North Sea: Landscapes of Coexistence
Transitional Territories Studio 2018-2019

MSc4 Reflection

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The State of Speculation:
Underlying Mechanisms of Built Environment Procurement

Introduction

The title of the graduation project, The State of Speculation, refers specifically to the notion of the state of exception as coined by Carl Schmitt. This concept points to a sovereign's ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of public good, the power of which is commonly mechanised in a state of emergency. In naming the project in such a way, a worldview is created whereby a degree of agency in the world system is deliberately transferred to the encompassing financial mechanism that recursively governs our day-to-day. Moreover, it draws upon this notions of breaking norms, rules, laws to refer to how often the regulation for monetary is superseded – in the game of the capitalist financial system, the best position to be in is at the top, and to be at the top is to game the game, a continuous game of subversion.

The project, within the scope of the architectural discipline, attempts to make clear the link between finance and the built environment. It does this first by very clearly declaring a hypothetical building that derives itself from contemporary monetary nomos, second by reproducing an alternative hypothetical building as a counter project to the first, and third by analysing the differences between the two speculated futures.

1. The relation between research and design

Given the cyclical inferential dualism that exists between theory (research) and practice (design), where method is the operative mediation between the two, this reflexivity underlies ones way of knowing – no less a case of causality as asserted by Alvin Goldman[1]. Architecture as a discipline, like many others, does not escape this fundamental conception. Our readings of the world actuate particular actions performed by ourselves within the world that we observe. These readings hold the ontological assumptions that frame a distinct world-view characterised by a melange of ideologies, theories, and values that one, consciously and unconsciously, associates and engages with. In turn, each ideology, theory, or value holds an agency that structures our thoughts differently, and thereby results in a different action. Thus, there is no doubt that 'how we build is informed by how we understand the world, and how we understand the world is framed by what we have built there.'[2] Moreover, as it is often the case that one engages with a multitude of structuring theories, it is important to be explicit and self-critical about the theories utilised such that oneself and those who engage with ones work can understand how the methodology for a piece of research is arrived at, aiding in the validation the findings (if completely soundly) as well as anticipating potential outcomes.

Tackling the dualism of research and design purely on a philosophic level, as the paragraph above has attempted, reveals more questions than answers. No doubt has practising research and design during the course of the graduation studio answered more questions than produced more questions. Indeed, contrasting the crispness of ideas, essays, and argumentations, the practice of design is non-linear, illogical, and irrational. As such, over the course the studio as the research question was continuously tackled, reflected upon, and reframed, the initial large volume of pure research inquiries had to be shelved into the back of my mind to allow it time to be absorbed and, without clear evidence, actuate design intuitions as the demand for them started to arise in the studio.

Reconciling the relationship between research and design (or in the case of the studio, research by design), if the two practices were placed on a timeline, the timeline would typically start with research and followed by design. However the circularity and the intrinsic relationship between the two, as I have began to grasp, is far more fluid than one after the other. It is not untypical to find one reflecting upon one's design utilising research as a measuring stick. Thereby, I now see the two practices as partnering tools for understanding and actuating within the world with the following rule of thumb: where one cannot intuitively design, one lacks knowledge and thereby should shift into research; where one notices more questions are revealed than answers, one should design.

2. What is the relation between your graduation (project) topic, the studio topic (if applicable), your master track (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

The studio's focus on the North Sea as a landscape of coexistence was of particular personal resonance, given the political shift that being brewed across the very fabric of the sea between the United Kingdom and the EU27. No doubt, the globe is a shifting landscape of co-existence and antagonism. The era of co-existence that we are living through is more often than that taken for granted. Moreover, with the studio offering the opportunity to study in a transcalar and interdisciplinary (architecture, urbanism, landscape deisng, and water management) fashion, both spatial and temporal, the position of the architect is integral to this and this working position provides results that are more holistic and grounded.

My project, of relating finance and thereby degrees of politics with the built environment fits within this research framework in a unique way as it's conception of the territorial scale if not necessarily driven by physical factors like geology, climate, fauna and flora, but instead driven by the financially quantised perspective of the territory. Therefore the project's arrival at a site in London is based off current economic and political trends, and the main driving force for an alternative solution is the major political uprooting of Brexit.

The research component of the programme in the Architecture allows me to integrate my newfound rudimentary knowledge in finance and politics, whilst my background as a working architect allowed me to have insight into the developer's clichés that are to be considered as points of subversion in the production of the counter project. Therefore as a student of the Architecture track, I believe

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1   Alvin I. Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing", T*he Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 12 (1967): 357-372.

