THE TALLINN QUARRY THEME PARK

Architectures of deception

Thesis Reflection
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Methods of Analysis & Imagination : A Matter of Scale

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When choosing a graduation studio, I was searching for one that would allow me to explore an unfamiliar topic with my project that would widen my professional skills and challenge me to think differently about architecture.

Upon the field trip to Tallinn, I got fascinated by its limestone materiality which is fundamental to the architectural image and atmosphere of the city. Historically and geologically Tallinn is a city of limestone. Multiple quarries have provided material for the building of the city through the ages and this condition used to be taken as an expression of local context and national identity by stonemasons and architects in the past such as Arent Passer, Herbert Johanson and Reine Karp. Fragments throughout the city signify for the lost tradition of working with limestone, whose cultural importance has been now undermined by the shifting ideological, economic, architectural and technological values, as seen in Tallinn's contemporary architecture. However, being a popular tourist destination, this factor has led to the Disneyfication of the Old Town, which feels like a medieval theme park with carefully preserved colourful facades and a high concentration of as shops, bars, shopping malls, theatres and restaurants, whereas other parts of Tallinn are disconnected and lack quality leisure architecture for the locals. As part of the group analysis of the Old Town, we explored what architectural features contribute to this disneyfication effect such as materials, doors, windows and ornaments. These observations led me to an investigation of liemstone and fragmentation, expressed in the reciprocal relationship between the city and the quarry for my P1. I chose the Vao Quarry in the Soviet residential area of Lasnamae as a site of intervention, as it embodies the problem of urban fragmentation and limestone's extraction, use and decay. My main design question design focuses on how the post-industrial landscape of a quarry could be re-integrated into the city creatively and sensitively while celebrating the history and value of its materiality.

In contrast to normative approaches to designing post-industrial sites, my proposal is for the redevelopment of the Vao Quarry into a Quarry Theme Park as a theoretical and design exploration of deceit in architecture. The site is in the avoided and rather unattractive residential area of Lasnamae, bordering the busy highway between Tallinn and Narva and residential blocks to the north, an industrial zone to the east, and a forest to the south. Buffered by the highway, the quarry is unknown even to the locals, although many have experienced the heavy traffic, dust, noise and pollution from the mining activities.

Taking limestone as its central theme, the project aims to bring awareness of the value, beauty and temporality of limestone through the architecture and the landscape of the quarry by transforming it into an imaginative landscape celebrating the properties and uses of limestone. The park will allow the people of Tallinn and tourists to learn, experience and reconnect to the city's unique materiality and landscape in a fun way. This would provide a much-needed outdoor leisure place for Tallinners.

The project's developed area is the central area of the quarry with the idea that it sets a model for the expansion of the theme park to the rest of the quarry. To reinforce the immersion into a new world, a new road is created to the south of the quarry, taking the flow from the main Peterburg tee through the existing forest, where the parking for 3000 cars is located. The theme park is conceived as a sequence of thresholds, whose purpose is to immerse people into the world of the quarry. It has three main parts (thresholds): the parking, the main entrance, and a typical attraction entrance. The latter is devised as a type of threshold that can be replicated and plugged into all the attractions on the site, both outdoor roller coasters and warehouses. Stemming from the contextual, theoretical and disciplinary analysis, the design achieves organisational, structural, and surface deceit through the use of occluding edges, opposition, repetition, accelerated perspective, labyrinthine paths, use of colours, 'dishonest' materials and hiding the structure, as demonstrated by the design of each threshold.
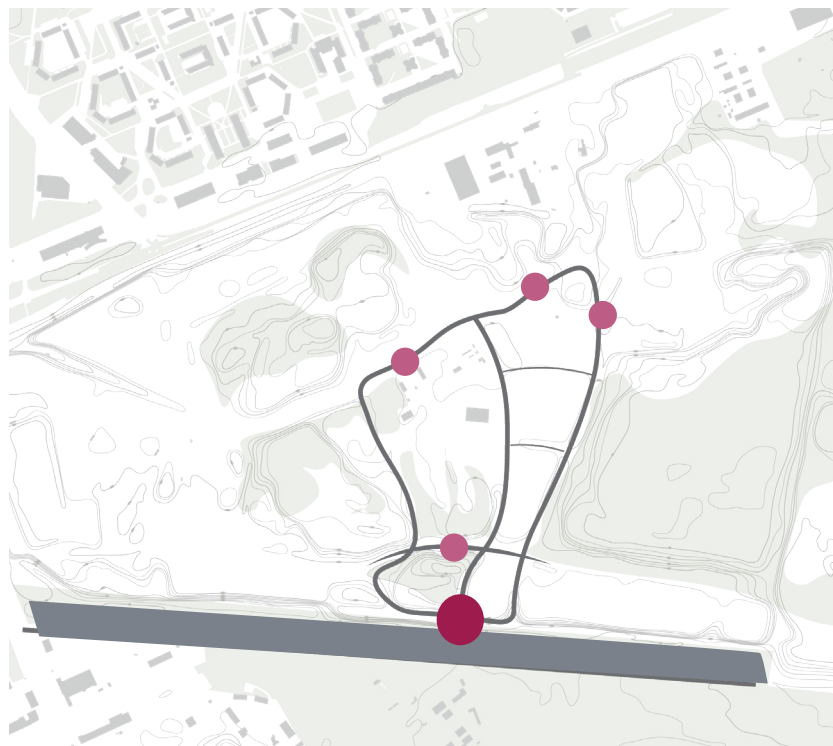

