Reflection

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Looking back at my journey through my graduation project in Explore Lab, *Sleeping Beauties* has been a deeply personal and academic exploration. The project was driven by the need to address the decline of small post-industrial towns in Italy, where top-down revitalization efforts have often failed to engage local communities. It focuses on community-driven revitalization of these towns, using Angera as a context for research. Through analyzing nine case studies, the research explores sustainable, community-oriented strategies. These insights, combined with ethnographic research in Angera, informed a tailored proposal for the town, with the former Soara factory used as a testing ground for revitalization, guided by the principles of commoning.

Graduation Lab

Explore Lab is a unique thesis lab for students with specific fascinations, allowing them to design their own curriculum. I had a strong intuition that this was the environment in which I wanted to graduate, perhaps because I was eager to discover my place within the architecture field, and felt it was something I needed to figure out on my own, away from predefined structures. Of course, I knew I was choosing a more challenging path, but I didn't realize how isolating it would be, which made me realize how valuable and enjoyable working with others can be. Ironically, my project proposal is a deeply social one, focused on collaborating with others.

Given the absence of a clear framework, I often felt lost, struggling with uncertainty and confidence and found myself reaching out to my tutors for direction. I'm not sure if I would choose this graduation path again, given what I have experienced. However, it has undoubtedly been a profound learning experience - one that has challenged me to navigate uncertainty, trust the process, and ultimately define my own direction. In that sense, I believe it has given me far more than any other graduation path could have.

What makes my project unique is how it balances architectural interventions with the organizational processes and community engagement that make them possible, and to my knowledge, no other graduation lab incorporates these aspects in such a way. Moreover, conducting a project in the town where I grew up adds a deeply personal dimension, providing a rare and meaningful opportunity that most graduation labs don't offer.

I do have some critical points regarding Explore Lab. While it offers freedom and independence, it also places a heavy burden on students by expecting them to handle tasks typically done by tutors or coordinators in other labs. This requires more guidance from tutors than in a regular lab, which, fortunately, I was able to receive, but it resulted in many additional unpaid hours. From the student perspective, it also demands more time to produce a good project, often leading to an extension of the graduation year or difficulty in meeting the required standards. Explore Lab students are still expected to meet the same standards as those in other graduation labs, but they receive less support, which feels like unfair treatment. Additionally, students still pay the same annual tuition but get far less in return compared to students in other graduation labs.

My advice is to reconsider the amount of hours tutors get to dedicate to each Explore Lab student and perhaps rethink the evaluation standards. It would also be helpful to integrate group mentorship sessions, where students can learn from each others processes and give each other feedback. This would make better use of the tutors' time and foster a sense of community in what can otherwise be a very isolating graduation year.

Master Track, Faculty, and University

My graduation project aligns with the master track in Architecture's focus on architecture as a critical, creative, and interdisciplinary practice, using architectural design to address the technical, social, and spatial challenges of our society and imagining possible futures. It does so through a critical stance on current revitalization strategies for Italy's depopulating towns and a critical approach towards engaging with the existing.

The project adopts an interdisciplinary and holistic approach, aligning with the broader MSc program and the principles of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment. It combines different scales and lenses, from the interior to the urban scale, and integrates various aspects such as industrial heritage, community engagement, and management. This approach is reflected in the form of my research, which consists of a compilation of brochures.

Overall, my graduation project aligns with TU Delft's motto, "Impact for a sustainable society," by exploring sustainable, community-driven solutions that aim to revitalize Italy's dormant towns, fostering a more resilient and socially responsible approach.

Academic Relevance

My graduation project contributes to the academic discourse on marginalized spaces as locations of radical openness and possibility, building on, among others, the work of author bell hooks, Italian architect Antonio De Rossi, and paesologist Franco Arminio. The project combines these ideas with the concept of the commons, a topic that has gained increasing attention in recent years, explored through works like the ARCH+ publication *An Atlas of Commoning*.

Architectural Discipline

In my graduation project, I challenge traditional hierarchies and the conventional role of architects in modern society. I adopt a more inclusive, community-oriented hands-on approach, where residents actively participate in shaping their environments, drawing from housing experiments of the 60s and 70s, as explored in the documentary *Life, Assembled*, as well as more contemporary practices such as Assemble Studio.

