their transposition from a discursive realm to a material-discursive one. This is: how some of these concepts changed during the process not only in a quantitative way, but in a qualitative one. Therefore, I think that one of the most interesting ways to map this process is departing from the question of ethics. This question not only changed during the process but also became a tool for resistance and, as it will become clear, it is the intersection where different concepts, components, elements and lines encounter. However, to introduce my position and its relation to the question of ethics, it is important to frame it also in relation with the studio and my first approaches to the phenomena of migration in Mexico.

As a departure point it can be said that, on the one hand, I found myself reading, gathering information and stories, being affected by the normative interpretation of migration (affective, emotional, victimization of women and children) and the mainstream speech that goes on in Mexico, while simultaneously, on the other hand, I was starting to get immerse into the world of relational thinking, materialist theories, posthumanism, and for the first time I started wondering about the possibility of approaching architecture from ethics (in relation or opposed to morality). The interaction between the topic and the information that I was gathering, the theory (the

ethical approach) and the questioning of the regular ways of doing architecture is what sparked a rigorous process that is the *becoming* of this project. That is how I found myself being pulled in different directions since the beginning of the project – being affected by the emotional impact of the imagery and the instinct to “emancipate” and the (institutional) push to “solve” (give an ultimate solution) – and digging deeper and uncovering a variety of concepts which meshed themselves together and revealed in a very particular way... All this trigger a need for searching how to apply all of this but not only in a discursive way, looking for ways of doing.

The breakthrough in the process happened when I came across Manuel deLanda and the concept of morphogenesis shortly before P1. What deLanda suggest is that everything is material and all matter has morphogenetic capacities when it enters in relation with other flows (including virtual flows, which are also material but not actual). It is important to clarify that morphogenesis is not *The Concept* that solved the project for me, but rather a way of working with what is already there, thus, closer to ethics. In order to find the way to trigger these morphogenetic capacities, deLanda proposes three different “logics” to approach any material phenomenon: *population thinking* that aids in the identification of material flows (human and non-human) and their interactions and relations within a territory; *intensive thinking* to help in revealing the drivers ('desires') that fuel the movement of these material flows; *topological thinking* that allows to find the structures of the possible movements within a territory. What De Landa suggests is a way of analysis, but what became clear to me along the way is that these ideas can help construct a way of doing as well. This is not to say that the analysis is used as a short-circuiting template for suggesting something, this is where it is important to note that what is suggested is a way of positioning myself. And this position then in conjunction with an ethical approach (non-judgmental and non-preconceiving) became a catalyst also for doing. The ethical approach was what pushed me to constantly keep questioning myself, pushing this theory to its practical limit, and keeping myself from jumping to quick into normative solutions.

Of course, the discovery of deLanda’s ideas, the willingness to work with what I thought was there, and my search for morphogenesis, was not enough and constantly I got stuck. Even after developing a more organized “method” to apply the three types of thought of deLanda to find morphogenesis, I found myself unable to really complete the information without making big assumptions. At the time I did not realize that the problem was that I was assuming too much, but I did *feel* that something was disconnected every time I tried to apply these logics. It was another theoretical approach what gave me new insights: *territorial thinking*, about how territories are defined through expressive contents. An expressive content can be anything – an action, a sound, matter– anything that, when in relation, is expressing more than itself, and by doing so it is helping to define a territory. This made me reflect on how subjects and territories are constantly defining and being defined by one another. In that sense, when I view a video of an American journalist going to the river on the border and the landfill and filming a very sad story with dramatic music (his preconceived version of what was going on there), I was suddenly able to see beyond the surface of the imagery, to tune into the fact of how much activity actually is going on there, people, animals, water are doing things, are being constantly actualized, are defining each other. Suddenly what before was just a sack of sand in the river or a shade in the Landfill, became more, they were telling something. When we go beyond what is right and wrong (morality), it

becomes clear that these unregulated informal activities are not right or wrong but rather are purely productive.

