

The quality of informality

Methods and Analysis, Graduation studio spring 2018, Positions in Practice: Analysis and Intervention in the Afropolis, Casablanca

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Studio approach

This studio is part of the larger investigation into "Constructing the commons" and investigates the position of the city as shared resource for its citizens. The studio aims to see architecture as part of an intervention loop. The research is leading into a hypothesis which then can be tested by the means of an architectural interventions. This can be analysed again and lead to a new hypothesis. This way of perceiving architecture was the first eyeopener for me. It made the work I would be doing this year feel much more relevant. At the same time, it puts my own contribution into perspective, my work is part of ongoing development and therefore is never the result of an investigation.

Graduation trajectory

This project is located outside the, for me, known European context. This was one of the reasons for me to choose this studio. Until now, I have studied and designed within the Dutch context. In this graduation project I wanted to test my abilities in different culture, climate and building history.

Analysis of local projects have proven to be of great help. By trying to understand the logics of building in a different culture, you start to question your own ways of working. Throughout the project I have learned to become more critical about the things I would normally take for granted and go back to the initial goal you wanted to reach. It got me thinking about my "standard" approach and why I design things the way I do. In the end this has led to a project that is shows European influences in a Moroccan style of living and building.

The site visit has proven of great importance in understanding the way of living as well as in developing our way of working. During the site visit (in partnership with Matthijs Engele and Meng Yang), we started off by observing the daily routines within the build environment. By mapping the amount and nature of different activities we created a map of the socio-spatial character of the place. We tried to relate this back to the different rhythms occupying the place. At the same time this approach made us well aware of the interactions and negotiations in the location.

A challenge in this way of research, is extracting concrete architectural conclusions out of it. The conclusions stay in the order of relations and are hard to relate to architecture. It turned out to be a quantitative research rather than a qualitative one.

Therefore, we went back to our methodological approach of the reading of the city and changed that from the focus on behaviour to the focus on the traces of behaviour. By analysing the environment and how this shows the use of the space, a better understanding was formed of the effect of the build environment of the use of the space. This shift in approach first felt like a step back, but as we went on, the previous work had given us a certain mindset at analysing the environment around us that turned out to be very helpful.

The continues discussions amongst the group have sharpened the method as well as the content. Together we learned how to read the environment with the regards to the relation between users and the build environment.

The relation between the actors and the build environment is one of the main research topics in the field of architecture. Back in Delft our research continued following the theoretical framework of adhocism as developed by Charles Jencks. Ad hoc meaning, a purpose immediately fulfilled with the resources that are at hand. Everywhere in the build environment ad hoc interventions can be found. This theoretical framework enabled us to find whole different layer of understanding the environment we already analysed. The ad hoc interventions show where the behaviour is clashing with the build environment. Consequently, it shows the constant negotiation of the actors with their surroundings as well as the negotiation between different actors.

By extracting the influences of from, materialisation and architectural communication, we gained a deeper understanding of the ability of the build environment to direct, enable, disable and intend certain behaviour. During this period, the tutoring sessions were very helpful to keep us within the field of architecture instead of wandering off to the field of sociology. I learned to trust on my architectural understanding in order to investigate topics related to architecture.

At the same time, it raises a very important question. When architecture has such a great effect on the use of the space, we, as architects, should take a position with respect to future adaptations. Via a more experimental way of researching we explored the effect of the position of the architect ranging from accommodating to directing. This brought us to a series of drawing of one location, showing wat it would look like from date of delivery as well as a few years later.

I have gone through a trajectory of defining my topic and goal for my design project. I read a lot about informality, structure and infill, resilient districts and social capital. Reading broadened my scope of the topic, which made it richer as well as more complicated. The task to clearly define my goal and go back to my first fascination with this topic has helped to combine, discard and use the theoretical framework.

Going back to the ad hoc interventions, the beauty of the ability to change your own environment spoke to me. Residents take matter in their own hands and build, adapt and extent their environment as they go. This could be a key in the development of resilient, viable neighbourhoods in Casablanca as well as in different contexts. Nevertheless, during this process of adaptation, some of the common interests, like walkways, daylight and ventilation are compromised due to the static character of architecture. The goal of my project is now clear: "Explore the possibilities of a formal framework that is open to be informalized in order to gain a resilient, viable neighbourhood".

Within the definition of the goal the issue of the identity and character of the space kept being a hard one. How could a space be open for interpretation, change and all different kind of users and still have its own qualities and identity? I approached this challenge by executing two parallel studies to gain the starting point for my design.

At the one hand I analysed Dutch precedents like Hertzberger and Habraken with regards to the flexibility and adaptability of buildings, mainly dwelling. By positioning myself in this greater line of development within the topic I gained a better understanding of my own

goal. Where Hertzberger is providing a structure, leaving the infill open for the user, I would like to stretch that notion to a structure that can grow and adapt.

