

LOW SKY, WIDE HORIZON

REFLECTION

Methods of Analysis and Imagination: A Matter of Scale

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Introduction

The Tallinn coastline is a rich reflection of Estonia's historical, societal and social changes and is a vital part of the formation of Estonian identity. For many decades, during the occupation of the Soviet Union, the coastline was inaccessible due to militarisation and industrial development. After regaining independence there has been significant progress in redevelopment of the coastal industrial and military heritage and efforts to reconnect the coast to the city, yet many parts of the coastline remain neglected. My personal fascination in the relationship of architecture and nature combined with the contextual evaluation led to the formulation of the architectural proposal, focused on re-establishing a connection between the city and the sea.

Initial site evaluation through contextual analysis determined which areas of the Tallinn coast are engaged with the sea either through visual connectivity, present activities or accessibility. This evaluation showcased how the district of Karjamäe, significantly decreases in engagement, evidently having no connection to the coast, thus becoming the site of choice. Whilst virtually all three criteria of engagement were absent on site, I purposefully chose a location, which would not have direct accessibility to the coastline. By doing so I wanted to emphasise how it is not mandatory to have all three criteria evident on site to create a meaningful connection.

Project

The research topic focused on the phenomenological/qualitative methods of design, which can be utilised to create engaging architectural proposals, responsive to the natural environment. Thus, the initial research for the design focused on theoretical analysis, which helped shape the design approach. Whilst the initial aim of the project was to enhance the presence of the sea; the theoretical research further informed an approach in understanding and addressing the natural environment. The work of Christian Norberg-Schulz has been highly informative in the design decisions, highlighting the importance to understand and address the unique tensions of vertical and horizontal qualities of the landscape. Utilising his framework to understand the context of my project, led to the conclusion that the landscape of the site consists of a low sky and wide horizon, which evidently became the title of my project. Combined with additional cultural research led to an important turning point of the project - to highlight the sea, you must also address the sky. Further theoretical research into the relationship of nature and type solidified the form of the proposal. Thus, the project is comprised of two distinct interlocking volumes, framing the sky and the sea, highlighting their interconnected nature.

To further the design, it was essential to establish how the function of the building responds to the natural environment. The chosen programme – a youth centre – had little to do with the research theme; however, the simultaneous design process of both created moments of unforeseen reciprocal enrichment.

The research continuously followed through the stages and scales of the design. It was important to integrate the collected research into the development of the technical aspects of the design. The physical qualities of the site such as sun and wind angles, seasonal changes and so on were important factors in creating passive design measures which respond to the changing environment.

Reflection

The project reflects my belief of the importance to include qualitative environmental design decisions in the design process. Whilst measures which are being taken to reduce the environmental impact of the architectural industry are commendable, I believe to truly create an environmentally friendly design, both quantitative and qualitative measures must be involved throughout the design process. The project aims to showcase the importance of understanding the natural environment and how it can inform and enrich the design process, resulting in an integrated and truly 'environmentally conscious' design. A distinct challenge of the design was establishing a relationship between the research theme and the building programme. Initially, I did not give much thought into the specificity of the programme as it was not the focal point of my research. Further, my initial intention was to express how designing a building grounded in place is just as powerful as creating a programmatically strong design. However, throughout the process it became evident that prioritising one aspect over the other loses the rich potential of synchronous collaboration.

Throughout the academic year, the analytical nature of the studio has been incredibly useful in understanding my own design and creative process. It has helped me see the importance of rigorous revaluation of ideas and their continuous clarification to create a scheme which is cohesive and thorough. Rather than focusing on the quantity of ideas to create architectural richness, the focus shifted to clarity of key ideas and their manifestation in a variety of scales. Whilst it was challenging to stay on this trajectory, the continuous and focused work, has provided a deeper understanding of the explored themes of the design. It has been introspective to see how my curiosity and sensitivity, which I valued as the strongest aspects of my creativity, if unmanaged, can become disadvantageous and unreliable to the design process.

I found great importance and appreciation in Michael Merrill's description of Louis Kahn's idea development: "What appears to the outsider as stubbornness or a paucity of ideas may instead be seen as the hidden strength of the work: for it is precisely this quality of sustained attention to a limited number of themes, of holding an idea firmly while working upon it, which may lend the activity of designing a character approaching that of "re-search" in the original meaning of the word." The educational experience and the development of the project has been thoroughly enlightening and challenging. Whilst there is definite room for improvement and refinement in my design process, the studio has provided a useful set of tools to continue to progress as a reliable architectural expert.