

GRADUATION REFLECTION

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Complex Projects
Havana Graduation Studio

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In general, a topic that intrigues me is the role of the architect in society. I’m interested in investigating the responsibilities and influence of the profession. Most relevant to me are the influences on people’s daily life. Doing so, I prefer working through different levels of scale. In the previous semester I got to investigate the effects of architecture on the more human scale in the Interiors, Buildings & Cities studio ‘Craft in the city’. I chose Complex Projects as graduation studio as I believe the studio offers a great opportunity to examine the design task from a much bigger and widely informed scale. The zooming character of Complex Projects of working from an urban analysis and strategy to the design of a single building is something that fits my interests very well.

My thesis project is titled ‘Tobacco Profunda: a resilient resurgence of nostalgia’. I’m creating a cigar factory, visitor centre and cafe in an interconnecting landscape that has a historic value as the first tobacco plantation in the city of Havana. I do this to bring back the identity and nostalgia of the fragmented and neglected area of Havana Profunda and with this create a future-proof neighbourhood. The area is directly connected to the touristic centre and masterplan zone and is therefore very likely to be subject to tourist development and gentrification. I see the heritage of the Cuban cigar as the connection between the local and the foreign.

Research
The municipality of Diez de Octubre is nicknamed ‘Havana Profunda’, which means ‘Deep Havana’. The area is located just south of the UNESCO heritage of Old Havana and is in severe decay. A hunch about the area that was later on confirmed during our trip, is that Havana Profunda is the ‘behind the scenes’ of Havana. It is very much a residential area without anything else really happening there. For work and grocery shopping most people travel to other parts of the city on daily basis. Building construction only accounts for 3% of the state budget; as all money is spent on education and healthcare. This lacking budget is very well visible in the homogeneous and residential area of Havana Profunda. The area is no one’s priority and is crumbling down very fast.

The decayed and ignored neighbourhood of Diez de Octubre needs bottom-up development, but the community is fragmented and has lost its sense of identity. Profunda is one of the oldest parts of the city and used to be a great and rich area. The main road connected Old Havana to the sugar mills in the south and this attracted the rich to build their city retreats. Later on the area developed as a cultural hotspot with many artists and a vibrant cinematic scene. All of this seems to be forgotten by Profunda’s inhabitants when the community got fragmented after the ’59 revolution. The lacking public space does not benefit this fragmentation as people mainly meet in their blocks or just outside on the street.

