Graduation Reflection

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1. FOREWORD

I have long harboured a frustration for the lack of understanding of the urban in architecture – and conversely of architecture in the urban. It occurred to me that, as architects, we try to defend the boundaries of our site, an absolute red line on a piece paper, without truly questioning the world beyond it. Yes, architects in practice carry out some form of 'site analysis', pages and pages of it in fact. Yet it feels more like placeholder material for a client's book than useful information. Sitting across the table from me in his East London office, Julian Lewis lifted his eyes from the spread of print outs I had laid before him. 'Careful, he warned, this research will only take you so far... A mere formulaic layering of facts does not help you make architecture.' The story had to be personal, emotional and entirely subjective. So, perhaps our profession will never be one of scientific reasoning but instead of storytelling. In uncertain times, stories provide more relief than facts do. They have a beginning and an end, they have a reason and a meaning, they are predictable.

As this journey began, I started with the city, a vast sprawling expanse, humanities proudest achievement. The project was both the city and in the city. It was a quest for understanding of the nature of the city and the physical manifestation within it. However, to avoid the shortcomings of my fellow practitioners, the project had to be an idea before it could be made architecture.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. Premise

The relationship between architecture and infrastructure has always been a focus for me throughout my studies. At an early age I spent many afternoons sketching in London's Victorian stations. The flow of people, the trains... it became a fixation for me. To this end, the framework of 'City of the Future' was inevitable appealing to me. From the outset, I was intrigued by the effects of stations on surrounding urban development. Tackling these issues required us to work across disciplines, which proved to be a particularly enriching process. Students and staff from Transport, Infrastructure & Logistics (TIL) were especially helpful in the early stages of research, guiding some key decisions in their area of expertise. At a theoretical level, the studio proved to be very insightful. I was able to considerably expand my body of knowledge, uncovering new authors such as Antoine, Picon and Paul Virilio while also strengthening many of the themes I had already encountered. I was given the necessary freedom to broaden the scope of my intervention by looking to the city at large. This proved to be instrumental in guiding the narrative that ensued and has since opened numerous avenues of possible intervention.

2.2. Positioning

The post-industrial city has become a fragmented landscape of urbanisation. The rational city of the modernist era has been eroded by the forces of globalisation and the liberalised economy, erasing the traditional points of reference in the urban environment. Consequently, this space has become increasingly illegible.

The initial statement for the thesis was certainly underpinned by a combination of frustration and naivety. What could we really say about the city? Was there even a city at all? After six years of education, I felt like I had not allowed myself to pose these questions. It seemed befitting then, in the context of the 'City of the Future' studio, that I should dissect the words 'City' and 'Future'. How can we predict a city that continuously changes? It seemed like an impossible task. I came to realise that the question was in fact a subjective one; each one of us should develop our own position, perhaps utopian, of how we envisage the city's future. More precisely, the fragmentation of the contemporary city was a sign that multiple interpretations were possible all at once. In this sense, understanding the city is embracing its many facets of life. We flourish in the midst of seemingly chaotic urban environments precisely because they are rich in experiences and diverse in interpretations. What then was driving this fragmentation? It became clear that infrastructure played a vital part in the way we perceived the city. Geographically distant places were now connected by high speed transit collapsing the traditional sense of core and periphery. Alterations in flows of people were driving changes at a macro level. This quickly became the prism through which I analysed the city.
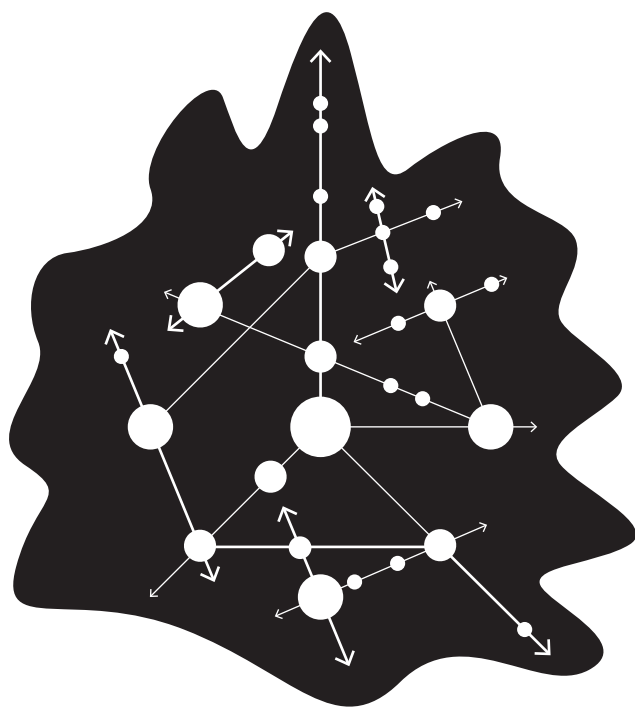
3.   THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