I believe that given the current societal and environmental challenges, architects will increasingly need to take on the role of a bricoleur - considering the city as a pool of material and immaterial resources and reinterpreting what already exists. The exhibition *Open for Maintenance* at the German Pavilion during the Venice Biennale 2023 embodied this approach by emphasizing care, repair, and the reuse of existing materials as fundamental architectural practices. In addition to the material aspect, the bricoleur approach blends social, cultural, and economic dimensions within the design process. Hence, beyond being a designer, I have adopted the role of a quartermaster, acting as a mediator in facilitating the necessary collaborations and processes.

Societal Relevance

The current state of modernity is shaped by dominant forces such as technology, capitalism, and the neoliberal state, which have turned contemporary life into a predictable, mechanized cycle of production and consumption. These systems have led to a "crisis of the future", suppressing the ability to imagine alternative worlds and diminishing the potential for creativity and transformation.

Drawing on philosophical, spiritual, and political traditions, philosopher Federico Campagna proposes in his book *Prophetic Culture* that we need a "prophetic culture" - a new way of perceiving and being in the world that looks beyond the present moment and embraces a radical reimagining of possibilities. He asks, "How can we help the creation of new worlds out of the ruins of our own?" and argues that by challenging the systems of power and fostering new forms of collective existence, we can help create new realities and futures. Campagna calls for a renewed commitment to human imagination, creativity, and vision, encouraging us to embrace uncertainty and think beyond what seems possible in order to build a more just, inclusive, and sustainable world.

My project tackles the societal challenge of depopulation in Italy's towns, leading to the deterioration of infrastructure, weakening of communal ties, and a loss of cultural identity. However, the approach extends beyond these local challenges, reflecting the current global time of transition and Campagna's call for reawakening human imagination and creativity. The project focuses on craftsmanship and hands-on practices that require passion and imagination, which cannot be replaced by Artificial Intelligence. It also creates opportunities for storytelling and collective dreaming, such as the democratic theater, the ruin garden, and the "Echoes and Dreams" festivity. In terms of organization, the project's grassroots approach explores alternative systems of power and embraces uncertainty through its organic phasing approach.

The title of my graduation project, *Sleeping Beauties*, evokes the essence of fairy tales that create alternate worlds where anything is possible, sparking imagination while carrying profound moral lessons.

Assessment of Research Method and Results

Examining the concept of the commons early in my research provided a critical lens throughout both the research and design processes. The research was not a linear process, as it was continuously refined and took on multiple forms. Ultimately, it resulted in a compilation of brochures, which I believe is a fitting format for the complexity of the project.

In the first part, I explored nine case studies of community-driven reactivation projects. Structuring their analysis through three lenses allowed me to compare them effectively and, ultimately, develop a strategy for Angera based on the same framework. The three perspectives through which both parts of the research were conducted - region/town, industrial heritage, and community/commoning - led to case study conclusions that showed similar results across their programmatic, spatial, and organizational aspects. This consistency across different levels of analysis allowed for a more cohesive strategy, ensuring that the proposed solutions effectively address multiple facets of the reactivation process. The case studies helped me translate the theoretical framework of the commons into concrete strategies and tools, allowing for its practical application within the project.

In the second part, I focused on Angera itself, using ethnography and literature review. Reflecting on my proposed strategy for Angera, I recognize that the conversations with local residents were incredibly valuable, as their stories and insights played a crucial role in shaping my understanding of the town's dynamics and needs, as well as in identifying the role each actor could take on in shaping the project. My conversations and observational walks on the Soara site were very meaningful as well. I believe it is important to focus on the things you can't see - the stories behind the walls and within the community. These, ultimately, shaped the soul of my project.

Looking back on the entire process, I consider the research to be comprehensive, well-supported by theory, and balanced between the general insights from the case studies and the specific context of Angera. However, I recognize that the scope of the research is quite extensive for a graduation project, which is typically expected to be completed within a year. If I were to refine the approach, I would have liked to focus less on the case studies and more on the social, hands-on aspect of the research. This would have allowed me to incorporate a participatory element and dive deeper into the design process. I do, however, see great importance in the case studies I explored, particularly in terms of the transferability of the results, that are applicable to towns other than Angera, adding significant value to the overall outcome of the project.