Diagram of the project's parts
● Parking lot
● Main entrance
● Typified attraction entrances

The buildings are designed as stable blocks hiding disorienting paths that connect the main spaces. Structurally, the buildings can be described as stone warehouses, combining structural stone with a typical steel roof truss structure, accommodating the mechanical systems required by the attractions, including light, sound, and ventilation. In this way, the architecture brings together the specific technology required by modern, mechanical attraction theme parks and the traditional technology of limestone, specific to Tallinn. The character of the post-industrial site is preserved and reinforced through its presentation as a playground, where limestone is shaped, giving people the opportunity to appreciate the value of the stone and see the processes behind its extraction.

In the context of the MSc Architecture programme theproject creatively conveys the historical, social, symbolic and environmental significance of limestone for the city of Tallinn, while also addressing the problems associated with its extraction, use and decay. It is developed across different levels, on which architecture operates – from the conceptual to concrete, from technical to theoretical, and from building to city scale. This encouraged me to improve my architectural skills, including presentation, design, building technology and aesthetics, which due to the chosen typology required a distinct way of specialisation, for example in developing a disorienting circulation, reliance on mostly mechanical climate control systems and theme park design.

In dealing with this topic, I felt like studying architecture anew and research was fundamental to the process of design. I read books, analysed precedents, and visited a theme park (Efteling) to gain insight into the operation, organisation and design techniques of this architecture. My initial design ideas were rather crude, due to my inexperience in applying the recently learned techniques and it took multiple iterations to correctly apply the techniques of deceit. The design made me see gaps in my research, as while I knew a technique once I designed it, I saw it did not work the way it should, so I went back to disciplinary research. For example, initially, I made a funnel tunnel for the main entrance to achieve accelerated perspective, however, after visualizing it in 3D it did not seem convincing. After more research, I came upon Borromini's Palazzo Spada corridor and the stage design of Fernando Babiena and observed that layering the walls enhances the effect. In this way, design and research were constantly going hand-in-hand. The project underwent significant changes since its beginning, which sometimes made me lose my creative direction, but regular feedback, reducing the scope, changing the location of the buildings within the site, and other decisions helped me find and focus on the essence of the project.
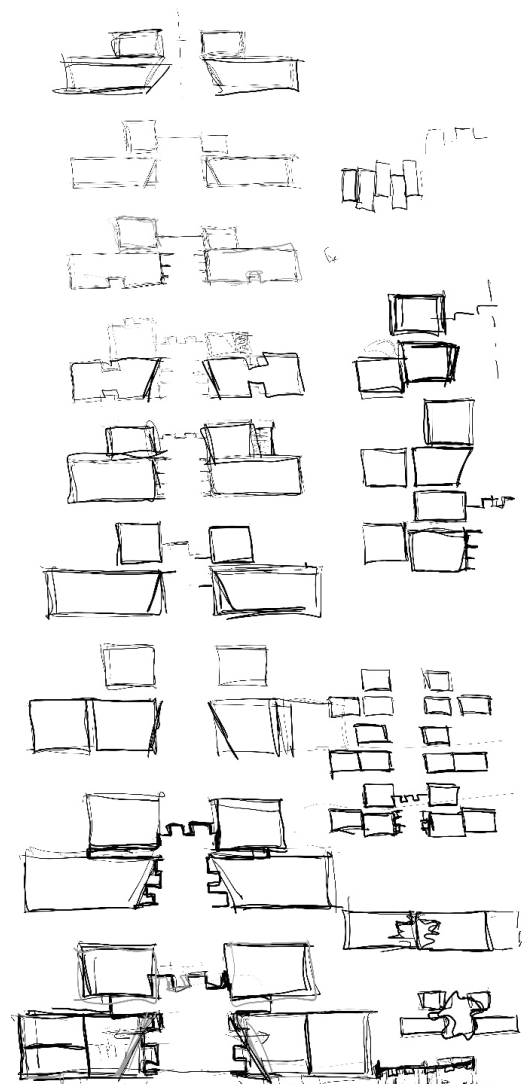
The project topic on deceit and the specific spatial conditions of the quarry directly relate to the studio theme of scale. The project explores how a massive urban fragment could be re-incorporated into the city and in a neighbourhood characterised by its lack of human scale. Managing the scale of the project was a significant challenge since I have never worked on such a big scale before. My ambitious initial design proposal covered the whole site of the quarry, and I easily got lost. In discussion with my main tutor, Jorge, we reduced and typified the project, which helped manage the complexity of the project and focus it on the key spaces. Considering the human scale and a person's experience of the architecture is essential for deceit. Perspectives and animated experience of the design helped during the process to always keep the experience on such a scale.

