

Fucú di San Nicolás

The Hauntings of Colonization

Reflection — Explore Lab 39  
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Relation to TU Delft Master Architecture; and academic, societal, ethical value

My graduation project is driven by ethics of care that is both personal and political. These concerns are not always foregrounded in conventional design studios at the TU Delft. By taking a decolonial position, I challenge dominant Western habits of practicing architecture and emphasize socio-environmental justice. Furthermore, having identified the refinery site in San Nicolas as a potential graduation project, Explore Lab provided the perfect opportunity to stimulate the exploration and development of my site.

In addition, my project contributes academically to the ongoing discourse on decolonizing architectural practice and transforming post-industrial landscapes. This is especially relevant and important in the context of Aruba and the wider Caribbean, where knowledge on architectural researching and designing otherwise remain limited. Societally, my project envisions alternative futures for a place where the community's sense of hope has vanished due to limits of colonial histories. The project highlights the importance of making the invisible power dynamics and injustices visible, designing with a sensitivity to both historical trauma and unrealized potentials. The project positions architecture as a medium for collective reclamation and socio-spatial regeneration.

Relation research–design

Throughout this project I've learned that there is no separation between research and design. That is, it is not a matter of linear sequences of causes and effects. Their relation proved to be reciprocal. It was an ongoing and messy process where the one questioned and informed the other.

This project started with a fascination with the colonial violence of erasure present in San Nicolas, Aruba — and more specifically the oil refinery site. In the initial phases, I explored abstract transdisciplinary theories and philosophies to further ground my research in (research about design); applying this knowledge in reading, analyzing and designing for the specific site (research for design) and produce knowledge through reflection (research through design). I've learned to adopt a schizophrenic attitude

of being researcher, designer and engineer simultaneously. Something that was extremely difficult to juggle. Without clear limits the process has felt very confusing and complicated. However, for future reference I've learned that it is important to set these limits early in the project. In so doing, I, both researcher and designer, operated in-between theory—practice and general—specific, generating a site-specific, grounded design.

Assessment approach, methods & methodology

Having selected hauntology early in the process served as a very strong methodological framework for my project. Situating the broader concept of specters in the Aruban context, as Fucus, was a strong decision. It allowed me to address the spatio-temporal dimensions of a place, tapping into the potentials or futures that never arrived due to the promises of capitalism. Consequently, this theoretical grounding ensured continuity and coherence linking research—context—design.

While my theoretical understanding and intuitive sensitivity to the site was strong, I really struggled to define a clear focus. Without limits, it was very difficult to understand what exactly I was looking for during my site observations and thereafter how to explicate my findings into architectural propositions. It was not until late in the process that I've learned that setting clear boundaries to structure the project was essential for operational clarity.

Making these spectral logics of the Fucus operative (instead of mere symbolic metaphors) from research to context to design assured continuity and coherence. As for the design strategy of reclamation and acts of erasing, modifying, adding were grounded in the site-specific context of e.g. exclusion and decay caused by the refinery and colonization.

Physical conceptual and study models were very valuable methods in my process, as they allowed me to materially engage with the site. In doing so, they helped explore scale, composition and material relations in a tangible way—in contrast to digital modelmaking. Similarly, countermapping through digital collage was an effective method of research and expression through spectral

(archival) image overlays. However, in retrospect, I recognize that a mixed-media approach where analogue meets digital could have strengthened this exploration. Though I aim at applying this approach in my definitive design drawings.

A key methodological strength was reading the site through embodied experience. Beginning with affects (e.g. the uncanny and decay) and investigate how spatial elements condition them. Furthermore, expressing these intensities into explicit architectural problems remained challenging for me throughout the project.

Throughout my project, I've learned that there is a fine line between care and anxiety. The former drives and the latter inhibits. Though I understood the concept, I was still affected intensively and reactively to such discomforts. I've learned that sensitivity demands structure. Not having defined limits, care shifts into paralyzing anxiety.

Overall, looking back I've had very strong methods and methodology, but it was in the operational execution where I encountered the most difficulty. Personal challenges, such as mental health struggles, affected my confidence as architect. But I will take all lessons learned with me as a guidance in my ongoing personal and professional growth.

Integrating feedback

Looking back, my mentors played a crucial role in helping me structure my project and finding a direction. One of my main struggles was overly ambitious and operating in a limitless field of possibilities. I easily felt lost in the complexity and vast scale of my site. My mentors continuously reminded me about the importance of setting limits and goals, starting small, and work from site-specificity rather than abstract generalities. Although I understood this feedback intellectually, I found it very difficult to apply it in practice. It was not until very late in the process, that I managed to narrow my focus.

Throughout the process I've learned to work across different scales; to engage with the site's potentials; and to ground the project in the social and material context. I became more attentive to transitions — particularly how different territories at the limit — and to allow program and form to

unravel from the context's problem, rather than being imposed on the community. These are all elements that I've managed to incorporate in my project.

Another recurring challenge was to be more radical. Looking back, I recognize that I could have pushed myself harder. I was leaning more on an attitude of 'what should I do' instead of 'what could I do'. This cautious attitude has limited my creativity and therefore my project's capacity. Becoming aware of this tendency is an important lesson for me. I've been working on this and will continue doing so in the future. I understand that this takes time and practice to improve.

Despite moments of uncertainty and intense anxiety, my mentors have been extremely supportive — not to mention intuitive about my project's potential — and I appreciate them greatly for this. Their constant dedication and guidance eventually helped me regain clarity so I can further translate their critique into concrete design decisions. Moving forward, I aim at remaining actively open and more confident in my own position as an architect.

Project's transferability

Although my design is uniquely site-specific and grounded in the social and material context of San Nicolas, I've developed strong underlying research and design logics that are transferable. My project operates through a strategy of reclamation. That is, reclamation of land, material, and nature. And is supported by design principles e.g. regeneration, permeability, impermanence and repurpose. These operate as both framework and constraints that are specific enough to guide interventions, yet abstract or flexible enough to adapt to other contexts.

Transferability here, does not imply repeating forms. But repeating the underlying logics and methodology. My methodological approach of using hauntological logics can be applied to similar post-industrial and post-colonial landscapes elsewhere. Be it on Aruba, the wider Caribbean or other global contexts affected by destructive colonial logics. Even if I were to design another part of the same refinery site, design will result in different forms, since there are different site-specific conditions to respond to.