2   Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture.* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016): 8.

that the project contributes to making our cities more liveable, resilient and sustainable by negotiating with this factor of the built environment that is more often than not overlooked due to it's restraining qualities.

3. 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.

Multiple research methods were employed in the course of the graduation project. Perhaps the most relevant of these was the use of actor network theory (ANT) throughout the different scales of the project, on the territorial scale with drawing up a speculative board of stakeholders, on the urban scale considering the users and the urban form in relation to the agency that they afford, on the architectural scale of what kind of architecture would be built at what budget and the degree of craftsmanship that is available in light of hard Brexit. ANT provided the structure necessary for considering the architectural counter project as a literal world-building exercise for the scenario-based research by design. To achieve this, an ANT approach to the reading of the procurement process of the built environment with particular focus on finance, development, and politics was completed and can be seen in the Catalogue of Architectural Elements and their Effects.

In the process of design of the counter project, the Catalogue is continuously referred to for solutions and knowledge and is reflexively updated whenever a problem in the design process arises and the solution is found. Each entry is categorised for ease of use upon revisiting the document, but the categorisation process forms a level of editing and reflection necessary to afford the time necessary to comprehend each design solution. I believe then, that this recording of work and its editing produces a form of knowledge generation that is in line with the overarching methodology of research by design which is called for by the chair of Transitional Territories.

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

The graduation project draws its pertinence from two primary elements. Initially, the venture attempts to join the aspirations of various professions and stakeholders in the advancement of the built environment in our urban communities. This incorporates from one viewpoint the practicing bodies (not limited to architects, urbanists, planners, engineers) that make up the Faculty of Built Environment. From another viewpoint, that is outside of the scope of the Faculty, the project tries to include the profession to fund managers, project consultants, and developers in the processing of producing a new standard of living that is reflective of the new economic and political climate of a hard Brexit London. As such, the project forms a sort of blueprint for how practitioners who are typically not immediately engaged or do not the knowledge required to actively inform the procurement of the built environment can get involved and the varying desires of stakeholders can be addressed with the scope of a building project.

Secondly, the project finds itself within a context that can only be described as the bubble of academia. Whereby the condition of architectural education today is a representation of the discipline in today's society. Removed from the coordination with engineers, municipality, and permitting agencies; the administration of the construction process; dealing with contractors; engaging product vendors; producing graphic manuals for construction; aligning with clients' desires and budgets, much of architectural education today is not only a gross misrepresentation of the profession, but also does not fully prepare its subjects with the skills and know-how in its 'vocational degree'. Therefore, I see the project not only as having a transferable set of methods onto the professional and practising level of architecture, but it can also be used in the education of architects such that student are better prepared for the skills and workflows that are typically found in professional practice. For these reasons, I find that the result of the project is the methodology that can be drawn from it, whilst the resulting counter project is a vehicular brief for the generation of a methodology that adheres to the morphed ideologies that I had absorbed at the beginning of the studio.

5. 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.

There are clear ethical issues and dilemmas attached to ANT. For one, ANT has been criticised for being amoral due to its lack of concern with regards to the intentions or ideologies of actors. This point of criticism has often been disclaimed as null due to the fact that it is only in the construction process of the network that one should not take sides or positions that may affect the topology of the network, however one is perfectly well to take up such positions in reviewing the completed network. ANT apparent objectivity though can indeed be questioned, although it does make good grounds in homogenising ones perspective on all the actors that one draws, no doubt the pillar of one's own baggages, curiosities, biases will continue to prevail. however, indeed, the act of accumulating the knowledge and information through relational observations does open new potential underlying narratives that may have been missed or assumed dismissed. The case of which can be seen in Luuk Boelens' application of ANT in Dutch planning[3]. Whereby although a network and ANT's approach to conceptualising the world has been taken into account, ultimately the pragmatism in having to generate revenue for subsistence overpowered any attempt at homogenising the field of actors. The author, however does raise that new and creative solutions were found utilising this methodology (figure 1.). No doubt then, that ANT like many other theories and accompanying methodologies is a double-edged sword and one has to be critical of ones action at all stages of the project such that a rigorous, logical and coherent result is arrived at.

