Graduation reflection

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Borders & Territories

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Introduction

This document reflects on my graduation project, done for the studio *Borders & Territories* in the academic year 2024/2025. The course outline asks students to develop a research and design project in either the city of Tbilisi, Georgia, or Chongqing, in central China. With enthusiasm sparked by multiple visits to China during an exchange period in Hong Kong, I chose Chongqing.

After a period of literature review, multiple mappings of Chongqing, and a site visit, I wrote my P2 graduation plan around the concept of *Space Leak*. Space leak was a term I developed myself, based on theories by Tamburelli ("*On Bramante*") and Koolhaas ("*Junkspace*"). It proposed that Chongqing has developed as a patchwork urbanism, where different plots of land—or patches—hold different architectures in different stages of development. Further split by the rugged mountainous terrain, I theorized that these patches act like little islands: they contain space within themselves, but not in between. In between the developments I argued space *leaks*.

However, in the months after P2, I struggled to represent these space leaks in a way that satisfied either myself or my mentors. As a result, the project evolved and is now titled *Civil Affairs*. While the research I did on the city and the concept of leaking space remain embedded in the design, the focus has shifted. The project now consists of a pedestrian bridge that connects multiple fragmented patches of the city and introduces a significant amount of public space, as well as a small and high building housing a civil affairs bureau. These bureaus are where interaction between government and civilians take place in China, and it is where the name of the project comes from. The bridge complements the building and supports a new public realm. I sometimes see it as a derivative of Hannah Arendt's political arena—a place where people come together to understand, and misunderstand, one another: in dialogue. The project is called civil affairs, because it takes a stand in how civil (urban) life should be and what affairs should be given space to.

Questions to be answered

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

What sets the Architecture track apart for me personally, is the focus on story, on developing a story around the design, of explaining it entirely. I've felt that in other universities students learn how to build in a specific way, where we learn to make a story around whatever we choose to build. Civil affairs does just that, it creates a narrative around a city's development, it recognizes good and bad things that came with it, names them and sketches an alternative for it's future.

Rooted in research—through literature review, mappings, and a site visit—the project identifies the city's patchwork urbanism as both a constraint and an opportunity. It proposes a pedestrian bridge and a civil affairs bureau as a spatial and civic intervention. These elements aim to connect isolated urban patches while creating a public realm grounded in accessibility, dialogue, and shared space.

In doing so the project mirrors what I think is part of the core ethos of the Architecture track at the Technical University of Delft: context-driven, multidisciplinary design that responds to complex technical, social and spatial challenges. The project explores how architecture can mediate between fragmented urban growth, steep topography, and the need for civic life.

The broader AUBS programme fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and international engagement. My project merges architectural design with urban analysis, public infrastructure, and moral ambition in a foreign context. It stands as an example of the programme's ambition—to prepare designers who can operate across scales to shape a more liveable and cohesive built environment all around the world.

2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

The research and design developed in a constant and somewhat messy dialogue with each other. At first, the literature research focussed on political and urban development, and on China's transformation in the past 50 years—particularly China's reform period which led to a tug of war for property rights between national, regional and local governments and civilians. The subsequent different speeds of development of adjacent plots became a lens through which I could read and understand the city: not as one coherent fabric, but as a city made up of differently developed patches. This first iteration of literature review then answers the most prudent question about my project: why am I making a pedestrian bridge in Chongqing? Too connect these patches. Here research directly dictates the scope of the design.

Next to this, the site visit was of major influence on the design. On location, I decided to walk from East to West Chongqing. In doing so I realized what these patches generally mean for pedestrians. Because the city is fragmented, infrastructure must connect fragmented patches of land. This infrastructure is almost exclusively for cars. It took me a total of nine hours to walk from one side to the other, and for most of that time I walked besides 4–8-line highways. This lived experience (which was not a pleasant one) pushed me to try to create spaces that are specifically designed for humans. Highways are made for cars, the spacing of the lines on the road, the distance between turns, the height of the side walks are all made for eyes of drivers moving at 80-90 km/h.

Eventually, the design also started to lead the research. To justify the bridge, I had to find further proof of fragmentation and public space scarcity. I looked for projects where bridges solved spatial issues, thus further solidifying the thought that a bridge (with public space) can be a solution to a spatial issue.

