THE ARCHITECTURAL EMBRACE

'un lugar para todos'
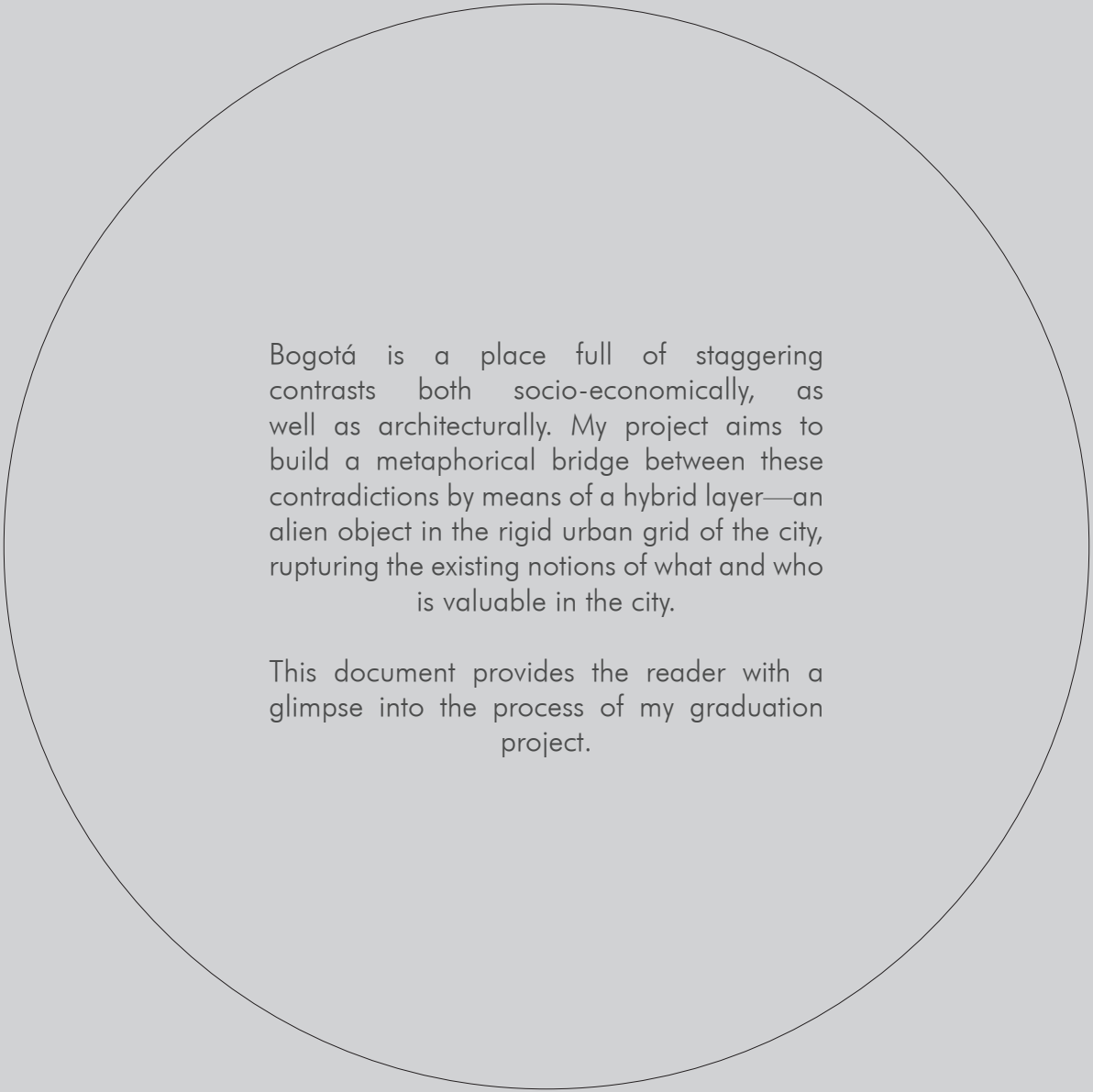
P4 reflection

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Methods & Analysis
Positions in Practice

Bogotá is a place full of staggering contrasts both socio-economically, as well as architecturally. My project aims to build a metaphorical bridge between these contradictions by means of a hybrid layer—an alien object in the rigid urban grid of the city, rupturing the existing notions of what and who is valuable in the city.

This document provides the reader with a glimpse into the process of my graduation project.

reflecting on the wider social context and the theme of the studio: positions in practice, and the commons

Before visiting Colombia to analyse the city of Bogotá, I specifically refrained from engaging in the prejudices of their drug related and violent history, nor fall into the trap of *white saviourism*.

Therefore it is perhaps ironic that I ended up with a symbolic intervention about a group of people that are directly affected by this history: outcasts of society (homeless people, drug addicts, prostitutes, et cetera) who lived in an area ruled by the mafia.