I found the studio's heuristic way of working helpful and reflective, as it

encouraged me to do research and design simultaneously, reflecting on my work on a regular basis and form a iterative process that benefits the quality of the design. I needed to develop new strategies for this project, challenging me to change my design methods. Regular feedback helped me develop strategies for managing the scale and complexity of the project and rethink my process. Through simplification, and typifying the project, it became more manageable. It also helped me re-evaluate my design decisions and the effectiveness of the deceitful techniques that I was exploring. The value of this way of working is that it helped me observe the effect of the deceitful techniques on the design. With regards to my research methods in retrospection I realise that I could have aimed for a greater variety of methods. Eventually, I delved more into the disciplinary, theoretical research, while missing opportunities for more creative, artistic methods that could have helped me more with the experiential design and benefited the project.

The project provides a valuable addition to the city and responds to the immediate needs of the local community for diverse recreational spaces, including hotels, restaurants, theatres, bars, and cafes in Lasnamae, that would attract diverse social groups - locals from all generations, tourists, disabled are allowed by design. At the same time, its could be argued that the project is deliberately unethical in the sense that it uses deceitful techniques to manipulate circulation and one perception of architecture to provide a pleasurable experience. Based on my findings and experience from the project, this topic proved very extensive and opened up opportunities for further academic research.

Theme parks have been a hot topic for debate in architecture, but also sociology, psychology, landscape design, management and geography. On the one side, Michael Sorkin sees theme parks as 'antigeographical spaces' that rely on 'architecture of deception', control, surveillance, and simulations that ignores the real need and traditions and relies purely on achieving spectacle.'[1] My design challenges this understanding by creating a theme park that is inspired by traditions and takes advantage of deception in design to create a space that tells the story of the material limestone. It aligns closer to the opposing views of Rem Koolhaas, who has observed the potential of such spaces for experimentation. It is a place that functions 'above the conflict between mechanical and natural surface [...]as a breeding ground for revolutionary architectural prototypes.' [2] Through my design I want to emphasise the importance of theme parks as spaces that bring people together

Sketches of iterative process for the main entrance plan

and respond to practical economic, leisure and cultural needs, as educational spaces, but also ones with important social and out-of-home leisure functions, that instil pride and relate to local traditions. Theme parks are valuable spaces for escape that provide an imaginative alternative to reality, which in turn can make people critical and want to change the outside reality.