Transferability of Results

The conclusions of the first part of the research offer a range of strategies that can be applied to other towns, particularly those with vacant industrial areas near the town center. While the project in Angera may not be directly transferable due to its unique history, traditions, local knowledge, and community dynamics, the underlying principles can serve as a model for revitalizing similar towns. These principles include the reintroduction of a lost festivity, repurposing a former industrial site as a testing ground, and engaging larger stakeholders to ensure long-term viability.

Advice to a Future Student Working with an Existing Factory Site

When working with an existing factory site, my advice is to take on the approach of a bricoleur, starting by truly listening to the place, keeping and revaluing what is there, and working with this substance. This deep listening includes both physical and social aspects - conducting observational walks, cataloguing materials and objects found on site, researching archives and future plans, and engaging with people who have a connection to the place. Factory sites are often large in scale, and it can take time to fully understand the relationships between the structures. Filming the entire site, including the interior spaces, was incredibly helpful for me, as I frequently revisited the footage to better grasp the spaces. It also allowed me to discover new aspects that I had overlooked when I was there. Creating a 1:500 scale working model helped me to gain an even deeper understanding of the site. Another piece of advice is to visit a similar urban regeneration project in the area and speak with the people involved. Not to replicate, but to gain a contextual understanding of the organizational processes, funding, and phasing of such a transformation. For the social aspect of the deep listening, my advice is to approach the field research with an open and curious mind. Get in touch with current owners, former workers, and those involved in future plans, but also stay open to spontaneous encounters. I found that this process unfolded naturally, with one conversation often leading to meeting new people, discovering unexpected places, and offering new perspectives along the way.

In my design process, I used a pragmatic approach, classifying the current state of each ruin and developing a transformation framework focused on minimal interventions where existing structures are preserved, repaired, and reinforced, using the least possible resources. This set of guidelines and recommendations is crucial for the scale of such a large project, ensuring cohesion and providing direction in an unpredictable process with many people involved. Besides providing this overarching framework, I see it as the role of the architect to elaborate a number of interventions as concrete examples of how to engage with the existing, and inviting others to dream and take part in the process. These first interventions should be carefully chosen, as they set the tone of the project. They are typically located in the heart of the site, the oldest part with the most memories, and where the identity of the place can still be felt. These parts are often also the most deteriorated, with the structures in rapid decline, requiring immediate action before they fall into further decay.

My final advice is to treat the project not as a final product, but as the groundwork for collaborative processes. First of all, because such a project simply cannot be realistically completed within a graduation year, but most importantly because this way of working opens up the opportunity to engage people and facilitate a process of commoning. This means that the emphasis is not on creating a definitive design, but on addressing multiple facets, from envisioning architectural interventions to addressing organizational aspects and the roles of the people involved. It's about finding the right balance - providing just enough direction while leaving room for interpretation, allowing people to contribute and bring their own ideas to the table.

Relationship Research and Design
My research and design process evolved in tandem throughout the project. The research not only shaped my design decisions but was also refined through the design process, resulting into an aligned outcome. The insights gained from the theoretical framework of the commons and the case studies directly influenced my strategy and design, guiding decisions on how to integrate community-driven solutions into the revitalization process (eg., organizational structure, collaborative hands-on construction). The research conducted in Angera complements this by ensuring that the strategy and design are deeply rooted in the local context, reflecting the town's unique dynamics and needs (eg., identification and role of each actor, integration of local stories). In turn, the strategy and design influenced the research by prompting a deeper exploration into specific areas, such as further conversations with local carpenter Fabio on San Quirico wood and vocational schools in the region. Additionally, the design process also influenced the way I explained and structured the research, so that now, with the research part completed, it appears as though all the pieces have fallen into place.

Evaluating the Strategy and Design
At the end of the chapter on the commons, I identified ten criteria, each supported by guiding questions. Beyond serving as a tool for analyzing the case studies, these criteria also provide a framework for evaluating the design project, which I will test and assess through answering these questions:

1. Inclusivity and Participation
Are decision-making processes transparent and inclusive, allowing for continual redefinition of space and use?
These processes are driven by the development team, who act as key representatives and connectors between the community, local institutions, and stakeholders.

