

Dramatising Rio Arzobispo in Teusaquillo

reflection on graduation process and project

01 Point of departure

During a study visit to Bogotá, I discovered Rogelio Salmona's architecture – as fascinating once I got to know it, as it had been obscure before the trip. There were many buildings of his that shared the intriguing quality of slowly revealing itself in space rather than disclosing everything they had to offer at once, but one in particular caught my attention - Edificio de Posgrados de Ciencias Humanas at the campus of Universidad Nacional.

It looked pleasant yet rather inconspicuous at the entrance – a sculptured, multidimensional volume, characteristically Salmona-esque brick details, accentuated blue gutters, tall trees overshadowing the whole space. Once I entered, there was a big linear open space, from which I could catch a glimpse of the other ones to come – hidden behind open brickwork, there was a water pool in the atrium to the right; it seemed that there was another atrium to the left, some bits of it visible through the window, and also a long ramp leading upstairs. I started walking around and the spaces kept unfolding, constantly giving new points of view, changing the way I was moving in them (ramps, narrow corridors, circular atria). And then once I got to the rooftop, a whole new landscape opened up – the field of view became bigger, I could look around and see a whole variety of spaces, including the ones I have already been to, and the magnificent panorama of the city. There were people on every roof slope (many of which enjoying it as a slide), on every low wall, in the auditorium and under the pergolas – the view I could not have expected when entering the building.

When we visited Fundación Rogelio Salmona, after asking how the building was designed – I just got the word “sections” as an answer. The whole complex geometry, the series of spaces unveiling themselves one after another – all of this was generated from sections. Designing on sections focuses on how the space will be experienced by the users, step by step, on how what they see and feel will influence the impression of what is to come. This notion led me straight to my big fascination with cinema. The theory of montage seemed more than relevant.

Together with my research partner, we used the cinematic technique of montage to research the neighbourhood of Teusaquillo. Following the three basic steps of montage - selecting, editing and putting together – we started building sequences of all kinds of spaces and through that bring attention to the varied potential they have. During that process I discovered what a powerful, liberating, anxiety-free way of researching (and designing) it is, to speculate, make conjectures rather than create definitive propositions. This research method led us to define a set of design tools, such as displacement and transposition of materials and colours - site-specific but essentially universal.

02 Drama of space

The research on montage led me to drama of space, which focuses on shaping spatial experience, on the means of structuring and orchestrating spaces. A topic for exploration for a lifetime. As vague and indefinite as it may seem, drama of space is the most interesting, the most comprehensive and the most potent field in architecture I have come across.

In the centre of attention of drama of space is how the users perceive spaces, how their specific arrangement defines their expression and evokes a certain kind of reaction. It expands beyond the visual, to include movement, time of exposure, tone, sound, rhythm and textures. It also points to the fact that architecture is not ever perceived in its entirety at one moment – it is discovered gradually, it will reveal itself one frame at a time, adding layers to our understanding of it. An experience designed in the way the sequences to “Alexander Nevsky” were, creates synaesthetic, immersive, multidimensional architecture. And that is what I aim for.

While doing research, I analysed works of, among others, Louis Kahn, Rogelio Salmona, Donald Judd, John Pawson and Yasujiro Ozu, and from their works gained a variety of insights about drama of space.

In case of Salmona, beyond the already mentioned technique of luring participants in architecture unfolding one step at a time, I incorporated into my design the tool of playing with space in such a way – mostly by generating desired movements and creating vantage points - that the participants can gain ever-new perspectives of the ingredients of a project, as well as of the others in it, being the one who watches and who is watched. By using a limited palette of materials and keeping stylistic unity, Salmona brings to the fore the drama of space - its configuration, volume

“Pillow shots” that punctuate Ozu’s films are yet another idea that inspired the project. Roger Ebert wrote about them in one of his (many) articles on Ozu’s mastery:

“Ozu’s most endearing characteristic, for me, is what Sato calls his “pillow shots.” The term comes from the “pillow words” used in Japanese poetry--words that may not advance or even refer to the subject, but are used for their own sake and beauty, as a sort of punctuation. In Ozu, a sequence will end and then, before the next begins, there will be a shot of a tree, or a cloud, or a smokestack, or a passing train, or a teapot, or a street corner. It is simply a way of looking away, and regaining composure before looking back again.”

