Office for Digital Oblivion
P4 Reflection

Theodor Reinhardt, 5619785
Delft University of Technology
MSc in Architecture, Urbanism and Built Environment
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1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

The central relevance of this project for the discipline, practice and education of the field of architecture is its engagement with infrastructural systems as architectural problems. In both education and practice the focus often lies with structures that primarily operate on a local scale, with spaces of immediately concern to human beings. At the beginning of the 21st century, and in the Digital Age, it becomes more and more evident that this focus is dangerously narrow and implicitly fosters the propagation and reification of the expansion of extractive landscapes and practices, as those fall 'outside' the field of concerns of the common understanding of our built environment.

2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

The research was an inextricable, generative part of the graduation project. Not only did it set the conceptual ground for the issues later problematised by the design, but it also informed the conceptual methodology used in for the design. On the one hand it was through contextual research on the local conditions and history that a strategic constellation of three sites was discovered: antennae and bunker on Ancon Hill, communications node in Corozal and the satellite ground station in Utivé. Research on systems that interconnect these sites in the context of a site, the Panamanian territory and ultimately a planetary scale was foundational for the programmatic propositions of the design: the Archive, the Exchange Point and the Space Cemetery respectively. On the other hand it were the notions of 'zonefacts' and 'operational otherness', conceptualised in the research part, which were immediately informative in the development of a design strategy, from a territorial scale down to the scale of a detail.

3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

It can be argued, that one critically important and valuable aspect of the methodology employed over the course of this project, is the maintenance of a conceptual continuity when moving through scales by orders of magnitude. By addressing processes and contexts in a critically transscalar way, this methodology allows to operate with complexities adequately, neither falling into simplification, nor producing indecipherable collisions. By focusing on specific matters of concern – here mostly logistics and issues of communication infrastructures and information preservation – the project's approach of establishing transscalar continuums allows to address these issues with greater depth and accuracy.

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

While there are different issues that this project touches upon, I believe its central academic, societal and ethical value lies in its problematisation of the question of 'physicality of data'. Contrary to a wide-spread and well-marketed ideology of 'the digital' resembling some sort of de-territorialised ephemeral, almost abstract space, this project highlights, engages with and critically

embraces the immediately physical, material and spatial infrastructure and processes that form the loci of that what we call ’digital’.

This, in turn, can have serious implications for our understanding ethical issues raised here. Centrally, the project highlights the striated, highly colonial and contested nature of our communication infrastructures which in the Digital Age tend to be viewed to have a rather ’neutral’ or ’indiscriminate’ doctrine. Additionally, the project problematises the immediate material impact that any digital technological operation has and various issues that inextricably arise from that.

5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

As the project addresses aspects of the exponential expansion and accumulation of information and media – arguably a defining process of the beginning of the 21st century – it can be argued that insights gained, questions asked and issues raised within the scope of the work can very well be transferred, extrapolated and further deepened on the seemingly endless points in space and time where data and information infrastructures will be engaged with.

6. What is the value of the approach to issues of data preservation developed in the project?

The strategy proposed in response to issues of preservation of digital data arguably produces a valuable question which should be asked in relation to our ways of being in the Digital Age. Contrary to a seemingly self-evident approach to design a system which would expand, trying to mimic or catch up with the continuous expansion of digital data, the project proposes an explicit cap, a limit, to its own size. Thus, instead of following the positivist prevailing ideology of continuous quantitative expansion, it instead critically inserts the need for limitation and selection in moments when the ideological motion hits the physicality of material planetary systems.

7. What was the primary contextual focus in the development of the design?

During the design phase, resulting from both feedback and independent research, the central theme in the contextual application of the design has been the attempt to intermesh, entangle and find environmental points of attachment of the design proposal to its context. Thus instead of conceiving of the design as a ”sterile” technocratic infrastructure, it has much more been developed to become an entity that seeks out to blur the distinctions between context and programme, between technology and material, between wanted and unwanted. The most important insight from the project’s design development is in the rich potentiality of designing infrastructural systems beyond their sterile functionality and actively incorporating and attaching other more-than-human systems to its points of contact with the context. Examples of this approach include: planned Lampenflora habitats which feed on excess light and heat of the data centre operations, a wind tower hosting nesting spaces for migratory birds passing through the region and a passive de-humidification system which feeds water into a garden, to name a few.