

Methods & Analysis

Graduation Studio

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Thickening the threshold

Public spaces for encounter in the entry squares of Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

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Master Thesis

Reflection

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1| Fieldwork

In September 2018 I have travelled to Bogota - the capital of Colombia with a group of Methods & Analysis students and teachers. During the trip we have been hosted by the students and professors of two Bogotan universities: Universidad de Los Andes and Universidad Nacional de Colombia. The Bogotan students were kind and hospitable to guide us around their city and necessarily my impression of Bogota was that of a student.

We have spent most of the time in Bogota in Teusaquillo – a downtown district which is also a student district due to the presence of the biggest Colombian university – Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

During the trip to Bogota I have repeatedly visited the campus of Universidad Nacional de Colombia. As a visitor only I was condemned to experience mostly the outdoor spaces of the campus. What evoked my biggest interest after these visits were the peripheral areas of University campus.

While still in Bogota I have gathered photographic documentation, conducted interviews with students of the university among them Daniel Bernal. I have tried to absorb knowledge about the recent history and the current affairs of the university. Most importantly I tried to observe the daily life around the peripheries of the university.

2| P1 Group work in collaboration with Isabel Ulbrich and Danlei Huang

During the first part of research, we were encouraged to put our individual interests aside and research a shared topic. Me and my group mates were drawn to work together by an interest in the manifold instances of disjunction in the city. Isabel had observed the impoverished condition of the city floor and some of its buildings. Danlei was interested in the neglected pieces of land in the middle of the streets. And I held an interest in the boundary of the university.

We have performed our analysis under the umbrella name of urban commas, understood as places where some elements of a city are interrupted but some level of continuity is maintained.

The analysis included conceptual, disciplinary and contextual aspects.

The contextual analysis was performed mostly with tools such as mapping and drawing impressions of the sites. We conducted the conceptual analysis by researching literature about punctuation and applying the metaphor of punctuation to architecture. Lastly the part of disciplinary analysis was analysing case studies located in boundary areas through preparing plans, sections, axonometric views of sites and case studies.

This analysis has allowed me to realize that an investigation can deliver highly nuanced results when the concept, chosen as a lense to investigate it, is equivocal and intriguing. Looking at the entry squares as commas has sensitized me to multiple properties of the entry squares, which I would not have thought of, if I were to think of the entry squares as ‘full-stops’.

The most valuable result that the analysis of commas has yielded are the multiple observations of the patterns of use of the entry squares. Moreover, I was able to draw broader conclusions about the influence of voids, lacks, absences on the in-habitation of space. Nevertheless, I think that in this part of the investigation I could have spent more time analyzing urban conditions of the formation of urban commas as well as their forms.

3| Probing into Precedents

My interest in the university was invigorated by the seminar Probing into Precedents. For the seminar I have worked with Alexander Petrounine. We have analyzed Plaza Che - the central plaza of Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

I was given a chance to see the peripheral entry squares in a broader light – in comparison with undeniably the most central representative space of the university.

During this course I have learnt a lot about the subtle nuances which bring a public space to life. I realized that a multitude of circumstances must correlate in a space for it to afford many uses successfully. These circumstances include qualities of architecture but also accumulated memories and a program that is inspiring instead of stiffly

determined. This positive example has become a subconscious model of a lively public space, which I had the ambition to replicate near the boundary of the campus.

4| P1-P2 Individual work

Site

The first part of the individual work which I did after P2 aimed at a better understanding of the entry squares. I analyzed the entry squares through a disciplinary lens and looking at different species of pauses.

This stage of research I tried to focus my attention on the very inconspicuous architecture of the entry pavilions. On the contrary, the unexpected modes of use and appropriation have always taken over my attention. This investigation has led me down winding paths in strange directions. It was very difficult to make conclusions from this part of analysis less specific than about the sites themselves.

I concluded this part of research by sketching a draft of a design assignment for myself. I decided to design at the 4 main entrances of university campus. I wanted to formulate a strategy for an intervention on the threshold of the university campus.

Conceptual shift and forming the design approach.

This assignment has gone through many modifications as I gained more experience and a renewed understanding of the context of my task in the architectural discipline.

I think that the first important conclusion which has set my project on a path was to abandon the attempts of strengthening or clarifying the connection of the campus, across the highways leading to the city. This conclusion followed a reading of Georg Simmel's essay 'Bridge and door'. In this work Simmel points out that whenever one attempts to overcome an obstacle by building a form, the division is confirmed.

During this part of work I seemed to sit in a chair of a person who needs to evaluate whether the division between the university and the city should be maintained or torn down. However this is a question I would neither be able to give answer to nor it is something that an architect should find himself responsible for. Hence I decided to exclude that question from my investigation.

