

# P5 REFLECTION PAPER

**Lincoln Flex** - How Can Architecture Weather the Storms of Crisis?



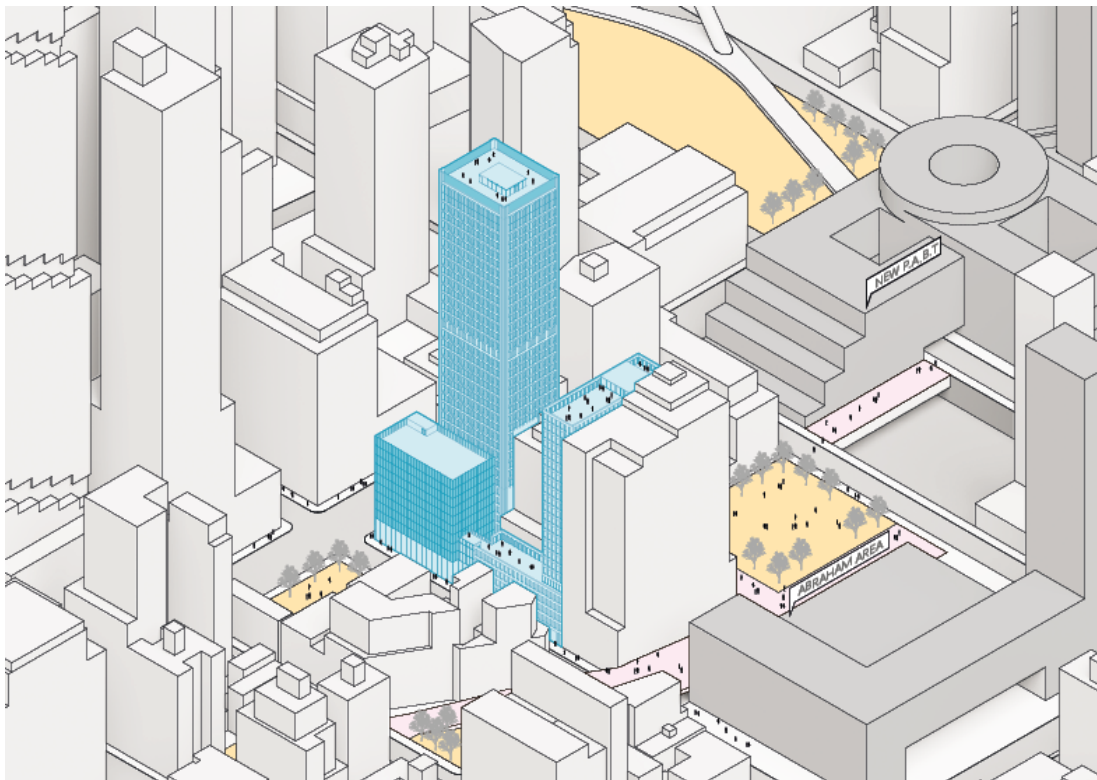
Tutors:  
Hrvoje Smidhen  
Gilbert Koskamp  
External Examiner:  
Peter de Jong

Adam Michael Hill | 4831462

## Project Description

Rapid change has always defined the city of New York; owing to the continuous state of its evolution, buildings are becoming increasingly short-term ventures, surpassed by the latest trends and the progression of the markets. Following the research, the aim is to answer the question “**How will the influx of financially led developments, effect existing frameworks in Midtown Manhattan?**” This question is particularly poignant during the current global situation, as both economic and social order fall into decline. Uncertainty is created within the building market, as working practices and social interactions change. The inherent nature of such predicaments, leaves an inability to predict future requirements and necessities, resulting in a constant state of fluctuation. The project is based against this background of constant shifting values, exploring facilitators for such rapid flash points within both the urban and social environments. The objective of the project is to accommodate adaptability within the ever-evolving city. This has been achieved through combining both varying users and functions, enabling the complex to evolve over time, rather than becoming another individual short-term faceless entity, which stands alone unable to adapt to change and is eventually lost to time. The project builds upon current trends of quick turnaround flexible offices and residential working spaces, combined with the growing need for community and public space.