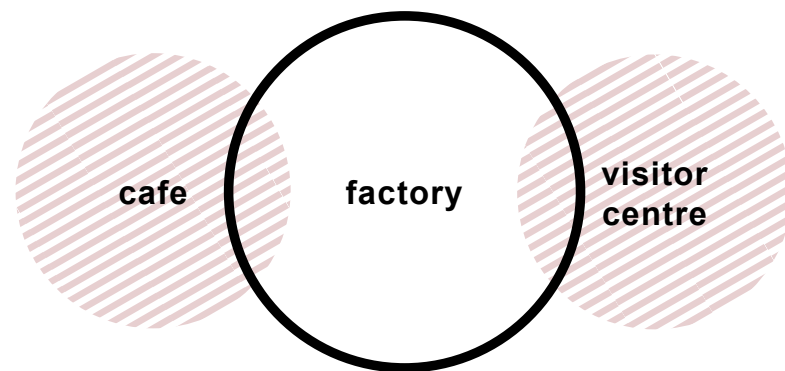
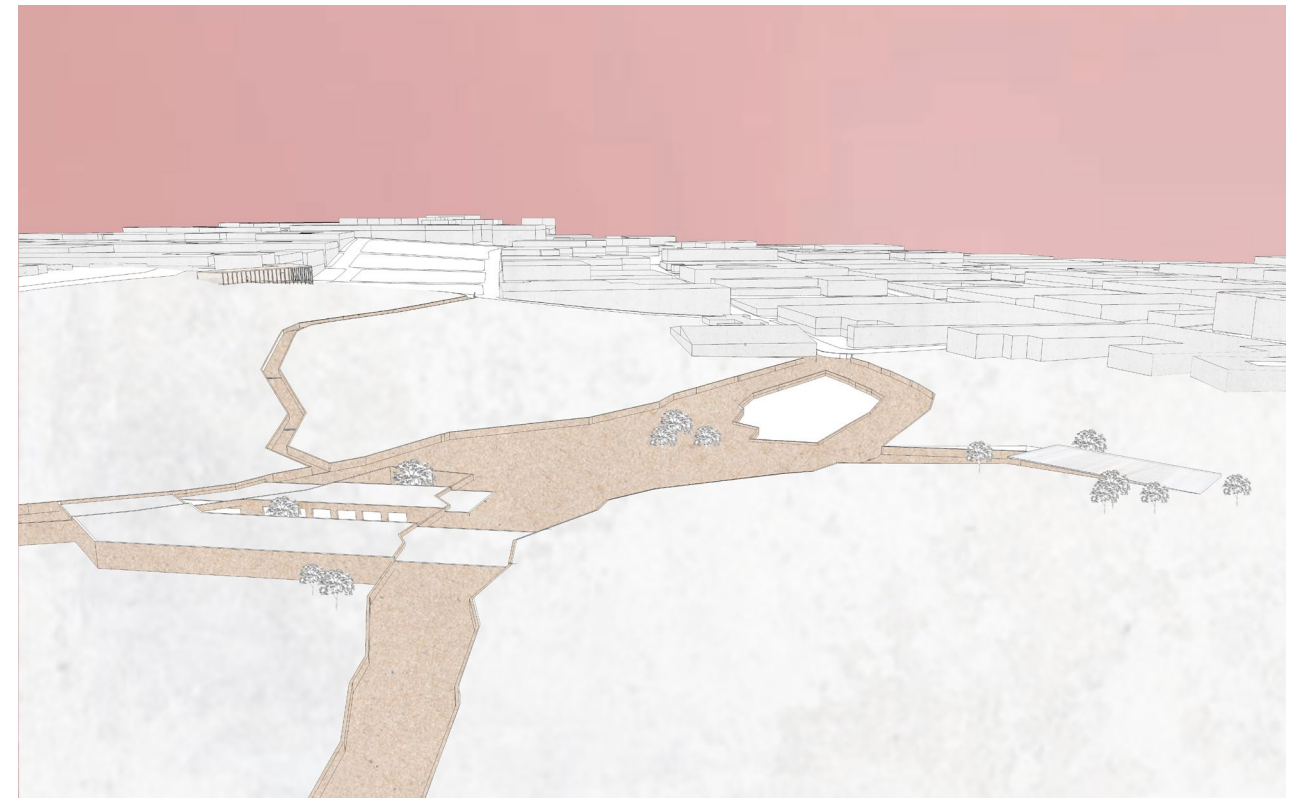
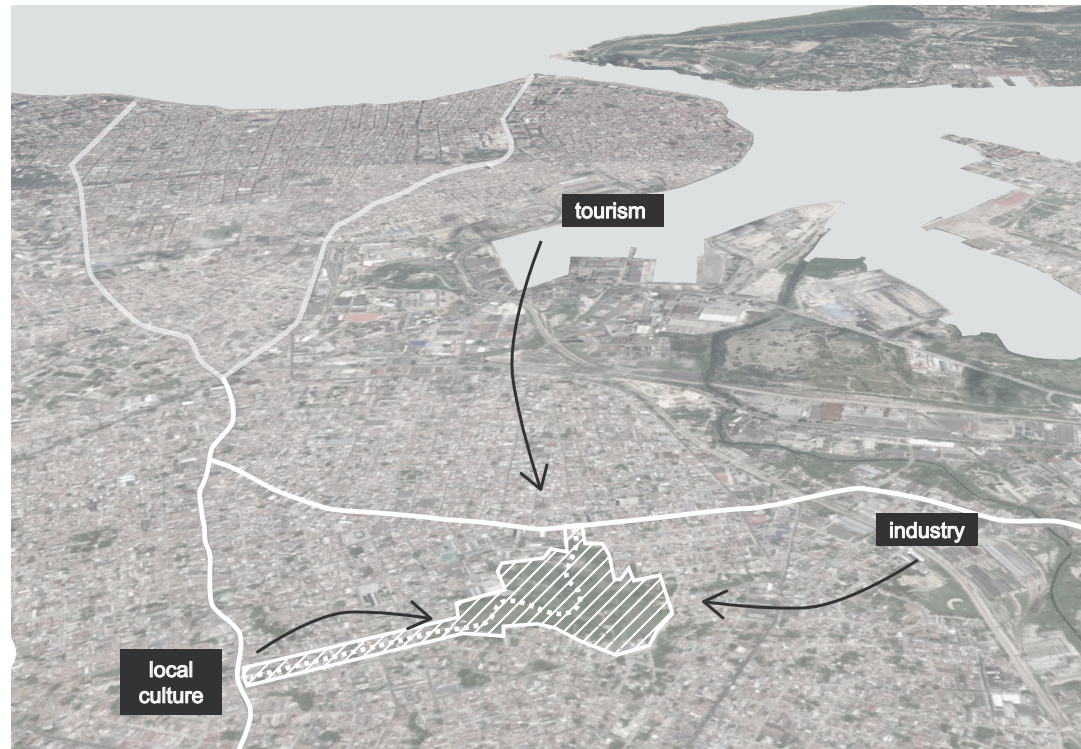
The big question is how an area like Havana Profunda will ever develop and become able to cope with its problems. The community of Havana Profunda needs to be united and their identity restored in order to ensure stimulation of bottom-up development. Thus, the area needs improvement of the public domain

