

REFLECTION

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How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

Pre-phase - Brainstorming

The brainstorming phase for my graduation thesis began in MSc 2, the second semester of my master's program. My third mentor was my supervisor for the course 'History Thesis' at the time. There, I had already laid the foundation for exploring the history of Oujda and how the neighboring countries, particularly Algeria, have influenced the city architecturally and urbanistically. This made it clear that he could be an excellent third mentor for my thesis since he already had an affinity for my topic. We discussed this during our previous supervisions. The personal connection and experiences I have with the city motivated me to further investigate the topic in MSc 3/4. It was now my task to find a suitable graduation studio that could provide me the freedom to continue with this topic. I soon realized that the 'City of the Future' graduation studio could enable me to experiment and address my personal fascination and frustration.

Start of the graduation studio - Getting started

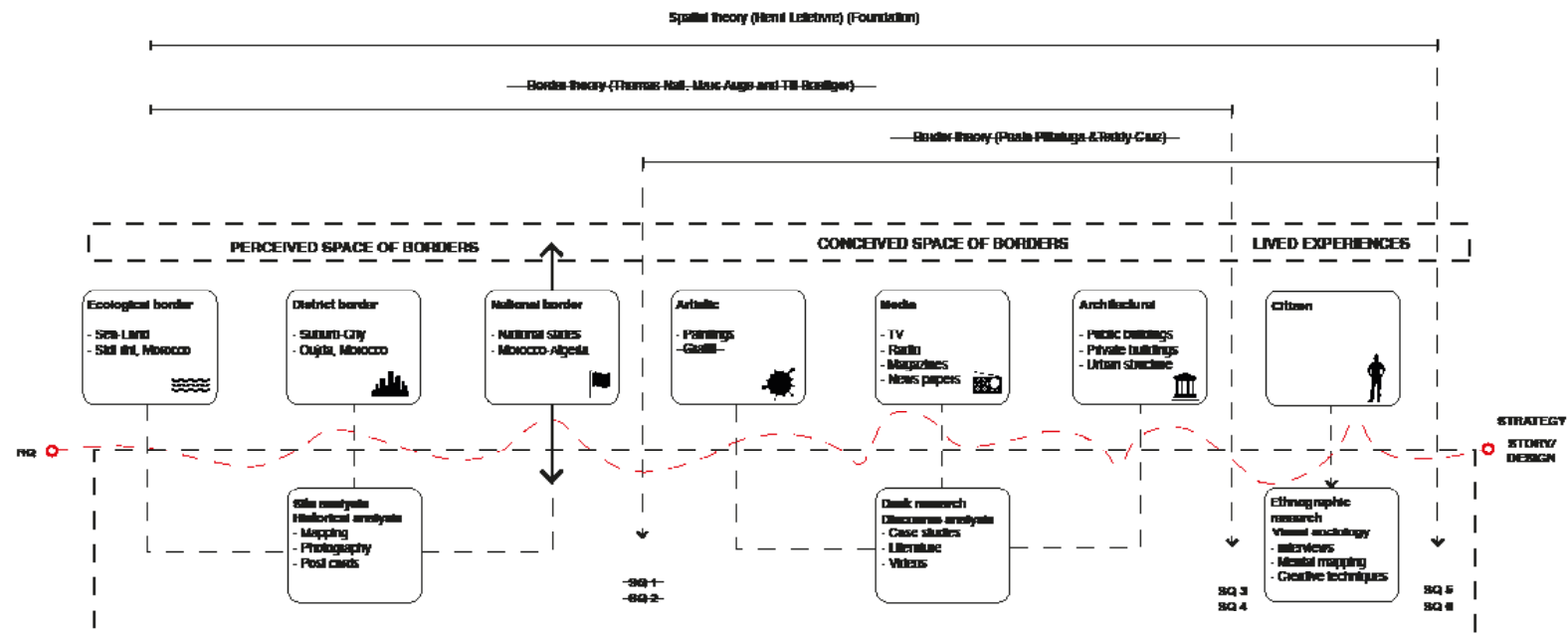
The time has come; I have begun my graduation year, with the goal of helping my beloved city in Morocco achieve a greater purpose - towards a bigger geopolitical move, which is opening the borders. With much enthusiasm and ambition, I am writing a research plan. However, the result is an overly ambitious proposal to soften the Algerian-Moroccan border through architecture. I wondered how on earth I was going to achieve that. I had no idea and became a bit desperate because I couldn't visualize the outcome of the project or which direction it should go. The reactions from other students and family members didn't really help either: "Are you going to build a tunnel under the border?" As a result, I started to drift away from my original topic, and that's how I went into P1.