Though when reflecting, my process seems linear and simple, one breakthrough after another, it is also true that around this time it became very difficult as the institution of the studio and the university was pushing me to start producing, and producing normative, requirements fulfilling (box-ticking), architectural solutions. The discursive part of the project was not ripe enough yet to morph into the material part, yet the fact that I was obliged to initiate the material production part was beginning to have an impact on the whole process and could appear counter-productive at times. At the same time this situation was having an impact on me as a person, because as a result I experienced a complete disillusionment with architecture and the solutions it professes to offer. I do not say this to complain but to point out how *all* agents involved in a process, be they human or non-human, local or virtual, are enmeshed *into* this process and have an impact on the direction it takes. This is why relational thinking is so relevant.

It was right before P3, due to the pressure of delivering and without being able to produce architecture, when I reached a critical threshold, when looking at the site of the river, I realized that not only the expressive contents (sacks of sand, boats, people, etc.) were there, but also that morphogenetic manifestations in the form of different economies and modes of organization were also there, of course changing, mutating, becoming, but already there. If all these things were already there, it was not about me proposing them, being the guiding hand of the architect. It made me reconsider my own position in the process, how I could be a part of it instead of disrupting and dismantling it, which alleviated my previous disillusionment to a certain extent. Now I was able to define my goal more clearly – to direct the flows towards moments of opportunity. That being the goal for the project, while of course there were individual goals for each site. After this critical threshold or re-positioning, I tried to go back to the method of applying populational, intensive and topological thinking, where previously I was struggling to move from analysis to proposal, now it flowed effortlessly. I was able to draw the conclusion that the agents were not acting only due to being forced by socio-politico-economic circumstances (a rationalized interest), but also to a large part due to very intensive desires and in response to different modes of organization and interaction.

From here I could start to think of architecture not as being on top of the site as a moral imposition, but as parameters emerging from and with the site. So, if the morphogenetic capacities are there already and everything is in relation, then everything can be seen as a parameter, and architecture can be one of the many, thus gaining agency and capacities, which it would not have otherwise. P4 date was already close and certain requirements of the university needed to be filled. However, to be coherent to the method of the project, it was still necessary to work all three sites at the same time, and the best way to do that is to work them in time, as they would develop, respond to contingency and be appropriated by the agents. The project and the three sites need to be understood as a system. Each of the three sites has a gravitational field of relations, which far surpass the physical boundaries of each. The most obvious link is the migrants which might go from one to the next to the other, but there are many more connecting flows and aspects besides the migrants. The intra-connectivity of the sites manifests as well in other people, animals, products, garbage, money, water... Precisely

looking at this relational connectivity between the three sites is the strength of this project, as it implies acknowledging the limits of the 'frames' used normally for conceiving architecture, and that the frames are not actually there, and that everything exists in relation to everything else. Once you change something in one place, it acts as a parameter affecting many other things, if even in the smallest ways. The gravitational waves ripple through the system, and enmesh with others, creating the very complexity of the system itself. This is why I resisted the advice of my tutors to just do one or the other of the sites, as it would be a betrayal to the heart of the project.

For P4 I had to demonstrate all of this, make this connectivity and its importance evident not only for myself, but for all my tutors and everyone else. Even though I had an idea of specific architectural intervention I did not have time to discuss them with my tutors, especially taking into account the extent and the complexity of the project. The part that fell short in the P4 was the architecture and the building technology, which I failed to marry satisfactorily with the idea and the temporal articulation of the project. At this point I chose to prioritize the systematic and temporal aspects of the project while resorting to grand (and to an extent quite crude) architectural gestures in the spatial and material sense. After failing the P4 I could look at all the sites with fresh eyes, and start working truly with the morphogenetic capacities of each. At the same time, the building technology became a very important tool to explore how these material relations manifest in space. These questions were the ones to close the gap between thinking in terms of parameters and the building technology. I was able to see more value at this point in looking at references and thinking of material articulation. It was not about concepts and architectural gestures but about thinking how people on the ground would build and use these things, and how would they interact with their surroundings, even if the interventions end up being imperfect or altered in some ways. Thus far I had been struggling with proposing architectural solutions because whatever the 'master architect in me' was coming up with, it felt disingenuous and unfair to the project, to the sites. The breaking point that let me overcome this came when I started to acknowledge my own status as a component of this system, that I was *becoming* in this process as well. Ironically the 'grand gesture' came from my fear of not knowing enough... The moment I was able to understand that I will never know everything and that whatever I proposed would be neither right nor wrong, nor good or bad, I was able to let my agency flow and to go wherever it took me. In that sense this realization was very liberating.