Is the project increasing agency for underrepresented and vulnerable communities?
The project fosters local empowerment by giving local artisans a stage, involving them in guiding collaborative hands-on construction and creating "jewel-like" elements that showcase local craftsmanship and pride. The project also supports the independence and empowerment of children by providing hands-on learning opportunities within walking distance from the local schools.

Are mechanisms in place to prevent exclusion or appropriation by identitarian movements?
The diversity of the development team, the varied program on the Soara site, and the shared ownership model ensure broad representation that should foster collaboration rather than prevent exclusion or appropriation by any specific group.

2. Flexibility and Adaptability
Can the space or system adapt to changing needs over time?
The approach of using minimal interventions that repair and reinterpret existing structures allows the space to adapt to changing needs. The collaborative nature of the project and the educational aspect ensure that community members gain the agency to actively contribute to the ongoing transformation.

Are spaces designed to blur public/private boundaries and support collective living, working, and caregiving?
The project does not focus on collective housing but it integrates shared workshops, a communal kitchen, and spaces for caregiving, such as afterschool activities. The theater's design blurs the line between audience and actor.

Can the commons model adapt across different scales and contexts while remaining viable?
While this project is situated in a town with 5,000 inhabitants, its approach is inspired by case studies from both similar contexts and larger urban environments. The comparable outcomes from these cases demonstrate strategies that can be applied across different scales and settings. A key difference in smaller towns is the stronger sense of personal connection and reliance on local networks, which can foster collaboration and resilience in ways that might differ in larger urban contexts.

3. Decentralization of Power
How is decision-making distributed among the community members?
Decision-making is decentralized through the development team, which later evolves into a management team. The entrepreneurs' cooperative and vocational school are part of the development team through representatives and they maintain control over decisions related to their own buildings.

Does the governance structure explore alternatives to state dependency, reflecting grassroots autonomy?
The project gradually transitions ownership from the municipality and the current owners to a Community Land Trust. It adopts an entrepreneurial approach, focusing on self-sustaining revenue streams to minimize reliance on external funding in the long run.

Is the space structured to prioritize sharing over private control, avoiding monopolization?
The design includes anchored elements, such as the bar, that can be used by different groups upon registration. The communal spaces are unobstructed so they are available to different users for temporary occupation and various functions. Shared workshops and facilities further promote collaborative use.

4. Accessibility and Open Access
Is the space or system physically accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities?
The site is accessible by car, bike, and bus and is within walking distance from the town center. The western side of the site is situated at a higher elevation, creating a natural boundary. Access can be restricted at night through a gate placed near the theater building. The vocational school and makerspace include two elevators providing access to all floors. The theater entrance is wheelchair-friendly, with a cost-effective and energy-saving solution that eliminates the need for an elevator. Community spaces are situated on the ground floor for easy access for all.

Are there barriers to entry, whether economic, cultural, or social, that might exclude certain individuals or groups?
Larger stakeholders like the school and supermarket contribute to funding shared facilities, ensuring accessibility by keeping some services and facilities free or prices low.

5. Sustainability and Resource Management
Are there mechanisms in place for collective responsibility, such as shared maintenance or care?
The management team oversees long-term maintenance, with the Neighborhood Academy playing an integral role in organizing workshops that engage the community in garden upkeep and restoration, passing down skills. The entrepreneurs' cooperatives' shared ownership model, as well as collaborative hands-on construction, fosters collective responsibility.

Does the project utilize resources in an environmentally conscious way that avoids externalizing costs (e.g., labor exploitation)?
The project makes use of existing structures as much as possible, repairing and reinterpreting them through minimal interventions. Materials are sourced locally, including reclaimed elements from the site and wood from San Quirico. The site functions as a sustainable ecosystem, integrating solar panels, passive heating, and a helophyte filter.

6. Solidarity and Collective Responsibility
How are responsibilities distributed among the community members?
Each actor in the development team contributes their own perspective and expertise (their specific roles are elaborated in Appendix 2).

Are there opportunities for community members to collaborate and support each other?
The shared workshops and proximity of different parties stimulate collaboration. Vocational students can do internships at one of the local businesses, and secondary school youth can extend their studies at the vocational school. Local entrepreneurs collaborate with the bio supermarket, garden, and canteen, fostering a supportive network of farmers, chefs, and artisans.