Prior to this project, I did not have much personal or professional experience of theme parks or similar immersive architectures. This is why research was essential for my project and I enjoyed the process of learning and analysing how such architectures work. Delving into this new kind of architectural production, I gained extensive knowledge of techniques for deceit and immersion in architecture through I books, precedent analysis and first-hand-experience of theme parks (Efteling) to gain insight into the operation, organisation and design techniques of this architecture. I learned how to design a masterplan for a theme park with a challenging topography, a parking lot and beautiful and immersive entrances and thresholds. I also approached the design from a new perspective, starting from a material.

Following my exploration of theme park architecture and strategies for immersive design, I believe I have developed and diversified the techniques used by theme parks in two ways - by taking a traditional material as a starting point and by the choice of site in a quarry which gives a depth of the park that is usually not considered. The implications of this led to my 'innovation' of the vertical main street with shops and a restaurant and the conceptualisation of a theme park as a series of thresholds. The project also re-considers the importance of deceitful spaces by bringing out the qualities of these to immerse, instill imagination and provide a space to suspend our habits and belief. In the context of honesty and dishonesty in the architecture debate, the project makes a case for the value of dishonesty, allowing architecture to surprise and make us wonder.

The main discoveries that I have made through the process of working on this project and helped me derive a theory of deceitful and theme park architecture are the following:

1)   A theme park is a series of immersive thresholds

2)   Thresholds are key spaces/devices for immersion and dislocation, serving as a bridge between two worlds

3)   Theme parks achieve immersion through deception, which is necessary to achieve suspension of belief and to induce wonder

4)   Theme park design relies on inefficient circulation and regulation of vision

to stage architecture

6)   Theme parks distort architecture to provide a synthesised version of cultural expressions and provide a new, different understanding of locality, traditions and leisure through fragmentation

8)   Deceit is achieved through even small manipulations of architectural elements by exaggerating the regular way of perception

9)   Fragmentation can be taken advantage of to produce disorientation and induce curiosity

10)   Deceit makes one question the scale, limits and dimensions of a space.

Similar strategies as used by theme parks are used by other immersive architectures such as museums, casinos, pleasure gardens, shopping malls, and theatres, where one is required to suspend their disbelief to enjoy a play or go through a carefully manipulated path to pass through the greatest number of shops, or to spend more and more on gambling, losing track of time. In this way, the design techniques I learned by designing a theme park are highly transferable to the design of other spaces for leisure.

Several times during the project development, my tutor and I have discussed the professional implications of this project. In this sense, the project challenges notions of efficiency, circulation, and aesthetics. How does such a project that is going against the mainstream of architectural practice and many would argue is not true architecture, could help me become a better architect? The answer lies in the techniques and skills I developed through the research and the design and beyond the typology as such. I think the most important lesson has been the need to suspend my regular ways of making architecture to create a new and immersive world. This required me to be bold in unfamiliar design situations and pushed me to persevere and in exchange I believe it provided me with greater flexibility as a designer. I became more open to other ways of making architecture. The project also helped me improve my research, creative, technical and design skills.

While not claiming to have mastered deceit in architecture, the project has provided me with an opportunity to explore in great depth this topic and experiment with it in a productive way that would contribute to my professional development. The project achieves a tradition-oriented theme park through modern means to provide people with an experience of the atmosphere, materiality and scale of Tallinn and inspire further bold architectural proposals for the city. Further improvements for the project in the upcoming period to P5 would be focused on the communication of the project and developing the

visual style, while also further enhancing the aesthetics of the architecture along the theme.

References:

  [1] Michael Sorkin, ed., Variations on a Theme Park. The New American City and the Death of Public Space (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xv.

[2] Rem Koolhaas, Delirious New York. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 71