

# The wild plant library: Approaching the urban wilderness

## Reflection

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Since my research topic hadn't been completely defined by the time I visited Mostar, the choice was very much guided by my experience of the city. I spent an entire week visiting daily the same area, roughly covering the neighborhood where my site is located. It turns out that that area, being where the frontline used to run during the war, has a very high proportion of ruined and abandoned structures, making it an ideal place for spontaneous vegetation to grow freely. And so, it was there where I first came across wild plants blooming over the leftovers of the city, a sight that left me surprised and intrigued in equal measures. After repeatedly walking past them, I came to the conclusion that, even though it is an odd combination to have schools, cultural centers and residential buildings among war ruins, the plants growing in them gave a certain character to the neighborhood, making the experience, paradoxically, rather pleasant.

I find that the time I spent visiting such a small portion of the city had a great influence on how my research would develop later. With each day I started to look less into the ensemble of the neighborhood and more into the particularities of each ruin, discovering new things every time. After a first visual recognition of the surreal assemblages of debris and plants, I realized that the fascination I felt was not only about their image but about the overall experience; that the presence of such spaces brought sensations, textures, smells and sounds that were not so common in the middle of the city. Therefore, the understanding of the immaterial dimension of these places became an important thread to follow, pointing towards the use of phenomenology as one of my main research methods.

That initial encounter in Mostar was followed by an extensive documentation about the places that became my object of interest, but of which I had little knowledge beyond the observations made there. First, I started to gather a theoretical background to understand the transformation taking place, trying to follow both the decay of the man-made and the evolution of plants until the complete hybridization of the site. At the same time, I made an analytical account of the conditions affecting my site, trying to see how much that theory reflected on the reality I experienced. The development of the design project only came about after I felt I had gained enough knowledge on the possibilities and constraints of working with such sites. Since then, the process has been a continuous back and forth between trying to develop a proposal and finding the place for that hypothetical future in the multilayered story of the site. For that reason, I think that research and design are inseparable, feeding each other until the very end.

## Development of the research

At the beginning, the research put a lot of emphasis in the value of plants taking over urban spaces, arguing for the urgent need to preserve them over other aspects or actors involved. This way of thinking led

me to the conclusion that the best option was to keep ourselves (humans) from interfering with their evolution, reducing the possibility of intervening to the insertion a few elements within the existing structure. In practice that meant that, even where there was an attempt to create spaces and connections, the site did not have a structuring logic or a program for human users, because doing that would mean causing a new disturbance on the ecosystem. However, after that first experiment it became clear that the approach had a major flaw, in that it did not consider that the site is embedded in a city inhabited by humans and that nature's interests were not the only ones at stake.

The feedback received after the second and third presentations of the project was partly related to the previous point, considering that the attention I was giving to the site as an unique and highly complex place, with its mixture of plants, ruins and other elements, was keeping me from focusing on other equally important aspects; as are the influence of external factors, the relation with the immediate surroundings or with the wider context of the city. That remark would be especially helpful for the next stages of my project, because finding connections with the surroundings, with the present and past of the site, with the people living around, became one of the main guides for the materialization of the design proposal.

Another issue discussed was the ambiguous character of the first proposal presented, in terms of use and definition of the space. Even though there was a detailed analysis of all the activities currently taking place in the site, these were all taken as the programme without filtering or thinking of the implications of formalizing them. That resulted in a great need for different spaces, making the site very urban and contradicting the idea of minimizing the disturbance caused. At the same time, that variety made it difficult to associate the intervention with an existing type of space. Upon further consideration, the programme was narrowed down to the activities that could create a connection with the surrounding spaces, finally coming to the idea of the plant archive, a space of educational-recreational use that also works with the preservation of species.

Finding the balance between all the parts, human and non-human, and providing a response that is beneficial for all of them, became one of the main dilemmas encountered in the development of the project. That idealistic view I had at the beginning, where the presence of untouched vegetation was enough itself to justify the lack of action on the site, was hard to sustain for long. The reality is that Mostar still has a long road towards recovery from the war, and ignoring that, or putting the preservation of ruins and plants over the needs of the people living there, seems somehow superficial. That is why the approach shifted from the almost total preservation to a moderate intervention and management, trying to create a proposal that addresses the issues found in the area (ecological and urban) while providing a space for the use and enjoyment of the citizens.

The last piece of advice received during the presentations was about the possibility of seeing the project as one piece in a wider approach encompassing the entire city, as a sort of test site for the many spaces with similar conditions found in Mostar. In that way, the design of one of them could set a framework for intervention, between the ruins, the plants and the present needs; a strategy to help tackle the problem of overgrown, ruined and abandoned spaces in a bigger scale. I embraced this task, considering that the replicability of the intervention was a logical consideration for the creation of awareness on the value of such sites. Nevertheless, in the end, the design required answers that were highly site-specific, making it difficult to draw a strategy to be applied on a city-wide scale.

Still, I think the intervention can be understood as a test site in the sense that it shows the benefits of taking a different approach, constituting a first step towards the appreciation, use and preservation of ruined spaces and the plants in them. Whereas the project doesn't aim to transform every overgrown ruin into a plant archive, it does attempt to illustrate how to get there, from the thinking process, the scope and depth of analyses necessary, the parameters for the insertions and finally the possible future if we stop seeing the urban wilderness as a disturbance to be controlled or removed. So, if all the spaces taken over by plants are understood as a network, the site could be a sort of center that makes them visible, the trigger for a bigger transformation of the city.

## Reaching conclusions

In current times is easy to draw lines between species and bound them to their own space, usually in separate areas of the planet, with the idea that that will allow us all to live without disturbing each other. But, as seen before, the reality is much more complex, with humans and plants often competing for the domination of the same spaces and humans usually having the upper hand. A common way to restore balance, as I discovered on an earlier stage, is to try to recover spaces for nature, excluding humans from those areas to minimize the disturbance caused. But this responds to the same way of acting mentioned above, something that seems more and more unlikely as we get closer to the core of our cities.

