

PROJECT ORBIT

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research question

How to activate monofunctional, homogeneous areas in Empire Village through architectural interventions that adapt to the context of the blocks, the present typologies and future plans of development?

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

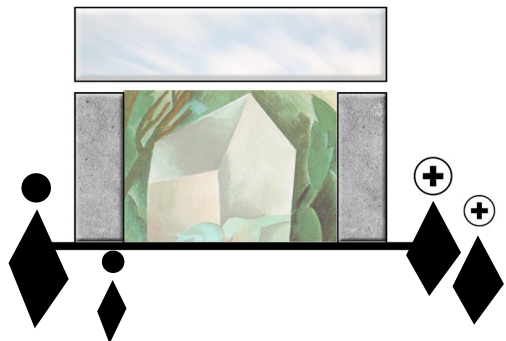
The success of a metropolis, is more than any other human settlement, depending on the sheer amount and people living in it, and the way they interact with each other. In New York, centuries of immigration gave the city a multi-cultural character. This led to exchanges of knowledge and skills, making New York the place of endless social and economic possibilities. Especially the city center, Manhattan, developed itself the last century in unprecedented ways. Rem Koolhaas calls this urbanistic ideology Manhattanism, which is the strong belief that hyper density is the basis for a desirable and modern culture. (Koolhaas, 1994)

Current statistics regarding usage of Manhattan pinpoint a paradox, caused by the rising segregation of city functions. Manhattan, the centerpiece of New York, is more and more becoming an island of exclusion, only meant for the rich and their cultures. People who are necessary to maintain the success of Manhattan are pushed to the outskirts of the metropolis, or move to less harsh cities. (Lu, W., & Tanzi, A. 2019) Primary uses in Manhattan get increasingly homogenous by commercial and touristic exploitations. Secondary uses can be facilities or amenities to support quality of the primary use. They make a city interesting for different user groups, but are also disappearing. This makes monofunctional and homogeneous areas in Manhattan, a source- and consequence of depleting user diversity, thus- a depleting social and economic resiliency. (Jacobs, 1961)



My fascination about these rather holistic issues made me question how it can be traced back within the built environment of the research site; The buildings and its relation to a grid structure. Therefore, my research question was:

How to activate monofunctional, homogeneous areas in Empire Village (Midtown Manhattan site 4) through architectural interventions that adapt to the context of the blocks, the present typologies and future plans of development?



The project is a masterplan to fundamentally change the closed-off relations between the residential area of Empire Village and the Medical complex of Manhattan. The project aims to make a realistic simulation about how the planned infrastructural upgrades by the NYC government will generate gentrification- and densification demands. By creating an open public space on a currently underused superblock, a gate way from the 1st to 2nd Avenue will be realized. The proposal of a subway station will create user density and -diversity to sustain social control. Secondary leisure and small commercial structures, that aim to retain the users will be distributed over the plot. The combination of these structures and greenery will revive the plaza..

The main program will entail the repurposing of two towers, unified by a new residential ring hovering over the plaza.. The towers will cluster and reserve space for future needs of the Medical complex, like student housing, visitor guesthouses and office space. The ring will provide housing, partly subsidized for medical staff, for different

family sizes and affordability levels, to ensure the livability potential of Empire Village. The total GFA comprises of the Masterplan 200.000m², of which 80.000m² is repurposed and 25.000m² are secondary uses. The other 95.000m² is formed by the ring.

ASPECT 1

The relationship between research and design.

In order to come up with sensible designs in the realm of architecture, one has to accept that understanding context is always the act of understanding the "dynamic". We often design for people in an globalized society, therefore we also design for different cultures. Culture is, as H. Herzberger puts it: People doing the same things, in different ways (Herzberger, H. 2019). It is imminent that this aspect alone has a big impact on how to make a program and how to divide and define space. For the contemporary architect-client relationship, the architect should therefore be able to place himself in front of a problem from different perspectives. These perspectives are defined by the ability to conduct research about context.

Research feeds the mind with a critical voice during design trajectories. It enables the designer to create a set of conditions that frame a testing environment for the design. Moreover, research can inspire. With an analytical mindset, the spatial result of other design trajectories can show how, or how not to- deal with certain parameters within the design. This academic way of thinking helps me to better define beauty in the built environment, because the embedded sensibility in buildings in regard to their context is better understood.

The education environment therefore simulates how real life architects operate. Not in order to force one into a field of thought, but to show how academic research skills can provide a factual rationale for design and a critical view on different scales.

ASPECT 2

The relationship between your graduation topic and your studio topic.

The studio topic revolves around Midtown, the corporate center of Manhattan. It is the biggest business district in the world. However, many buildings reached their lifespan and/ or are vacant. Therefore, the commercial value of the district is starting to decrease. Combined with increasing quantities

of (often expensive) housing projects, a shift is shown from what Midtown was and what New Yorker Midtown wants to be. The Rockefeller Center, Hudson Yards and other urban renewal projects in the 60's exemplify the attempts to reinvent and revitalize this part of Manhattan.