Does the commons foster a sense of responsibility beyond its immediate community?
The Soara project extends its responsibility beyond the factory site, functioning as a catalyst to revitalize the town, with neighboring towns also benefiting as Angera becomes more attractive.

Does it create innovative architectural forms that facilitate cooperation and solidarity in daily life?
Yes, as outlined in the previous third question under "3. Decentralization of Power."

7. Transparency and Communication
Are decisions and processes transparent to all stakeholders? How are information and updates shared with the community? Are there clear and open channels for communication and feedback?
Monica Moro, Remo Cardana and Alvinio Ravasi provide regular updates through exhibitions at the rowing club building, community meetings, and online platforms. The Festa dell'Uva is also used as a means to involve the community in the project and share updates.

8. Cultural and Social Relevance
How does the design reflect the cultural, social, and emotional needs of the community?
The project alleviates the current parking problem in the town center, fosters children's independence through afterschool activities and hands-on education, provides a space for storytelling and dancing evenings, offers a canteen with affordable, simple dishes, and creates job and educational opportunities through the vocational school.

Are the values and traditions of the community integrated into the design and function of the commons?
The project reflects the taste of the residents of Angera by using simple materials that still convey elegance and refinement. Local artisans contribute custom-made details, such as a curtains that honor the local textile industry. The revival of the Festa dell'Uva brings a local tradition back to life, resonating with the entire community. Additionally, stories and legends - such as that of Sant'Arialdo, the dancing goddesses around the oak tree, and the Rocca castle - are woven into the project.

Does the space provide opportunities for cultural expression and social connection?
The central strip of the Soara is designed precisely for this purpose, featuring the piazza, theater, ruin garden, community spaces, and exhibition area.

Does the design embed care work into spatial and social systems?
The project emphasizes care by valuing and maintaining existing structures, supported by the Neighborhood Academy. In building 1, rentable spaces for care practices further integrate care into the project.

9. Resilience and Long-Term Viability
Does the commons have the capacity to withstand external challenges and pressures?
The project is designed to withstand external challenges through community engagement, a self-sustaining business model, and sustainable energy solutions.

How can the commons evolve to remain relevant and functional in the long term?
The management team ensures the long-term functionality of the project through maintenance, adaptation to community needs, and ongoing community engagement. The Neighborhood Academy promotes informal learning opportunities, intergenerational collaboration, and partnerships.

10. Freedom of Creation and Autonomy
Does the commons empower users to shape and define their own spaces and experiences?
The entrepreneurs' cooperative is involved early in the development process, giving them a voice in decision-making. Necessary interventions are made by professionals, while leaving room for makers to shape and design their own spaces.

How does the design allow for creative expression and the co-creation of the environment?
The project encourages creative expression by involving artists (e.g., Simone Berrini's murals) and hosting workshops that engage the community (eg., involving former factory workers).

Personal Reflection
Throughout my graduation period, I've learned a lot about myself and my way of working. The overwhelming scope of the project and the lack of a predefined structure made it challenging, especially having to make all the decisions on my own. However, I've been lucky to receive guidance from supportive tutors. Now that I have completed the research, I realize how much it helps me to put my thoughts on paper, forcing me to make decisions and anchor them. After my P3 presentation, I received feedback on clarifying my strategy, defining the roles of each actor, and creating a transformation framework. I incorporated this feedback into the conclusions and appendices of my research, which brought more clarity and structure to the project.

 The project I've taken on is something that would normally require a large team and far more time than one year. I had to do this all on my own, and with my perfectionist nature, it might have been too much. Looking back, focusing on something smaller, like the Circolo Operaio, might have reduced the pressure and allowed me to complete one part more in depth, instead of leaving many aspects of the project unresolved. However, this approach has allowed me to address the project from multiple angles, considering a more holistic perspective on revitalizing Angera.

 When I began my graduation project, I set out to discover my place within the architecture field. I now realize that the nature of this project aligns closely with who I want to be as a designer - beyond the traditional profession, I value collaboration across different fields and a humanist approach, working in a cooperative way. This project has been a valuable exercise in that sense.

Looking ahead, in the final part of my graduation period, I will focus on completing the final drawings and presentation, as well as preparing prints for an exhibition to showcase the work during my P5.