Furthering these readings of Hertzberger's Diagoon dwelling the architectural mechanisms used are understood as mechanisms to define spaces without defining use. Using light, relation to other spaces and articulation of the shape, spaces gain an accommodating potential. This notion of accommodating potential interested me and sharpened my position regarding the adaptability of architecture. I could now define my role as accommodating.

Equally important has been the study into Moroccan precedents. The city of Casablanca has been subject of numerous experimental neighbourhoods and possesses a lot of information about the dwelling. A thorough study into one of these neighbourhoods has led to the understanding of the courtyard house, as a Moroccan basis of living, in relation to its accommodating potential and therefore openness to informalization.

With this gained knowledge and starting points I introduced a new type of housing. Based on the courtyard house and suitable for informalization.

To test this concept, I searched a site with high density (negotiation, need for capacity), mixed functions (negotiation) and a common goal (need for capacity) under the residents. My choice fell on the district of Side Moumen in Casablanca. This is a fast-growing housing district with a suitable building plot located between social housing and a factory district providing a lot of work.

A long process of translating the intention of an expandable structure into an architectural articulation followed. The thin line between structure and infill showed again the importance of the definition. I struggled a lot with my task as an architect. What is the minimum you should design to accommodate the informal?

In order to get the project to a more concrete state, I started to test alternative configurations based on two types of housing, the single-family home and the apartment. Looking back, this testing was not as fruitful as I expected. My concept was clear on the level of the dwelling but didn't had an impact on the urban scale. This started to turn when I started to design the district around two strong central cores in the plan, in the form of public squares. These spaces would act as the patios, just on a different level within the plan.

With these squares I now could begin to define the relations of the housing to these public spaces and this started to direct the configuration.

Within this process, I need to be careful to contain a coherent whole instead of starting from piecemeal solutions. This continues to be a point of attention which I developed, but not finished developing during this graduation period.

Through the development of the urban plan, turned out to be a new iteration on the formal framework. The project will evolve around some **central cores** with non-negotiable qualities like daylight, ventilation, shade and transportation. At the same time, these cores are positioned in a way to give a high **accommodating potential** to its surroundings. The cores will be articulated from personal patio, entry zone for two houses, to public square on all **layers of clustering** within the project.

An urban plan will form the basis of the project, assuring the connection with the surrounding districts. The formal framework will be the structure for daily life to cling onto. Residents or groups of residents can from this point informalize this formal framework.

In the next phase of the project, I chose one part of the masterplan to develop more detailed. In this phase as well, maintaining a coherent whole is a challenge of mine. I tend to solve every inconsistency with its own solution instead of iterating the whole design.

The different tutoring sessions thought me to take a step back and develop the project as a conceptual whole as well as in architectural form. I took this approach in the design of the patio as a family of spaces on all architectural levels of the house, the collective, and the urban square.

In the final part of my graduation, I would like to develop my skills on representation. During the process I often discovered that my idea's did not fully come across. This has to do with the way of presenting. In this last phase, I would like to work on the presentation to get it more precise and accurate as well as get it more convincing. The next step in this development would be the coherence between the content and the way of presenting.

Conclusion

This project forms the test of concept in the context of a Moroccan neighbourhood. This location has been crucial in the development of this concept. The architectural mechanisms used to accommodate, direct and intent certain use are based on the research done in this location. In order to develop this concept to be suiting on a larger scale, or different cultural context, another type of housing might form the basis and slightly transformed architectural mechanisms are able to act. Nevertheless, the same principle of a few core elements to carry an entire neighbourhood would be fascinating to explore in any given context.

During this graduation period, I wanted to develop mainly two things. At the one hand my position within the field of architecture. To become more precise about what the task of an architect can do. During my research and all the discussion around that with group members, tutors and friends, I explored a different position towards architecture.

The studio of methods and analysis embraces the fact that you are part of a bigger whole. This notion helped me a lot during this year. By analysing the project done before within the same theme, I was able to define my own contribution in this theme much stronger. This past year I feel that I really learned to gain much more out of precedents. The analysis with different methods and layers of understanding has given me much more tools when it comes to the use of precedents. Where on forehand I was often hesitant to copy, I now know how to extract the underlying architectural principles and how to use that in my own project.

Next to that, I wanted to train myself in coherency of the plan from first intension to final detail. I'm a quite pragmatic thinker by nature, in a design process I often find myself struggling to explore options in a more experimental way. I tend to solve every individual problem instead of exploring different options. This often results in a project that didn't reached his full potential.

During this process I tried to focus on this coherency in applying the same logic from the urban plan to the materiality of the window sill. Although I have grown in this aspect during my graduation, this continues to be a point of attention for me. I think part of it has to do

with the definition of the concept. As visible in this reflection as well, this takes place in a later phase in my trajectory. Overlooking this graduation process, the formal framework unconsciously has been there all along. It's my task to develop this process to a more conscious level.