



THE URBAN RETREAT

Methods & Analysis Bogota
Positions in practice

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REFLECTING ON THE THEME OF THE GRADUATION LAB

From the very beginning of my graduation project, I have approached both the research and the design as a reaction to the studio's two main themes; the development of a position towards the unfamiliar context of Bogotá, and the contribution to the notion of the 'commons'. These two themes can be seen as the underlying foundation of my graduation project, as they form the starting point and the guidance of my investigations. And although these two themes were constantly on my mind, I believe they never dictated any decisions or restricted the outcome in any other way. For me, they continuously served as a friendly reminder to focus my investigations to contribute to the overall aim of the studio.

As the subtitle of the graduation studio states, *Positions in Practice*, we were encouraged to form a position on intervening in the unfamiliar context of Bogotá. As a foreigner, can I fully understand the nuances of Colombian culture? Can I fully master the sensibilities of the local building practice? Or should I superimpose my western/european viewpoints upon the local situation? I started out with the ambition to try to understand the context I'm intervening in as thoroughly as possible. And although our two week on-site research contributed enormously to obtaining a greater understanding of Bogotá, and Cementerio Central in particular, I came to the understanding that for me it is simply impossible to fully comprehend this foreign context. So rather than trying to act as a local, I tried to use my ignorance and fresh perspective as an outsider to my advantage.

While I was exploring the Cementerio Central, and came across the countless occult rituals that were taking place there, I noticed that most Bogotanos looked upon this with great disapproval. They thought only of it as a group of misfits performing superstitious rituals at a derelict cemetery. On the other hand, I saw this cemetery as a place of exception. A place where the norms and values of the city did not apply. As a place where one can retreat from the everyday life and immerse oneself in this alternative reality. Because this kind of cemetery, with its complementary practices, simply does not exist in the Netherlands, I was able approach it without preconceptions and establish relations that otherwise could have remained unseen.

At the same time, the graduation studio encouraged me to contribute to the notion of the commons. I interpreted this as an invitation to envision in what way I could enhance the everyday public life of the Bogotanos. I started out with investigating how I could add something to the already vibrant public life of Bogota, but I quickly realized that we as europeans could learn something from Colombia rather than the other way around. Thus, I envisioned somewhat the opposite, to provide an escape, a retreat, to this vibrant and bustling city life. I envisioned a place where anyone and everyone could find shelter against a fate they all shared, the stressful city life. I tried to accomplish this by combining two common architectural figures, the market and the bathhouse. The result is a two-faced building, presenting an arcade with market stalls to the outside world, while housing an introverted bathhouse on its inside.

REFLECTING ON THE METHODOLOGY OF THE GRADUATION LAB

While the two above mentioned themes were prescribed by the studio, the way one would approach these two themes was left open to interpretation completely. The studio challenged us to find the appropriate methods and tools to investigate the chosen themes and subjects. This meant that the use of an unconventional method could sometimes bring unexpected results, like when we captured our observations from the fieldwork into a metaphorical illustrated narrative. And sometimes this freedom of methodology resulted in an endless search for the appropriate tools to apply to a certain investigation.

Towards the end of the design process however, I started to realize that I applied a much more distinct and specific methodology. I started looking at the project simultaneously from three particular points-of-views. Approaching the project from the outside in, approaching the project from the inside out, and approaching the project as a sequential procession.

The first point of view, from the outside in, has to do with the image that the project presents to the outside world, to its immediate surroundings. How does a passer-by experience the building? Is it perceived as open, inviting? Does it accommodate certain practices? And how does the building fit in with its immediate built environment?

The second point of view, from the inside out, has to do with the interior logics of the project. How is the space organized. How does daylight penetrate into this interior? And how much of the outside world does one experience on the inside?

And finally the third point of view, the project as a sequential procession, has to do with the relation between in- and outside. In what way are the exterior and interior of the building related to one another? How does one traverse between these two worlds? And how does one experience this transition?

It was by taking on these three points-of-views, and asking myself these questions, how I slowly but surely progressed towards the current state of my design proposal.

REFLECTING ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN

In my experience, the development of an architectural project is a constant back and forth between researching architectural theory and site conditions on the one hand, and developing a concrete architectural intervention on the other hand. This idea of a constant iterative process between research and design has proved to be a learning process. I could construct at this time a narrative of how my research has guided my design in a continuous and linear way, but in practice the opposite has been the case.

Many of my research endeavors prematurely came to an end. For example, I wrote my position paper on monuments and memorials, and I ended up with a design proposal for a bathhouse. Two topics that don't seem to have a lot in common. On the other hand, at one point I investigated monasteries with their enclosed cloister gardens for a short period of time. A couple of months later, I realized that my design had become a metaphorical Hortus Conclusus. While at first sight the investigation on monasteries seemed to be a dead end, it later proved to be fundamental to my project. Bob Ross would call this a 'happy little accident'.

Another example worth mentioning is the method we used to analyze Cementerio Central, after our studies of the cemetery during the field trip. As mentioned earlier,

we used the format of the metaphorical illustrated narrative to capture our findings. Scene by scene, this narrative depicted how someone traverses from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead. It was this sequential way of thinking which I would apply later in the process as a design method. The third point-of-view, the project as a sequential procession, is in a way the intrinsic counterpart of the metaphorical illustrated narrative.

After all, I came to the conclusion that the design process is inherently inefficient and a continuous stream of incidental findings. Unconsciously, every step along the way will have some influence in a later stage, regardless of the fact if the investigation was at that time seen as successful.

REFLECTING ON THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

Literary critic Andreas Huyssen suggested that our thinking and living temporality are undergoing a significant shift, as modernity has brought about a real compression of time and space. This suggested acceleration of the passage of time is most apparent in our contemporary metropolises, in which an ever-increasing percentage of the world's population is currently residing. This hasty pace that is present in the urban environment is greatly suppressing contemplative practices such as acts of reflection, reverie and imagination. Practices that require a slow state of mind of its practitioner. To be able to escape this hasty pace of the city, slow down, and appropriately engage in contemplative practices, an architectural challenge arises. As Nietzsche already remarked in the late 19th century "One day, and probably soon, we need some recognition of what above all is lacking in our big cities; quiet and wide, expansive places for reflection [...] buildings and sites that would altogether give expression to the sublimity of thoughtfulness and of stepping aside." It is precisely this type of place that I intended to construct.