I initially approached my research from the positive theme of *urban intimacy*[i]: where do people feel secure or at home, where do they meet, and how can we contribute to that feeling in a city permeated by a sense of insecurity? I analysed spaces on the verge of homely and public: semi-public spaces such as courtyards in museums and universities.

But while conducting the analysis and research in Bogotá, I realised that I was working at places that were somewhat disconnected from city life. They were common places, as well as places for communing, but people that make up the city– and streetscape and provide a direct sense (or lack) of social security—appropriators such as street vendors, jewellery sellers, people going for a lunch break, street musicians; but also the homeless, drug addicts—were nowhere to

be seen. Thus, I felt like I was analysing the wrong types of places, and the wrong kind of *homeliness*.

After a slight culture shock by nearly tripping over a homeless person, twice in a row, and suddenly noticing a dozen people clothed in canvas sheets at a small square, I instead dived into the world of homelessness; specifically in an area called *El Bronx*. I found out that this area—three streets run by the mafia, where 1000 to 2000 people found shelter—was surrounded by three blocks with contrasting political, symbolic and architectural objectives: a introvert military recruitment batalion, an empty square commemorating the martyrs of the Colombian independence, and a catholic church within a poor labour area.

And moreover, the general negative attitude towards these people was unlike anything I had ever seen in Europe. For example, *limpieza social* or *social cleansing*—dead squats made up of paramilitaries, police and vigilantes killing these outcasts, under the premise that *los desechables[ii]* do not contribute to society—is not uncommon in Bogotá.

I also found out that Bogotá's current mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, was repeating his mistakes from the past. He had evicted El Bronx

and planned to demolish and gentrify the area, creating a limbo for the people that had their homes in the area. A similar action had taken place during his previous term in 1998, where he demolished a whole neighbourhood and replaced it with a park, causing their tenants to find a new place to live and deteriorate—the area which is now El Bronx. And although something obviously needed to be done about El Bronx since it was a hotbed of crime, the homeless living in El Bronx were amongst equals, and protected by the mafia from social cleansing.

Although described by media and seen by regular Bogotanos as the *hell of Bogotá*, I found it fascinating and admirable how los desechables had found a way live without any belongings, to create a place with an internal economy, and against all odds found a place to feel *at home*.

So my project is a counter project to Peñalosa's plans. It is a direct criticism towards gentrification, and especially the negligence and disapproval of citizens that do not "contribute" as much to society as the Average Joe. Of course I am aware of my limitations as an architect. A building, beautiful as may be, will not solve issues that—especially in Colombia—have been rooting for many years.

It is easy to point a finger, but less easy to come up with a proper alternative. So it was vital that the design would be more than a utopian concept, but rather a viable and feasible building that could actually, potentially, be realised.

I am well aware that my design, even outside of the academic setting, would be highly unlikely to be built, but the design needed to go beyond criticism and offer a feasible alternative in order to make people reconsider or at least contemplate their preconceptions of *los desechables*—and in the case of Enrique Peñalosa, his politics.

Thus, the project offers a starting point for conversation: a conversation on gentrification, on how to deal with homelessness and people who don't want to be formed into the standard mold of society, and on what architecture can contribute in this manner.

To not fall in the same line of thought as Peñalosa, it was important to not colonise the area politically nor architecturally. This relates directly to the two themes of the studio.

Politically, I did not to want not impose my Western and European world views as the norm, but rather to try to learn *from* Colombian culture, Bogotanos, and especially *los desechables*: how and why

do they live how they live, and how can I use this in my design? For example: ideas like social housing and free treatment are sure helpful for some, but people who have been living on the streets or in sewers for decades trying to escape police and paramilitaries, are unlikely to put trust in the government or other agencies. So with my research and design I tried to not impose any notion of superiority, but rather create a place without a predetermined function, a place to observe and reflect, and exist without judgement.

Architecturally, the fear of colonising the place followed directly from my research into *the architectural uncanny*[iii] and *transgression(al space)*[iv], as well as my very early ideas about utopianism[v] in our current age, on which I will elaborate later.

lessons learned from method,
research and design

Literature is able to relate atmospheres and experiences with all scales of the built environment seamlessly. The use of the literary method for a more symbolic design was therefore, I believe, inevitable. However, it proved to be a great challenge to translate theories and ideas into actual architecture. *Transgressional space* is by definition impossible to design[vi], and *the uncanny* is perhaps best described as "a feeling of unheimlichkeit", which according to Anthony Vidler is "provoked by the fearful invasion of an alien presence in a secure and homely interior"[vii]. So how does one design a space that enables the act of transgression, while providing an uncanny experience? And how to deal with the bigger quest of my project, namely to negate the existing contrasts and hierarchies of my location?