One of the exercises that I resorted to at this point was to look at the satellite images of the sites and to see how they have developed and changed over time. Firstly, in the border site the strength and the agency of the river became increasingly evident, to the point where whole neighborhoods on the banks of the river could disappear, the informal practices and their accompanying structures varying from year to year, the banks of the river being eroded... The activity there was so strong that it was visible even on satellite images, thus the richness of it on the ground must be even more powerful. With this knowledge and the input from the building technology side, the proposed intervention changed completely, all the components aligned in the same key, as it were. Though the structures proposed (the groins) were not much smaller than the initial 'grand gesture' proposal, they are much humbler (not for the sake of being humble) simply as they are working *with* the river, using its agency, as opposed to not acknowledge it.

After initiating the final phase of the river project, I looked at the other two sites. The landfill was in some way similar to the river, as the flows and developments were easy to appreciate from above. Garbage moves, there are fires, informal paths being created; one could see also the agency of the government and the institutions, with another part of the hill being carved to create another section of the landfill, then that being gradually filled in with garbage as well. This analysis revealed a lot about the very topography of the site, as there is very little precise information available. With these new discoveries I was able to propose in a much subtler way. The practical functions of the previous proposal were kept but now it was possible to give a more defined location to them. The practices of the agents and the natural flows, as well as an analysis of desires, let another part of the proposal emerge.

As opposed to the other sites, with the park I was stuck for the longest time. Compared to the others, the park is very normative, and the satellite imagery analysis was not yielding enough substantial information. Though, even if the changes were not evident from satellite imagery, it does not mean that change is not happening, in fact it is taking place always and everywhere. This meant that I needed to look at this site in a different way, to reconsider its position in relation to the other sites, to the migrants, to its position in the region. When viewed in relation to the other sites, the river site can be understood as a gateway (a narrowing of paths) for the migrants, while the landfill is where some of them end up and choose to claim their territory. In between these two narrowings of paths, there is a multiplication of possibilities. The park is a perfect example of this. While the migrants might form packs around the river and drift to the park (the central alameda of the closest big city) they can reorganize themselves there again and go different ways. In that sense, the multiple smaller interventions responding to a variety of material flows (migrants, products, garbage, etc.) seems like a good manifestation of the aforementioned inner workings of the sites. What I was gleaned from the satellite analysis in the other sites were their modes of organization. I knew that the park also had very strong modes of organization, perhaps even too strong. That is why the pinpoint interventions target very particular places where the existing normative flows can be influenced and/or disrupted, where new opportunities and modes of organization can become.

The phasing of the project sill played a very important role for the second P4. For this reason, I made the decision show particular cuts (snapshots) of the development of the project in time, being careful to never represent it a finished, timeless project in space. The next level is also to show how people who build it and use it might make their own alterations to the designs depending on what materials are available, and so on. To fit this, I chose to draw largely by hand and to avoid typical architectural representational trickery of making everything look neat and whole.

Finally, it is important to point out that what I developed throughout this project is a method, but it is not a methodology in the sense that it can be applied fully and in the same manner to another site and another project. All the steps that I made, even if it was not the straightest path, were necessary for the process of discovery accumulating and amounting to this method. I understand that a graduation project (from an institutional point of view) has certain constitution and requirements, and one is obliged to bite off what one can chew in a year. However, I intend to continue research and working in this manner in future, which is why I was not willing to cut down, reduce, or do for the sake of doing at any one point. The discoveries and leaps forward I made

after the first P4 make me unable to view it as a failure but as a necessary extension of the project. For this reason, it is fair to say that it is impossible to fully reproduce this method in the future, in other territories or with other phenomena. Of course, some parts of it can be repeated, however an ethical approach means that even those parts can become different.