

Inhabiting Bodies and Territories: On Spatiality and Materiality of Migration

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

Aligned with the studio's overarching goal to decipher emerging complexities along the New Silk Road, my project delves into the intricacies of migration as a pivotal spatial and temporal process. Specifically focusing on the journey through Panama, it investigates the dynamic interplay between migrating bodies and the transitory territories they traverse. By emphasizing the nuances of this movement, my proposed graduation project aligns with the studio's focus on the "transient" nature of emerging spatial conditions resulting from global economic, ecological, and sociopolitical shifts.

The migrant experience serves as an opportunity to critically examine the static references deeply ingrained in our architectural approaches. By embracing the tactile, body-centric ethos of migration, the project contributes to ongoing discussions about the relationship between space and body within the Architecture Master track.

In exploring the potential design outcomes arising from the discourse on body and territory, it is crucial to acknowledge the multi-scale nuances inherent in such conditions. The multi-disciplinary nature of the master program provides a valuable framework for identifying and comprehending diverse strategies adopted at different scales, aligning with the multifaceted investigation embedded in the project.

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

The initial research phase of the project established the triad of Space, Time, and Body as a foundational framework for my investigation into the process of migration. This triad provided a basis for selecting particular phenomena that were examined through literary references in preparation for the theoretical paper and through several mapping exercises. These efforts facilitated a more focused study of the area under investigation, refining both the scope and scale of the design approach.

Of the spaces traversed by migrants in Panama, the Darién rainforest was selected as a prime arena for the design as a space that presents the furthest departure from the commonplace landscapes of everyday life. Consequently, further research was necessary to understand the natural and operational systems of the land to initiate the design process.

However, due to the lack of existing information and the relatively unexplored nature of the region, the research process extended into and became intertwined with the designing phase. This fostered an interdependent relationship between research and design that eventually enabled a more experimental approach to the interventions. The findings facilitated the identification of natural features and processes present in the rainforest, which were then incorporated, alongside the body of the migrant, as spatiotemporal strategies for the design.

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

From the onset, I maintained a mindset free from preconceptions, open to where the topic would lead me and trusting in the explorative method encouraged by the Borders & Territories studio. This enabled me to push the topic beyond the conventional tendency to focus on the departure and arrivals points of migration, but rather investigate the spatial and temporal experiences during its transitory process.

This approach led to the uncovering of various themes, all of which were curated under the framework of Space, Time and Body by the end of the first semester: Body in Space and Time that discusses the systematic control of space and time at relationalities along the way that impacts the mobility of the migrating body; Space and Time in Body that reconceptualizes these relationalities as dynamic settings which push migrants to practice spatial and temporal homemaking; Embodied Timespace where the intersubjective nature of this interaction between the body and the territory is highlighted, which become as a form of reciprocal inhabitation.

The materialization of this inhabitation is through imprints enacted by both parties.. The project became an organizational force that accumulates these imprints into architectural spaces that mediate the exchange between the body and territory, dubbing the role of the architectural intervention as a Housekeeper.

Three different typologies of accumulation were determined upon various attempts. Each typology represents varying time conditions spent in a certain space: The Fountain, hosting migrants for the shortest amount of time, serves as a momentary resting space. It utilizes groundwater to provide a relatively clean resource for the migrants. The Camp hosts migrants overnight, utilizing the river's morphology to provide safe bathing settings and using flash floods to flush out unclaimed items onto catchments. The Cemetery, providing a permanent resting ground for migrants, is the most intense out of the three typologies. It utilizes rainwater from surface runoff to provide basins for the cleansing of the bodies of the dead. At the launch of the design phase many attempts were made to consider how the imprinting and housekeeping processes operate to construct and deconstruct the architectural interventions.

Recognizing the Cemetery as the most intensive form of imprint, I selected it as the key intervention to encapsulate a template for the other two interventions. Reflecting on this decision, I acknowledge the importance of initiating the conceptualization of the other two interventions earlier in the process to develop them more thoroughly.

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

This graduation project aims to challenge the misconceptions about migration being a timeless and spaceless phenomenon. It argues that space and time are integral concepts to comprehending the process. It aims to redefine migration by considering it as an essentially architectural process, unveiling the profound ways in which a territory shapes and is shaped by this movement of bodies.

The project problematizes the tendency to discuss migration on an extra-large scale as a mere exchange of numbers between two geographies, often losing sight of the individual crosser's experiences, stories, and identities. While aware of this issue, my mapping exercises revealed that the homemaking practices of migrants in the Darién rainforest are haunted by the perpetual fear of death, thus oriented around survival rather than the creation of spaces of belonging.

The Darién rainforest emerged as a space that is both for all migrants and for none, simultaneously resisting personalization to the extent that it did not necessitate the development of this project on a one-to-one scale. Instead, the conceptualization of the migrant body transcends the individual crossing in a particular period in time. Thus, the body represents a continuum of bodies that have and will transverse the territory.

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

The value of my project's transferability lies in its ability to provoke critical discussions and inspire further exploration of migration within the field of architecture. Throughout the development of this project, I engaged in conversations with peers and tutors who often described the subject matter as daring or taboo. Despite these challenges, I was committed to presenting the stark realities experienced by migrants during a specific state in their lives, in fact, many end up repeating the journey due to asylum application rejections.

Migration is a prevalent phenomenon, and the experience of movement is often traumatic, involving injuries, starvation, and death. By addressing these harsh truths, my project aims to serve as an invitation for others to discuss this topic within architectural discourse, emphasizing the humanitarian role of architecture in serving people.

Beyond the subject matter, the project also showcases innovative technical approaches to working with inaccessible contexts. It creatively navigates the limitations of what can be implemented with minimal resources and manpower. The project demonstrates how minimal interventions can have significant impacts, organizing the physical imprints into architectural intervention that accumulates and self-destructs over time.

6. How do you overcome the inaccessibility of your location of interest?

Unable to visit the Darién campsites and conduct one-on-one conversations with migrants, I instead referred to available recounting/documentation of the journey online. Considering that the popularity of this track is fairly new (since 2021 when the initial surge of the movement happened), there was not much content to analyze. I would categorize my references into two: curated or personal.

Curated sources included news articles, news footage, and documentaries that interpreted migrant narratives through the lens of journalists' concerns. These provided structured and edited insights into the migration experience. On the other hand, personal sources came from social media, particularly YouTube, where content creators documented their own journeys. These videos offered an unfiltered and unbiased view of the experiences, showing the raw realities of the walk.

To thoroughly understand the intricacies of the physical conditions in this unmapped location, I meticulously analyzed and compared all these references. This exercise was key to translating what is presented as an abstract movement in a specific manner.

7. What limitations did you face whilst developing the project?

The struggle of understanding the physical environment extended to finding a method to represent the immersive experience of being in the context. I resorted to combining abstract architectural lines with experiential collages extracted from the references mentioned above. Both

are combined on cyanotype prints, a technique used by botanicas and architects of previous centuries. The prints are made on translucent and opaque layers used to combine multiple layers of drawings to evoke the passage of time. I plan to experiment further with this technique in hopes of incorporating my Modi Operandi 3 results to capture the tactility of the bodily exchange in this multiscale set up.