The graduation topic which has been introduced in this project description; activating monofunctional city spaces, is in line with the attempt to revitalize dense areas by large scale urban renewal. By a critical examination of the South-East part of Midtown, a design scenario is proposed which aims to make underused residential- and utilitarian areas a more integral part of Midtown. The project is based- and depended on the group vision that tackles overall monofunctionally by:

1. Project Inner-city: Binding and pedestrianize public spaces and create residential affordability in the city center (Daniel Samaniego Diaz, Wyman Wong);
2. Project Gateway: Creating transportation infrastructure to- and from the 2nd Avenue, overcome border conditions from the residential area to the medical complex and add secondary uses throughout the area to make the population use the public space (Yde Engelsma, Freija Rozendaal Yanjie Liu);
3. Project Waterfront: Increase environmental resiliency and enhance public amenities. (Zhaoxin Yu, Luyuan Shen)

There is a multitude of aspects that make the graduation topic challenging in the scope of the aim of Complex Projects. First of all, there are no known developments in Midtown where different architects made structures on different, spread out plots in the area to strategically enhance neighbourhood qualities. The challenge of this unknown way of urban renewal in this context, is that the grids structure of New York separates block as independent entities. Therefore, there is an intricate balance between the dependency and independency of each individual project for it to achieve its goal. Secondly, there is a technical challenge. The proposal of the residential ring in the project requires the high level understanding of engineering's principles in order for the building, and therefore the urban concept, to work. These principles are derived from integrating different structures, since making a cantilevered ring on this scale has not been conducted before. Integrating this structure within a housing lay-out

requires also a spatial awareness. To conclude, whereas the mentioned urban renewals in Midtown neglected the building environment context, or valued it as redundant, Project orbit aims to involve the existing building stock as a way to add quality to the overall project.

ASPECT 3

Research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio

Complex Projects acknowledges ever changing situations in dense urban environments. The studio aims to develop a clear narrative for design that incorporates many aspects and parameters based upon researching metropolitan clusters, before initiating the design process. The yet unknown building site, program, and goal at the commencement of the studio, is the reason for choosing this graduation studio. This strong relationship of research for design provides freedom of testing different research methodologies before presenting results.

One of the more valuable methods of research was the field trip in November. Understanding the distinction of the Empire Village research site in relation to the other research sites of Midtown. Moving horizontally from West to East showed the excluded character of the 2nd and 1st Avenue. Moreover, moving through the city from eye perspective shows the rather inhuman scale of the site better than skyline pictures on the internet.

Communicating to the tutors throughout the year revolved around product based design developments and a structured approach. This first seemed to directly contradicts the rather dynamic processes of the architect, because a step-by step approach implies there could be a manual written for design, which is frankly impossible. However, the officialness of the work gave the opportunity to critically review the work before presenting. This made the overall process more efficient, since there was a need to communicate with a conclusion based approach.

For me, this approach is substantiated by the following order:

1. Notice: Find a fascination by looking for irregularities, contradictions, paradoxes, etcetera;
2. Define: Try to understand what it is that makes

the topic interesting;

3. Elaborate: Research thoroughly by different viewpoints and various mediums;
4. Conclude: Make clear insights about what the data means for the project;
5. Discuss: A successful conclusion-based approach would usually incentivize to start talking about the topic more.

