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01

REFLECTION

## Project description

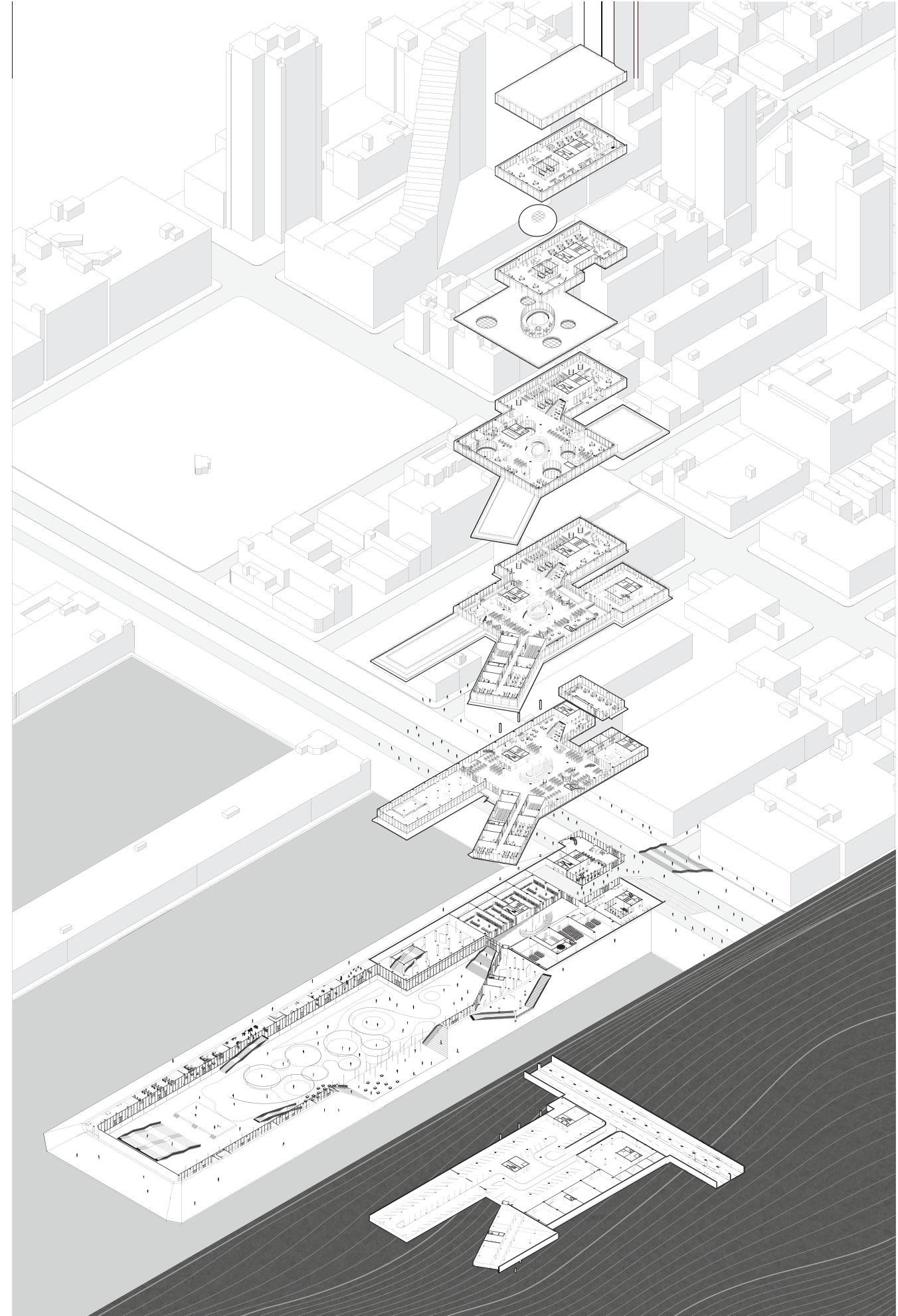
The city of New York is densifying wherever it can, more pencil-like skyscrapers are being constructed every year, adding more housing and office space that is in high demand. Recently, industrial areas such as Hudson Yards have been transformed to gain more area to build on. Hell's Kitchen forms one of the few exceptions for this trend of densification. The combination of an industrial waterfront and the protection of the low-rise character has prevented new developments from taking place.

The industrial waterfront, however, is undergoing a transformation with manufacturing and warehouses moving out of Manhattan. The vacancy creates opportunities for the development of a city with a different character along the waterfront. This desolated waterfront is unique in its character as is the only waterfront stretch in Manhattan that has not been developed further in the post-industrial time.

