

P4 Reflection

Independent Group

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Abstract

This project investigates the spatial and social tensions between residents, city, and government in the rural-urban contexts in Chongqing, China, where industrial development displaced farmers into urban resettlement housings. It addressed the predicaments of such space: misalignment between top-down urban expansion and the traditional lifestyle, everyday rituals and identities. My design serves to reclaim space for people, negotiate land use, and articulate agencies on an informally contested ground.

The research combines field observations, interviews, photography, film, precedence studies, and literature. Preliminary research revealed the practical problems and wishes of residents. And by studying the “institution-life” theory from Wu Fulong and Ying Xiao, the project settled its strategy to a bottom-up initiative. Early investigations into material expression and construction methods in China, such as those of Wang Shu and Rural Urban Framework, set path to explorations of building systems accessible to unskilled people. Further studies on regional rural housing and European building traditions made considerable impact on choices of materials and forms.

The Project

This project situates within an informal agricultural landscape that emerged from an unattended fenced construction site in a resettlement housing community of Chongqing, China. What began as a spontaneous claiming of territory for farming practices reveals deeper tensions between state-led industrialization/urbanization, rural/urban identities and residents’ old habits and lifestyle.

Drawing on interviews, photography, film, analysis of rural land use, and documentation of everyday spatial practices within the neighborhood and their expropriated homelands, my research situates the site as a microcosm of China’s rapid urbanization on industrial towns: removing aboriginal residents from the land of generational memories and placing them as bulk into modular urban housing that is designed for the convenience of industrial interests rather than for that of the people. I hence frame my project’s conceptual grounding through first-hand experience and wishes from the people and their

living traditions, with an inquiry to an alternative for communication with a broader spectrum of stakeholders including both users and the government.

The project arrived at the shape of a staged transformation of the site's condition, with its Northwest corner being a catalyst for change:

1. A piece of land near the gate is flattened and paved to give a square for dancing. And a simple shed is constructed by farmers and their families and placed upon an existing trench, providing a roof above a resting space and storage for tools;
2. An extension continues the roof structure and gives a mini room for indoor gatherings, with water collection installed and used for farming. In the meantime, materials from steel fences are also repurposed as roofing and other architectural members, and border conditions are therefore changed to form a more welcoming gesture to streets. Entry experiences are improved through implementing stairs and pavilions with flowerpots and seating area. This invites non-farming residents to claim and take care of the flowers, and give them space for leisure, which helps increasing their engagement with the site.
3. By engaging and negotiating with the state and farmers, an insulated, permanent building is constructed alongside previous structure, serving as half a tea house and half an adaptable venue space that overlooks the landscape. A leisure garden is also placed near the square, serving as an urban backyard for lingering that attracts people to the further agricultural landscape, and B. a starting point for future landscape transformations towards a leisure + agricultural park.

Answers to Graduation Manual Questions

What is the relation between my graduation project topic, your master track, and your master program?

My graduation project centres around the architectural discourse within the context of a highly regulated and top-down planned urban context in China, with the main target group being peasants, workers, and their families. It resonates with the studios vision on architecture responding to social issues and making designs with good intentions. It positions within the discussion on how to design a piece of architecture that is ethical, responsible and well-situated, and investigates possible tectonic solutions. It hence falls upon my track, Architecture. It involves an active argumentation on architecture, urbanism, social change, construction, and human-centred design, and therefore it is appropriate to place within the Msc AUBS.

How did my research influence my design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence my research?

I started by looking at Chinese local practices like Wang Shu and researched on their expression of materiality and construction method. Only later did I start to look at practices like Rural Urban Framework that have predominant focus on participatory construction and ecological design, thanks to Daniel's recommendation. From there, I started to look at construction methods and materials that can be easily used by unskilled people. By going towards this direction, I started to look at European traditional houses and reading Francis Ching's construction manuals.

How do I assess the value of your way of working?

My way of working dances between revisiting preliminary research materials, looking at references, and sketching, modelling. I sketched out design ideas while looking at site photos, and translated these sketches into 3d models. In the process I also discuss the project with classmates and colleagues to receive feedback. However, I would like to improve my skills on pushing design when idea is stuck. One good way I found is to "create something no matter what", whether it being a drawing, a 3d model, or a sketch that is vague.

How do I assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of my graduation?