Between P1 and P2 - Turning point

I knew that until P2, I needed to find a way to give my research more direction since it could still go in any direction. My tutors were a crucial link in this who gave me the necessary motivation to trust the process. Together, we looked at how to make the research more specific and clear. An important takeaway is that the thought process is strongly characterized by the leading theme (inspiration source). You can compare it to a strong fascination for something that you do not want to deviate from. The leading theme for my thesis, in this case, was the contestation of the border communities. By using this as an inspiration, I soon realized that the focus was on transient activities that could challenge the authorities.

This was a critical moment in my graduation project, where I was able to refine the problem statement, research questions, and methods. The way I did this was by documenting every feedback session with my tutors in OneNote. Usually, after a feedback session with one of the tutors, I take a moment (most of the time, on the train back to home since I have to travel for 2 hours). I paid extra attention to how the tutors talked about my project and what their perceptions were of my ideas. This helps me phrase some sentences much more clearly when talking about my project. Although each mentor had a specific interest in discussing my project, I feel that these diverse interests were like missing puzzle pieces that strengthened my project.

I also found out that conducting the research in three separate levels (conceived, perceived, lived space), as well as analysing three different types of borders, didn't work out for me. Instead, I approached the levels as integrated research tools and focussed on what impact the national border had on its surroundings.



Between P2 and P3 - Looking abroad

After P2, I felt a moment of mental calmness. I still didn't know exactly how everything would work, but I had a solid concept to continue with. Before starting the graduation studio, I knew I wanted to create something special for the final project and address a problem that is close to me and my family. This resulted in a perfectionist attitude as a designer, aiming to create the best possible design that I could look back on with pride. However, this led to slow design decisions and stagnation during the P2/3 phase. Additionally, I sometimes found it challenging to obtain relevant photography and postcards for my research, particularly when they were written in French, which hindered my workflow.

The way I tackled both problems, was to reach out to people living near the border in Morocco and its surroundings. I was fortunate to have the advantage of having many family members living near the border who could help me translate the photos. Some site photos were taken by my family members since I couldn't be on-site during my study. Furthermore, by asking them about the problems they encounter, how they currently live, and what they would like to see in the future, I was able to establish the initial design principles. Lastly, I enlisted a "fourth mentor," an architecture professor from Rabat, whom I met during the study trip to Morocco in MSc 2. I had a 2.5-hour feedback session with her via Google Meet, which gave me a different perspective on the history and livability of Oujda. Overall, this helped me with the foundations of the design decision-making.

Between P3 and P4 - back on track

I have completed P3, and the feedback is clear: I need to start producing 'architectural' drawings at full speed. I had 10 weeks to create a design, and I knew that doubting my design choices was not an option. At this moment, I realized that if I had started the design earlier, I could have achieved much more. However, I needed the period of struggling between P2 and P3 to get to the core and I don't regret spending more time on the research which gave me a solid foundation for design decision-making.

Towards P5 - Finalising

The final part of the graduation period will be used to refine the proposed strategy:

- Creating 3D diagrams of the context explaining the incremental growth of the nodes and the settlements.
- Further development of the plans and sections
- Further development of the moving market in terms of design and agenda
- Creating visual impressions

- Creating a masterplan - zooming out again and trying to understand the strategy on a regional scale and what these community stations in between mean in terms of urban sprawl.

The relationship between the graduation topic, the studio topic, the master track, and the master programme.

City of the Future is a multidisciplinary graduation studio focusing on matters like accessibility and social inclusiveness, which my graduation project addresses. The studio has enabled me to experiment and tackle my personal fascination and frustration - the contestation and separation of border communities along the Algerian-Moroccan border. This topic's multidisciplinary nature requires a studio that explores various areas within the built environment, maintaining a holistic perspective that integrates architecture, urban planning, technology, and landscape architecture.

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

The research influenced my design by revealing the realities of life among border communities, since they don't perceive the border as an obstacle, but rather as an opportunity for economic growth through informal trade. This inspired me to contest the authorities by introducing growing settlements along an abandoned railway that once connected Algeria. However, utilizing the abandoned railway required a complete grip of the existing tracks, including the history of the track, maintenance, and other aspects. Also, a train track controls things very much because of its anchored nature, so I also had to explore less controlling infrastructures as well.

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

The strategy could influence policy decisions or lead to new regulations to 'soften' closed borders or reopen them in the long term. The quality of life of the border communities would improve by recognizing the informal activities of the border communities and giving them a place to continue their activities. It would also promote a common understanding of borderscapes in general and not only by the locals. All in all, the strategy seeks to raise awareness of borderscapes and their opportunities in space, society, and culture. It encourages the collaboration between the authorities and communities to strive towards a sustainable future around borderscapes.

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

Although the project focuses on Oujda as the context, the findings and recommendations from my thesis can be applied to other geographical locations, particularly those with similar border issues or urban challenges. Furthermore, the project introduces a strategy that can inspire or guide others in the field. The train and the abandoned track are in this case used to move the market. However, the concept is open to other transportation means. This way, the strategy can be scaled up or down to larger or smaller areas, or to different types of borders (cultural, economic, etc).