Treffpunkt Berlin

From Collections to Connections:
An Intercultural Public Library in Gesundbrunnen

REFLECTION PAPER

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COMPLEX PROJECTS
Bodies and Building Berlin
AR3CP010

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a host & disseminator of diverse media

a social connector to facilitate integration
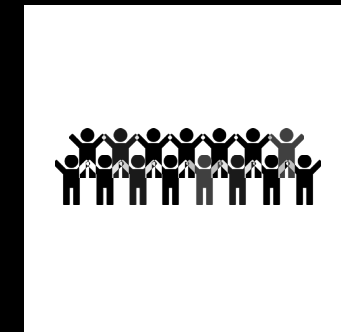
an upgraded futureproof district centre
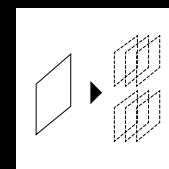
VÖBB
VERBUND DER ÖFFENTLICHEN BIBLIOTHEKEN BERLINS

Federal Office for Migration and Refugees

BERLIN
Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen

Partner (Operator)

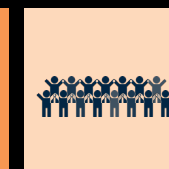Main Client (Initiator)

Partner (City Development)

Sonic Haven

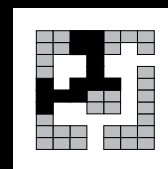Diverse Population

Future Demand

Digital Emulating, Archiving, Dissemination

Conscious Language Learning

Informal Intercultural Exchange

Co-Creation & Dissemination

Futureproof Implant

The project is an intercultural district-level public library in Gesundbrunnen, Berlin.

It aims to explore the research question: How can we design a public library that facilitates the integration of migrants into the local community?

The project's primary ambition is to act as a social connector for facilitating integration. The secondary ambitions are to host and disseminate diverse media types; and to serve as an upgraded futureproof district centre.

It is a response to rising global migration flows, which results in increasing cultural diversity within societies around the world.

Germany is currently the second top destination for international migrants. The country has already received multiple waves of immigrants in the past century – from guest workers to refugees – but its attitude toward foreign newcomers has historically been conservative. However, with the Skilled Immigration Act (Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz) passed in 2023, the Federal Government now aims to push Germany into a "Modern Immigration Country" (Ein Modernes Einwanderungsland).

Within this new national ambition, the integration of foreign newcomers is highly prioritised; and public institutions are expected to facilitate this two-way process between local Berliners and foreign newcomers.

To support this, the public library emerges as a highly relevant institution. As an architectural typology, it began as a house for collections and on-site reading. Yet over time, digitalisation has largely reduced the need for this building to fulfil this specific function; thus liberating and shifting its focus to become an active site of social connections, where people from all walks of life can encounter each other regularly.

Furthermore, in Berlin's future city development, the Senate envisions the public library as a mixed-use centre for strengthening social cohesion and bringing life to new residential districts (Neue Stadtquartiere). While there are already well-located public libraries – already enjoyed by existing Berliners of the vicinity – that can serve these districts, they are not spatially nor technically equipped to meet the multimedia & multi-programmatic needs for this social ambition.

Source: Konzerthaus Berlin on Pablo-Neruda-Bibliothek Facebook Page, 2019

The Complex Projects graduation studio – titled "Bodies and Building" – speculates on how typologies have changed over time, potentially in response to evolving human practices.

In particular, this graduation project has speculated on the trajectory of the public library, whose focus is shifting further away from merely housing collections, toward an active site of social connections. Digital archiving has enabled reading material to be accessible beyond the walls of the library, but people are still attracted to this third space due to the inclusive values of the public library as an institution. As a result, the programs in this typology are diversifying - thus requiring a complex architectural response.

Seeing the public library as a means to bring foreign newcomers and local Berliners together, this graduation topic has particularly explored how the diverse programs (e.g. classrooms, market, studios) can be spatially and functionally arranged, while simultaneously responding to the existing fabric of a particular mixed-use Mietkaserne block that had served as a public heart of Gesundbrunnen for two centuries. Further, the programs have been grouped under the themes of "Conscious Language Learning", "Informal Intercultural Exchange", and "Co-Creation & Dissemination", with a key circulation route through them that generates more social encounters.

