

Reflection on the Graduation Process by Gabriël Bani

Embarking on the journey of my graduation project, I delved into the complex issues surrounding Tunis's port-city identity and the impact of French colonization. This reflection is a narrative of the process, guided by the STARR (Situation, Task, Action, Result, Reflection) method, reflecting on the path of discovery, feedback, adjustments, and learning that shaped my work.

Exploring the Approach

From the start, I was determined to understand the complex identity of Tunis and its port-city heritage. In my approach I combined historical research, theoretical frameworks, and empirical observations. This included analyzing literature, reviewing legal documents, conducting photographic research, site mapping, fieldwork, and examining case studies of Mediterranean port cities.

As I progressed, I realized the importance of specificity. During my research, I explored various port areas but did not create detailed drawings to analyze the spaces around the waterfront. This oversight limited my understanding of how these spaces were designed. Moreover, I lacked a specific location focus during field research, which restricted the depth of my site-specific pictures and interviews. Despite these gaps, my extensive literature review, fieldwork, and interviews deepened my understanding of Tunis's evolving identity and the importance of creating more awareness of its port-city heritage.

Reflecting on this, I recognized that my approach needed more explicit decision-making related to scale and program. A focused location and detailed drawings would have enriched my research, providing clearer insights into the design of waterfront spaces.

Embracing Mentor Feedback

Mentor feedback played a crucial role in refining my project. Initially, I struggled with defining the intervention's scale and ensuring it adhered to local craft and economy-driven principles. My mentors emphasized the need to be deliberate in showcasing the hybrid identities of Tunis from the initial design steps. They urged me to question the research and design interventions iteratively, clarifying why the absence of these identities was problematic and why the local port city identity required attention.

This feedback prompted valuable adjustments. I scaled down the project area to nearly half of its original size, allowing for a more human-scale design. The concept of dual identity became visible in the idea of creating two facades—one facing the city and the other towards the sea. These changes ensured coherence and depth in my work, showcasing the hybrid identity of the area more effectively.

Translating Feedback into Work

Adjusting the project's scale was transformative. Initially, I envisioned a vast area, but feedback led me to focus on a smaller, more manageable site. This change enabled me to design on a human scale, making the project more relatable and contextually relevant. The dual identity concept materialized through the creation of two facades, reflecting the area's unique characteristics. These adjustments brought clarity and purpose to my design, aligning it with the local context.

I think that the hybridity of the city is very grayscale there is not a singular dominant identity in the city, the “Arabic” part is not really Arabic but also a mixture of native Maghreb culture and even the “French” part has clear hints to the local architecture with the Cathedral of St. Vincent de Paul as an example.

Learning from My Work

The iterative process of research to design was a continuous learning experience. Each stage revealed areas for improvement, and I refined my understanding of Tunis's hybridity and port-city qualities. Feedback on architectural elements led to a deeper exploration of specific programs, ownership dynamics, and symbolic expressions. This learning influenced the evolution of my design brief, grounding it in a more nuanced understanding of the city's identity and spatial dynamics.

Reflecting on this, I realized the importance of a faster-paced, more iterative process. Future projects will benefit from an active approach, allowing for quicker insights and more effective refinements.

Connecting with the Master Program

My project, "Revitalizing Bab al Bhar," aligned seamlessly with the goals of the "City of the Future" studio, which focuses on transforming urban environments to be attractive and inclusive while preserving their uniqueness. The architecture track encourages innovative building projects that address technical, social, and spatial challenges. My project aimed to reconnect Tunis with its roots as a port city, addressing these challenges head-on.

This connection reinforced the relevance of my work within the broader academic framework. Revitalizing Bab al Bhar was not just about reclaiming a port but about reconnecting the city with its heritage, ensuring its unique identity was preserved amidst urban transformation.

The Iterative Influence of Research and Design

The relationship between research and design was a dynamic, iterative process. My research influenced the scale and focus of my design, leading to a more thoughtful and contextually relevant project. Since I have not worked on a port-city scale before I did not know how to divide my design area. In the beginning I chose a large plot, after the feedback of P2 I realized this was too big of a quest for me. I needed someone else to tell me this since I did not have that experience on this scale yet. Just like I did not know that much about the fishermen in Tunisia. After my site visit and talking to the fishermen, I learned that they have an endangered job. Since I was already interested in the port-city they became the lead role in my research. This is not something I would have come up with if I had not gone to Tunisia.

These are just two of the small examples of how little things during my research process led to big changes in the research, kind of like the butterfly effect. Equally, my design ideas prompted philosophical considerations about public space in Tunisia, refining my research objectives. Studying architecture in The Netherlands you learn that a public space would for example be a square. But in Tunisia public spaces work differently. Since Tunisia has a hot climate a public space is not a big open square but rather somewhere with lots of shade. I know this because of my double nationality and having visited Tunisia a lot, but an outsider that has not spend long periods of time in Tunisia, would probably not know about this. So the site visits combined with past knowledge and doing theoretical research led to an iterative cycle of design research. This iterative cycle enriched both the research and the design, ensuring a cohesive and well-rounded project.

Assessing Methods and Value

One of the most valuable insights came during a site visit. This visit highlighted the significance of focusing on the fishermen and their endangered way of life, emphasizing the importance of ethnographic methods. This human-scale research approach provided deep insights into the local context, shaping the project's direction. Since I am designing for the locals, it was important for me to get their feedback. I am not designing something that I have user experience with, so to get a perspective from users has helped me through my research and helped me form a better idea about what was needed in my design. Think of a place to sell the fresh fish, but also a place to rest after a long hard day of work.

Academically and societally, my project aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on waterfront development and port city heritage. Researching Tunis offered insights that could extend to other regions, encouraging locals to reconsider their city's identity. This broader applicability underscored the value of my work, demonstrating its relevance beyond the immediate context.

Conclusion and Future Steps

As I move towards the final part of the graduation period, my focus will be on refining and developing the design proposal based on received feedback. This includes addressing remaining issues related to scale, program, and the representation of hybrid identities. I will finalize the research document by working on the structure and layout. I will also create detailed drawings reflecting the architecture's use of space, think of plans, sections and fragments.

This journey has been a insightful learning experience. Reflecting on my approach, incorporating feedback, and iteratively refining my work have provided valuable awareness. This project has deepened my understanding of how to design for people, ensuring that future work contributes meaningfully to the discourse on urban identity and design.