Located at the juxtaposition between the recent Hudson Yards developments and historic industrial garment district, Lincoln Flex aims to provide the link between tall technological skyscrapers and the urban fabric of Manhattan. The project is a 70,000m<sup>2</sup> multi-use complex which contains commercial, residential and community functions; wrapping around an existing Orchestral Centre, situated between West 36th and 37th Street, whilst forming a bookend to 10th Avenue. Due to its proximity to the Lincoln Tunnel entrance ramp area, the land value is reasonably low and largely underdeveloped, and thus is prime real estate for new construction; increased furthermore by its proximity to Hudson Yards. In this proposal, flexibility, and the use thereof, is a key defining factor and for that reason, many design principles were reinvestigated in order to determine what true flexibility is and the implications that can arise from it. For example, circulation, climate and the structure itself, all posed interesting challenges in the pursuit of achieving a truly flexible building.



Above: Urban Implementation of Lincoln Flex within the surrounding New Lincoln Neighbourhood.

## Relationship between Research & Design

Architecture as a discipline is the constant debate between the two contrasting forms of activity; research and design. The processes are intrinsically linked, feeding into one another, whilst progressing the development of a project forward. Both are essential in the understanding of the landscape and the societal realms in which we exist, to create an individual's worldview. Research enables the Architect to familiarise and position themselves, within varying unknown environments, through the gathering of evidence, whereas design enables the testing of the research whilst opening further avenues of investigation. In the interest of creation, a delicate balance is created between the two. These ontological assumptions frame a worldview, or paradigm, that accommodates numerous schools of thought, that any researcher or design practitioner, consciously or subconsciously relates to. "To be aware of our research methodologies is to master the languages we speak with the world."<sup>1</sup>

Without research, there is the likelihood that architecture falls into the trap of following cookie cutter trends with no consideration for context, tradition, values or environment. This was highlighted to the extreme over the last few decades; when the staple of glass towers, in a typical western style, were constructed worldwide irrespective of location or environmental conditions.

Combining the research and design processes together provides a heuristic approach. Within architecture there is often the drive towards the new innovative solution, fixated usually around the aesthetical or spatial qualities. If we are to create architecture that truly is rooted within the continuously complex urban frameworks, we need to learn from and acknowledge what came previously, incorporating and expanding upon prior knowledge, rather than taking an individualistic stance. A heuristic approach to research allows us to acquire and deconstruct previous developments and knowledge, through the development of specific categories which can be compared and contrasted, creating a starting point onto which a general base point can be formalised when first facing the challenges that lie ahead.

However, there is also the third element of the process which is not always considered due to the fact that the making of architecture is a social practice and is unavoidably an epistemological activity: it can be considered both equally objective and subjective. Whilst Architecture is heavily influenced by the advancement of both technological and theoretical practice, the pure essence of what Architecture is and can be, boils down to as Norman Foster states "an expression of values - the way we build is a reflection of the way we live."<sup>2</sup>

## The Relationship between the Graduation Topic and the Studio Topic, the Architecture Track and the Master Program

The aim of Complex Projects is to study different global urban conditions and how they are affected by social, economic, environmental and political changes; whilst also considering how they may evolve over time through combining knowledge and skills from design practice, physical and social sciences, technology and engineering. Possible solutions or developments are then tested upon a city, the location this year being Midtown Manhattan.

Within the studio, the group strategy formulated around the main challenges that face Midtown Manhattan, as well as every other major metropolis. The key challenges that there were identified were the 'Isolation' of areas within a city as new developments arise, the increase of 'Congestion' both on the human and vehicular level and the 'Gentrification' that is caused by large corporations investing heavily into single locations creating monoculture. The new District of Transitional Yards, seeks to address these challenges by developing underutilised areas through a combination of additional green spaces that permit more fluid access and porosity, the introduction of new formal and informal connections to pedestrianise the area, and the implementation of urban hotspots including a new neighbourhood of New Lincoln to relieve the pressure on the existing context.

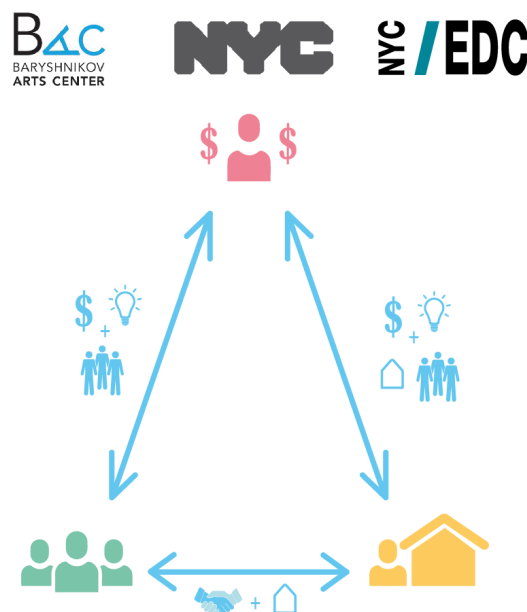
---

<sup>1</sup> Seamon and Mugerauer, *Dwelling, Place, and Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World*.