An investigation of Profunda’s urban structure taught me that La Lomo del Burro is a hill of great importance in the history of the area. It is a site that symbolises clashing communities, as it functioned as the border area between the villas of the rich and the shantytown of Las Yaguas. When digging deeper into the history of the hill I learned the area was founded in 1700 as probably the first tobacco plant of Havana.

Design
The project helps restoring the identity of the area on a masterplan level by the creation of a neighbourhood centre in the heart of the area: La Lomo del Burro. The public domain has returned to its original program as tobacco plantation, plus it houses the enjoyment, production and commodification (including tourism purposes) of tobacco. The Cuban Cigar as a common ground is not only popular under all layers of society and well-known for its cultural heritage, it is also an important part of the identity of Cubans and the people of Profunda in particular. It is a product of great cultural value that will never lose its relevance in the Cuban culture, partly because of its traditional, hand crafted and organic way of production. The design explores the social, cultural and economic impacts of the local tobacco industry in an intimate residential context and offers a place for leisure, cultural activities, production and tourism.

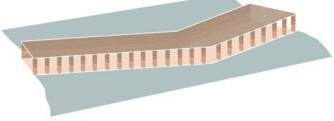
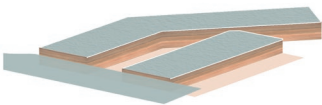
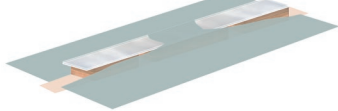
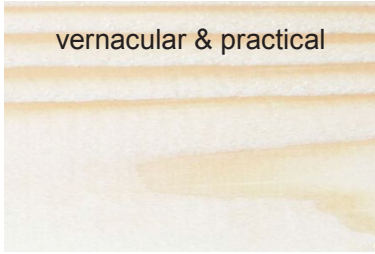
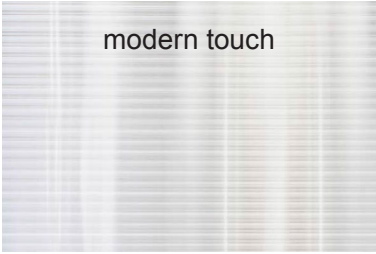
Method & output
Since the intervention is localised on a historically very rich but momentarily completely vacant and desolate site, the chosen method was an investigation of architecture through the lens of context and the vernacular. Looking back now, this appears to have been the right approach. I now describe the overall architectural aim of the project as the creation of awareness between three main topics: past & present, urban & nature and local & foreign. It is the duality between these forces that is the result of the investigation in how to interpret vernacular style in a modern way. Secondly, the investigation of the vernacular style and culture has also pushed me into an investigation of ‘sustainable tourism’. This later appeared to be very valuable for the project, namely in a wider social context.

