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REFLECTION REPORT

ACTIVATING THE VOID: THE LAGACCIO VALLEY

The Architecture and Public Building Studio 'Spaces of Accumulation: Genoa' was presented as having a consistent research component through the lens of the theme of 'accumulation' of urban spaces in the Italian city. The theme seemed extremely intriguing and particularly fitting for Genoa, as it was evident from our field trip that the city is the result of deposition and stratification of conflicting spatial programs, which led to the creation of peculiar and unique possible sites for a design project. I was also attracted to the notion that the studio has about 'site'. In fact, the site is viewed as an intrinsic component of the resulting program, which is something I have always firmly believed in. However, what I thought it meant was the act of responding to a specific need while paying attention to the physical context and its material qualities. I believed this studio could expand this notion, as it is considering the site as a construct characterised by a specific field condition, in which the process of change, intervention and transformation could be integral to the production of an architectural object.

My attention was drawn almost immediately to the existence of a network of hidden creeks buried under the urbanisation, seasonal streams which pass through and characterise the city centre. These creeks started to be canalised mainly during the 1600s, and were later gradually covered, while the urban settlement slowly took over nature. The canalisations now function as grey water collectors and sewage system for the city. As a counterpart to this underground reality, the newly gained space within the river valleys was gradually appropriated by the city in different ways, creating new spaces with manifold functions through the action of accumulation.

The research and design approach concentrated on these areas of land which are essentially artificial landfills aimed at creating new space for a growing urbanisation. In fact, the valleys of the creeks constituted an opportunity for large scale open spaces to materialise within the steep and ever-changing topography of Genoa. However, the city is nowadays shrinking with the result that sometimes these open spaces become abandoned and act as fractures within the urban fabric. Furthermore, the artificial landfills create a succession of terraced artificial landscapes which were viewed as a potential, but that at the same time constitute an obstacle for the underground waterflow, especially in correspondence of a great height difference. As the sections of the canalisations are not sufficiently dimensioned, when the seasonal rains in spring and autumn hit, this condition results in the risk of flooding downstream.

I chose to concentrate on one of the river valleys crossing the city of Genoa, the Lagaccio Valley. This valley has a great concentration of artificial landfill areas in close succession and it was essentially approached following two lines of research. The first looked at the sequence of spaces present along the valley and how these are visually and physically disconnected, mainly due to the height differences between one another. The second observed the valley as a group of localised systems, often responding to utilitarian needs and sometimes redundant, not really working together as a coherent ensemble. After experimenting with speculative drawing techniques and model making, I arrived at the conclusion that the injection of a foreign system superimposed onto the existing valley could start to reorganise it and somehow link the sequence back together.

My design project concentrates on one of these artificially landfill areas which is now abandoned and inaccessible, the area of the former military base Gavoglio. Today the site appears to be a large fracture within the Lagaccio neighbourhood, enclosed by a collection of high retaining walls and disused. The social reality of the Lagaccio is of a poor, almost completely residential area that misses

the opportunity to create a public centre for its own community, facilitating mostly what is programmatically utilitarian (supermarket, parking spaces, a large soccer field that filled an artificial lake). Therefore, the design intention is to link the abandoned area of the valley to the outer urban fabric through its saturation with leisure 'pockets of program' that could not only bring the inhabitants together but could also turn out to be a destination for the whole city of Genoa. Another layer of information that I wish to take into account is the underground water system. The flood risk concerning the creeks running through the city centre isn't as severe as the one related to the Polcevera or Bisagno basins, however the introduction of a proposal which not only is flood resilient, but also might liberate the ground and be designed to take off some of the pressure from the downstream areas – where the water flow is bottlenecking into the denser fabric of the historical city centre – could serve as an example and a rule for future developments of abandoned areas within the boundaries of the city, strengthening the ecological dimension belonging to the project. The 'why' of this project is then constituted by the creation of a destination which can help the valley to work as a coherent ensemble and the 'how' is the injection of a new system into the existing fracture. The formation of a new destination in this case addresses also the issues of post-industrial dilapidation and the need to reuse abandoned areas, especially when concerned with a shrinking urbanisation. The environmental demands of the specific area chosen, even though they are not posing disastrous issues, might be addressed in a way that reconsiders how we approach the built environment and the so-called "natural resources".

At first, I attempted to create a catalogue of instances where these pockets of program could materialise around the site, depending on the existing condition or elements they would have to interact with. Sometimes these were more ground-related, some other they were placed above the ground and consequently liberated it, sometimes they interfaced with the retaining walls transforming them from a façade or a wall into interiors. The main critique was that these pockets of program attempted to colonise the whole valley by their mere moltiplication, resulting into an assemblage rather than an ensemble, at the expenses of the potential strenght of the proposal.