<sup>2</sup> "Architecture Is an Expression of Values".

As discussed within the project description, my thesis explored the nature of Manhattan to be a city that is governed by singular developments, that are usually irrespective of context and instead develop into distinct districts which are characterised by the function of multiple entities. Investigating the relationship between the American concept of Capitalism and how entities have the ability to rise and fall, creating opportunities for the next evolution to take its place; provided not only insight into the continually rapid evolution of Manhattan but also how similar cities also function. However, as a city becomes more developed, the rapid evolution that was once possible at the initial phase peters out, the turnover of the city then relies upon either the collapse of enterprise or changes within real estate regulation to open up new areas for development. Manhattan is facing the challenge of buildings reaching their perceived lifespan, creating the opportunity for new development; these flash points have led to huge changes within the city. The Studio topic aims to investigate this change and how Midtown endeavours to react to such evolution, these findings will provide invaluable insights into the situations that are likely to be faced by every metropolis and urban landscape in the future.

Complex Studio positions itself to address the crossover of technical problem solving and the speculative nature of research and design. The studio [focuses on research to achieve a good understanding of the existing, while the studio scope is the exploration of the possibilities]. Combining hard analytical interpretation and experimentation, achieves degrees of complexity which accumulates across a variety of scales and lenses. The heart of the studio's methodology, is that research methods and design are not bound by the confines of the architectural field, but within a multi-disciplinary scope; whether that is the city planner, developer or user of the realm in which we inhabit or wish to create. Research and design are to inform possible solutions to global problems or situations, which are then tested within a predetermined context. This constant shift between lenses, affords designs which are grounded in reality, yet can achieve real change. Research helps to create a position and speculate where the future may lie.



Above: Symbiotic relationship between all the users present within the complex and the surrounding stakeholders.

### **The Research Method and Approach Chosen by the Student in Relation to the Graduation Studio Methodical Line of Inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work**

The research methodology and theory are principally structured towards understanding and exploring the contextual factors that have influenced and shaped Manhattan into what it is today. Due to the complexity of such a diverse context, the contents of the research are defined by key factors as

designated by the Transitional Yards group. The areas of research included History (land development, evolution of the grid), People (demographics, tourism, new economics), Public (public space and access, amenities, POP's), Building (zoning regulation, architectural typology, economic value, vacancy), Mobility (passive modes, public and private, delivery frameworks) and Environment (nature, energy, pollution). The aim of the research was to investigate the pure essence of what Midtown is and helped to explain why Manhattan is a unique combination of circumstances and how it compares to other large global cities. To achieve this, graphical representation and mapping were employed to translate quantitative data to visual formats, allowing for ease of digestion and comparison. It is also a more efficient way of communicating large amounts of data in a succinct format. During the field trip, we were also able to visit local offices and interview residents and visitors, providing a rounded view of Manhattan. In this way, we were also able to compare the literature and our findings whilst gathering the latest primary resources within the practical field.

The research process started with the aim of contextualising Midtown Manhattan and distilling the similarities and irregularities between neighbouring districts, allowing for a base typology to be created. This research was largely context-led, as opposed to theory or methodology led, as defined by Ray Lucas <sup>3</sup>, due to the emphasis of the studio a wide range of contextual information was amassed into which a position can be derived. This etic viewpoint enabled me to observe correlations between economic and building timelines, in relation to building booms during times of considered crisis and the architectural advancements they facilitated. This led me to research how a metropolis such as Manhattan reacts to times of downturn and the opportunities that can originate from them.

My approach was to view the various data streams through a variety of lenses: mainly commercial and social developers, existing stakeholders, the users and the wider community. Approaching the research from an etic perspective, allowed me to stay objective rather becoming subjective and lost in the vast amounts of databases. This was particularly difficult as accurate detailed data was often hard to come by and usually inconsistent. Despite this, what was noticeable was the correlation that I had previously observed between economic and building rates and that times of crisis are closely linked to spikes in development. The utilised methodology in combination with paper study and theoretical research, along with a typological inquiry, gave me an insight into the underlying processes and frameworks that have shaped Manhattan. In recent years, these have generally been financial, the availability of land and the desire of certain bodies to be seen as successful or forerunners.

