



SÓLIDO.LÍQUIDO.LÍTICO

a river garden for Bogotá

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Chair of Methods and Analysis \ Positions in Practice - Bogotá

The graduation project is a river garden along the River Arzobispo punctuated by architectural pavilions, which explore new possibilities for public space in Bogotá and aim at reconnecting the citizens to the natural landscape, in particular to the elements of soil and water. The project takes in consideration three levels of intervention:

- o the urban/ecological scale for the re-naturalisation of the currently polluted river Arzobispo, including the appropriate technology for the treatment of water;
- o landscape design for the articulation of the river bed and the zoning of the garden with the relevant vegetation;
- o architectural design for the creation of the pavilions and the infrastructure which allow the interaction with the re-naturalised landscape.

ASPECT 1

the relationship between research and design.

The starting point of the research for the project was a workshop inspired by the text "Thinking Through Things" by Amiria Henare. Film-making was used as a tool to record series of data within the chosen neighborhood of Teusaquillo. These data had to do with various soundscapes, touchscapes and landscapes in which different individuals would act.

This sparked the starting point of the analysis and my interest to analyse that particular architectural layer that is existential space, under the category of the "unapparent". Analyzing existential space implies an attention to sensuous aspects of life, which also influence or are influenced by architecture and that are often disregarded in traditional architectural thinking. Using the body as a three-dimensional analytical tool allowed to unveil characteristics of the neighbourhood which were not immediately evident, but instead 'unapparent'. This allowed to map ethnographic traces and reconstruct a sort of sensorial archaeology of the place.

The concept of reconstructing an archaeology of a place made of unapparent elements was carried on in the investigation of the project theme. Reading Javier Ocampo Lopez's *Mitos y leyendas indígenas de Colombia*, I found out about the origin of Teusaquillo as a geographical limit of the city and the importance of its river and lagoon as a sacred place in the social/religious/political life of the Muisca, the indigenous population of Bogotá. Teusaquillo, in the Chibcha language means in fact "place for rest". This brought to the investigation of early colonization historical maps to retrace the geography of these watercourses and lagoon and the observation of how disconnected is today the urban tissue to the nearby mountains. In order to address this lost relationship with water, earth and nature, the analysis focused on the stretch of land which connects these two different realms of nature and city - Rio Arzobispo. The original and ritualistic use of this river also inspired at first the investigation of the theme of bathing, and particularly the possibility of "undesigning" the act of bathing, which is generally connected with the notion of exclusivity and luxury. Instead, the project aims at deconstructing the formality of the traditional bathing sequence of a bathhouse and proposes instead a river garden with a route, along which it is possible to experience the elements of water and natural soil while being immersed into the landscape. This emerged as a result of the P2 feedback.

Therefore, rather than taking the bathhouse as a reference type, it is instead the garden that facilitates this renewed relationship between the citizen and the river (described by the elements of water and soil). Shifting my focus to the realm of the river garden, rather than staying solely within the bathing theme, it helped opening many more unpredicted possibilities for the design. Freeing the design from a fixed program also helped realising design intentions that lied within the phenomenological formulation of the initial research. For example, the reconnection of the urban tissue and the mountains came together naturally in the form of the garden. With its connotation of artificiality and of designed nature, the garden represents a mediated form of nature where human and wild are in contact - it is the encounter between the unknown, uncontrollable, untamed and the domesticated. The garden enacts a mediation between the wilderness of the mountains and the regulated program of the urban fabric of the city. In this sense, being an in-between place where artificial and natural, civilised and social coexist on an edge, the garden is also a place of self-discovery, a place for the human inner environment to take form, grow and change. In this way, the presence of a river garden not only succeeds in transforming the urban ecology and climate of Teusaquillo, but through the architecture of its pavilions, it directly affects the human environment, bringing new opportunities for public space.



