



REFLECTION PAPER

THROUGH, ABOVE AND UNDER

Art Hub on the Path of Surrealism

The backbone of my graduation project called *"Through, Above and Under"* is set in the growing issue of overtourism in the city of Prague. The Czech capital is walking a road towards the transformation from the beautiful "golden Prague" to just another touristic commodity. The immense waves of tourists are flooding the city's landmarks while pushing away the locals who no longer feel comfortable in the heart of their own city. The most historically imbued parts of Prague have fallen under rapid commercialization, resulting in their transformation into torpid pretty holiday photo locations – digital age commodities, the identity of which is slowly disappearing. Those heavily-touristic areas in Prague show very high concentration in certain parts of the city, as well as a notably strong borderline, separating the two contrasting worlds of locals and visitors. The graduation project aims at dissolving that invisible threshold and dispersing the flow of people towards the periphery of those concentrated areas in order to preserve the identity of the city, as well as the state of its historic sites.

The research process began with establishing what is already given by Prague as a resource and how can it be enriched. Following literature reviews and on-site analysis and documentation of the urban tissue, with focus on the web of arcades and passages within the city, I established the starting point and main driver of my design intervention – *Art and Surrealism*.

The Czech capital has a very strong surrealist tradition with the works of Franz Kafka, Václav Havel, Jindřich Styrský, Josef Šíma, Toyen, Karel Teige, Milan Kundera, Jan Švankmajer and many more. Moreover, Prague was the only place outside of France that had an official surrealist group, but due to the inaccessibility of the Czech language, as well as the constraints of the communist regime, the Czech surrealist works remained fairly unknown to the rest of the world. However, the art movement is not dead – even nowadays we can see surrealist approaches and themes within the works of the contemporary Czech artists (for example David Cerny, Jakub Matuška, Jan Vytiska, Pavel Baňka, etc.) Consequently in the second part of the research on-site documentation was conducted in order to map out a collection of art pieces and symbols, found within the city. Furthermore a praxeological research focusing on big geolocated data, provided by popular social media platforms, was carried out in order to mark Prague's attractors and main touristic hot spots. This combination of research methods, incorporating both traditional and contemporary ways (ex.: literature and technology) shows the need of versatile and multidisciplinary approaches in modern day research and architecture due to the complexity of their nature.

The research process led to a design proposal that is driven by the use and transformation of existing matter. Such approach is commonly explored within the track of Architecture and Public Building as it investigates the various aspects given by the public realm and through reaction and remodelling develops a design proposal that respects and improves its context. In the case of *Through, Above and Under*, Prague's urban art, found in the web of streets and passages, is used as an attractor for the dispersion of the tourist flow outside of the popular locations, while at the same time boosting the popularity of the adjacent areas and bringing in new people and businesses, by triggering human curiosity through carefully positioned elements that will direct the movement on a journey of art and discovery. Starting from the heart of the city, one is lured into the small streets and hidden squares staging numerous pieces of art. The trail leads to Riegrovy Sady park where an open-air gallery emerges with various surrealist artworks and objects hiding within the landscape. Its heart – the art hub – stands on the highest point, adjacent to the existing

Sokol sports school. The park's paths unexpectedly lead the visitor towards the school's running track, where an integrated additional ring spirals up and down, presenting an outdoor exhibition and puncturing the solid box of the hub persuading the visitor into the world of surrealist art.

Following the research and the transition through the different scales the project concentrated its main focus on the architectural interpretation of the art hub. The design concept is based on the aforementioned paths that run through the different urban realms, reaching the building, where they transform into a passage. This passage becomes the main element of the design, cutting through the fairly simple body of the structure. Its architecture is a surrealist reading of the findings of the conducted research and more specifically of the defined basic elements that construct the city of Prague. The passage is a collage of the alternative image of those elements, presenting the visitors with various spatial experiences, while at the same time giving little peaks into the world of surrealist art within the building. The main aim of the project is to popularize and preserve Prague's surrealist wealth and attract people and creative businesses into the neighbourhood (Žižkov) while providing workspaces and exhibition areas to the local artists. Moreover, Riegrovy Sady park is activated by introducing new functions while at the same time preserving its current strengths (views, relaxation locations). *Through, Above and Under* focuses on the creation of events instead of objects within the built environment. The overall concept, starting from the scale of the city, allows the stroller to get lost while discovering hidden art treasures in the streets of Prague. Approaching the park, he/she will have the opportunity to not only observe such pieces but also interact with them, use them as outdoor furniture or simply explore the boundaries of their imagination. The last stop of the journey – the art hub – lays a whole new layer to the experience. Art is no longer a foreign matter – the visitor can expand his/her knowledge, connect to local artists and become more familiar with their work, or even make art themselves in the workshop.

The graduation project is an example of interdisciplinarity in architecture – inspiration can be found everywhere, in all fields of science and art. Furthermore, it promotes added value in architecture – new edifices should carry more than a simple function, enclosed in a shell. They must add to the existing social, cultural and economic context and contribute to its improvement. That is why the nature of hybrid architecture, that lies in the center of the Architecture and Public Building: Public Realm studio, is the perfect solution for adding significant value to the existing context. In the case of the art hub in Prague, it presents a new stage for the local creative

community, which combines the three main functions of learning, making and exhibiting, and at the same time helps for the preservation of the most historically imbued sites within the city.

A challenging aspect within the project was presented by the main theme of surrealism. A challenging aspect within the project was presented by the main theme of surrealism. The merge of everything surreal with the realness of architecture simply represents the width of the scope of possibilities in design. With the help and feedback of my mentors, as well as the solid base given by the research, I have been able to transform this very abstract concept into something tangible. Major part of the process has been the suggested by my mentors analysis of various examples, ranging from existing buildings, with a focus on the work of Joze Plecnik, to digital photo manipulations, such as the creations of Filip Dujardin, as well as visiting the exhibition dedicated to Jan Švankmajer. This opened a whole palette of different perspectives towards the task of translating surrealism into reality.

The final period of my graduation focused on the fine detailing of the project, going from materialization, through construction methods to spatial experiences and user perception. With the completion of this final stage of the process I hope that the art hub of *Through, Above and Under*, in combination with the design strategies on the scale of the city and the park, will fulfill its role as an urban attractor, showing the enchantment of surrealism in the fight with overtourism. Of course in any intervention touching on the subject there is a risk of rebound – such spreading of visitors flow towards the more locally-inhabited neighbourhoods may threaten the preservation of their current character and result in their commercialization. This is the main ethical question of the project – how to find the right balance between domestic and foreign without putting Prague's identity in danger and the comfort of the local people under threat. Such issue only proves that issues as broad as overtourism require a well-designed general strategy and not simple single interventions. However, the project of *Through, Above and Under* may be used as a tool of raising awareness and setting an example of the possibilities that are already offered by the city itself and simply need to be implemented into a larger strategical planning.