As a response, I tried to condensate some of these typologies onto a single strip within the valley, running west to east. The resulting proposal had to deal with the ground on an ecological level, while considering the multiple field conditions present on site and also create a shortcut running above, in order to connect one side to the other. The element binding these two aspects together would be the leisure program happening in between them and contaminating both. The resulting proposal consists of a landscaped urban playground that treats the existing ground conditions and delineates new ones, while defining a path crossing the valley side to side. The 'shortcut' through the area isn't necessarily materialised into the shortest way to get from one point to the other one as the urban playground starts to become a destination in itself and a scenic operation, becoming a non-direct way to create a connection. The path also extricates itself from being a grounded landscape element and transforms into a multi-functional structure because of the need to connect height differences within the Genoese landscape. Here, in the in-between space amid the upper structure and the field condition of the ground project is where the proposed program really comes to life.

It was clear that the proposed design project had to deal with multiple conditions and inputs and tried to order and activate them based on the addressed potentials. The resulting project would be characterised by manifold and hybrid gestures, which was difficult to encapsulated within one single design project. Therefore, I started to envision a unique proposal which would work in different ways mainly based on two cycles:

1. *Daytime / nigh time:* during the day the area is used as a landscaped urban playground characterised by the free flow of people and program, while during the night the area might transform, prioritising issues of access, in order to direct the flow of people more strictly, reserving a performative space as the centre of the attraction;

2. *Seasonal cycle:* the ground might allow flooding if needed (during the frequent storms in autumn and spring), temporarily becoming a retention basin in order to alleviate the pressure on the downstream canalisation. On the other hand, rainwater might be collected, purified and be fed back into some of the proposed programs.

The structure injected into the area is organised around 3 nodes, a main one which encapsulates the main leisure programs, and two peripheric ones which are respectively articulated as logistics – dealing with storage and access – and as vantage viewpoint. The main node is also the main structural element creating the centre of the proposal where the program is forced to interface with the retaining wall, while the peripheric ones become the points where the structure touches the landscape and becomes a land operation, giving a balance to the geometry of the structure and reinforcing the character of a scenic operation running through the valley. The programmatic requirements of the scenarios distributed along the structural nodes and their connections constitutes the constraints upon which the interdependency between the ground project and the structural project are built. The tectonic approach that is adopted to encapsulated program revolves around the acts of *thickening the structure* and subsequently *bracketing* program within. In the case of the central leisure node the retaining wall becomes thicker thanks to the proposed structure that is injected and embraces it, bracketing the leisure programs within. In the same way, along the connecting portions of the construction, the structure doubles up, thickens or encloses certain programs.

One of the biggest difficulties and critiques I had was that my approach to the proposal was too additive and was missing the subtle way of how to create an interlocked dependency between the ground proposal and the shortcut above. The two parts of the proposal appeared disjoined and there wasn't really a reason for them to necessarily coexist in such proximity. My approach was merely filling the gaps, identifying an issue and trying to solve it immediately after, so that the result was once again more similar to an assemblage than an ensemble. This was partially a result of the way I was taught to think about design during my past studies or my work experiences, when usually a problem is identified and addressed in a very straight forward manner. The Genoa Studio taught me another way, which is to look at potentials and not problems when proposing a design.

Even though I really struggled, I think I was able to come up with a comprehensive and cohesive proposal. I tried to think about every single element I was proposing and not only to look at it for what it was, but I also tried to identify its hidden potentials and what other role it could play, what other programs it could host or activate. A retaining wall became a piece of urban furniture, a bridge became a shading device, a structural element like a column became a playground. Slowly, observations and activities started to show overlaps and possibilities for interlocking. It was at these intersections that I could build solid foundations for my design project, because when I identified the hidden potential of an element, I managed to define how it could play a role for the larger proposal and how to create a dependency.

Overall, I think the relevance and effectiveness of my project lies within the fact that it is very site specific, as each component behaves in a different way based on the varied conditions it interacts with. However, it also proposes a way to deal with such different conditions, which could be applied throughout the same site or to other areas, even not necessarily belonging to the city of Genoa. The approach concerned with bracketing program within an existing condition could also be applied to other sites which are being disused. These areas typical of the Anthropocene could therefore be activated, while addressing the specific conditions found, creating site-specific projects which might also address ecological and social issues.