What is lacking in the current situation is the lack of destination and purpose of being along this waterfront. Culture is often used as a means of sparking a new type of development in an underserved area. At the same time, the lack of culture in the current situation makes that there is nothing that brings people together. Therefore, the introduction of a new cultural attraction also binds together these new types of development along the waterfront. This led to the research question of this thesis: "How can a new type of inspiration lab bring people together and spark an all-inclusive redevelopment in the post-industrial waterfront of Midtown New York"

The project is a 38.000 square meter inspiration lab and public park, showcasing the new public waterfront of Hell's Kitchen. Along this waterfront, the project

creates a new destination and acts as a trigger for urban redevelopment. With its location on the pier, the building signifies the change from a manufacturing society to a knowledge-based society. While the building extends the public Hudson River park further north, it is mostly aimed at serving the new developments as well as the Hell's Kitchen area directly. The building is very flexible in its program and integrates a more diverse mix of functions as compared to a traditional library to connect people and inspire them to create, share and consume knowledge in a new collective space along the waterfront.



## 1. Relationship between research and design

Architecture is always a mix of research and design, two parts that are separated by a very fine line that can be blurry at times. They should not be seen as two completely separate parts but rather as elements in a virtuous cycle that enforce each other through feedback. Analyzing, interpreting, comparing, and designing, together form the framework of design. The studio of Complex Projects has a research-based approach to the design process. On a specific location, changes that affect both the built environment as well as the larger socio-economic situation are used as a starting point for the research.

This research starts with both hard and soft data that is gathered as a group. By visualizing and mapping data, creating presentations and interviews and observations, students create an understanding of the location and the shift that is taking place. To understand the scale of Midtown and the location better, a large 1:1000 scale model is created with the whole group. This group research is used as a starting point and as evidence for the personal fascination. The personal fascination is the interpretation of the objective data and forms a narrative to solving a problem that is identified in the area.

Similar to the visualization, the research phase has an approach to research by doing. The process of making models, alterations, and working in a presentation format is very effective in being able to communicate and reflect on the work. Making the whole process visible is also very specific for Complex Projects, where all the data is combined in a research book, large models are always on display and presentations are constantly created to share knowledge between students.

The goal of all this research, in the end, is to create a solid basis that informs the choices made during the design phase. The research forms an objective starting point for a design process that can be very much influenced by feeling and intuition and therefore loose its scientific value and reasoning. Being able to lead back design choices to the facts and data creates an understanding for all those assessing and evaluating the design. Falling back to much on the intuition and creativity can be blinding to the systematic approach and research of phenomena

This radical approach of separating hard and soft data, making assumptions, and only then visiting the location to try and verify those assumptions and test the conclusions on-site helped become familiar with the situation in Midtown. It was also very instrumental in the selection of a site and program; it was however not the best starting point for the speculation of how these underserved areas of cities can be revitalized in the future. Therefore, not a single approach to research is able to address all the facts that are required to inform the design process.

This linear approach that is complemented by Complex Projects it therefore not fitting to creating a more comprehensive knowledge about the problem and requires a more iterative process that creates the possibility to use different types of research methods that address different aspects together. Looking at the same problem through different lenses, rather than with the same lens creates the possibility to dig deeper and create a better understanding of the underlying problems and thereby inform the solution.

## 2. Relationship between graduation topic and studio, master track, and master program

The studio of Complex Projects is always focused on researching areas around the world that are undergoing a change or are expecting a change in the near future. The studio then tries to find ways to react to this change in the built environment. The research in the studio always starts from the large scale of the city, then zooms in to the scale of the neighborhood and then to the location itself. Through these steps, the conclusions from the larger scale always influence the smaller scale. This way, the proposals generated always react to the larger scaler problems by intervening on the smaller scale of the neighborhood.

The location for this year's research is Midtown New York, an area that has been the cause of and currently undergoing a big change. Centuries long, the lower tip of Manhattan formed the economic center of the city and the region, but with the development of a new business district in the area now known as Midtown in the 1920s, Manhattan started to change. The creation of this new and world-famous business district brought forth the most renowned high-rise towers of Manhattan. New offices, better standards of living, and a more inclusive area caused a large shift of businesses and workers to Midtown.

Today, many of these buildings have reached the end of their lifespan, and companies are looking for new buildings to move into that satisfy their employees. The introduction of Hudson Yards as the new and flashy place to be along the water is causing the second shift in Midtown.

It is not only the office buildings that are reaching the end of their functional lifespan but also different types of industries are leaving the city. Industries

such as manufacturing, car dealerships, and warehouses that take up a lot of real estate in low-rise buildings are moving out of Midtown. The lack of zoning reforms in these parts is creating dead zones of vacancy.

In that sense, my thesis provides an understanding of how these undervalued post-industrial zones can be developed and use Midtown New York as an example or case study. This approach of the studio of building a narrative from the city scale to the building allows for a relationship between the small and the big scale and the underlying processes of the city. The phenomenon of a post-industrial area in the city limits is an increasing problem that western cities are dealing with as more people move to cities. Densification within cities is therefore required as a space in cities becomes a premium, in which this project and its intentions can be easily dispersed to other parts of the world that deal with similar problems.

In relation to the Master of Architecture Track, Complex Projects addresses the larger-scale problems that cities are facing and develops these into research questions, master plan, and design briefs.

Working in a technical university has the benefit of being able to work with a research-based approach to a speculative research and design process. Not every conclusion might be academically supported, but the steps taken should be evident and self-explanatory and lead back to the hard data.