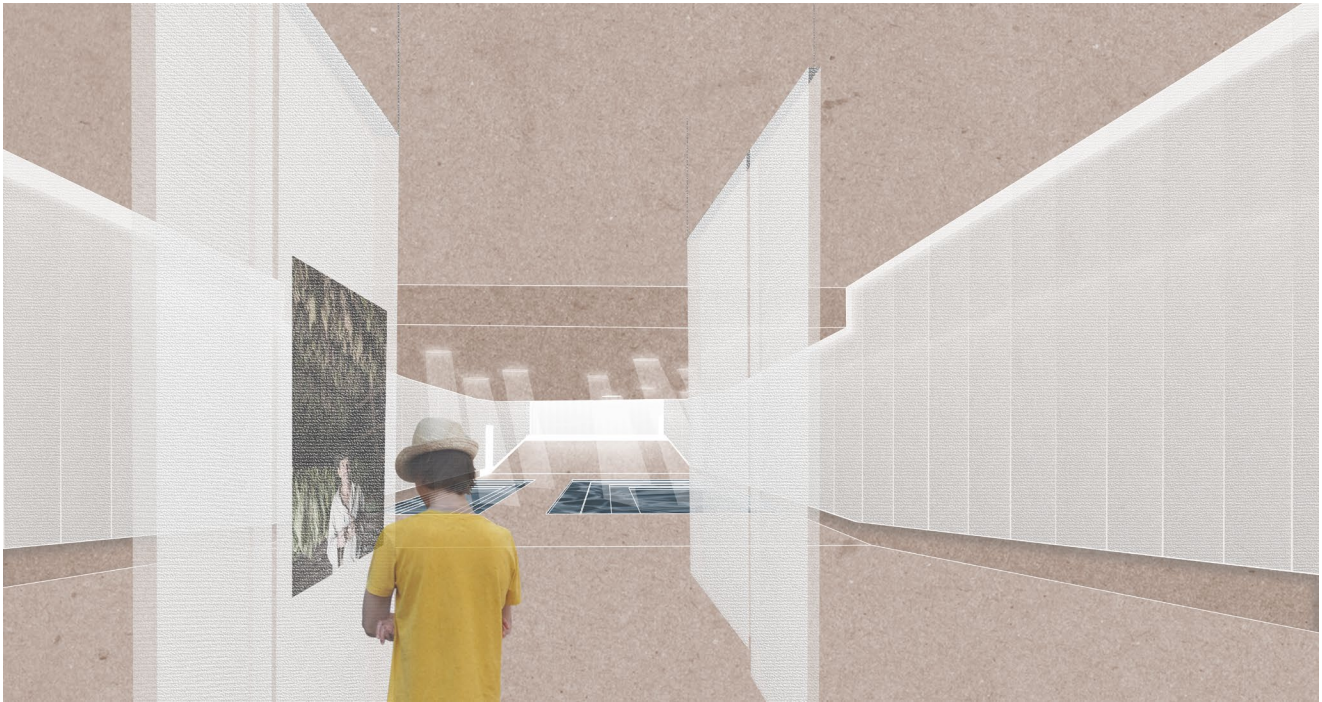
With the next figures I’ll shortly explain how my research method has influenced the design and why this was successful.



