

Reflection Public Building Studio 'Spaces of Accumulation' Genoa

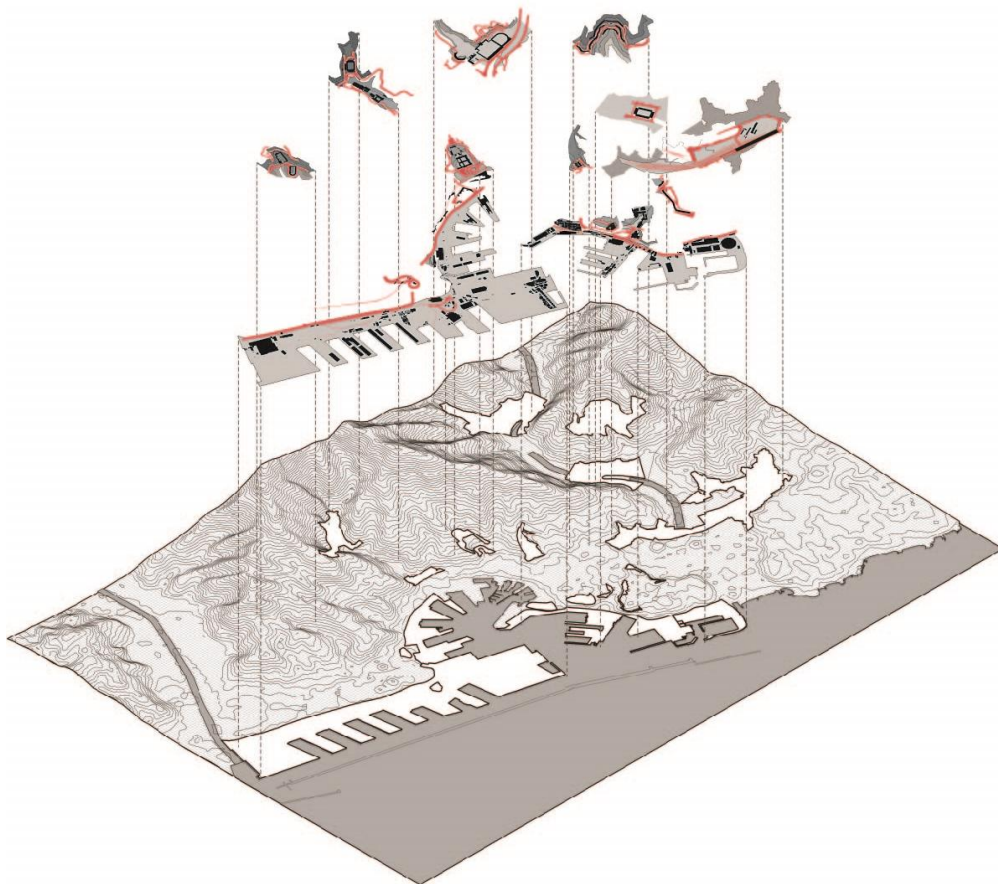
'Sottoripa MMXL'

Inhabitable infrastructure as a social catalyst during demographic recession

Genoa: an urban archipelago

Genoa is, and always has been, a fragmented city. This condition originates on the one hand in its physical location and on the other in the nature of the Genovese people. The steep ridges of the Appennine Mountains are not an obvious location for a city to form yet Genoa grew rich and powerful and ruled over an empire with territories as far as Greece and North Africa. Despite its great power during these times, Genoa had no overarching governance and was ruled by a handful of rivaling noble families, operating from their own *alberghi*: fortified city quarters with great economic, military and political power. By the fourteenth century, Genoa was divided into sixty-four of these strongholds. Social fragmentation and a clear physical disjunction in the urban fabric operated in a close synergy.

Later, when Genoa expanded beyond its last city walls into the hinterland, the mountainous topography prevented consistent urban planning. As the rugged landscape resists every attempt at human appropriation, a very site-specific way of thinking emerges and an overall structure is lost. Genoa has become a collection of smaller patches of city, emerged through continuous adding and subtracting of landscape, infrastructures, architectures, programs and systems.



Genoa as urban archipelago

The Genovese suburbs draw a clear parallel with the medieval *alberghi*, not only when it comes to their physical disconnection but also regarding their social structures. The discontinuity creates social pockets with the Lagaccio valley as a clear example: its geographic properties have made it into a 'forgotten' territory of Genoa, which has already started to result in vacant and/or derelict buildings and overgrown areas. The ongoing economic and demographic shrinkage of Genoa will cause this scenario to continue and worsen in the future, resulting in the gradual full-scale deflation of Lagaccio. The valley will become an empty 'enclave', in contrast with the surrounding city fabric.

Inhabitable infrastructure s

In medieval times, 'neutral' territory consisted of the *Sottoripa*: the first row of houses separating the port area from the city itself. Here the roads from the center converged into an arcade passage along its whole length. It was the focal point for trade, social interaction, gatherings and entertainment, and was not under the control of the noble families. This border between the city and the port evolved over time, adapting to the changing city but stayed in its ambivalent role as both a segregator and socioeconomic catalyst for the whole of Genoa. Its final form, the *terazze di marmo*, was the ultimate architectural manifestation of the edge condition; an infrastructural thickened border, physically dividing but programmatically consolidating.