With my research I aimed to find an alternative that allows us to coexist with non-humans, thinking that bringing species together could work the double purpose of preserving plants while also making humans more conscious of their value. That explains the evolution in the concept towards the mediation of contact of humans with the urban wilderness, a vital step for the development of a closer relationship between all actors involved. Overall, I think the final response succeeded in finding common points between humans and non-humans, expressed at first through the sharing of spaces for mutual enjoyment and benefit, and later also in the development of a programme that encourages interaction, with an experience that goes beyond passive observation. This last aspect is also important if the site is to be the first in a series of transformations involving plants, ruins and void spaces, because it has the task of causing a shift significant enough to bring about action on other spaces. For that, the introduction of the educational aspect was a great help, since it facilitates the diffusion of information to raise awareness, a direct approach that is necessary to plant the seed for a more conscious way of relating to our environment.

In that sense, this research is not only relevant in solving some of the issues found in Mostar, but also in the change of perspective required to deal with wild plants growing in the city in an increasingly urban world. The possibility of giving small but multiple spaces for the preservation of plants inside the city without having to create a division between built, human spaces and spaces for nature, presents an alternative for coexistence in the face of the loss of natural habitats to the expansion of our built areas. This attempt becomes especially challenging in the field of architecture, since accepting their unruly nature means giving up control over certain spaces of the city. It means that the cities that we work so hard to design will always have parts that won't necessarily stick to our plan. Still, this quest is not only meaningful for non-humans, because, at least in my view, the idea of enjoying spontaneous vegetation as part of a wide arrange of spaces is highly seductive, adding new dimensions to our experience of the city.

The project also addresses the recovery of spaces in post-war contexts and the reuse of derelict sites, a task of great importance given the extension of the destruction seen in recent wars. In dealing with ruins, this kind of intervention could stand along other techniques as the demolition or reconstruction of buildings, offering an alternative that enables the use of structures with different degrees of damage, in the highly probable case that not all buildings are fixed or rebuilt in a short period. Abandoned, ruined and derelict places exist everywhere, which also may make more appropriate the study of the process than the design of a city-wide master plan. In that way, such an approach can be an alternative in a variety of contexts, not only for Mostar.

Following this path marks an enormous distance with the more conventional approach of clearing out the site and starting over having (almost) all the variables under control. Working with the existing certainly entails an extra effort to label and understand all the elements and processes present. It implies expanding the basis of our knowledge to cover much more than buildings and people, going into the most varied fields and topics; from botany, to geology, to material science, to the specificity of any other elements found. But, again, I believe it is an effort that offers a valuable reward.

### **Final observations**

The attempt to work beyond the limits of architecture maybe is an unconscious response to the Neretva recollection studio, which encourages the crossings between architecture and landscape, being the two tracks involved in the studio, but also with any other methods, disciplines or analytical processes, as a way to understand the post-war entanglements of urban and natural conditions in Mostar. The brief for the joint studio already brings up a series of topics that were key for the development of the project, as are the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, land and other materials on multiple scales, the multilayered structure of landscapes, from their visual dimension to their history and underlying processes, and, finally, the expression of time-space relations through ruins and their unlimited possibilities for constructing new stories.

Overall, I found that interaction between disciplines very productive, because it helped me find the methods and tools that were more suitable for my research from a wide arrange of options. I think that freedom was precisely what allowed me to find a new perspective to approach these sites, avoiding the urge to build as the only way to fix problems. There was indeed a great deal of advice and exchange of ideas with tutors and students from the landscape track, in a project that, at times, appeared to have more in common with landscape than with architecture. At the end, however, the project found its place within the realm of architecture, with an answer that addresses pertinent issues such as programme, spatialization or constructive language, without forgetting all the knowledge gained from working outside our field, which is embedded in the final materialization of the proposal.

The studio also introduces the idea of disruption as a strategy to break with the “spaces of shame”, a mental and physical construct created in Mostar by the war and the posterior division of the city. Through this interpretation, the presence of plants in war ruins constitutes a disruption itself, changing the way how the spaces of trauma are perceived over time. The project, then, is born from a succession of disruptions, not in a negative, breaking-with sense, but as events that (further) stir the existing conditions, questioning the way how things are commonly understood and opening a window for change.

The research taught me a lot about the multiple topics I visited in the effort to understand the site. The encounter with the scars of war and the intervention in a post-war context were new and undoubtedly shocking experiences for me, coming from a place where the last armed conflicts happened centuries ago. The approach to the site from an experiential perspective and the study of plants in relation to buildings showed me that unconventional ways can uncover elements that are enormously enriching for the architectural project, a realization that I hope to carry with me and apply in the future projects I engage in. But more than the theoretical and applied knowledge I gained, I think that what I value the most is the process that I went through to jump from one to the other without losing key elements in the way.

Indeed, one of the most valuable lessons I learned while developing my project was to follow the path that offered the most appropriate conclusion to the research, even when that meant changing things over and over as I progressed more into it. That path was certainly not what I had envisioned at the beginning, so at times it was challenging to keep going without knowing where it would end up. However, looking back now, I think it was a good exercise to carry on a project without trying to impose a predefined concept, image or solution on the city, a response that is more common than it should during our training in architecture school. In adapting the concept to accommodate the new things I discovered in the way, I had to compromise my ambitions, my initial idea of the project I wanted to have, for a more coherent design. But at the end, letting go of that first idea that had little to do with the context is precisely what allowed me to read the environment and listen to the site, to finally arrive to a response that made the best of all the conditions found.