In order to deal with this, I dived into the world of spatial art, and specifically three artists[viii] that work with the notion of perception of one's surroundings. From this, I derived three steps needed to change a persons perception: distortion, reflection and connection. I translated these to architectural means, but this was a literal and somewhat superficial or naive translation, in order to have something architectural to say about my project.

Furthermore, the scale of the analysed works was that of materiality and room-size. It was therefore difficult to transform to the urban scale of my building. A two way mirror[ix] works well in a small space, but becomes caricatural in a ring with a 378 metre-circumference. The blocking of a route is effective to disrupt an existing situation, but is odd in a designed and perfectly geometrical building. And the framing of a view[x] creates an exception, but an exception inherently creates a hierarchy, which opposes

my goal of a non-hierarchical space. Thus, the issues that remained (and which I still have not completely solved) were those of the architecture *within* the ring, and materiality *of* the ring.

Considering the fact that my design would not have a predetermined function, there was very little in the traditional sense to base my design decisions on. Luckily, one of my mentors send me in the direction of Italian Rationalism, and here I decided to analyse the geometry of *Casa del Fascio* by Giuseppe Terragni. The building was the exact opposite type of what I wanted to achieve, but it turned out to be the decision that transformed my project from merely a concept into an actual feasible design. The building had a similar scale as mine, and it shed a different light on my approach towards architecture. It taught me how one can base design decisions on geometry, proportions, and the (spatial) logic of the volume, rather than on functional requirements or a guiding theme. This was exactly what I needed in order to stop fearing interfering in the perfect shape of a circle. Furthermore, it helped me to understand the scale of my project better, and thereby develop it into a project that was better related to human scale and experience, while still maintaining the original size.

The architecture within the ring is solved by leaving the ring empty. The distortion, uncanniness and change in perception therefore do not come from the three architectural steps that I had come up with (distortion, reflection, connection), but from *big brush strokes*. For example, the fact that the building is horizontal while its surroundings are slanted, changes the visitor's relation towards the area and the people on the plaza.

Although I was incredibly fearful of the emptiness of both the square and the building, I have since realised that this was the only suitable option regarding the decolonisation of the place. I have still not solved the issue of materiality, and would like to further develop this working towards my P5. The references and literature that I studied did not provide me with ideas of materials that I could use on the big scale of my project without them becoming a caricature.

I will note that there is a big paradox in the concept of my project. On one hand, I do not wish to colonise the place. But on the other hand, I designed an enormous building, with an architecture and typology that is in no way related to the surroundings. The building is a circle with a 60 metre radius and demolishes anything that stands in its way. However, by not distinguishing between (poor) residential buildings or institutional buildings, and with the non-hierarchical shape of a circle, I have aimed to diminish this paradox. And perhaps the fact that no such building exists in the surroundings, is actually a good thing, because it then does not "picks a side" on what is right and what wrong.

I would like to end with a quote from the film *Dead Poets Society*[xi], which adequately summarises the conclusions from my process.

English teacher John Keating teacher stands on his desk and asks his students: "Why do I stand up here? Anybody?"
A student answers: "To feel taller."

Mr. Keating: "No. Thank you for playing mister Dalton. I stand upon my desk, because one must constantly look at things in a different way. You see, the world looks very different from up here."

A simple, but effective change. That is all that is needed.

Endnotes

i   Based on Bachelard, G. (1958). *The Poetics of Space: the classic look at how we experience intimate places* (1994 ed.). (M. Jolas, Trans.) Boston: Beacon Press.

ii   Translates to *the disposables*. This is how drug addicts, homeless people, recyclers and other low classes of Colombian society are often referred to. It is telling for the way they are seen and treated.

iii   Vidler, A. (1992). *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

iv   Avermaete, T. (2010). *Border Conditions*. Architectura & Natura, pp. 173–218.

v   Stamps, L., Stokvis, W., & Koolhaas, R. (2016). *Constant—New Babylon. Aan ons de vrijheid.* Den Haag: Uitgeverij Kannibaal.

vi   Transgressional space could be defined as "architecture going beyond its initial intention", for example a bench that is used for skateboarding, or in the case of my project: a neighbourhood that was built for the wealthy, but got intruded by the poor.

vii   Vidler, A. (1992), p. 3.

viii   Olafur Eliasson, Dan Graham and Krijn de Koning.

ix   In Dan Graham's pavilions the view of the visitor is distorted by one way mirrors, and also continually changes the role of the user from observer to the one being observed.

x   By directing the visitor to use a certain route and framing certain views or objects, Krijn de Koning gently forces a person look differently at the existing surroundings.

xi   Haft, S., Weir, P., Witt, P. J., Thomas, T., Schulman, T., Williams, R., Leonard, R. S., … Buena Vista Home Entertainment (Firm). (2006). *Dead Poets Society*. Burbank, Calif: Touchstone Home Entertainment.