3.1.   Methodology

Initially, I carried out a theoretical research to gain an understanding of the city. During my final undergraduate year, I encountered Bill Hillier and the concept of 'Space Syntax'. Throughout the Masters course his writings became a methodological guide for my site research. Starting with the 'city as network', I extended my readings to Constantinos Doxiadis, Paul Virilio and Antoine Picon. Alongside this, I explored the 'city as project' through the Linear City. Cataloguing such projects allowed me to extrapolate some of the key topological characteristics of the linear diagram. However, this could not be an end in of itself. To further explore the concept of 'linearity' I had to find a physical occurrence that matched the theoretical definition I had now assimilated.

Ilford High Road provided the ideal testing ground for my ideas. Originally a Roman road, this artery runs almost perfectly straight for several kilometres into the Essex countryside. Working with a photographic survey, I was able to isolate a number of recurring conditions that formed the basic topology of this notional place. The exercise altered my point of view from a predominantly formalistic approach to one that was more ecosystemic. From this was born the metaphor of the Urban Coral Reef. It provided a lexicon to further develop the framework within which I was operating. The marine theme was partially borrowed from Rem Koolhaas' statement: 'We were making sandcastles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away.'
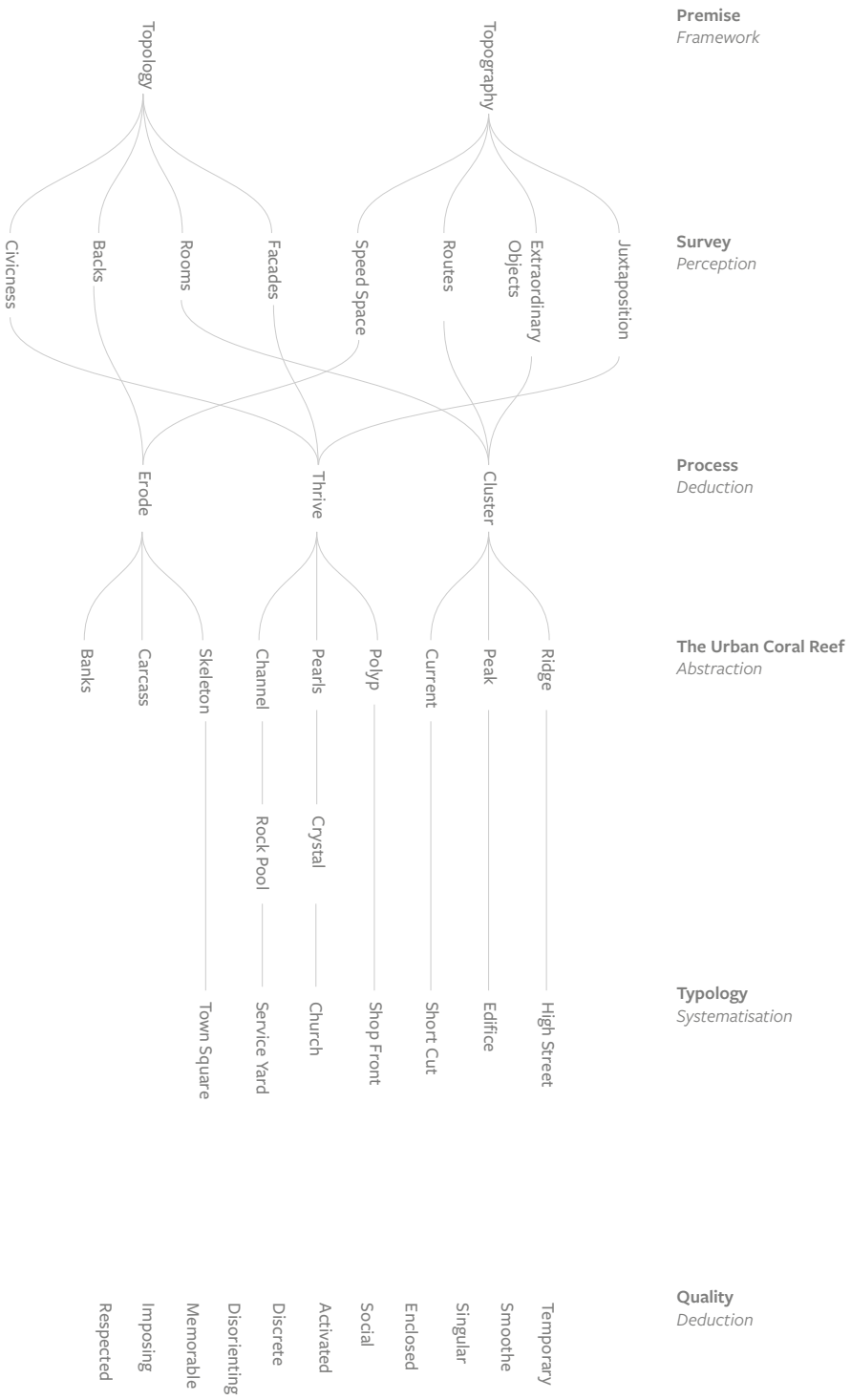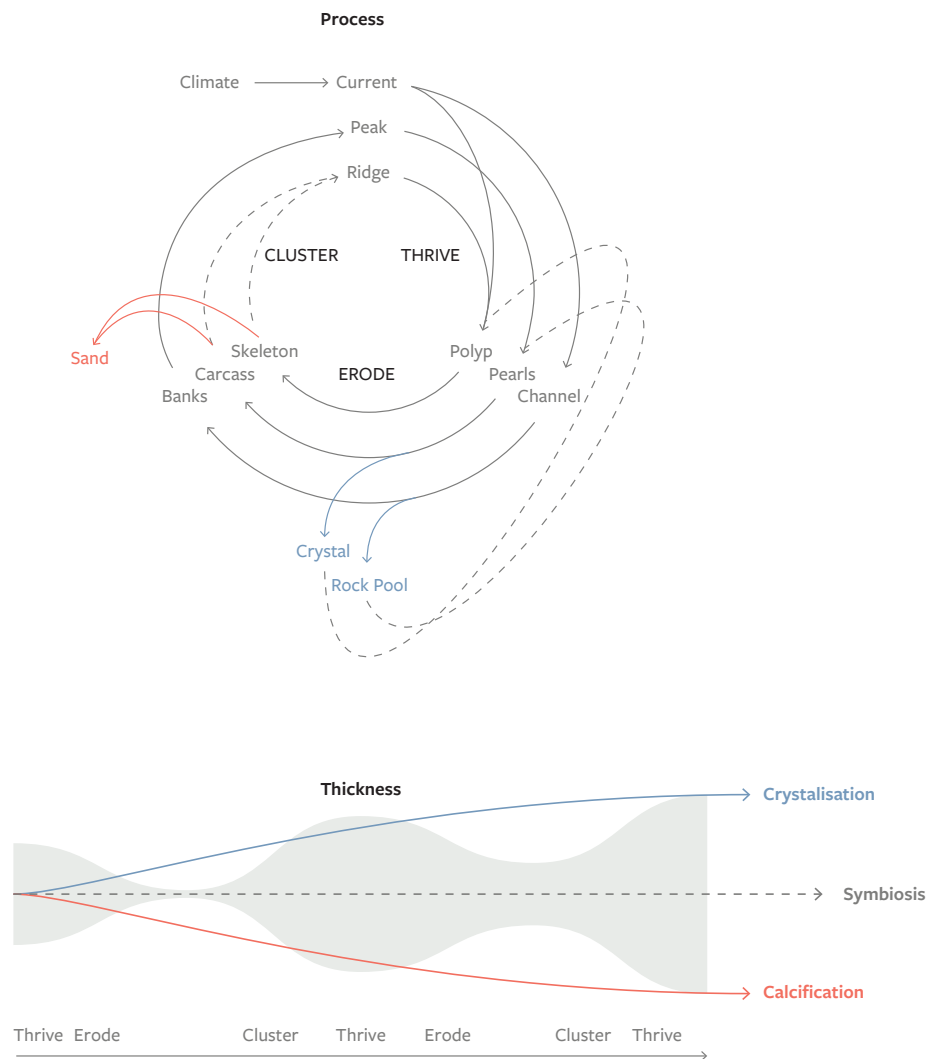
3.2.   The Urban Coral Reef

The Urban Coral Reef was thought of as an ecosystem, underpinned by some form of mechanism. Moving forwards, it became vital to highlight the processes at work, namely the principles of 'cluster', 'thrive' and 'erode'. The emergence of the reef is embedded in a cycle of perpetual urban renewal. Towers rise from the rubble of previous architectures, histories are erased and rewritten. The collective memory of this place is in such turmoil that only those who live permanently within its flux can adapt to its changing identity. My aunt grew up here in the 60s and 70s but would no doubt find this place unrecognisable today.