ASPECT 4

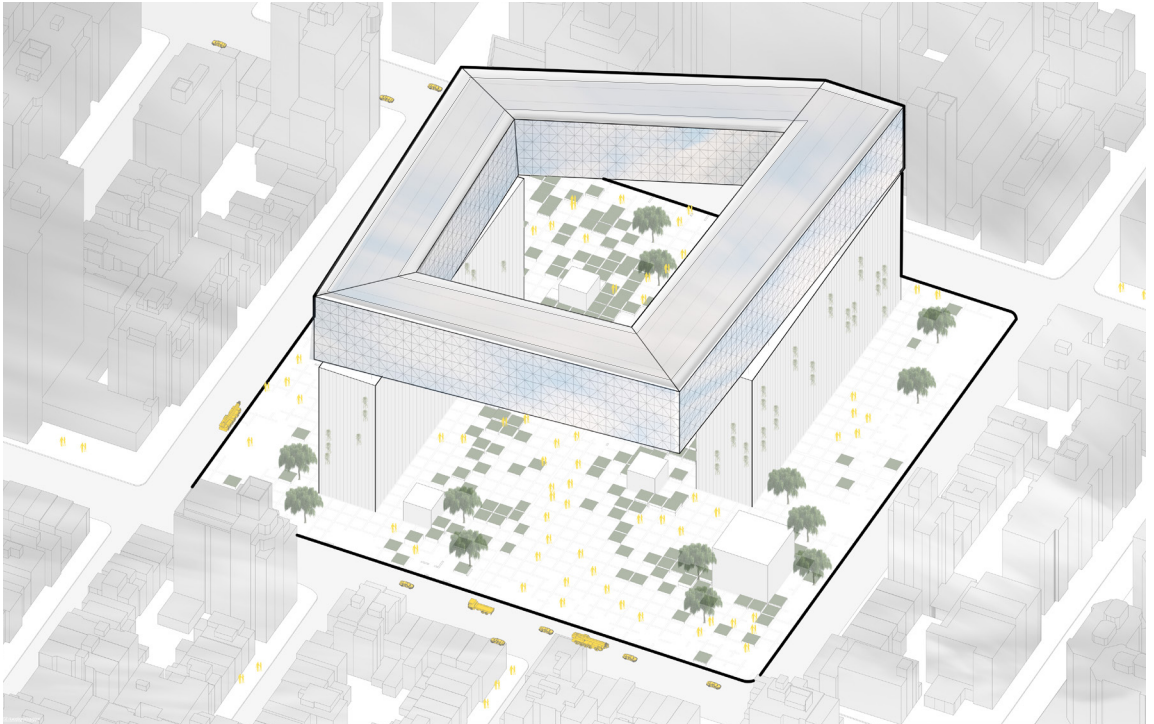
Relationship between the project and the wider social, professional and scientific relevance

As Jane Jacobs points out in her book: The life- and death of Great American cities, "I think by far the most important question - about planning cities is: How can cities generate enough mixture among use - enough diversity - throughout enough of their territories, to sustain their own civilization?" (Jacobs, 1961)

If this was up to Robert Moses, the most notorious urbanist in New York, the answer revolves all around large scale urban renewal without looking too much at the existing: "You can draw any kind of picture you like on a clean slate and indulge your every whim in the wilderness in levelling out a New Delhi, Canberra, or Brasilia. But, when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat axe!" – Robert Moses (Flint, A. 2009)

For this, firstly the project finds its professional relevancy in the concept of large scaled urban renewal itself. The proposed masterplan location is part of Moses's his "Title I Housing Project" and it was highly criticized to segregate minorities in New York. The issue with the concept of gentrification in general for the architect is that it can attract people, and as a reaction it can therefore also make people leave. Therefore, urban renewal projects, especially in metropolises, can imbalance city uses.

An example of this would be the highline along Hudson Yards. It was expected to draw in a couple of hundred thousands visitors a year, to revive the residential area with public life. Instead 6 million people every year walk over the highline. Housing prices have skyrocketed and livability of housing with windows next to the highline is reduced in such a way, that owners do not actually live in the real estate but use it for storing their capital. It stresses the importance that for big masterplans not only a top down view is required, but also a bottom up view from the users perspectives.



What does make the highline a success is the re-use of a nostalgic structure. This is in my view a paradigm shift in the way New York urban renewal has worked before.

As 75% of buildings in Midtown are made between 1900-1930, many are getting outdated in regards to contemporary programmatic needs. While these buildings are what separates the New York metropolis with any other metropolis in the world. The graduation project tries to do

urban renewal based on contemporary needs while preventing the alienating effect of an object that estranges itself from its context. The masterplan uses the enormous mass of the residential ring to shape a literal gateway from the 2nd Avenue to the Medical Center, creating a landmark in a rather underdeveloped area of Midtown. However, the masterplan is revolved around the quality of the public plaza as a void. The concept of the unbuilt is driven in value by Manhattanism itself, making large voids

an auto-monument. As New York will keep congesting and densifying itself, which it will, it will therefore make the massing of the ring less apparent as the main landmark, and the void the anchor point of the residential and medical neighbourhood.

ASPECT 5

Ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered during your graduation

As we have been thought to make the project viable within the realm of neo-capitalism and form follows finance, What the average New Yorkers likes to see, based on interviews of the field trip, is a society with more social awareness. These two worlds are very hard to bring together. An architect can definitely design to create interaction on the streets, but it is not up to us to determine who walk there. Making a more inclusive city should therefore be based on rational arguments and not on just personal values. Difficulties of

making these two worlds meet is the challenge. However, making a medical complex more reachable for the public, and housing for staff is important. The COVID-19 crisis shows that all medical staff who need to travel an hour in unhygienic public transport to a hospital is not sustainable and frankly unsafe. While elderly New Yorkers, which are overrepresented in the demographics of the residential areas of the 2nd avenue that find their current home situation to harsh and difficult to live in. In an individualistic society, the alternatives are care-homes, proven to be local epicenters of the spread of the virus. This exemplifies the importance of the Medical Complex in a city and how dependent New Yorkers are on its staff. This exemplifies that making a long-term successful metropolis is not just about money driven decisions, but also about people driven decisions.

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