Furthermore, within the studio, we have been divided into groups with respective lenses. This project has engaged with the digitalisation lens in terms of its aforementioned impact on the public library typology - but also more explicitly by incorporating an edge data centre into its experience. This aspect is part of a collective group vision that public buildings should increase societal awareness of data and its related infrastructure.

In conclusion and with regards to the Master Architecture programme, the project has responded to the graduation topic with a building that revitalises its immediate urban fabric, internally accommodates various programs (and their technical demands), and addresses users and functional circulations. Additionally, in looking to the future, diverse space usage has been considered with open spaces formed by a consistent grid and dry construction, which can be flexibly divided by users and adapted to new needs. Finally, the introduction of an edge data centre has also raised discussions of sustainability and energy production for the building. These are relevant architectural aspects that can be explored with the skills acquired throughout our Master track.
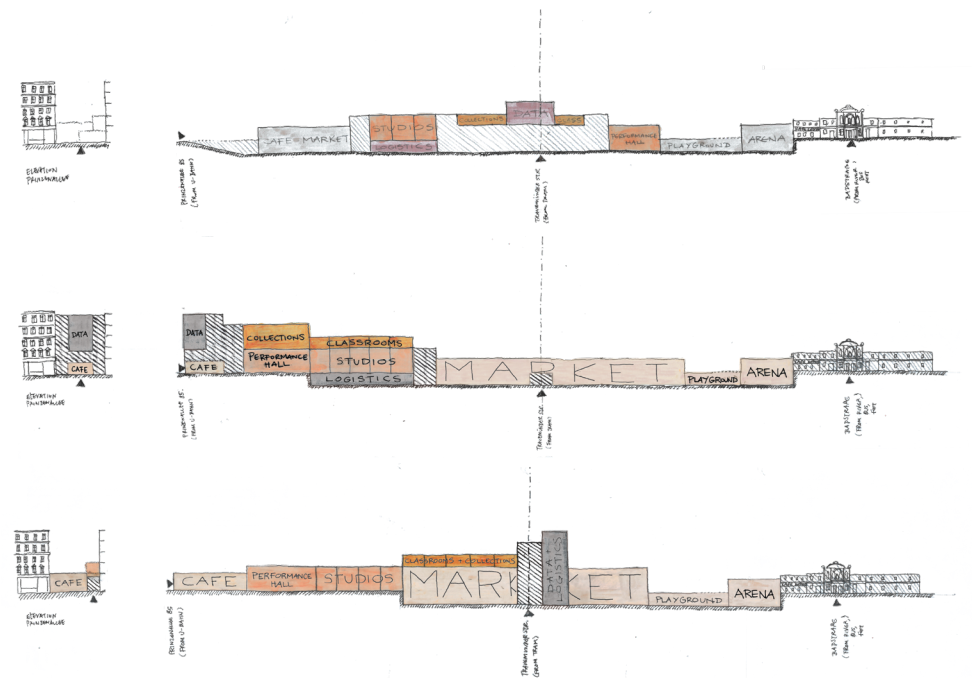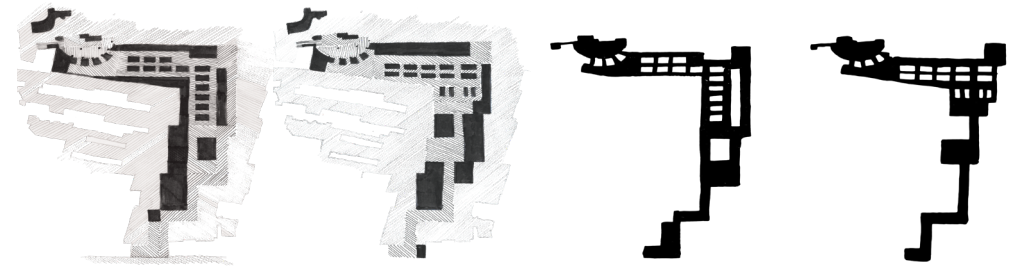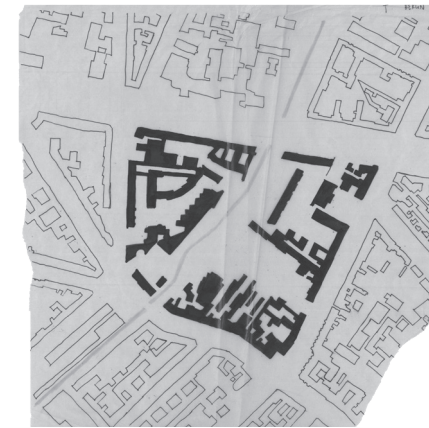
The graduation studio was roughly divided into a research phase (MSc3) followed by design (MSc4), but these two aspects have undoubtedly influenced each other throughout the project's development.

