

Maciej Moszant

Reflection

1. Introduction

The main reason for which I chose the B&T studio was its interest in the socio-political context of the built environment that I have found in the center of my fascinations when studying architecture. Moreover, I found the theme of the New Silk Road particularly grasping as it deals with the sites that, having been at the outskirts of the general interest, now are expected to gain considerably greater importance in the (near) future. The choice of the studio turned out to be well suitable to my interests and so far fulfilled my expectations. The studio's emphasis on the theoretical as well as conceptual aspects of architectural practice, at the same time not disregarding widely understood context, has formed my own intellectual priorities when thinking about a project. Moreover, despite online teaching necessity, the variety of additional side activities (like film projections or guest lectures) enriching our (students) understanding of the cultural/social contexts in which we design, was launched. These were delivering a great deal of inspiration as well as introduced interesting references from different art disciplines.

Several research methods which I had used for my investigations in the research phase were still working effectively during the design phase (ex. retrieving informal information from video-sharing and social media platforms, exploring terrain via satellite imagery); however, other ones (mappings, physical models of border conditions aspects) turned out to be most supportive to the certain stage of the design process. I perceive the role of the latter ones especially crucial in the transitional moment between research and design - acting as initial triggers, these allowed me to develop more specified and suitable design methods for pursuing my evolved concept. A similar role played the design strategy I have previously taken. Being first an initial, general outline it eventually, after focusing on particular aspects (obscurity, exchangeability, fluidity, anonymity) transformed into more limited, yet – in my opinion – considerably sharper in terms of conceptual qualities, proposal, that I am fully dedicated to when developing it as my graduation design. Regarding additional methods that emerged after the research phase, on the way of the concept materialization, the use of a specially crafted generative algorithm as a supportive design tool should not be omitted, as its role is highly considered in relation to the narrative of the project.

2. The relationship between research and design.

The relationship between research and design is most well reflected in the choice of the materials and construction techniques introduced to the project. These were derived from possibly thorough observation of the everyday landscapes emerging from a multitude of – very often - brief, non-coherent, non-professional, videos and photographs being voluntarily unveiled by regular actors of studied contexts. Scrutinized study of a considerable amount of these materials allowed to paint vibrant - yet without any doubts subjective - picture reflecting a set of materials and techniques being available and commonly in use at the project's site (often distant) proximity.

Such “Online-travelling”, limited to the use of the exploring vehicle delivered by satellite imaginary or social media, implies a multitude of occasions to, even unconsciously, fall into clichés, that afterward assembled inevitably create a rather deformed vision of the studied cultural context, what usually leads to instinctive, illusory understandings and abstract extrapolations. Despite that, aware of such consequences of distant investigations, my design approach, rather than trying to exactly render the objective (if such even exist) cultural ‘spirit’, position itself as attempting to embrace this inevitable condition of research-on-distance, and permits itself building on what was actually (selectively) perceived.

Another domain of the project that was substantially affected by the research work is its conceptual substance. The very initial core of the concept in its present shape could only appear in the result of the synthesis of multiple aspects that had emerged during the research phase; as well as its further selection and (re-)formulation according to my particular interests and fascinations that correspond to the larger scope of architectural practice in the geopolitical, cultural and social realm of today. Looking retrospectively, this process of (again subjective) reformulation was effectively well supported by the series of abstract mappings and physical models, without which, in my opinion, the concept would not emerge in its desired shape. This way, the final aspects-keywords of the later concept were formed: exchangeability, obscurity, anonymity, fluidity. During the transitional moment between the research and design phase, these played a considerable role acting as, abstract yet helpful benchmarks, that placed foundations for the narrative which was gradually growing around these. Such method of sculpting the design concept - by reflecting the semantic quality of accurately pre-formed keywords in the spatial materialization, which becomes sharper and more specified with each iteration – has appeared to be well paired with the feedback that regularly accompanied the process. The variety of perspectives that were delivered during multiple feedbacks with different tutors was not only abundantly feeding the design with new inspirations, but also, and primarily, has acted as a reflecting device in which the concept could critically reflect. The act of presenting has also required to formalize the abstract ideas in an accurate and suitable language expression, which paired with the afterward received feedback has considerably helped to establish a clear line of inquiry, and then effectively (re)form another concept iteration.

3. The relationship between graduation project topic, the studio topic, Architecture track, and MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences programme.

