

Rehabilitation in/of Laguna Vere.

***student:** Francesca Crotti
1st mentor: Stefano Milani
2nd mentor: Jan van de Voort
3rd mentor: Stavros Kousoulas
Explore Lab 33

introduction

Between research and design:

The following text is a retrospect over my graduation process seeking to reflect on the interplay between a recent ongoing personal experience, the accidents and encounters that it entailed, and underlying theoretical concerns.

I have been in Tbilisi for the past few months. I have been wandering around until I am confident that I know where I am. I have been listening to a language I could not comprehend before, but now I can guess. I have been introduced to different ways: anecdotes, rhythms, smells, tastes, practices, and tools. I challenged my body with physical labor, and I accumulated information and memories. I erased memories and experienced a different sense of time and space. I have been talking with people, and it appears that I'm not the only one who feels this way; perception is shared. The day following a binge, after hearing the news, I would re-engage my body with activity, movement again, work again, speak again, wander again, memory again, sober again, maybe even soberer.

In the last months, I focused my attention on a case of architectural abandonment in the context of Tbilisi; Laguna Vere, a late Soviet aquatic complex that is today privatized and in disrepair.

In a moment of personal research and reflection on the tendency of conceiving reality through totalities and opposing concepts such as "inside-outside, me-other, subject-object, matter-form, local-global, east-west, state-market, private-public," I happened to enter the building and experience its current condition firsthand.

Those concepts can be thought of as reductionist mechanisms that form ideologies and mold people's perceptions of reality through static images, preventing external encounters and unexpected events from leading to diversity and evolution.

In such terms, the situation in Laguna Vere could be analyzed and problematized. Laguna Vere has been framed as a symbol of the Soviet era, of International competitiveness. Laguna Vere was also a vibrant public space in the city center. It was open, green, and crowded. One could learn how to swim, how to hang out, and build networks there. It was a displace of bikinis and bare bodies, a cinema, a theatre. A swimming pool was previously located somewhere else, it had a different shape. previously, it was the river.

Its status has deteriorated over time to one of physical abandonment and mental forgetfulness, which has been exacerbated by the city's most recent privatization processes. Within its transformation dynamics and life cycle, the architectural object currently appears static, inaccessible, impermeable to external influences, and devoid of any link with the (public) context.

method

During the process of analysis questions as *where is Laguna Vere, how is it composed, how was it planned, how did it evolve, who is in there, doing what, who can enter, how to enter*, started delineating.

Since external bodies (and minds) are denied access to the physical space and, to an extent, to its memory (due to the lack of archival material) my preliminary questions formalized in the research question *how could bodily experience, as a tool for perception and analysis, be used to problematize the state of an abandoned space and foresee a possible future?* Thereafter, in design terms, *how could this space be rehabilitated and how could collective benefit be produced?*

Theoretical and philosophical literature has been regarded as the first tool of analysis and interpretation to frame the specific case and the more general themes it involves.

Theoretically framing (along with frustration at what I saw as the approach's constraints as more particular features were challenged) aided in defining my method in practice: an active, direct interaction with space (both within Laguna Vere's complex and in the larger context of Tbilisi). Through direct, bodily contact and perception, the in-situ investigation intended to obtain an image of the architectural object and its milieu.

To deepen my understanding, I collaborated with local artist Gio Sumbadze on an artistic project.

**research
outcome**

During our time on-site, we made considerable use of photographic media to actually frame our perspective of the location in its existing state, challenging it by introducing our bodies (external bodies executing external habits), and eventually documenting the environment's response. Framing the actual to express the potential (looking at the camera as an extended bodily organ, the eye of the virtual, enhancing the power of the body). The resulting photographs were later combined with graphic production: a record of actions, route mapping, encounters, and observations made during site visits became a tool for retrospectively reflecting on and constructing an image of the architectural object and its surroundings. Written memory records enhance the power of the mind in the same way that the camera enhances the power of the body. When you write something down, your mind and body become one. The recollection of exact motions, along with a vague -although developing-understanding of the overall contextual situation (as seen from the outside and affected by practical constraints), influence one another, forming a complete, though dynamic, image of the place.

The products of this analysis and collaboration resulted in an exhibition entitled "Maps of Nowhere" (Artbeat Gallery, Tbilisi, December-February 2020/1). Photographic material and written records have been combined in the setup with Sumbadze's graphic works.

First-hand everyday experiences, gathered as notes and observations, informed my analysis of the architectural object, its context, and broader theoretical topics of interest, which comprised the major body of my research eventually unfolded and expanded.

**design
outcome**

The same dynamic approach was used to define design solutions. I propose a strategy for the ruin's ultimate rehabilitation more than a univocal answer to a critical condition. This must be viewed as the design of a method that responds to the ever-changing needs of the community while taking into account actual constraints such as material availability, ownership, city development policies, socio-political concerns, and idiosyncrasies. As a result, its architectural formalization can be regarded as an exemplificative suggestion, one that can be broadened and modified. It involves neither (solely) the private nor the public, but both. Starting neither from the inside nor from the outside but from the in-between condition, the membrane (the only operable one according to ownership constraints and the only one that could reconnect the former aquatic complex with the rest of the city and vice versa). The program is informed by current activities on and around the site, amplifying and expanding what is already there, making it beneficial to the collective, and simultaneously repairing Laguna Vere -materially and relationally.