For example, in understanding the project's programmatic requirements, nine key case studies were chosen in relation to its ambitions. Four key cases were analysed primarily by benchmarking GFA, diagramming relations, and context mapping, thus providing a solid foundation to start designing the large-scale massing and hardware of this project.

Seeing that the case studies were various permutations of programs (e.g. bookshelves, studios, halls, study cells) specific to its catchment population, I summarised them by creating an "Inventory" of typical modules for each program in the project. This was already a step into design, but it was necessary to foresee the practical extent to which I could challenge certain aspects (or not). It was something that I revisited and questioned throughout the design process. Ultimately, it has been most evidently translated into the decision of which programs required specific and closed spaces, and which did not.

Similarly, the research phase for the site mainly allowed me to select and understand a suitable location for the building, at the scale of the city and district. The area was understood in terms of population composition, built-up density, land use, accessibility, sun, and so forth. This was followed by "optioneering" models, which gave an idea of the site's opportunities and constraints more spatially.

Yet when designing beyond the massing, in attempt to create an approachable, human-scale building at the heart of an oversized Mietskaserne block, I felt that I needed more time to research on specificities within the block. Thus, I researched deeper into the site, particularly understanding the neighbouring buildings and street plinth level that users would experience. This additional research resulted in the key spatial design concept.

Finally, the relationship between the research question and the design response - as of today - may not be extremely explicit through architectural materialisation, but rather through its program mix. The site and the experience through these programs should be the key spatial drivers of this project, but these form a slight tension with the Studio methodology, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

To conclude, the research phase sufficiently prepared the hard requirements for design. However, in dealing with this graduation topic, it is questionable whether such a building approach is the most suitable or elegant departure point for this project's social ambitions, which I believe requires a closer examination and prioritisation of what the site needs. Consequently, this called for an additional round of research during the design phase, in order to inform decisions from a more human-scale, site-specific, experiential perspective.
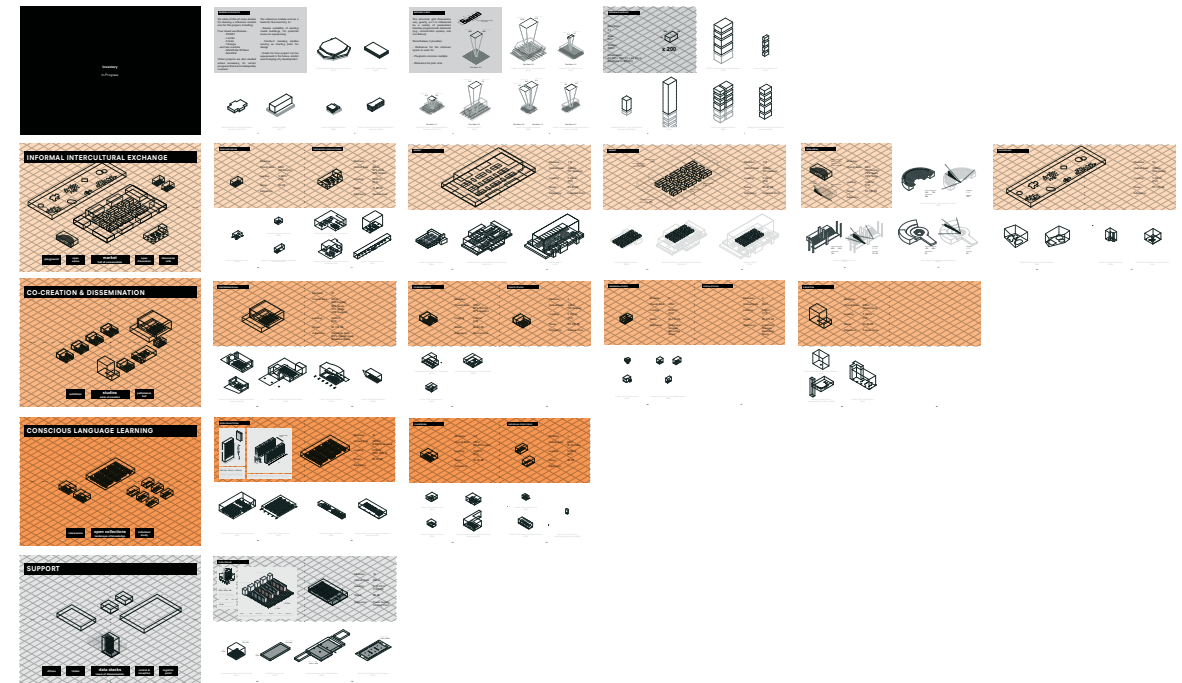
Methodology and Approach