Synestaethic Teusaquillo - collage drawing by the author

ASPECT 2

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

"Sólido.Líquido.Lítico" with its route of pavilions intends to layout a new physical vocabulary for the neighbourhood of Teusaquillo, and eventually for the whole city of Bogotá, to recuperate forgotten rituals and institute new practices of public life. People are encouraged to get lost in the river garden and seek quietness in its pavilions, being challenged by imaginative spaces which often come as a surprise, emerging from the ground or from behind a wall. They are designed to arouse physical as well as psychological reactions. Some of their characteristics are the juxtaposition of natural and artificial materials, an unusual alternation of interior and exterior conditions, the varying of scale and level of enclosure and the alienating effect given by the use of mass. Creating imaginative spaces for the wonder of the citizen-explorer can represent a statement against the global tendency which tends to turn cities into commercial machines. Architecture has to also be able to escape this confinement and vouch for human life in its entirety. The ultimate responsibility of architecture is to house people and host their social action. To take care of people means, architecturally, to accommodate their bodies including a number of sensorial perceptions that convey comfort and, ultimately, pleasure. Pleasure, affect and emotion direct social action, dictating the use and metamorphosis of those same spaces that architecture set out in the first place. A memory of pleasure related to the public realm is extremely important when thinking of public space in Bogotá, where public often rhymes with fear, danger and distrust. Pleasure and care are also at the basis of the social responsibility that comes with sharing life in one place. A place that becomes part of people's lives, that hosts moments, present or past, is a place that is looked after and maintained through time. Shunmyo Masuno says that "an unforgettable garden is one that becomes an essential part of a person's life"¹. The architecture of the river garden aims at transforming the 1km strip of Teusaquillo in a destination for the flaneurs of the city, where strolling, sensing and connecting are the main activities. In this way the area that has been eaten out by urbanisation and densification is regaining space and function in the city allowing the inhabitants to reflect on the possibility of achieving a more meaningful public space by reconnecting with the sensorial beauty of soil and water and therefore with the geographical and topographical origin of the city itself.

In a society where cities tend more and more towards concealing nature rather than inhabiting it, which focus only on views and in collecting a series of images, it is due to rediscover an architecture that is able to exalt what is already present and hidden, what is disregarded and unapparent. Soil and water are often elements to shield away from in architectural practice, they are the elements that architecture is conceived to shelter from. What happens instead when architecture is there to bring attention to them? What if the architecture is designed to be an infrastructure which is there to facilitate the experience of the natural landscape? What if architecture can be treated as an archaeological tool, which is able to expose different layers of space and time?

The project explores these theoretical positions into a series of interventions at urban/landscape/architectural level, in accordance with the Chair's method of action. Methods and Analysis often privileges a regime of interventions over the design of a traditional building - it rather questions the meaningfulness and appropriateness of it. Often intervening with one all-solving building is not the best proposal, therefore working at this project also opened up further possibilities in formulating proposals which work simultaneously at different scales and on different levels of intervention. It also focused attention on the fact that very often an appropriate proposal might not include only an architectural solution, but needs a full-fledged plan of action within different disciplines - like those of

¹ Masuno, Shunmyo. *Landscapes in the Spirit of Zen. A collection of the Work of Shunmyo Masuno*. Process architecture, Special Issue 7. Murotani Bunji 1995. p. 9

ecology, urbanism and landscape design, in this case. My approach to the project was in fact to touch upon all these in order to restitute this complexity.



On unexpectedness \ the landscape penetrating the urban block - conceptual drawing by the author

Aspect 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.

My research approach is corroborated by methodologies which span from the spheres of phenomenology, body-centrism and heuristics.

The introduction of 'body talks' within the architectural discourse is a fundamental aspect, which should not be considered inferior to other more conventional and technical research fields and methods. That is why the space within bodies interact, architecture, creates the scene for those interactions, where ultimately the body itself can be considered as an architectural system: a space within the space, where the senses are the epistemological parameters. They are in fact protagonists of our approach to knowledge, which is knowledge of the outside as well as of the inside, a conscience of the other as well as of the self. The scope of architecture is thus to be able to re-establish our connection with these parameters and to make us aware that the space we inhabit is not a viewing machine or a peephole, but instead the world we inevitably belong to and act in, not as spectators but as sensuous beings.

