

RE-INTEGRATING THE CITY

**A SCHEME FOR THE DENSIFICATION OF AN
UNDER-USED GOVERNMENT-OWNED SITE**

P4 | REFLECTION

METHODS, ANALYSIS, AND IMAGINATION

Msc3 Position in Practice

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When starting this graduation project, I did not really have much expectation other than to learn from the process of yet another design and to think about my position as an architect the way the studio title 'Position in Practice' suggests it.

I guess if I have learned one thing, it is that individual projects are still challenging to me, (and something I am glad to never experience again), and that although the direction and position of my project is quite clear and defined, I still have a lot to learn about myself and what I truly want to get out of this master.

My project proposes the renovation and redevelopment of an under-used government owned site in Belgrade (Ruzveltova 39). Moreover, the project aims to question the usual approach to housing densification in Belgrade (for instance with the Waterfront Project) and more globally in urban peripheries: a destructive approach, which displaces individuals and undermines the impact of individuals on their environment by discarding less 'historically-valuable' neighbourhood, in favour of modern brand new high-rise neighbourhoods. From the occupation of the site by Kvaka 22, a cultural group which have proposed events and workshop for the past 7 years on site, the project also explores the co-habitation of cultural and housing uses and the idea of community building within an urban block.

I hope that this topic, in the context of the master, TU Delft, but also the current trends of architecture, is somewhat contributing to a discussion about the way we look at our cities and evaluate them. In light of a publicly performed architecture which is commercial, increasingly international and complex, my position is to take the side of those who turn to the local, the small scale, to make small yet significant change. Rather than proposing a solution to the housing crisis that Serbia and many other countries are experiencing, the project is defined by its site and respond to its specific needs, and morphology. However, it also proposes an approach and construction strategy which could be replicated on other small sites an existing urban block. The project approach is therefore not bound to its site and could take many shapes and form.

If this approach, this position, is today truly clear to me and make sense in the context of this design studio and specific site. I find myself today wondering about all the other ways this project could have gone. Although I believe that this approach is one which should be explored by architects, I find myself at times a bit underwhelmed. Indeed, many a time my approach led me to feel like I was designing a mock-version of what is already there, an overly simplistic rendering of what was previously built by non-architects. What was my added value? Additionally, my own need to create a realistic project often led me to go for the obvious answer, and perhaps to explore less than I could/should have. For instance, the facades are an area of the project with I am still unhappy with, while simultaneously feeling that what I designed is what this project called for. Participating in SUM (Solar decathlon) also, I believe emphasized this need to have a very concrete project: always thinking, "what if this project was proposed to the government and Kvaka 22?".

When Aleksandar told me after I finished presenting my work, "I could see this being built", I wondered if that was truly what I was aiming for and today I am wondering whether this graduation project could have been the opportunity to explore more, or, for lack of a better expression, to 'go crazy'. Many a time I wished I were an MVRDV-type architect, who makes grand gestures about the urban fabric and contrasts. Often, I felt like I was lacking creative direction. On other instances though, I found joy in small things: spending a couple hours designing a letter box for the apartment entrance, a window sill, or getting very intensely focussed on producing the best floor plans possible (although I am sure that if given the opportunity, I would tear to pieces my current plans). This, at times reminded me why I design the way I do, because what I enjoy most is the small things, the details which I would notice when walking in the street, the ones which makes each building unique even when seemingly identical to their neighbour. Although at P4 I lacked time to develop these aspects, I hope that P5 will be an opportunity to show some of these small explorations.

Looking back, and despite how much my project and topic has changed, the study of the Sava Bridge and urban commoning really influenced my work, and I believe brought me a much deeper understanding of what it is that we really do as architects. The ideas of tolerance, universality and heterogeneity in design will surely follow me in my future projects and revealed key tools which I will happily use again. However, ideas like collective ownership were left behind formally (as they did not bring any value to the design). Nonetheless, they still mark the project and its design. At the P2 presentation, the project proposed to research creative re-use. However, following the development of the project, I realized that for housing purposes, and the angle I wanted to explore, re-use of existing construction materials is complex. This topic became with time a subtle detail, and even an anecdote, rather than a central topic, which I regret somewhat. But perhaps this would have been an entirely different project altogether.

The process itself of designing brought me new references and highlighted my need to keep curious and look out for the amazing old and new architecture that surrounds us. However, despite the emphasis on design as research the university promotes, I do not believe my design is a research project as much as the result of a toolbox which I inherited from my bachelor and the product of specific overlay of references. Therefore, I do not believe the result of this project truly created new knowledge. I simply hope to have proposed an approach to the densification of existing urban sites which produces good quality spaces for everyday life and respects the site and its inhabitants. The construction technique is not revolutionary, but the idea of a system for both renovation and new built really interests me. The only thing I can say, is that I look forward to building, it in real life, space which people will use, and then truly experience the success or failure of my design.

Leading to P5, I wish to finish detailing certain areas of the project, especially these small-scale items like window bench and doors that I was describing earlier, and to produce drawings which reflect more clearly the use of the building. I also wish to produce a cross sectional model (1:50/1:20) which would show more clearly the construction technique.