3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

Looking back, I'd say my way of working was messy, which I liked, and slow, which I did not like. I didn't follow one clear methodology from start to finish. Instead, the project evolved through iterations of reading, mapping, drawing, writing, and walking. I think the strength of my approach lies in that it was layered, and that I wasn't afraid to adapt quickly to new insights. I started from big-picture research: reading political theory, urban history, and contemporary takes on Chinese urbanism. That helped me build a theoretical backbone for the project, and it shaped how I looked at the city. The site visit and the fieldwork—especially just walking around—proved equally important. I tried to document what I felt on the ground: not just what was visible, but what was missing: human scaled public space. I think that mix of theory and lived experience added depth to the project.

That said, my approach had downsides too. Because of the importance I addressed to the graduation project, I was at times afraid to start working on a single part. It always felt like I still had to do research, still had to read more, still had to understand more. Only after letting go of understanding everything and just start the process of making did the project take flight. I really think all research was valuable to the design, even the dialogues that didn't make it, but I think I could have started the design process earlier. The act of making something new—as opposed to reading something existing—creates a narrative of its own, one which I could have used earlier. My mentors pushed for this, but also not always on the right spot or with words that hit my ears.

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

I see the academic value of the project in how it tries to bridge abstract urban theory with specific spatial design. The project started with big questions about urban development, governance, and public life in a rapidly transforming Chinese city. By translating those into a spatial intervention—a pedestrian bridge—it connects theoretical discourse with real-world application. The project deals with themes of fragmentation, access, and urban governance, all of which are or should be central concerns in contemporary architectural education and research.

Societally, the project raises questions about what counts as public in the Chinese city, and who has access to it. In many ways, Chongqing is emblematic of broader tensions across urban China: between public and private, state and civilian, overdeveloped and underdeveloped. By introducing a piece of connective infrastructure that isn't just about circulation but about civic life, about civilians as political beings, the project argues for the discontinuity of the apolitical (everything is political).

Ethically, the project doesn't pretend to solve Chongqing's urban challenges. Instead, it positions itself within them. It doesn't speak for civilians but tries to make space where they might speak for themselves. That's why the civil affairs bureau is so central—it's a space of dialogue, of administrative negotiation, of understanding and misunderstanding in a political realm. The project recognizes the limits of design but insists that architecture can still open doors—literally and metaphorically—to more civil urban affairs. Again, not by governing actions, but by allowing them to take place.

5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

Civil Affairs deals with a fragmented landscape and acts in in-betweens. In this it holds value to all over the world where—whether through rapid development, infrastructure-led planning, or uneven governance—cities or urban areas are becoming patchworks of disconnected urban fabrics. The project deals with this directly and forms an investigation into how to reconnect such fragmented urban tissue with spatial intervention while introducing spaces that feel pleasant, public, and human-scaled. It doesn't just aim to move people, but to offer places where people can dwell, meet, and engage—civically as much as spatially. That makes it more than a circulation problem; it's about creating conditions for urban life to happen between the gaps.
This kind of intervention—half infrastructure, half institution—could apply to many cities dealing with similar issues.

6.
What was a personal challenge you encountered during the project, and how did you deal with it?
One of the main personal challenges I faced was daring to stand for the design—especially in moments when the project wasn't fully resolved yet. I often times thought and still think the design is too flawed and the research to shallow. It has at times made me hesitant to speak about the project, and still does so. The project has become an exercise in faith I feel, and a good one. To have faith in oneself, to say: *this is the project I believe in*—and let the conversation unfold from there. If you don't commit, others can't engage with it. And I think that's the point: it's not about having all the answers, but about putting forward a position that others can respond to. That's what Civil Affairs became— a spatial and civic position I could stand behind, even when I didn't yet and still don't know every detail. It is a lived experience still unfolding.

7.
What is your main takeaway from the graduation project process?

Get something on paper. Always. That's the key takeaway. So much of the early phase of the project happened in my head—reading, thinking, comparing, thinking again—and while that gave the work depth, it also slowed me down. I only truly started moving forward when I began putting things down: a drawing, a section, a sketch, anything. It doesn't have to be right, but it has to exist. Production is conversation—if something's on the table, people can respond, and the project can grow. That shift—from internal to external, from thinking to making—was essential.