The Complex Projects studio takes a typology-driven approach for sizeable public buildings, which should serve as "one-of" its kind. Its endorsed methodology seems more productive for relatively larger functionally-driven typologies (e.g. airport, station) and concepts (e.g. the most efficient ...) that would initiate change to the city by standing out.

In terms of design, a lot of time was invested in the massing. The massing scale is undoubtedly a necessary design stage for any large-scale building. Yet, the time spent on this phase and the strongly advised "3x3" method (i.e. masses fulfilling program, site, client interests) was overly restrictive and counter-productive for this particular project. While the method can help us understand how far those respective interests can be spatially addressed, the chosen site at hand foreseeably required more attention and research at a closer scale. Thus, the time invested in the massing phase could have been shortened and less rigidly guided.

After the massing phase, I had made a start in researching the grain, rhythm, and details of neighbouring buildings and the existing river landscape. Simultaneously, I was schematically developing the building's inner workings. Both are necessary ingredients for the project, but the pressure of time hindered neither aspect from being fully fledged.

Further, as I was learning more about the site while designing; and given the sheer scale of the building; it was difficult to generate comparable design options for discussion sessions. Instead, I worked in a more cautious and progressive manner, which limited the spatial exploration that could have been done to sharpen the ultimate design decision.

Overall, I can see the effectiveness of the studio's methodology for designing buildings that are introspective landmarks in the city. This is perhaps also the practical reality of how most large-scale public buildings are presented to clients and eventually realised. Yet, in combination with this project's interests and my inability to produce more design options under the lack of time, the project has struggled in materialising a refined response to its ambitions. Thus, looking toward the last presentation, I hope to further strengthen the presence of the project's ambitions and spatial concepts at the level of experiential and detailed design.
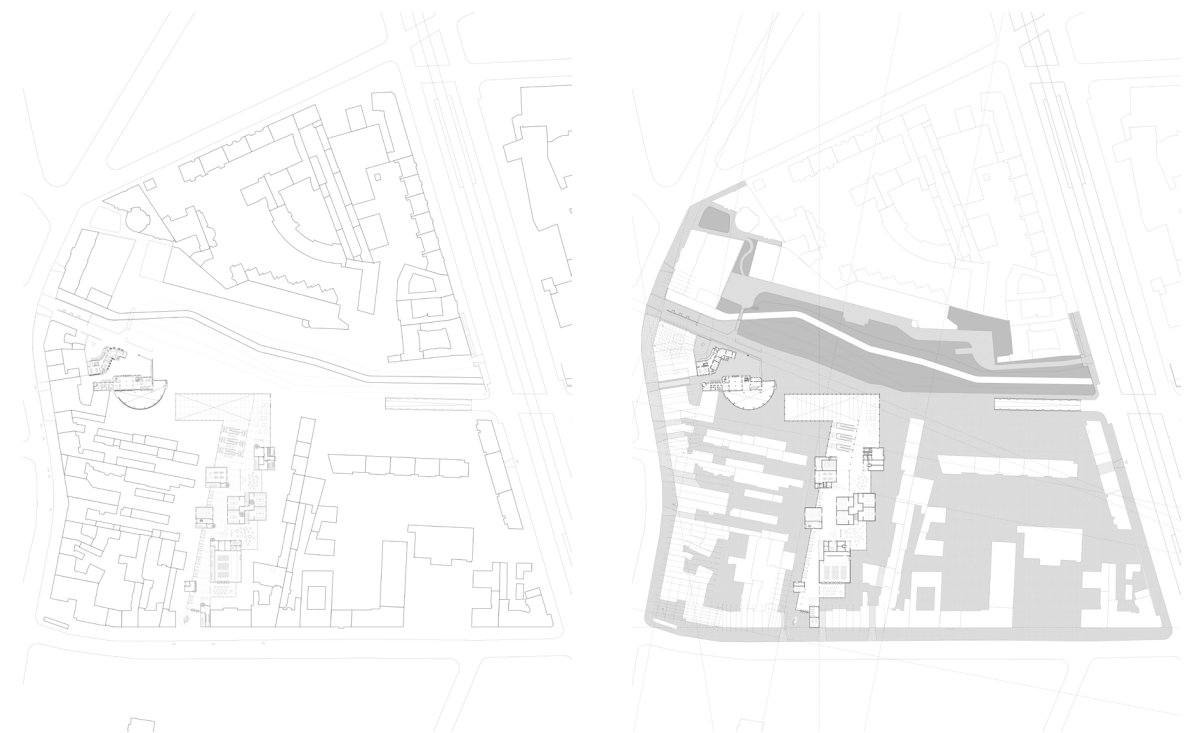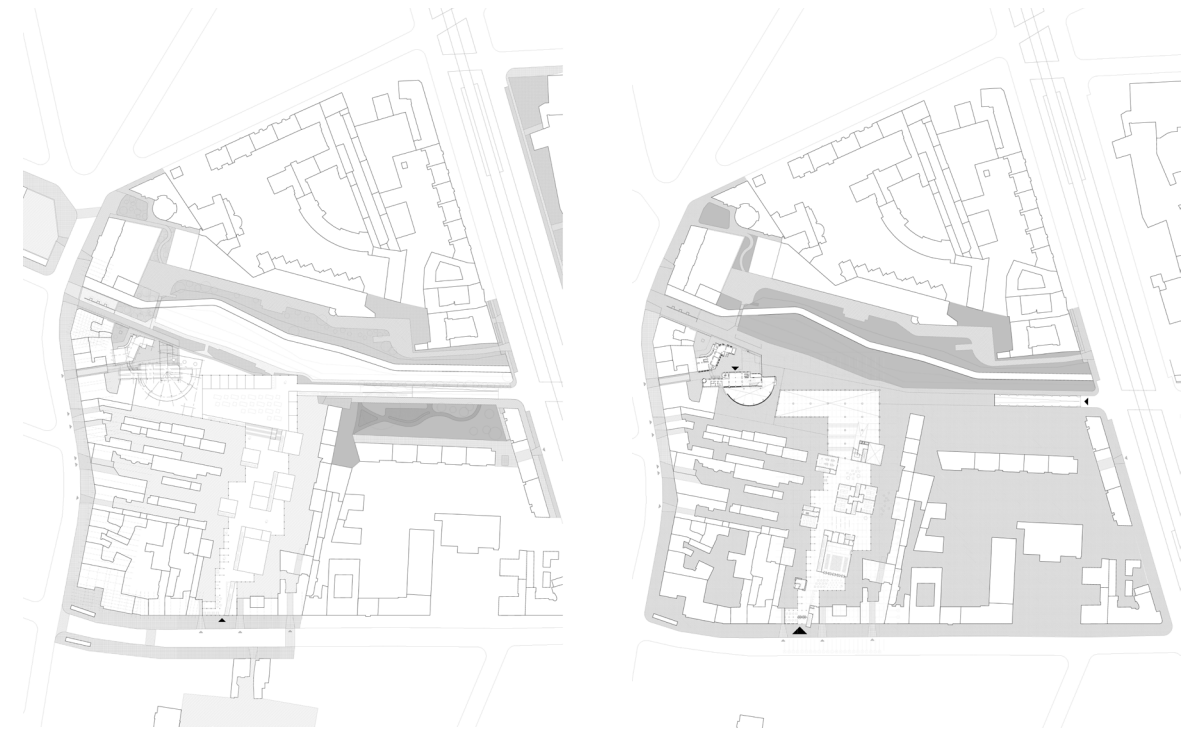
The need to facilitate two-way integration between foreigners and locals is not a situation specific to Berlin or Germany, but also to other migrant-receiving societies around the world, owing to a global increase in migration flows. As the project has proposed a building with a specific program mix to facilitate this process, its general strategy of open and closed space can certainly be replicated elsewhere.