**social
professional
scientific
framework**

In relation to the wider context:

As previously said, the encounters and accidents I experienced during my time in Tbilisi influenced my analysis and (urban/architectural/political) responses to the issues addressed in this project to a large extent.

Because I had the opportunity to actively participate in side activities that extended my understanding of Laguna Vere's case, this project is relatable to a wider social and professional context.

In turn, the same effort gave me the opportunity to communicate my observations and results, enabling a more extensive public debate.

The material displayed in the "Maps of Nowhere" exhibition, for example, is meant to elicit critical reflection on socio-political concerns affecting the Georgian context, ranging from the privatization of public areas to the consumption of narcotic drugs. On the one hand, combining and confronting my research with what my local colleague saw as 'critical' prompted me to come up with new development and architectural scenarios for Laguna Vere. On the other hand, it revived a cause of concern and dissatisfaction among the local population, as well as aroused the interest of non-local visitors. Some people attempted to re-enter the facility, posted images on social media, and re-published articles about its controversial closure and privatization in 2014.

In addition, in order to provide graphical material and architectural expressions to later design stages, I developed a set of drawings (based on photographic material obtained on site and indirect sources) surveying the complex's current state of material and relational neglect. There is no record of the actual conditions, only limited archival documentation regarding the original planning (provided upon request from family archives), and no record of later spatial modifications (whether additions or erasures).

The graphic and photographic materials created will be made available to other professionals.

Finally, the rehabilitation methodology I envisioned for Laguna Vere is heavily influenced by a side project I am currently working on locally: a heritage conservation project that my colleagues and I started with the aim of setting a precedent for cultural heritage conservation based on crowdsourcing, private sponsorship, and collective participation. Through direct action and involvement, the project attempts to address the city's rapid loss of cultural historical artifacts and develop dynamics of local empowerment.

Laguna Vere is a living monument, rich in historical layers and traces of past usage and appropriations, which is today threatened by the site's inaccessibility and its closure to the public. As a result, I believe that only collective action would be able to rehabilitate the space. We must take on the roles of architects, carpenters, volunteers, investors (both in terms of time and money), and users. There is no client, and there may be an owner, but 'interest' should not be polarized; mutual support is beneficial to both the public and private.

Laguna Vere is a ruin now, a car wash, a flower market, and a gas station; it should stay that way if this is profitable for someone, and the municipality lacks the funds to rebuild it. It should remain that and more; a car wash, a flower market, a petrol station, a building site, a continuous workshop, eventually, an ecology, and perhaps, one day, a swimming pool again, all of which are the outcome of a collective effort for the collective good.

In relation to the studio, track and program:

I was able to obtain an underpinning knowledge that ranged from the most conceptual to the most concrete approaches by developing my graduation study and project within the spectrum of possibilities offered by the Architecture Track.

However, without the option Explore Lab provided to focus my inquiry on a specific site and a critical condition of personal fascination, while using a broader approach in terms of methodologies and media, this would not have been sufficient.

Indeed, I was able to explore my subject of interest and its many levels in a variety of methods, developing it according to the idea of becoming a part of the context before analyzing and responding to it; my body inside Laguna Vere's body, inside Tbilisi.

tutoring

The Theory Chair was an important element of my mentorship since it provided me with the first tools of interpretation. Primarily focused on the concepts of totalities/dualities, multiplicity, and singularities as fundamental to problematize Laguna Vere's current static condition, preventing it from any kind of becoming, of future, -trapped in the binary oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, etc.

This phenomenon must be countered by presenting an alternative that seeks to reconcile rather than generate conflicts, dismantling dual classes by considering complexity as the condition of reality. Multiplicity and difference, rather than opposition of totalities, are the focus of such an approach. It must be handled by construction, affirmation, rather than negation.

To talk about "opening up" a *closed, reactive system* (as I indeed refer to Laguna Vere), means to allow the exterior other to affect it, modulate it, and expect, in return, that the open system would affect the exterior.

In such a way, a continuously dynamic becoming is enhanced; relations are created. In such a way, no transition is a total revolution, but rather, the blurring of a threshold producing an effective change, an evolution.

Involving the Chair of Borders and Territories in the design phase, on the other hand, proved to be beneficial, given my site's conflictual setting. Furthermore, the mentorship's specific focus on architectural representation aided me in translating an image of the architecture garnered through direct, bodily engagement and observation onto paper and other mixed medias .

Finally, paying attention to the architectural details allowed me to formalize the interventions and reflect on the materials and low-tech approaches I employed. Once again, understanding the context made me aware of issues as material availability, local practices, and the relevance of active engagement in woodworking.

My opinions and observations are influenced to a large extent by personal direct experience in the local environment; however, this does not negate the fact that the proposed methodology for rebuilding Laguna Vere and the 'collective' benefit addresses universal issues and thus delineates generally applicable ideas and approaches; the local informs the universal and vice versa.

Ethics:

The premises of the research as well as the research question (*how could bodily experience, as a tool for perception and analysis, be used to problematize the state of an abandoned space and foresee a possible future?*) required me to spend time in-situ, wander around it, wonder about it, looking for shreds of evidence in photos and asking for lost memories. As I previously stated, the site was physically inaccessible; therefore, all of the memories and materials I directly obtained are the result of a series of short, hurried visits. Indirect sources were occasionally problematic as well; people didn't recall how things were and didn't know how things are now. It takes a physical and mental effort to rehabilitate; recalling movement to restore memories and creating new movement to build new memories and, thus, an evolution.