The phenomenon of cross-border smuggling through the Iran-Pakistan border appears to find its vivid relevance regarding the socio-political emphasis that sits in the core of ‘Emergent Border Conditions in Eurasia’ scope of interests. The gradually changing nature of the border security and, in consequence, the smugglers’ need to constantly adapt to it, creates another emerging condition within the larger context of the new silk road in Eurasia. As a result of larger (geo)political scope, the evolving reality creates new tangible consequences for the local population. This relation between global causes and locally visible effects, of which Balochistan appears as a perfect embodiment, is another highly relevant aspect for the studio interests. In a broader sense, such radical in their political and social complexity sites, hold important potential for dealing with uncommon conditions that may alter one’s conventional, western-based vision of the built environment in general.

4. Research method in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, the scientific relevance of the work.

The already described research method evolved both from previous experiences of researching on the distance and as a result of pursuing the exercises and side activities that the studio proposed. Both “modi operandi-” and “corner-” workshops, pursued in a transitional moment of the research/design phase, allowed me to materialize abstract ideas and became, effectively, an important factor in forming research methods that I then found most suitable to my investigations. However, it was the initial, group work part of the research phase, during which the cooperation between other fellow students delivered me a great amount of general knowledge concerning Gwadar and Balochistan region, that then allowed me to consciously limit the territorial and intellectual scopes of my interest.

Regarding the scientific quality of the project, the research methods that I have eventually pursued allowed me to explore the non-formal, less conventional techniques and use of materials that draw either, from the vernacular culture of small desert communities or being a splinter product of globalization and politics. At the same time, regarding pragmatic and environmental matters, the emphasis was lying on using materials that are recycled, widely accessible in this particular context, and relatively easy to deal with. Therefore, in a technological layer of the project, instead of maintaining the random relationship between each other, the high- and low- tech materials and techniques were tightly juxtaposed to obtain unprecedented, original design quality. Effectively, this assemblage of modern and traditional delivers a proposal that can be perpetuated in similar geopolitical conditions.

5. Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional, and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.

The project, being a spatial formalization of the studied cross-border smuggling phenomenon acts as a commentary on the present condition of the relationship between Balochs and the state colonial-like rules extracting region's natural resources at the same time leaving the local population economically abandoned. The project operates on the notions of obscurity and confusion as the strategy to maintain smugglers' functioning and at the same time regain a sense of adherence to their primeval territory after being marginalized in their homeland. Rather than imposing a ready-made, fixed, and site-specific solution, the project raises a proposal of the systemic spatial strategy that can be introduced in various locations along the border and evolving through time alongside with the smugglers' needs resulting from trade intensity in a particular area. Such an approach to the design practice attempts to contradict the stereotypical, traditional understanding of an architect as a demiurgic creator imposing, often in an arbitral top-down manner, an intervention that may turn out to be completely non-paired with the user's characteristics. Instead, the project is meant in a spirit of a manual for a local non-qualified (construction-wise) population.

In the wider social framework, the project, by raising a proposal of 'obscurity reserve' attempts to raise a critique of today's globalized strive for total transparency and lack of anonymity, especially regarding digital worlds in which the global society functions more and more intensely, where even such peripheral locations like Balochistan do not stand for exceptions. The ascending development

of surveillance-related solutions in the built environment, as well as voluntary public exposure of everyday life in social media or video-sharing platforms, raise the inevitable risk of being used improperly by the state if one maintains an unfavorable political or economical attitude towards particular social groups. Yet controversial, the possibly evoked discussion about the role of surveillance in the global realm appears especially important regarding still ongoing tendencies to treat the widely-understood control as the main arm against terrorism, pandemics, or criminal activities in general.

6. Ethical issues and dilemmas encountered in doing the research, elaborating the design; potential applications of the results in practice.

Smuggling practices in the official state's narrations have usually been recognized as unequivocally illicit. Regarding my project, such commonly spread narration naturally situates its addressees - the Balochs smugglers – in a criminal light, therefore might have exposed me to an ethical dilemma. However, the larger political context, namely: important under-investment of the region's social infrastructure; colonial extractive attitude of the state towards Balochistan territory as well as the neglected local population, delivered me a consciousness of the fact that among Balochs smuggling is considered to be an entirely legitimate practice that for years have been standing for one of their main source of income. Indeed, this 'illegal' practice is forced to act as the state's replacement in creating jobs and generating economical flow, and in fact maintaining life in these hostile conditions. Regarding today's societies of the western world, which are more and more deprived of trust in politicians and disappointed with the formula of the neoliberal capitalistic states, the example of standalone, bottom-up economies tailored by Balochistan population poses an intriguing opposition to the official trade practices and allows to re-perceive a common understanding of economical (and therefore political) independence.