The project situates in an urban context that witnesses a collision between rural population and industrial urbanization. This context is extremely common in China and some other developing countries. Issues like failed balance between urban expansion and residents' traditional lifestyle, disrupted everyday rituals, identity crisis of peasant populations in cities, are under-addressed and sometimes ignored by public discussions. By looking at these issues and developing a design response, it helps me to further understand the social problem and exercise on designing for these populations. My final outcome includes a design for a building that can be constructed by unskilled people, and a master plan for site transformation. And I thought about ways of negotiation and communication with different stakeholders. Therefore, this project may as well set an example of making change through architectural means in China's wider but similar rural-urban context.

Reflection

Through this project, I aimed to find a possible solution or proper response to the predicaments of China's rural-urban development where people are displaced. Learning from what I have done so far, I have begun to understand that people's engagement is crucial in making a voice. And that way,

architectural means become more than physical construct but putting out demands and collectiveness, hence pushing for a positive change in a bottom-up manner.

In the beginning, my approach was mainly mapping out objects on the site without considering specific existing conditions. The design idea went back and forth between “making pavilions”, “making two buildings at the sides”, “transforming the border”, and “using the corner as catalyst”. Daniel has provided useful references in both practice and literature, and guided me towards a direction that focuses more on existing conditions (such as the gate and trench). Although there are misalignments on design ideas, I have learned that designing as if people are going to really build it is an important mentality for my project. I arrived at a design where everything begins from building by hand upon the existing trench and expands the structure later.

The project came with intimacy as it relates to my grandparents’ neighborhood and their future living. This sets my position as an architect that values people’s needs and predicaments. With it situated in a very contemporary Chinese context that cannot escape from the influence of state power, it also urges me to rethink about people-government relationship and how to advocate for positive changes through bottom-up influence. This position was not formed before my participation in the studio, and it was only formed at a later stage where I see the possibilities of grassroots initiatives.

Previously, I predominantly laid my focus on architectural forms for large public and commercial spaces. For my bachelor’s graduation project, my design centered around intricacies of plans and facades, yearning for a breakthrough on my sculpting skills that creates “beauty”. This mentality accompanied me for many years, and I have gained positive takeaways from it and learned how to “decorate”. In Interiors Msc1 studio, I carried on that skill and produced a work highly related to this mindset. But it is also at that studio, I started to notice the interesting aspects of relating to nearby conditions and spatial qualities in banality.

My experience at Independent Group reinforced my context awareness. This awareness includes not only being conscious about physical site conditions, but also its intangible power relations between stakeholders. By researching professional practices that engages users at early stage (such as Rural Urban Framework and Shu Wang), and looking into traditional ways of living in the area, I started to understand architecture as a medium capable of tying people together in both the using and making of it. Through this lens, it pushed me to role of design not as an imposition but as a negotiation. Working with an informal landscape shaped by necessity, memory, and uncertainty of policy, I began to realize that I needed to calibrate what already existed instead of replacing them. There was a moment when I

looked at all my research materials, I noticed that the spatial intelligence of residents is in fact a form of collective authorship with its own logic and values, hence forging its own durability. This durability is perhaps a “stain” unnoticed by the government when they planned the community, as it would have direct impact on its ongoing urbanization progress – and it did: residents started to occupy land that is legally owned by the government and transforming soil that is supposedly attended by the developer. Yet, it is unerasable, as people live with it when together. To me, this durability is a device that may reverse the top-down urban transformation: gathering people is no less crucial than merely giving them a place to be. Through gathering, people form a collective to create something meaningful for the entire community, to construct a more powerful space that welcomes everybody, and to make a louder voice that speaks for themselves. Recognizing this shifted my initial mentality of creating a institutional complex (P2 idea) to one that hopes to engage residents more directly through hands-on construction and responds to their needs at different stages.

The change in perspective also gave me a better understanding of what architectural agency can be. Instead of focusing entirely on the final built outcome, I became more attentive to the process: communications between people, architects, and government, the rhythms of everyday use, and the social rituals that maintain a sense of place. Place-making (in this context, both as marking a territory and constructing a structure that becomes a ‘place’) has the power to create opportunities for dialogue and shared responsibility.

In summary, engaging with these complexities has reshaped my own position as an architect. I now understand my role as one that navigates and mediates between different forms of knowledge and power figures. This project taught me that meaningful architecture can arise from embracing contradictions and conflicts between informal and formal, planned and improvised, policy and lived experience. I will carry with a greater commitment to working with communities and users, listening to their needs and predicaments, negotiating with authorities and collaborating with them, and finding ways in which architecture can facilitate a more dialogical form of urban transformation.