The terrazze di marmo, as envisioned in Lagaccio valley

It is this phenomenon of 'border architecture' in Genoa what my project takes inspiration from. Taking place in a probable future scenario, the Lagaccio valley is being abandoned as a result of urban decline and has subsequently been reappropriated by nature. Lagaccio, being a natural connection between the wilderness in the mountainous north and the sea in the south, will have become an abandoned strip which crosses through and is adjacent to a plethora of Genoa's urban conditions, resulting in a range of dynamic programmatic contrasts. The project reprograms the valley and reshapes it to become like the *terrazze di marmo*: an infrastructural element and a social catalyst. Contrary to the *terrazze*, the design itself is not reactive to two existing contrasting systems, but rather actively creates this contrast, as it becomes a generator for the valley to be reprogrammed. The dividing 'infrastructure' results in a rearrangement of the valley ground, categorizing it to become the breeding ground for new programs to arise.

Methods

During the first readings of the city, my interest was drawn to the fragmented nature of Genoa's urban structure. This particular interest resulted in looking at the city as a collection of enclaves, essentially reversing the investigative order using Latour's idea of the *oligopticon*¹. Through speculative mapping and abstracting, the socio-spatial semiotics of different types of (deliberately) enclaved territories became visible and a conceptual understanding of their introspective and extrospective systems was achieved. This conceptual understanding could then be translated to a site-specific condition. The cultural aspect of enclave gave an incentive to treat the project as a narrative or construct in time, which generates ingredients for an intervention and anchors it, apart from site, in the city as a whole. While investigating the architectural boundary, the technique of montage became important. The architecture of the border becomes only evident when passing through or over it, when being in motion. Therefore, space should also be considered as being perceived in a sequence so it becomes informative for programming and materialization.

My design emerged from approaching Lagaccio valley as a dynamic enclave; recognizing the potencies in its isolation and qualities from its abandoned state. This state, resulting from the decline of Genoa's population and economy, tuned out to be a challenge regarding the programmatic justification of the project as the valley being abandoned is a direct result of a decreasing demand for building volume in the city. Because of this, the project is required to deal with program differently and in a more flexible way. To achieve this and to map the scenario in which the project will take place, listing has been an important method of inquiry. I have categorized the intrinsic natural qualities of the abandoned valley in a matrix, treating them all as equally important. This was based on David Gissen's notion of *subnature*: the aspect of nature which is deemed primitive (mud and dankness), filthy (smoke, dust, and exhaust), fearsome (gas and debris) or uncontrollable (weeds, insects, and pigeons). He explores the possibilities to use subnature in design instead of seeing architecture as a method of refuge from it². My act of listing is based on and expands on this theory.

The matrix approach steers away from a problem-solution dichotomy, as suggested by my mentors, and departs from a subject-action-reaction progress, resulting in strategies, textures and atmospheres as input for design.

(SUB)NATURES

	The Market			The Theatre			The Garden			The Pool		
	subject	action	reaction (condition/qualities)	subject	action	reaction (condition/qualities)	subject	action	reaction (condition/qualities)	subject	action	reaction (condition/qualities)
times	morning	warming up	open	afternoon	cooling	massive	morning	heating		morning	warming up	massive
peoples	shoppers	strolling	directive	evening	heating		afternoon	cooling		afternoon	heating	
	vendors	standing	comfortable	audience	sitting	soft	gardeners	working	bowery	swimmers	swimming	wet
animals	pigeons	pooping	collecting	performers	working	sheltered			busy		sunbathing	spacious
	seagulls	looting	protective	birds	sitting	dirty	insects	pollinating	fertile	ducks	swimming	
	flies	buzzing			looting	dirty	pigeons	pooping	fertile		fighting	
	rats	knawing		dogs	chasing	spacious	rats	digging	damaged	seagulls	pooping	clean
plants	vegetables	display/hang	hard		playing	organic					screaming	
	fruits	display/hang	colourful	grass	sitting	organic	weeds	cooling	patchy	lilies	filtering	vegetal
	ground	cleaning	colourful	trees	cooling	organic	trees	shading	leafy	duckweed		
grounds	dirt	directing	smooth	weeds			mud	staining	irregular	tiles	cleaning	slippery
	paths	directing	infrastructural	litter			fences	dividing	transparent	mud	smudging	dirty
acoustics	dry	absorbing	open							echoes	amplifying	loud
air	exhaust	absorbing	porous	smoke	obscuring	enhancing	pollen	flying	fertile	vapor	cooling	misty/foggy
moistures	puddles	drainage		puddles	collecting	wet	ponds	watering	cooling	pools	swimming	reflective
architectures	stalls	setting up/breaking down	accessible	stage	performing	loud	greenhouses	containing	reflective	changing rooms	sheltering	opaque
	storage	collecting	central	grandstands						entrance	opening up	inviting
leftovers	facades	supporting	structural	facades	cooling/warming	regulated	facades	climatization	overgrown	steeple	height	elevating
					sitting	scattered	cellars	dividing				
smells	spice			cigarettes	smoking	messy	flowers	pollen	insects	chloramines	sanitizing	
	rot			food	vending		mulch	composting	fertile	sweat	smoking	littering
	garbage	rotting	compost	greens			exhaust	polluting		cigarettes		
										sunscreens		
sounds	rumour	buzzing	crowded	music	echoing	contained	rustle	calming		splashing	moistening	
	shouts	noticing	lively	amplification	carrying	contained	machines			rumour	buzzing	lively
	seagulls	screaming		rumour						yelling	echoing	
climates	muggy	airflow	open	warmth			cool		relaxing	darkness	cooling	resistant
							hot			hot		
lights	sun	warming up	light	sun	illuminating	orientated	sun	growing		sun	tanning	reflective
				stagelight	highlighting	matte	streetlight			pool lights	illuminating	calming