3.3.   Research question

Urban Coral Reefs are the new spaces of the city. How can we ensure they fulfil the needs of the existing community while catering for the influx of new residents?

Premise
Framework

Topology

Topography

Survey
Perception

Civicness

Backs

Rooms

Facades

Speed Space

Routes

Extraordinary Objects

Juxtaposition

Process
Deduction

Erode

Thrive

Cluster

The Urban Coral Reef
Abstraction

Banks

Carcass

Skeleton

Channel

Pearls

Polyp

Current

Peak

Ridge

Rock Pool

Crystal

Typology
Systematisation

Town Square

Service Yard

Church

Shop Front

Short Cut

Edifice

High Street

Quality
Deduction

Respected

Imposing

Memorable

Disorienting

Discrete

Activated

Social

Enclosed

Singular

Smoothe

Temporary

6

Process

Climate → Current

Peak

Ridge

CLUSTER   THRIVE

Sand

Skeleton
Carcass   Polyp
Banks   ERODE   Pearls
                  Channel

Crystal

Rock Pool

Thickness

Crystalisation

Symbiosis

Calcification

Thrive Erode   Cluster   Thrive   Erode   Cluster   Thrive

4.   DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

The framework I had set for myself encompassed both the theoretical readings that started my research and the elaboration of a site wide strategy for Ilford. The Urban Coral Reef encapsulated my position towards the city, which provided a point of reference towards developing a design proposal. My photographic survey of Ilford informed the selection process for a site. Eventually, I settled on Ilford Hill just across from the station. Despite its central location, Ilford Hill was cut off from the rest of the town by a four-lane gyratory system created in the 80s to bypass the High Street. The back of the block had been brushed away leaving the remaining buildings horribly exposed to traffic. Within this seemingly hostile environment lay the oldest remnants of the town, a 12th century normal chapel that had managed to withstand successive development campaigns throughout the ages.

The design development attempted to reconstruct some of the key qualities I had observed during my visits of Ilford. I was particularly intrigued by the network of backstreets and courtyards that many locals use to travel to and from the station. These intimate settings of everyday commute were a key part of my site research and fed into the wider context of infrastructure in the city. Furthermore, I attempted to inject some of the fundamental typological concepts that arose from the idea of Coral Reef. How could I combine these elements to create, in a sense, a microcosm within this ecosystem? The distillation of my research into the project led to a series of interventions on the site. The aim was to use the topology of the reef to create the relationship between each element. In turn, I developed a distinct tectonic quality to each massing, which served to reinforce the notions of front and back, skin and mass, room and route.
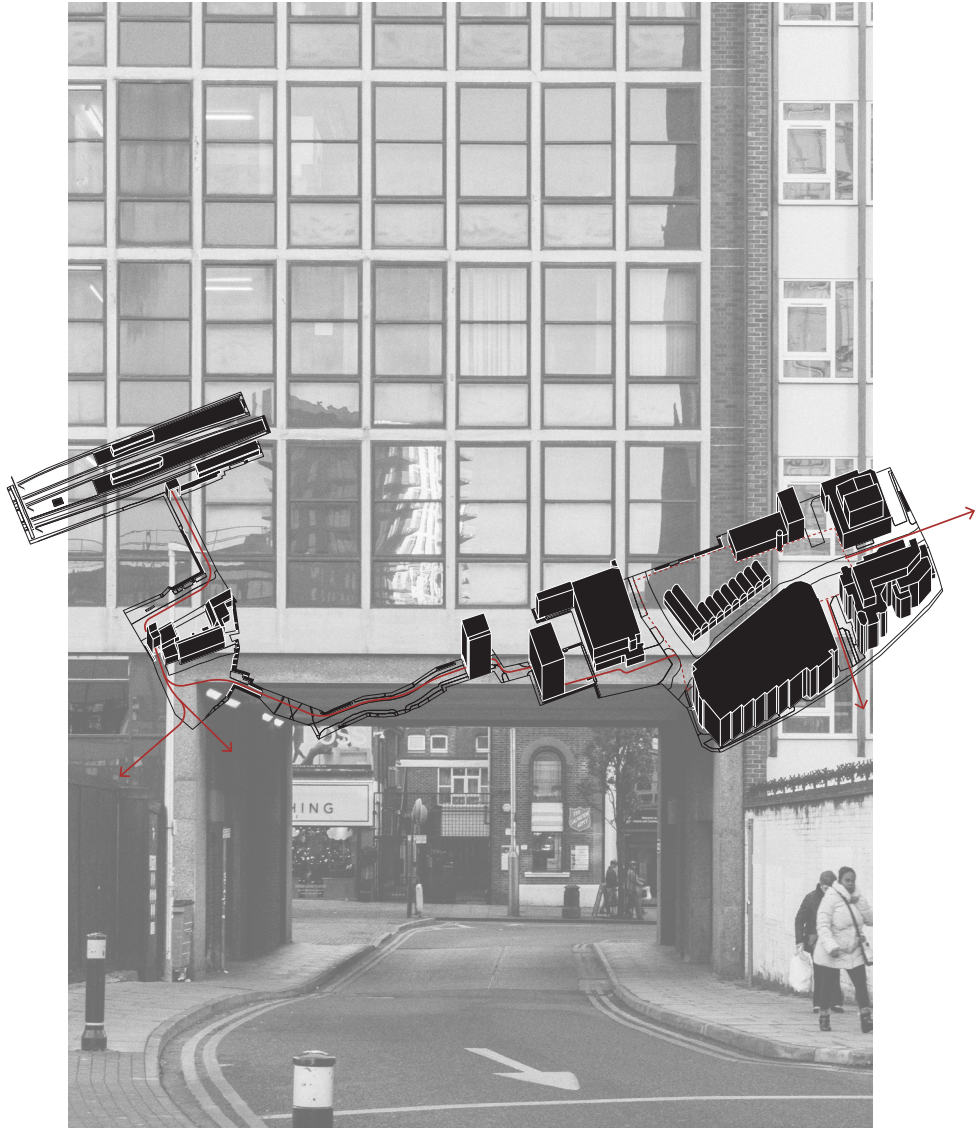
5. THOUGHTS

