

P4 Reflection

Valentin Zech | 4587979 | 17/05/23



Explorations

Going into my graduation I wasn't so sure about becoming an architect. I enjoyed studying it *almost* all of the time, especially the less restricted masters programme. Some experiences during my internships as well as in uni-courses, however, really made me doubt the bigger questions: Would I feel relevant/fulfilled enough? Who would I want to be as an architect? Am I willing to accept the often-precarious working conditions? And: What do those doubts mean for my final year at university?

So when I heard about Explore Lab, I knew immediately that I had to do *that*. If I wanted to make my graduation count – both in an academic and personal sense – I had to start with a blank sheet of paper and give myself a year's worth of time to explore. Explore architecture, explore a topic and place I care about deeply, and explore myself as a designer. So more than anything else, that was my goal: to explore my project while exploring myself, taking as many moments as possible stand still and reflect, in a quest to – maybe – find answers to some of my most burning questions..

Separations

Along the way, I came across a few dualities that I reconsidered during the graduation:

Doing/Thinking: I wanted to use every chance this year to stand up from my laptop and explore in a more active, hands-on way. It started with the research trip to Austria, continued with hand-binding and building research booklets, and it was the major working method in the second, more design-heavy phase of the project. By striving for physical 'results' for the presentation moments, I really set myself up for *thinking by doing* rather than the other way around. Fascinating to me was that not only the perception of the design process changed, but so did the results. There is something about the slower process of *making* things that unlocks a lot of subconscious thoughts and realizations along the way. And suddenly, after a few built experiments, the solution becomes apparent almost by itself when you look at what is there. Rather than following a "conceptualizing-then-producing" process, this is a continuous process of making and reflecting – a very intuitive and interwoven way of working that was entirely new to me. I enjoyed working like that a lot.

Nature/Culture: It doesn't happen so often that a project actually does something to the way you look at the world around you. Originally, I was fascinated with where I come from, the romantic memories of a beautiful mountain landscape. I thought I was going to think of some kind of exciting alternative to skiing. But the idea of that romantic nature turned out to be more thought-provoking than anticipated. It has shown to be tied fundamentally to the most pressing questions of our times: Who are we on this planet and how can we deal with a changing climate? Introducing the idea of all things being hybrids, never all natural or all cultural, was a fundamental shift in my perception and went far beyond my architectural sustainability exercises in earlier projects.

Research/Design: The line between research and design was always awkward to me. Research is what you do first and then you start designing. Right? Research is data and numbers, impossible-to-contradict-conclusions. Design is people and place, feelings, impressions, sounds, images and experiences. Right?

During the graduation I was given a lot of space to discover what the relationship between the two is for me and what that means for my personal design process. If I look at the results now, I see in how many areas the design and research almost fully overlap; to the point that they are difficult to distinguish from one another. This makes for the outcome to be a project that tells a story – about our role within nature and possible ways to fix our relationship with our planet – that is a communication tool by itself; beyond the architectural value of plans, sections, and perspectives. In my opinion, this makes the project much stronger than if research and design had been two entirely separate processes.

Frustrations

A year of working on a project entirely by yourself is also tough at times. Especially in the first half I often struggled to find a sense of direction in the huge cloud of ideas and thoughts. At times, you feel completely lost.

It's good that you are not entirely alone, but there are two (and later three) tutors to help you find the right path. This was extremely important for me – sometimes just for an inspiring and energizing conversation, other times for the right critical questions or reassuring comments. I felt very spoiled with my tutor-team; all three of you granted me lots of autonomy and freedom in exploring whatever I had come up with, but asked the right questions when it was necessary. There were definitely a few major turning points along the way, where the input from you really made me reconsider some of the choices I had made. Those can feel like setbacks in the moment, but looking back I am thankful and think the project would have been way less strong without them. Thank you all three for the inspiring, educational, and pleasant sessions!

Into the future..

I want to spend the weeks after my P4 making the last of many photo-essays in this project: the 13 frames of walking through the laboratory-landscape I conceptualized and designed partly. Also, since the P5 will be more of an exhibition format I will spend some time designing and setting that up, too.

And then? Will I become an architect? Did I find the answers to all the questions I had at the beginning of the year? Well, I guess most of them are the continuous kind of questions that only ever get answered little by little as you go, never really all the way. Nonetheless, I found a way of working that I enjoy a lot. Hopefully whatever I'll do next will involve a lot of hands-on working, intuition, and storytelling.

I found it more suitable to structure my reflection like this, but the questions posed in the graduation manual were in the back of my head when writing. They should all be answered sufficiently.