“Pillow shots” is one of the most poetic concepts I encountered during the research and that I want to work with in the future.

03 The line

When I was walking around Teusaquillo, it struck me how Rio Arzobispo, the only river in the neighbourhood, the river that people would go picknicking to, instead of being celebrated is turned into a concrete gutter and squeezed between two roads, full of rubbish and becomes a pretty dangerous place at night (as opposed to the rest of Teusaquillo). I wanted to develop its potential through creating an alternative to the linear park idea, proposed by Le Corbusier and varied on by many others. I wanted to restore the river, to bring water into focus again, to make the project more urban and bring some diversity and energy into the district which is pleasant yet somewhat lifeless.

I decided to work on the 1 km long stretch of the river between Avenida Caracas and Parkway. The recognition of architecture as spacial experience unfolding in time, as well as Judd's exploration of richness within an established outline, influenced the first idea for my project – to develop a single section and create a sequence of iterations.

The first movemet I made in section was to extend the riverbed, so that it absorbs the complicated infrastructure and touches the edges of the plot (neighbouring rows of buildings). The riverbed contains everything, everything stems from it.

The next step was the introduction of two main elements within the riverbed – the wall and the host, nested beneath the street, both creating at the same time architecture and structure.

Street profile influenced the spacing of the grid, which ended up being 7,8 x 7,8 m. I optimised it, so that there is as little irregular elements as possible.

Instead of starting with a definitive masterplan, I created a series of ingredients – modules, spaces, material combinations, transitions, etc., let them inform the project and lead me to the overall design.

Method of construction stems from the conceptual principle of composing the project out of a sequence of elements. They are modular, prefabricated on site and then put in place section by section, in phases related to the functional zones of the masterplan.

Atmosphere was very important for me from the beginning and so after the first volumetric studies I moved to studying materials. I wanted to add freshness and lightness in brick-dominated Bogota. I decided to work with a composite system of reinforced concrete –for the structural elements – and with rammed concrete, which is the perfect material to explore in different variations over the course of the project because of its richness of textures and finishes. Wood is the third main material used in the project, mostly for door and window frames. And there is of course water, which the project puts in the centre of attention, and celebrates in a multitude of ways.

The design is based on polarities between the complexity of the neighbourhood and the simplicity of the development, between the two levels of the neighbourhood, between open and enclosed spaces, density and emptiness, the organic and the artificial, commerce and sharing. It creates a series of public spaces on the street level, as well as on the line level, is well connected with the neighbourhood and contributes to it on many levels.

The whole masterplan is in the end a composition of denser, mostly commercial areas (offices, restaurants, cafes, shops) on both ends, connecting to Av. Caracas and Parkway, and more loose arrangement of housing in the middle part. Those three parts are in turn separated by “pillow spaces”, where the whole focus is oriented towards the spatial experience.

04 Next steps

In the later development of the project, I want to focus on three main areas. I will work on designing and detailing the plazas created on the street level and also further develop details for hosts and urban furniture integrated with skylights/inlets/outlets. Impressed by Teusaquillo by night, I would like to explore the possibilities of night life and lighting in the development. I am also planning to create images that will represent the project on its many levels – its atmosphere, materiality, appropriation, connection with the surroundings, details etc.

05 Conclusion

Academically, it has been the best year in my life. I feel that in Methods & Analysis Studio, there was finally enough space and time (possibly also because there is a whole year for the development of the project, rather than just three months) to properly think about what and how I want to do, rather than just rushedly look for ideas and design. Through research, design and talks with tutors, I have been stimulated to find the topic - drama of space - which I believe to be of great beauty and importance, and which want to keep exploring over my whole career.

My initial approach to design, focused mostly on strong concepts, aesthetics and problem-solving, was changed and refined a lot during the last few months. I learned to evaluate my own and other projects through the lens of social impact and relevance, to appreciate even the smallest of interventions and developed sensitivity for projects that are far from being grand.