(Sub)nature of Lagaccio, generating textures and strategies

¹ (Latour and Hermant 1998)

² (Gissen 2009)

The categorization and organization of these (sub)natures resulted in four programmatic 'themes', each of which make use of and deal with a specific set of conditions in their own way. The programs serve as example of how the infrastructural linear element can function as a programmatic generator in synergy with the existing ground conditions, making it repeatable through the whole valley and on other locations as well. The four programmatic themes (The Market, The Garden, The Theatre and The Pool) each have their own very distinct character and architectural requirements which reveals the adaptability of the connecting linear infrastructure.

Context and relevance

The essence of the Public Building studio 'Spaces of Accumulation' is the approach to site as intrinsic part of the architectural program. The studio focuses on a reading of the city as an accumulation of (conflicting) spatial programs. The project that follows from this reading of the city is therefore positioned larger more complex urban relations and forces, transcending its mere physical boundaries as architectural edifice. The project is a rewriting of an already existent, ongoing, urban construct. Design therefore becomes a synthetic act, a projection rather than a response to a specific problem. My project does exactly this, as it responds to the specific site and herewith connects to larger Genoa as a construct. By approaching Lagaccio as part of a larger, ever changing palimpsestuous web of accumulated programs, infrastructures and architectures, a speculative scenario unveils itself in which the design project is situated. Within this approach is it important that the traditional problem-solution dichotomy is let go and the emphasis shifts to the potencies of the speculative scenario instead of the latencies. The architecture (A) track within the master program focuses on the diverse role architecture can fulfil within the city and the different studios within the track all answer to that ranging from conceptual to concrete, from technical to theoretical and crossing the borders between building and city scales. My graduation project cycles through all the scales, from urban scale to detail level, and focuses of both the conceptual and concrete and the theoretical and the technical. By doing so, it establishes connection on all these levels. This approach also strongly resonates with the focus on multi-disciplinary character of the master program overall, which results in an integrated design for the built environment.

Speculating on the specific (future) condition of Lagaccio results in more universally relevant themes of economic and urban decline, social structures in the modern city and the relationship between the man-built and nature. Lagaccio, as abandoned territory as result of a deflating city, can be seen as representative for a more universal scenario. With the transition to renewable energy ongoing, cities with economies reliant on fossil fuel unable to make this transition have been in steady decline. This is clearly visible in the great industrial cities of Europe and America like Belfast, Bochum and Detroit, as they fail to compete in a post-industrial world. Genoa, as long time harbor superpower, is an excellent case study in how to deal with the 'un-densifying' of the urban fabric. This resulted in an ethical aspect of the project that I had to consider as I had to justify building new architecture in a shrinking city. In this scenario dealing with the ground, nature and architectural leftovers in a sustainable way became essential to successful design. A careful consideration of program was needed to justify realizing a project in a demographically and economically declining city. Carefully mapping out the qualities of the narrative-site helped greatly in the process of determining how to adjust to these conditions and design with instead of against them, addressing seemingly problematic conditions as potencies instead of latencies. After all, the last thing architecture should be is in a struggle against its environment.

How to Proceed

After the P4 presentation, the overall design will be finished and the emphasis will lie on conveying the narrative. This will be done by perfecting the drawings from P4 and making (several) final models. The models will take up most of the time as they will be an important tool of storytelling during the P5. The narrative must be logical and flowing, making use of the traditional mediums like physical drawing, projected material and models. With movement being an important design theme in my project the final period will also be used to experiment with other mediums with which an experience of *montage* can be achieved as mentioned by Sergei Eisenstein in *Montage and Architecture*³.

Bibliography

Eisenstein, Sergei M. „Montage and Architecture.” *Assemblage*, December 1989: 110-131.

Gissen, David. *Subnature, Architecture's other environments*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009.

Latour, Bruno, en Emilie Hermant. *Paris ville invisible*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond & Le Seuil, 1998.

³ (Eisenstein 1989)