5.1. Urban Suburban

Linearities develops a framework at both urban and architectural scales, oscillating between topographical and topological viewpoints. At the larger scale, the project highlights the conditions for the formation of Urban Coral Reefs. This phenomenon is omnipresent within the city, to the point that it characterises the condition of city itself. However, it is most starkly visible on the outer fringes of historical centre. 'Suburbia harbours the seeds of tomorrow's urbanisation', says David Knight, co-founder of emerging practice DK-CM. The once quiet neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the bustling city are now engulfed in the most dramatic urban transformation seen in decades. Yet, these are places that remain largely undocumented by architects who see them as lesser replicas of the historic city. To this extent, the project seeks to advertise the qualities of suburbia. Ilford is but one of many forgotten towns that now find themselves on the front line. Ilford is a precursor to this new wave, but the lessons learned here may serve to avoid some of the pitfalls this town has already suffered.

At the human scale, the project attempts to reconcile everyday pedestrian routing with the inhospitable infra-scape. During the 1980s, countless town centres across the United Kingdom were amputated by large infrastructure projects, at a time when planners were responding to the Post-War surge in private transportation. Ilford Hill is a strong reminder of the broad stroke approach that saw vast swathes of historic fabric cleared out, leaving a handful of enclaves to be strangled by traffic jams. The systematic nature of the infrastructure means that these centres have very similar challenges. The proposal lays out a possible blueprint: preserve and enhance the qualities of the site and surgically remove where necessary. We should show the same attention and care to the collective memory of a place like Ilford than of an affluent West End neighbourhood.

5.2. Accessibility and Displacement

Working in the context of an infrastructural project such as Crossrail brings several social issues to the fore. In Ilford, the effects of the railway upgrade are already visible as a forest of speculative tower blocks loom over the 800-year-old Hospital Chapel. Network analysis reduces stations to a series of interconnected nodes, defined by a series of metrics that contribute to the accessibility of the place it serves. However, the social impact of such an object is far more complex. As accessibility increases, land value follows. Soon the developers pile in, a frenzy of construction labourers, cranes and trucks. The resulting 'exclusive' residences become bastions for the liberal metropolitan elite, insular compounds over 100m high looking out over the sprawl of suburbia. Whereas the blocks themselves are hermetic bubbles, their effect on the immediate surroundings is palpable. Like a stone dropped into a pond, the ripples of rising market value propagate beyond the epicentre of the station. In doing so, there is an unaccounted displacement of people as the price hike forces residents to move beyond the bounds of the accessible city.

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EDINA

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NOMIS

OpenStreetMap (OSM)

Archives:

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National Archives Kew Gardens (NA)