As architecture is a very context led medium, when researching the site and its surroundings, Jane Jacobs' methodology contributed greatly to my own. Providing a platform "to look closely, and with as little previous expectation as is possible, at the most ordinary scenes and events, and attempt to see what they mean and whether any threads of principle emerge among them."<sup>4</sup> Jacobs' approach to urban research allows the 'citiness' to reveal itself through the actions of the everyday, then uses this gained knowledge as the base for understanding more general principles and structures that make the city. This led to my design brief of how Architecture can be designed in such a way to take advantage of the ebbs and flows of an evolving city, whilst encouraging urban participation from the development.

## **The Relevance of the Graduation Work in the Larger Social, Professional and Scientific Framework and the Transferability of the Project Results**

Midtown offers an invaluable opportunity to explore the opportunities that arise within a metropolis. Even before the current pandemic, Midtown was in the process of undergoing a dramatic shift. Much of the building stock is becoming outdated, and the migration of offices to newer developments is resulting in land bleaching, stagnation and the increase of vacancy rates. There has been a lack of affordable residential accommodation within Midtown, further exasperated by the existing monoculture and gentrification. Complex Projects is intrigued by these periods of transition and is

---

<sup>3</sup> Ray, *Research Methods for Architecture*.

<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 19.

investigating the impacts upon the urban landscape. Midtown provides the perfect testbed for observing and trialling possibilities that such a city can provide.

The close links between Manhattan and the financial systems, can bring great benefits and negatives; the results of which can be seen in the different districts of Manhattan and is why the city is an ideal testing ground for metropolitan solutions and practices. The extreme obsession with Modernity enables the implementation of radical urban and architectural ideas. The development of New York is controlled by Capitalism and is fed by the need to consume, creating a spiralling cycle that is hard to break. Walter Benjamin, likened this to a religion, "Capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers."<sup>5</sup> The wave of consumption took hold through mass production, as the creation of items and consumption of which, became the equivalent to the creation of identity. The endless growth within Manhattan has enabled it to prosper, become immensely wealthy and the icon that it is recognised as today. Whilst Architecture has always been at the juncture between monetary and cultural values; the rise of cultural economy within modernity, most noticeably rooted in the make-up of Manhattan, permits us to broach new questions about how values of architecture intersect and affect one another.

The project whilst highlighting elements that can be considered negative, refrains from stating that an urban ecosystem based upon a pure capitalist identity is wholly evil and therefore the origin for all difficulties that transpire there. Instead, it tries to work within the existing framework, to offer an alternate solution and implementation of such reliance. However, the project is critical of such dependency of economic and political systems, and the values that can be lost by putting economic gains first. When in New York, the extremes of wealth are often on show, less desirable areas are usually hidden and masked. This phenomenon is easily accessible, as when people first picture New York, it is usually larger than life elements which come to the fore. This fact leads to the urgencies within the fragile nature of metropolis' and large urban landscapes dependent upon Modernity becoming obscured, a factor that persist in every large-scale city.

Due to the limitation of land and therefore its ever-increasing value, extreme architectural solutions have become the norm. This has resulted in the creation of air-rights and innovative solutions such as building over what is considered 'dead ground' to further facilitate growth, a prime example being Hudson Yards. These creative solutions can then be utilised in other cities where land is also restricted or with high land values. Utilising flexibility to a larger extent, can become the next step within the process allowing functions to fluctuate depending upon the needs of society and enabling cities to work as symbiotic systems, rather than independent units.

The research identified that a huge amount of construction occurs during times of crisis; however it is usually very mono-typological office buildings and similar ventures, as these are considered low risk with a quick financial turnaround. Apart from the fact that this removes valuable residential opportunities, it further gentrifies parts of a city and freezes social growth. Lincoln Flex, is an alternative architectural archetype, providing a framework into which the needs of the surrounding context can dictate the requirements and therefore overall program split. This ability to change with the times, will provide the site with longevity, rooting itself within the economic, social and time spatial context; thereby enabling a community to develop and prosper.