However, the building's site-specific form and almost urban-scale infrastructural concept may only be transferable to similar block situations, but not elsewhere. I find the project quite similar to the Sant Antoni - Joan Oliver Library by RCR Arquitectes. The size of the block they intervened with is nine times smaller, but the strategy is somewhat alike. On the other extreme, if we were dealing with an entirely newly-developed district, it may be most beneficial to have the public library being a centralised icon that kickstarts the social life of its future residents. Yet, this kind of site condition may be less effective in gathering the diverse users and audiences that this project tries to connect.

In the professional field, the project can demonstrate how the library typology today demands a multifunctional building, with both specific and generic spaces. Generic spaces cannot merely be empty open spaces - they still have to be aptly designed, or its usages and possibilities demonstrated. Furthermore, this project shows how a highly site-specific building form could benefit existing urban fabrics, and vice versa; but this may also bring challenges for its internal workings, thus requiring time to figure out. For example, establishing a reasonable logistics point and routing has been a discussion point throughout design development.

In academia, this project poses a broader question: to what extent can large-scale buildings respond to local social processes? I believe that this project has some unfulfilled potentials that can better respond to this, but at the moment, the project's strength lies in its program mix. Perhaps the building itself can only facilitate that, and ultimately, social processes rely most on those who inhabit it.

Then, another question follows - can we do more as architects, working in the realm between the government and people?
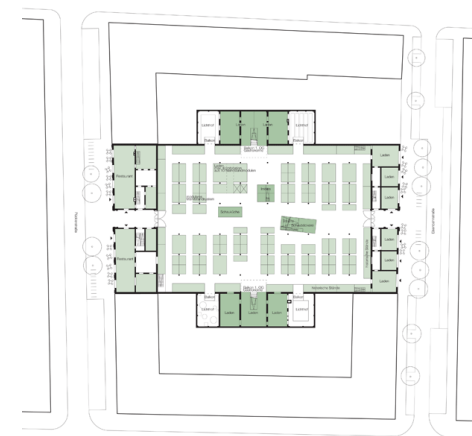
I had always hoped to graduate with a community-based project, or one that serves a social purpose. When applying to this university, my motivation letter wrote about developing a self-built architectural tectonic for strengthening local communities; where the act of building becomes valuable as a social process, and the architect serves as a facilitator and connector. I was deeply inspired by Carlo Ratti's "Open Source Architecture", Peter Swinnen's "Architect as Policy Whisperer", Raumlabor's "acting in public", among others advocating for working with different spatial agencies.

So, why not in Berlin? Perhaps this interesting city, and the community-oriented public library typology, were my main motivations to stay in this studio and explore these broader questions subtly, despite being told on a late night seminar session: "In practice, community means nothing. You are making it difficult for yourself."

Indeed, this project has been difficult to materialise here and I am very grateful for my tutors and peers for joining me on the process. I do believe that the project has unfulfilled potentials, and all these ambitions and questions could still be further architecturally explored. In the remaining time, I hope to further refine the project in a smaller scale; both spatially and conceptually.

Source: RCR Arquitectes

. . . . . T H E J O U R N E Y I S T O B E C O N T I N U E D !

Source: raumlabor berlin