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3   Luuk Boelens, "Theorizing Practice and Practising Theory: Outline for an Actor-Relational-Approach in Planning," *Planning Theory* 9, no. 1: 51, accessed December 30, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095209346499.
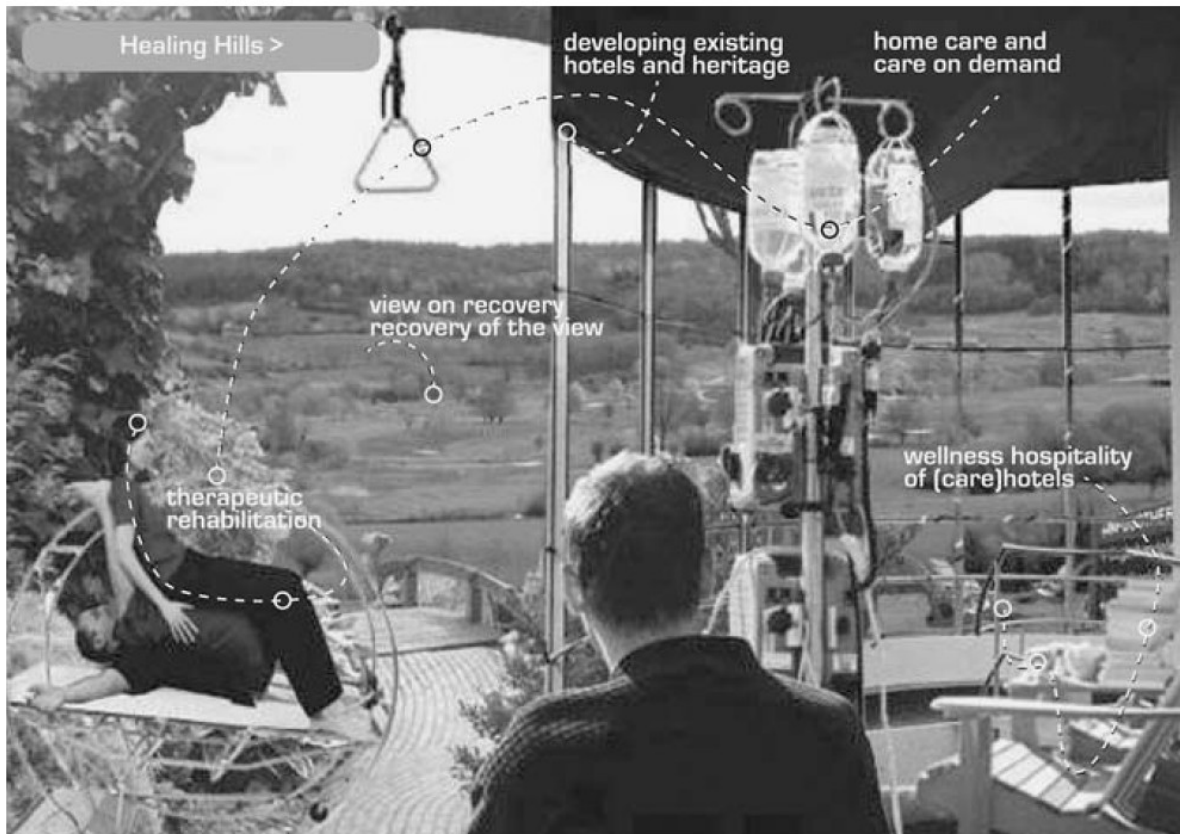
Figure 1. A network superimposed onto an image to describe the relation between a hotel and a hospital, in which the patients of the hospital could stay in the hotel after a number of nights such to free up beds in the hospital.

When considering the issues relating to the resulting counter project, an immense change in lifestyle will be necessary if the building is to be successful. While it's intentions of a hyper dense, low private floor area living were introduced for the cost-saving benefits it may have, it clearly does not suit a portion of the housing market demographics of today. The building calls for a radical change from the consideration of one's own space to the consideration of the commons' own space. No doubt, these factors are out of the designer's hands unless one was to consider the temporal element of introducing this change gradually and over time However it is considered that the radical shift and aftershock of hard Brexit should be pertinent enough to call for such changes in lifestyles and notion of ownership. Indeed, given such a perspective on how the day-to-day of people can change, the idea of 'shock therapy' as utilised by Naomi Klein[4] is brought up, the ethical and moral position of which is dubious at best. Clearly, it can be extended that any design or plan of living is always some degree of 'shock therapy', a speculative future that engages the imagination of the viewer of what they may or may not want. When utilised in a strategic way, one then may influence the desires and malleability of the viewer to one's content, and here stands perhaps the greatest moral dilemma for designers.

4   Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*. (Canada: Random House of Canada, 2007).