

Reflection paper graduation project

‘The city of Cuba’

H. van Bennekom, K. Vollers, T. Asselbergs

Bram van Klink 4024923

Introduction

This reflection paper is about my graduation project called 'the city of Cuba'. The city of Cuba is a concept for a hybrid building housing a presidential center and a cultural center, which is placed in the historical former market building 'Cuatro Caminos' in Havana. The city of Cuba consists of the idea of a place that can be seen as a city, where the past and the present have a place and where locals and tourist encounter.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

As the complex projects studio aims for, the context on the larger scale plays a mayor role in the scope of the project. To maximize the impact of the architectural intervention on the larger social context, the design responds to solutions that arise on multiple scale levers, ranging from a national scale to a the building scale. On the building scale, the renovation of historical market building 'Cuatro Caminos' will be used to have a macro scale impact with a micro scale intervention. Every scale the project addresses will be explained accordingly.

The problems that are addressed on the national scale of Cuba are rooted in my personal fascination for the unique political situation in Cuba and the ambiguous opinions about said system. When thinking of Cuba, some see the somewhat romanticized image of the David versus Goliath perception many have of Cuba, while others see a totalitarian system that keeps its citizens hostage in an impoverished country. Fact is however that Cuba has been serving as an example in independence struggles in Africa and South America, serving as a resolute alternative for the modern day imperialist system. And even today, in the days of polarized politics and domination of capitalism, people don't hide their admiration for the unique position of Cuba. By focusing on preserving this unique position by using conception of a presidential center, a problem is addressed that exceeds even the national borders of Cuba.

The previously mentioned fascination for the unique Cuban atmosphere results in an tourism industry that has been growing increasingly since Cuba opened up for tourism halfway the nineties. Since then, the tourism industry grew into one of the most profitable economic branches in Cuba, and especially in Havana. However, the governmental interference, like introduction of a dual currency system, has led to a skewed economic relation between the tourism industry and the local industry. In current day Cuba, it is no novelty that a doctor or architect has eight times less income than a Cuban person who works in the tourism industry. In addition to that, tourism is very centralized in the city of Havana, enhancing the disconnection between the local economies of Havana and the tourists. The Cuatro Caminos building is located in a neighborhood that is neglected by tourism, despite the plurality of touristic qualities it has to offer. By targeting both the tourist and the locals, both aspects of problem is addressed.

The actual acupunctural intervention comprises a building called 'Cuatro Caminos', and historic market building right on the border of three neighborhoods. The historical significance and the intangible value that the building has for the residents of the surrounding neighborhood has been the most significant factor in the design process. Both the social, economic and spiritual value that the building had has been restored in the current design by creating shops, social program and introducing new public space.



The relation between the research and the design

The research conducted during the start of the graduation studio was rather broad, we were only given the location of Havana, plus two additional courses as an extra tool to start our research with. The group research for the P1 presentation was the phase during which everyone started to develop preferences for a design direction. My personal interest in history and the political context in Cuba and the analysis I did of the famous 'plaza de la revolution', gave me quite early the ambition of focusing on the unique political context of Havana. The phase after the P1 was used to research the political history of Cuba more on an individual level. The field research caused the first major change in defining the project; instead of wanting to design a symbolic building on the Revolutionary square I shifted to an old market building in the heart of the city of Havana. The field trip strengthened me in my ambition to work with the political background, but it also made me reconsider the purpose of the project. Interviews with people made clear that Havana is not primarily in need of another big monumental gesture; the building should primarily be for the Cuban people. As I came to grasp with this change of approach during the design process, the research I conducted obviously changed. The first part of the research focused on theory about how to express political ideologies in buildings, whereas the second part of the research focuses field trip-based and precedent analysis-based research on how to create a building that accommodates program for Cuban cultural expression.

Failing the P4 twice pushed me to re-evaluate the research done earlier, which led to a better understanding of both the history of the market as the current situation in the adjacent neighborhood. Consequently, the design changed considerably in a later stage of the process. The program for the presidential center became less prominent and served more as a catalyst to create a social economic impulse in the area. Hence the symbolic meaning changed and resulted in a more humble design than previously. As my understanding for how the neighborhood grew, the building became more and more focused on place making for the activities that already took place in the neighborhood. Consequently, the design relies heavily on anecdotal research done during the field trip, reports about the needs in the neighborhood of El Cerro and correspondence with a local architect.

The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework

The chair of complex project aims to 'investigates settlements around the world that are ambiguous in their development and embedded in the process of globalization'. As I wrote earlier in this paper, the main focus of this project is preserving a unique part of Cuban history that is presumably threatened by a very imminent globalization wave now the country up to the United states. In that sense the design quite literally reacts to the theme of globalization and the specific Cuban context; it responds to a unique piece of culture being threatened.

Furthermore, our tutors during the p1 and p2 period gave is the additional theme of using the concept of a hybrid building. Initially this caused more headache than that I saw it as an opportunity. Analysis of the concept of presidential center, a concept that formed the basis for the first ideas for a design, showed that a hybrid function is actually an necessary addition to

the concept of a presidential library. Eventually, designing a hybrid building that combines the concept of a presidential center and a cultural center became the main theme in the design.

However, our specific design studio offered us tools that were provided to us through additional courses called 'Water Management' and New Urban Questions'. Both themes were relatively informative, but played merely a minor role in the design. Reflecting on the time spent on both courses before the P2, I would have preferred to use that time for a more profound analysis and research on the typologies of the chosen program.



The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

I followed the first part of the methodological line of the studio, which played a huge role in my approach for the design project. During the first phase, we did a group analysis and designed a master plan based on this analysis. Through 'acupuncture' designs as part of this master plan, we built a basis for a profound field research. During this phase I learned the most about how to approach the project I desired to make.

Prior to the field trip, I had a rather top down idea about how the graduation project should be like. The field trip changed my outlook on the project considerably, and made me research into Cuban culture instead of the bombastic revolution monument I pictured prior to the field trip. The collages, produced before the field trip, illustrate the different approach.