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Reflection

BY THE MARGINS

Passages & Permanences in the Outskirts of São Paulo

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By the margins of Guarapiranga, a monumental reservoir in the south of São Paulo, Brazil, lies an abandoned leisure club from the 1960s. Hidden behind high walls, the decaying concrete structure can be seen through glimpses for those that pass by the busy avenue that surrounds the waterfront. The complex itself, formerly called Santapaula Yacht Club, also has a monumental scale and a deep symbolism behind its history.

With a built area of over 20.000m², it was once one of the largest private country clubs of Latin America with a privileged position in the most upscale balneario of the booming metropolis. Originally designed to be a hotel, its unfinished structure was renovated in the early 1960s by renowned architect Vilanova Artigas, only to fall into decline two decades later and be closed for good.

In the meanwhile, the idyllic Guarapiranga went through a quick and overwhelming urbanization process, abandoning its spot as the exclusive getaway they were in the first half of the 20th Century and becoming a typical suburban area of São Paulo. Nowadays, the deep social inequality and urban problems that exist in Brazil are now also reflected in the shores of the reservoir.

However, when I recalled the two visits I took to Guarapiranga, I became immediately captivated by the monumentality of the place and the endless potential the site of the former Santapaula club held. Suspended between past significance, a complex present and future possibility, when I joined the Explore Lab graduation studio I was already particularly drawn to this place.

Furthermore, from all the possible approaches to the diverse layers of the former leisure complex and the city that surrounds it, I felt particularly drawn to better understand it through the scope of passages and permanences, both spatially—through the ways we navigate and occupy the urbanscape—but also temporally, influenced by the layers of heritage and meaning attributed (or not) to a place over time.

An approach that was not completely foreign to me. For my previous graduation project at the University of São Paulo, I investigated the spatial and temporal aspects of passages and permanences in the context of abandoned movie theaters in São Paulo's city center. For this project at TU Delft, I felt intrigued to shift my focus toward an area that held a lesser protagonism: the outskirts.

Although I had lived in São Paulo for three years—a city whose metropolitan population surpasses that of the entire Netherlands—much of its vast territory still felt unfamiliar. This sense of estrangement is perhaps a reflection of the city's expanded urban fabric, which, having grown in a fast and uncontrolled manner throughout the 20th century, appears to have redefined its own patterns of passages and permanences multiple times over the decades.

Moreover, my interest lies in understanding how these two forces can come together to shape meaningful urban public spaces—what has been named “spaces of urbanity.” Such places possess a high spatial quality for the flourishing of urban life, naturally

inviting people to take action in everyday life through gatherings, interactions and exchanges. Most importantly, I wondered how this sense of urbanity plays out in the outskirts of the city—areas that urban planning researcher Regina Meyer defined as victims of a process of “urbanization without urbanity”.

With these ideas in mind, a central research question began to take shape:

“In the context of spatial practices in the outskirts of São Paulo, how can the dynamics between spaces of passage and spaces of permanence create affordances for urbanity?”

In a city like São Paulo, the subject of passages and permanences is nuanced with diverse layers, many of them seemingly invisible at first and marked by socio-political tensions that demand careful and thoughtful interpretation. From the wide array of literature, data, and references related to the city, one of the most significant challenges proved to be the process of curating and structuring them in a coherent way with a strong connection to the theme.

Furthermore, in the international context of TU Delft, it became essential to provide sufficient contextual background for an audience that may not be familiar with São Paulo’s urban conditions or socio-spatial dynamics. A condition that required a careful balance between specificity and accessibility.

With these considerations in mind, the research was consolidated around five main branches, each explored through different methodological approaches. These strands are presented across the five essays that compose the research paper, each contributing to a layered understanding of the relationship between passages, permanences, and urbanity:

1. **A Theme** – This section involved a review of key literature on the concepts of passages, permanences, and urbanity, forming the theoretical foundation of the research.
2. **A Context** – Here, an exploration of the evolution of passages and permanences in São Paulo and its outskirts is developed, setting a broader backdrop for the study.
3. **A Case Study** – Using the case study of Parque da Juventude as an example of a consolidated public space in São Paulo, a graphic analysis was used as a tool to investigate how design can shape spatial practices of passage and permanence in the outskirts setting.
4. **A Place** – In this part, a socio-cultural analysis and historical study on the conditions of the Guarapiranga Reservoir area was developed.
5. **A Site** – Finally, the study zooms in on the former Santa Paula Club, examining the architectural project by Vilanova Artigas and the layered history of the site itself.

Together, these five strands aimed to build a comprehensive and situated understanding of how spatial dynamics of passages and permanences can incentivize, or hinder, urbanity—particularly in the often-neglected outskirts of São Paulo.

In late November 2024, a key development to the general outcome of the project occurred when the Municipality of São Paulo released a new expansive urban plan proposing to change the relation of the city to its waters in the next 35 years. In the first phase, set to begin sometime this year, it is proposed the implementation of a waterway in the Guarapiranga Reservoir area. Notably, the former Santa Paula Club was identified as a key site—envisioned as one of the central nodes in this broader waterway.

This official update provided a stronger, more defined direction for the research and effectively established the foundation upon which the design would be built, especially considering that, besides the boat stop, the plan for the area also includes a park and leisure piers - elements that would later be included in my own proposal.