The project explores the capacity of tying differing functions through cross programming, especially commercial, residential and community functions, with the ability to transfer space between these elements. This is particularly vital in the rapidly changing situations we now find ourselves in. Including a varying program enables a building to stay relevant and therefore dramatically increase its longevity and consequently its environmental impact; something which all new buildings should consider. This being said, it is why the introduction of flexibility to such extremes is a physical possibility within New York, as the need for space outweighs the incurred costs of such ventures; there is always someone prepared to pay, if a financial return is perceived. Involving the wider community, both through function and the inclusion of a not-for-profit developer, the aim is to root the development within the surrounding context, becoming part of the natural urban fabric. As Jane

---

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, Bullock, and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 288.

Jacob's stated, "There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans."<sup>6</sup>

During the age of Modernity, we became disconnected from value of Social Capital and are only now starting to reconnect with it. The future of our interactions with Modernity and the built environment is one in which social interaction and community hold priority, learning from our past and utilising the advancements of the age but not to the point in which they control us. "Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably".<sup>7</sup>

## **Ethical Issues and Dilemmas Encountered during the Graduation Work**

This project is a critique towards the current climate within the construction industry, where buildings are constructed with a lifespan in mind and considered another form of commodity. Firstly, this is not environmentally considerate and secondly, developing a framework around continuously vacancy, especially when developable land is such a premium, not only stifles the upward mobility but also creates a monoculture. Lincoln Flex aims to question these dynamics, becoming a mediator between these two systems and providing an intermediate ground amid the tall, technological skyscrapers and the urban fabric of Manhattan.

In general, architecture is tied to the whims of the financial market, particularly in America and especially New York. This is epitomised in Carol Willis' work 'Form follows finance'<sup>8</sup> which lays bare how without financial backing, architecture would not be possible and is usually a luxury of the wealthy. Midtown, with its vastly varied economic districts, lays out the challenges of working in such a highly capitalised city: dependent upon fluctuations in the market in which fortunes are rapidly made or lost. Even though such positions are intrinsic in the fabric of Manhattan, I took the stance that there is likely to be another large shift within the relationship to economic prosperity. This approach is now currently being lived through during this most recent crisis, as society has had to become less dependent upon fiscal values. Although construction and real estate in Manhattan is extremely expensive, particularly in such close proximity to Hudson Yards, the need for a blending mediator between the corporate world and Midtown Manhattan is essential. To this end, I aimed to create a scheme that could both incorporate private entities as well as public domain. However, such balances must also consider the initial cost of the venture. The only way a development such as this could be realised, would be with co-operation between private capital and economic development trusts, such as NYEDC (New York Economic Development Corporation). These sorts of agreements are complex and can take years to come to fruition. Economic downturns from such crises whilst heightening the risks that companies are willing to endeavour upon, also provide the time to develop such partnerships.

Also, one of problems with embracing flexibility within a building, is that once an area within the building is occupied, does it then cease to function in the desired way? This is most noticeably with references such as the post-war metabolism movement in Japan; where once built, the architecture in practice became fixed, inflexible and fell into degradation; despite the original intentions. The movement failed to gain further traction, as a result of Japan's recession and concerns over the negative environmental impact, due to the ability of unchecked developments being able to continually expand. Lincoln Flex combats this by utilising the fixed external framework and fluctuating the internal composition. One consideration for such a development, is the need for constant management as some functions may change daily, whereas others maybe longer term.

The possible side effects of Lincoln Flex are the real possibility that it becomes a perpetrator of the gentrification and the monofunctional, that it aims to combat and critique. This would be most noticeable in the tower, in particularly if all the flexible accommodation is utilised as overflow commercial real estate, due the proximity of Hudson Yards and the draw of new financial centre of Midtown. The flipside to this, is that it becomes difficult to facilitate the adaptable nature of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, Bullock, and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance*, illustrated, Princeton Architectural Press, 1995.

complex once the area has been designated as residential, due to the fact that these areas are usually longer contracts and not sequential; freezing portions of the complex in time.

There is also the issue that in a time, where the environmental impacts and materials are a key concern, the construction of such a material intensive building can seem profound whilst there is existing stock that can be utilised or adapted. However, by incorporating circular materials and construction methods where possible, limiting materials such as concrete to the bare necessities and integrating climatic solutions, can all help to reduce such impacts. Through trying to mitigate and being aware of such challenges, resulted in the creation of a realistic project that will be an asset to the community and valuable in the search for a transitional urban landscape.