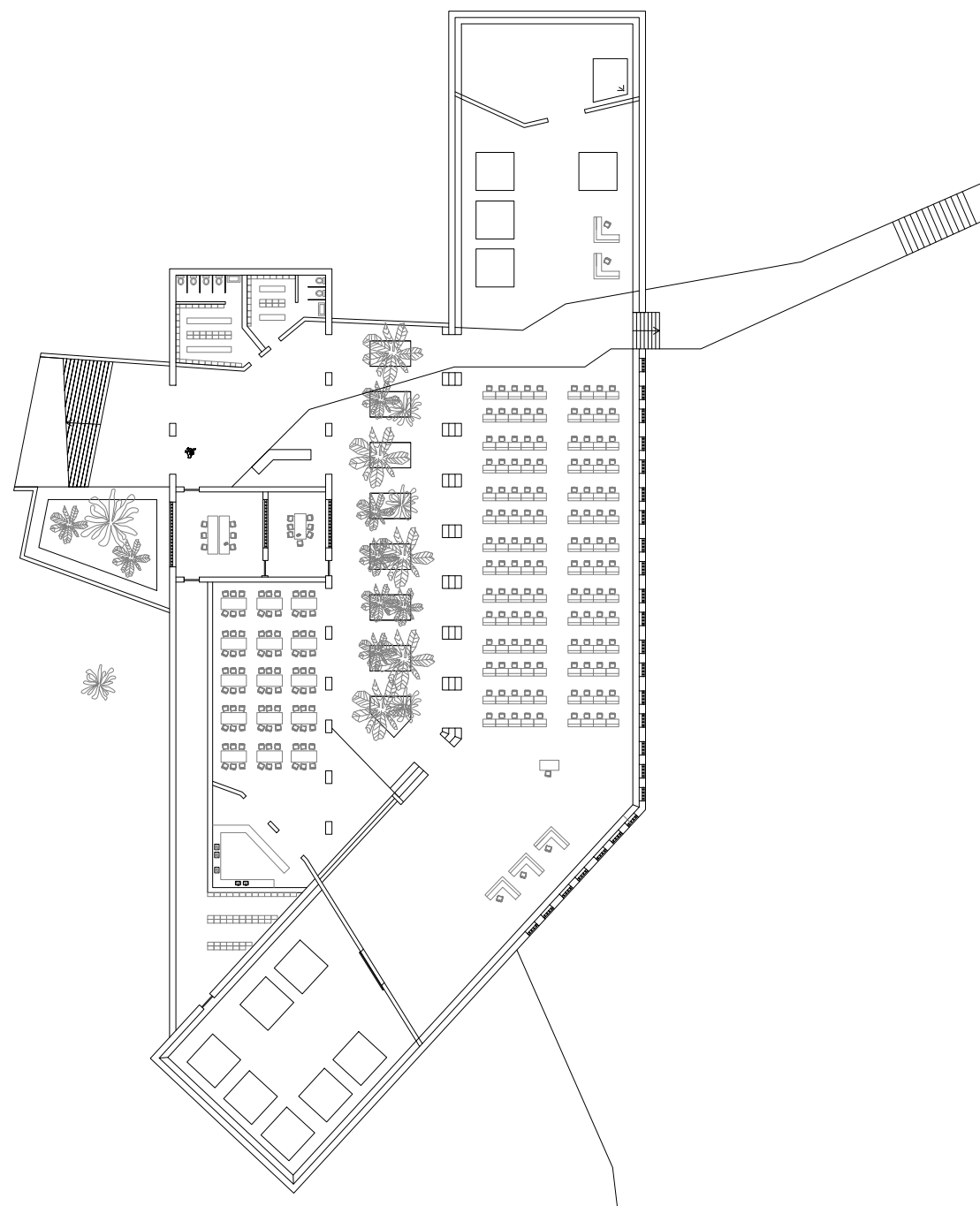
With influences of local culture and industry already on site, it is tourism that brings a new chapter to deal with. When taking these three forces into account, the production of cuban cigars will function as connector on the site. In the landscape this has resulted in three 'pavillions': the cafe and visitor centre as entrances and the factory as the heart of the project.



CAFE	FACTORY	VISITOR C.
context related 	landscape embedded 	camouflaged 
 context related	 vernacular & practical	 modern touch



The three bits of program have their own identity and character and so have their users. The use of material and way of dealing with landscape or context reflect this character and role in the ensemble. The collages on the right represent the use by locals and the use by tourists.



In this plan of the factory (left) a path is visible crossing the building perpendicularly. This is a result of research on how to engage with tourism correctly, as the tourists will only shortly cross paths with local activity and not linger around too long.

The section below is the visitor centre. It is a tunnel literally descending into the mountain, creating awareness of landscape and modesty.