Leading then to the design question **“What if the new Santapaula boat station was further integrated into the current needs of Guarapiranga inhabitants so that this incoming node of passages could also configure new stages for permanences?”**

Following the P2 presentation, a travel grant provided by FAST funding enabled a field trip to São Paulo, allowing for an in-depth on-site investigation by foot, boat. Being able to visit the shores of Guarapiranga after six months of research proved to be perfectly timed, offering a broader and more grounded understanding of the physical and socio-spatial context just as the design phase was gaining momentum.

Although it was not possible to enter the main building of the club—currently entangled in a long-standing legal dispute between the private owner and the municipality—the trip still proved highly valuable for a series of other activities that significantly enriched the experience. Notably, there was the visit to the archive of architect Vilanova Artigas, housed at the FAU-USP archives, which provided valuable primary material for both research and design, such as the original drawings (both technical and representational), photographs and documents.

In addition, key interviews were conducted with individuals whose insights gave an important contribution to the unfolding of the project. These included residents from the Guarapiranga shoreline, Marco Artigas and Vera Domschke—directors of the Instituto Vilanova Artigas (IVVA)—as well as the architect’s daughter and renowned architectural critic Rosa Artigas, and Wagner Amaral, a researcher affiliated with the Metrópole Fluvial group at FAU-USP.

Upon returning to the Netherlands, the main design challenges seemed defined. It was evident from the research findings and emerging design questions that the task extended beyond rethinking the architectural complex of the club—it required a broader reimagining of how passages and permanences are experienced along the urbanized margins of Guarapiranga. This was particularly pressing in light of current land-use limitations, which restrict the area to residential zoning, and the physical barrier of an

eight-lane avenue encircling the reservoir, both of which create barriers for a more meaningful human relationship to the water.

In response, an initial urban masterplan was sketched for the northeastern side of the reservoir. This plan sought to address those conditions while aligning with the municipality's official goals of establishing a system of parks around the reservoir, together with the plans for the new boat stops. Drawing inspiration from the case-study project of Parque da Juventude, it was envisioned that each segment of this park system could have a distinct character. The area in front of the club—designated as the future Parque de São Paulo—was seen as particularly promising for the implementation of diverse sports activities, both aquatic and terrestrial, in-doors and out-doors.

The club's main building, directly connected to the new park, would offer further support for the implementation of a sports program. However, it was essential that it also become a welcoming space for the socially diverse population living along the shores of Guarapiranga—emphasizing a more playful, inclusive, and community-oriented atmosphere. The central challenge, therefore, was to create a design that would engage in a dialogue with the existing conditions of the margins of the reservoir and articulate an axis of connection that could activate new forms of passage and permanence in a space that had been closed off for both during the past three and a half decades.

This task is especially complex in a city like São Paulo, where the boundaries between public and private, and between indoor and outdoor space, are often rigid and exclusionary. This challenge resulted in first starting out with a detailed plan for the waterfront park. The program focused on two new pedestrian streets: one running along the reservoir and linking the series of parks, and the other—central to the final design—cutting across the entire site. From the outset, maintaining a strong and continuous connection to the reservoir was a core design principle.

The park area is proposed to include a boat stop, a sports promenade, the adaptive reuse of Artigas' original boat garage as a public pavilion, outdoor swimming pools, and a sailing academy. For the main club building, the proposed renovation includes a youth center for indoor sports such as martial arts, gymnastics, and table tennis; a skate park; a clinic for sports medicine and physiotherapy; and community-oriented facilities like a restaurant and a sports shop.

Considering the large scale of the area and the demands of developing a design for the site, rather than narrowing the project down to a single focal point, three key moments within the broader urban design were selected for further development. Parts of a larger episodic walk, these chosen moments—the boat stop, the new main entrance, and the club atrium—represent three distinct thresholds: between water and land, inside and outside, and the new and the existing.

These three interventions are marked by a different roof structure that frames urban life in a unique way, offering spatial suggestions for varied uses and interactions. Understanding that the overarching goal of the project is the generation of possibility—possibilities for new passages, new permanences, unexpected encounters, and alternative ways of framing the space.

This idea of spatial porosity is enabled by a lightweight steel structure with generous spans, deliberately contrasting with the monumental presence of the existing concrete building. The design sought to enhance and reinterpret the qualities of the original structure or the natural site, in the case of the boat stop, to create a design that is new but still has a natural feeling of continuation, both in time and in space.

The resulting spatial experience is also responsive to São Paulo's humid subtropical climate and the predominance of west-facing façades. Architectural elements such as adjustable louvers, sun-shading meshes, sliding panels, and awning windows allow the building's spatial conditions to adapt, turning the act of inhabiting it into a dynamic play of when and how movement and permanence occur.

Ultimately, the project unfolds like a lively conversation—between different scales, different temporalities, and varying spatial conditions. Despite the large scope of the site, the design was conceived as a hybrid between a social condenser and a domestic living room, echoing Artigas' phrase: “The city as a house and the house as a city.”

This paradox reflects the scale of the graduation project itself. Though the year-long process might seem large for personal exploration, once curiosity takes root and new discoveries, questions, and possibilities begin to emerge, the project quickly transforms into a rich and multifaceted journey. It becomes, above all, a personal journey—an inaugural step that lays the foundation for how one, as an architect, will come to see and shape the world.