Identifying and solving these larger-scale problems in cities is very much in line with the master track and the university. Complex Projects does not approach research from one point of view but tries to broaden the research by also approaching the problem from a larger socio-economic and environmental angle.

### 3. Research method and approach

The studio of Complex Projects has a very research-based approach to the design process. Especially during the MSc 3, students are constantly working on different types of research and combining these to create a design brief. This research in the first part of the studio is done to get a better understanding of the site and the conditions.

The first part of the research is done in a group and focusses on the collection and visualization of hard data. For these different territories are defined to study the site, this included history, character, real estate, tourism, public space, mobility, and nature. Because the research is limited by the boundaries of the site, presentations are given to compare the location to the other parts of Midtown. This helps to explain the character and specificities of Hell's Kitchen in regards to the rest of Midtown.

To help with understanding the results of the research and interpret the data in the later stages, the studio included lectures and literature. These are used to compare the location to other parts of the world and give a timeline for the past and help predict the future of the city. In the hard data phase, I was responsible for the nature part that is very scientifically based. Research parts that dealt more with the future of the city itself are reliant on theories and lessons from history.

The methodology behind the research is always very important to get a better understanding of the location and the conditions that face the location. Because of the scientific base of the research for my part, mapping played an important role. Mapping is one way of being able to visualize large amounts of data and to locate this data on a site. Creating maps also gives the possibility to overlay different types of data to compare and draw links

between data sets.

During the field trip to New York, as well as site visits around Europe presents were visited to understand the feeling of buildings, while also interviewing people to get their view on the buildings. This research is done from an emic perspective, while the mapping and hard data research were done from an etic perspective. The combination of these two perspectives makes the research as a whole more complete by combining the objective and subjective.

### 4. Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework

In this project, I address the issue of neglected post-industrial zones that are becoming part of the city. The project is gaining relevance with regards to the socio-economic context as urbanization and congestion are problems that more cities around the world are facing.

The only way to deal with these problems within the current built environment is to look at underdeveloped areas and find strategies to include these with the rest of the city. Even though the built environment itself can offer solutions to such problems as under development by building cultural activities, for example, architects themselves have little influence on the greater scheme of things. In this scenario, students are tasked with identifying a problem and creating research around the solution to the problem. Students also play the role of the city and investors and thus pretend to have a greater impact than architecture has in the real world. What architecture can however do in these types of situations is look very carefully at the expression and character of the building. One part of the solution is the program, which is mostly given but the building, in this case, should be representing its ambitions and create interest among people to visits the building.

At the same time, the project is also part of an effort to reduce the effects of infrastructural borders that divide cities. Cities are too often split by infrastructure that creates a divide between parts, this green hill is an attempt to overcome this divide and create a zone in between that becomes an attraction point for activities.

This green hill is also a response to the threat of climate change that will affect everyone around the world. Especially cities along waterfronts will have to take serious measures to protect themselves against a rising water level and heavier storms. In this, New York is a special

example of such a waterfront city. Manhattan is an island very close to the ocean, forming the ideal showcase and testbed for cities around the world. In this situation, these two aspects of climate change and borders in the city come together. They both ask for an integrated approach that deals with the problem as a whole, not just fixing it in parts of the city that are economically more important than others.

This is where architecture is able to show its power in creating different strategies and forms of implementing the combination of reducing borders to connect separated areas and creating a sustainable and safe area. Being able to turn such problems into opportunities is exactly where architecture can change a city for the better.



## 5. Ethical issues and dilemmas

The main goal of this project is to create a spark in an underdeveloped part of Midtown, a spark that creates an appreciation for the area and starts a redevelopment of the area. In the group strategy, we propose this new development to be very inclusive in terms of a variety of housing typologies and prices, and types of work. The reality is, that especially in New York, the concept of “form follows money” is a hard reality. In a city where the price of land is so high, it can be very difficult to create an inclusive neighborhood. In this project, we are creating a sort of masterplan with different elements that should be part of this inclusivity and could be the start of a more encompassing zoning regulation for the area as a whole.

The current world is becoming more individualistic, not just the western world but the globe as a whole. A city like New York, this is especially true. People are very autonomous, pride their independence, and see New York as the center of the world. Midtown is also not a place to raise a family, we see a high percentage of people that are single in Hell’s Kitchen and a lack of family apartments. People are more on their own than ever before.

The thought of building a new urban public plaza in the form of a new type of library would seem counterintuitive. This project is, therefore, proving to be much more than just a covered public square, creating a space that flourishes on the interaction between people. Integrating different types of program attracts different types of people that consume, share, and create knowledge together.

If the current Corona crisis shows us one thing, it is that although the world is becoming more individualistic, we are all longing for human interaction. We all crave to be able to see each other face to face, not stand a meter

and a half apart put hug and high five each other. The absence of a real-world meeting shows us one thing that was lacking, different types of places to interact with each other. Places where we come together in different kinds of fashion, formal and informal, for work and play. A place where we can be contemplating by ourselves or enjoying a performance in a large group.