Whereas there is a lot written about phenomenology and the importance of perception and affect, there is little effort to bring this discussion into the realisation of a building. Some architects like Peter Zumthor, Steven Holl and Kengo Kuma have often expressed their sympathy towards these theories, but it is still difficult to see practical manifestations of it.

The Chair of Methods and Analysis tries to bridge this gap between theory and practice by considering them two parallel instruments to treat architecture, therefore developing my graduation project within it was the appropriate place to try to overcome this dichotomy. The studio methodological line of inquiry also lies within a phenomenological setting, specifically under the guidance of Klaske Havik, who has written extensively on the qualities of narration and writing as descriptive tools for the experience of architecture. The project, in fact, setting its premises into the original use of the river Arzobispo as a ritual and mystical place, proposes a take on magic realism applied to the field of architecture. Magic realism is a literary current which sprouted in Latin American and particularly in Colombia through the author Gabriel García Márquez. It is characterised by the utilisation of magic events within a framework of realistic scenarios, where the impossible, wondrous happening easily amalgamates with the routine of reality. In this sense, the project proposes an architecture where elements of unexpectedness, surprise, alienation coexist with the conventions of architectural technique and realism. The project focuses its intents on the atmospheric qualities of architecture and its ability to speak to its inhabitants/visitors, shifting the focus onto their body first, and ultimately towards the entire community and their benefit. This is also in line with the interest of the Chair towards the commons and the network of communities.

Aspect 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.

This action of excavating through different layers is not only the physical action of getting access to the earth. By creating a temporal window onto what the landscape used to be in Teusaquillo, it also allows the possibility of excavating through different layers of memory within the psyche of its inhabitants and visitors. The inner 'human gardens' of the people of Teusaquillo are encouraged to accumulate different experiences of the same place through different layers of time, to trigger past memories or even remember different versions of a past that is constantly changing along with the present. Italo Calvino says that "*Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places*"². The layering of time within human psyche is a phenomenon studied also psychoanalytically. Sigmund Freud in his *Civilisation and Its Discontents* offers an interesting parallel between this mental space and the physical space of the city of Rome and its archaeology. In fact, by excavating the layers of ground within the Eternal City is possible to make the Republican Rome coexist next to the Imperial Rome, Romulus and Remus next to the fascist *sventramenti*. Posing that the case of the physical underground past of Rome is the same of a human mental habitat, the psyche is able to store a long and rich past, where nothing of what once existed goes lost. Next to the last phases of development, the previous ones do not cease to exist. Sometimes, though, these older pasts are most difficult to access if not triggered properly. The architecture of the river garden allows to reconstruct, along with the physical archaeology of the place through the exposure of raw and unapparent elements, also a human archaeology in the enclosed gardens of people's memory. It wants to trigger the access to deeper and various individual pasts, trying to awaken a rooted connection with the prime of nature. The notion of "Sólido.Líquido.Lítico" derives exactly from the temporal dimension through which solid and liquid elements come into contact. The extended stratification of solid ground and the repeated shaping action of water produce the physical state of 'lithos', stone. Again, in much the same way, the lithic state can be considered as one of the physical states of architecture, where the mass of the built encounters the ephemerality of time and use, giving birth to a state of reduction to its elemental state, a dissolution to the essence and a permanence in memory of the people who lived within it. Connection and memory triggers an effect of belonging. Through belonging, individual care enters into action and stimulates a collective behaviour of responsibility.

