

Liminal waters: Discovering the productive liminality and metamorphic capacity of spaces in transition

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Graduation studio: Architectural Design Crossovers

Graduation thesis topic

The city may be understood as a changing, dynamic organism composed of various interacting elements. A central focus of this thesis is the transformative potential of liminal elements, with particular emphasis on water and its significance in forming a place's character. Like many other European urban centres, Madrid is confronted by the increasing impacts of climate change. Prolonged droughts and high temperatures are affecting living conditions and thus well-being.

This project seeks to uncover the city's deep historical and infrastructural relationship with water and highlight its continued relevance. It utilizes water's liminal qualities, regenerative, healing, and transformative capacities, and showcases them as essential to urban resilience and architectural expression.

Graduation project – exploration of the im/material

The selected topic operates at the intersection of physical and metaphysical concepts. It addresses philosophical concepts of transformation, temporality, and the dynamic relationships among site-specific actors that inform potential interventions. It ties together the philosophical and technical aspects of architecture on many different scales. Finding the balance between them is the key to exceptional architectural design. This could be obtained through the freedom and framework provided by the Architectural Design Crossovers Studio.

Relationship between research and design

Throughout the project, both the research and the design played vital roles and continuously influenced each other. In the initial design phase, the research was more informative and was used to build a theoretical and conceptual base to develop the architectural intervention later. This is when the main theoretical concepts of investigation were defined. Starting with the fascination for the "in between", overlooked spaces of the urban fabric and their transformative potential. This sparked a discussion about "metamorphic liminality" and how architecture could be used as a framing device to unleash a place's potential. Later, the two main concepts of interest were defined – 'liminality' and 'genius loci'. They capture the idea of transformative capacity and present a site's physical and nonphysical conditions. This was followed by exploring liminal elements such as water, air, time, and light in our lives, rituals, and daily routines.

Emphasis was placed on water's liminal nature and significance in transformation processes and Madrid's historical development. This directly influenced the selection of the design hybrid program - a wellness centre incorporating water treatment and educational facilities,

demonstrating the vitality and agency of the natural liminal element. Further research into the city's sacred relationship with water uncovered a complex, often overlooked underground infrastructure and a neglected heritage, both of which inspired the project.

Design approach

The chosen research topic could be interpreted in many ways, allowing one to approach Madrid from various perspectives and gain interesting insights. The research spread in different directions throughout the process. It covered abstract topics and led to a deep dive into the historic development of Madrid. Related to that was a good understanding of the operations of the water systems and the complexity of how all water structures are connected above and underground. Moreover, investigating the notion of liminality and genius loci accompanied further exploration into the importance of the spatial conditions for the experience of a place, which played a vital role in the design process.

Project relevance

The project aims to reestablish a seemingly lost connection between Madrid's residents and the historically significant Manzanares River. It seeks to encourage interaction and engage people with the city's water system. The design addresses the ongoing climate change processes and the resulting drought and water scarcity by raising awareness of water's vital role as a crucial resource and a powerful and dynamic force in the natural environment. The project reinterprets the conventional way of water treatment. It presents water infrastructure and management processes as a part of urban life. Furthermore, it metaphorically refers to the underground invisible water network for the people in the city and reminds them of its importance for their daily lives and well-being.

Transferability

In an era characterized by rapid environmental, social, and technological changes, the relationship between human communities and natural elements is increasingly disrupted and fragmented. This project aims to propose a design methodology that reintroduces water as a central element in the spatial configuration of the built environment and in promoting more intelligent, sustainable, and responsive uses of this essential resource.

The project addresses the topics of dis/comfort and un/predictability and how they could be used to enrich people's exploration of an architectural narrative. It investigates the role of liminality in the design process and the positive outcomes of creating conditions of uncertainty and potential for transformation. Furthermore, some approaches on different scales and aspects could be reinterpreted and applied in different scenarios.

The view of the architectural designer

When granted the freedom to define a project's main intentions and goals, the architect already reveals his perspective on current and future issues. Establishing these guiding principles is a reflective process in which the designer communicates his values and positions himself within broader social, environmental, or technological discourses.

The project comprises many intertwined components, posing interesting design challenges, particularly when disciplinary boundaries begin to blur. There are moments where landscape converges with architecture, architecture integrates with infrastructure, and, at times, all three domains converge. Those 'crossovers' of the different systems and the design of their fusion are some of the main challenges. Developing a coherent architectural language that operates as a connective tissue among these disparate systems offers a meaningful way to express the design methodology and intellectual framework. Ultimately, one should articulate a holistic and responsive design approach demonstrating how architecture can catalyze integration and transformation within complex urban environments.