This process of addressing at once the natural environment as well as the human environment can produce durable positive effects. First, the re-naturalisation of the river Arzobispo can be a model to be applied to many other watercourses in the wider area of Bogotá. Secondly, it allows to envision a public space which resonates with the history and culture of the Bogotan society and that is likely to be embraced as a positive platform for public life, outside of the dynamics of power and violence. The absence of a pre-determined commercial program also enables a wide degree of freedom with respect to the appropriation of these spaces. If the architecture is there to stimulate and awaken sensations of closeness to the natural environment, it can also lend itself as a platform for events of informal economy that are typical of the public life of Bogotá. I did not see necessary to include a designed café or restaurant, when I can very easily imagine the possibility of having a street vendor choosing to place his cart next to one of the pavilions, because that is where students come to sit during their lunch break and he/she can make a good business selling their goods.

All this allows the community to appropriate spaces without the necessity of an all-governing design act from above. Design is performed only to encourage life to happen, to create memories and trigger that sensation of care beyond the limit of the private property. I would like to think that the respect for our environment, built and natural, comes after this special form of care which is the result of the integration

² Calvino, Italo. *Le città invisibili*, Einaudi 1972, p. 28

between the human and nature. Architecture should be one of the tools to allow contact between these two worlds. The belief that adopting more and more advanced technologies is the only viable process to re-naturalise our built environment and cope with its issues, such as climate change for instance, ignores to acknowledge the responsibility that human comportment has within the world-wide issue of sustainability. Sustainability first comes from a genuine understanding of the value of living with and within nature, even in the dense fabric of a city like Bogotá.

Aspect 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.

The first dilemma I feel I have encountered is the task of having to act within a context that is foreign. Colombia is a very heterogeneous context and Bogotá is a complex city, which lives on fragile social and political dynamics, easy to perceive as an outsider but difficult to deeply understand within the span of one short trip. Therefore, because of the extreme multiplicity of these grounds, it is helpful to first recognise and accept this complexity. I then placed my research within the realm of "eventness", a method used within human geography which appreciates the ever-changing conditions of what is manifest, always evolving and never constant. I believe this was a turning point in the way I look at the architectural practice nowadays. Sometimes, as architects or students, we feel the need to formulate a truth, an evident and irrefutable truth to justify our choices or actions or position taken. But after all, reality is much more complex, and architecture much messier than a unidirectionally developing discipline. Leaving aside technical aspects, architecture as humanities has to do with issues of humans and their ever-evolving and always diverse process of existence.

The other ethical issue I had to confront myself with is the high presence of indigents and hubs of "informal living" which populate the river Arzobispo. The dilemma is created by the condition of need and poverty that surrounds these members of community, but also the negative contribution which they bring to the wider environment of the river. In fact, their use of the river as an open-air bathroom does have a negative impact not only on the water quality, but also on the general conditions of decay that the river area suffers from. This influences also the consequent behaviour of the rest of the community, which tends to discard the area as a dangerous place or as a disposal point for trash and old furniture. Intervening in this social scenario is not easy and I have always questioned throughout the research and design process whether it was dutiful to design an alternative space for these indigents. The problem with that, though, is again the quintessence of design, which lies into the planning and formalisation of a phenomenon which is evidently opposite to those kind of values. Trying to formalise homelessness seemed arrogant and also displacing those members of the community is only a temporary result. It is impossible to have control over a phenomenon that is extremely volatile and that requires definitely more than an architecture project to be tackled. I therefore decided to operate at the level of intervention that I could act upon, which involved the benefit of the urban environment and the community as a whole. I decided to leave the rest within the realm of that eventness and complexity which I accepted in the first place when setting my premises to this project.

As a result of my findings, I have understood that there cannot be only one way of analysing an environment, a human sample or a city; there is instead a multiplicity of orders, an over-layering of perspectives and information which contribute all to the rendition of a specific context. Pretending to grab them all and defining them within an unified view or a catalogue of judgements, types and forms (whether architectural or social), it is a negative practice in the exercise of the architectural profession. The architect who tries, often as an outsider to a given context, to understand it all, as an all-governing god, is counter-productive to the realisation of meaningful and appropriate architecture. Therefore, it is instead

by staying humble and trying to confront ourselves with the multiplicities and diversities presented to us that we, as architects, are able to make, sometimes perhaps small, but yet significant changes to the urban environment and eventually to the lives of others.

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