I realized that instead of attempting to make crossing the boundary easier there might be something I can do to enable dialogue between the sides.

At that stage of my research, I came across Klaske Havik's book 'Urban Literacy'. Klaske uses a metaphor of 'thirthing' which she borrows from Edward Soja. In 'Third space' Edward Soja describes 'thirthing' as a critical strategy. He argues that rather than thinking in binary opposites it is intellectually productive to add a third term, which provides a new balance.

A reading of some of Soja's work has made me realize that the problem of the boundary between the university and the city is precisely the problem of thinking in dualities, opposites, antagonisms. Such thinking is what brings divisions to life.

My first decision, aimed at stepping aside from this unproductive thinking, reaches as far in the past as the visit to Bogota and the observation of the rich vendor activity at the university gates. Vendors have recognized the peripheries of the campus as places where they can conduct their businesses successfully. They are making use of the space, light and the proximity to everyday activity of the university.

This discovery has inspired me to design for the vendors. I began to think that enhancing their activity can improve the peripheries of the campus.

The second idea that has helped me step aside from the univocal understanding of the boundary was threshold architecture. Thresholds are spaces of dual nature. Their state changes from open to closed. Ambiguity is at the essence of the meaning of threshold. Thus threshold escapes symbolic and customary meaning.

The first proposal which I prepared has been an intuitional response to many feelings I had about the sites and the smaller and bigger problems which I have noticed.

This proposal has received criticism from my tutors. It was brought to my attention that a project based primarily on immediate responses to the problems of the site is not capable of capturing the issue of urban boundaries. Moreover following this path would certainly not be the most interesting design trajectory.

Following this criticism I took a step back and revised the work which I have done until this point. I extracted the values and concepts which have been most important for me. I decided to put the concept of thickened threshold at the core of my project.

Thickened thresholds have been a part of my research for sometime but not until this point did I conduct a deepened research of this subject. Through this research I managed to learn a lot about how architects have tackled the often overlooked theme of in-between spaces.

The design proposal which I have prepared for the P2 presentation was an attempt to utilize some of the observations of thickened thresholds on the 4 main entry squares of the campus.

5| P2-P3 Individual work. Research and design

At the beginning of MSc 4 I was confronted with the task of translating the findings of my research into an architectural task. I had many ambitions and what seemed like many possible tools at my disposal. The first weeks of MSc 4 have been a time of persevere struggle to find a way to proceed.

The first important advance came unexpectedly with an realization that in the light of the lack of defined boundaries and architectural substance the most abundant and possibly most productive element of the spaces, I am dealing with, is the floor.

This realization has allowed me to focus on one element and to explore its potential of generating activity and enriching the experience of crossing the gate.

Determining the tool has set a path for investigation of the public spaces where the floor has taken a primary role. I was fascinated with Piazza del Campo in Sienna. It is a space where the floor is inspires and hosts the activity. Neither the facades of the surrounding houses nor the monuments are as important as the floor. The ground lowers down towards Cappella di Piazza slowly and unevenly. People sit just about anywhere on the incline.

With the knowledge extracted from the case studies analysis, I began modifying the topography of the squares. My intent was to make every visit to one of the squares more nuanced and non-repeatable. I was hoping that the gesture of inclining the floor across the gate could expand what is perceived as the space of the gate.

Designing by dividing was inadequate for the case of a public space. Hence instead of dividing the surface into parts devoted to one activity or another I decided to distribute stimuli. I imagine that in the entry squares the user finds himself in an environment which contains elements that grant possibilities. He chooses what use to make of the space.

6| P3-P4 Individual work.

After P3 presentation I was working on developing the form of the floor. At that time I was still confused about many aspects of the project. One of them was how to assess the probability of success of a space which is not predestined to serve any strictly defined activity or fulfil a specific need. Alongside these considerations, I was trying to rationalize the irregular form. I was subtracting the unnecessary and distracting elements of the design until the main design gesture could become very powerful. Moreover, I was wondering how could my approach be transformed into a strategy. I was puzzled by whether that could be done by clearly describing the geometrical deformations which shape the continuously curved floor, or by describing the sensations of the body or the archetypal topographies: hills, valleys, plateaus.

All of these doubts were somehow dispelled as the design proposal was becoming more and more clear.

I had set of to the 4th quarter of the year with the aim of designing the remaining 3 main entry squares of Universidad Nacional. With time I reassessed the feasibility of completing this task within the given time. My interests lied in increasing my understanding of the building methods that bring the undulated floor to life. For these reasons I decided to focus mainly on one entry square.

One of the big challenges of my Master project was to find a compromise between a rational form consisting of possibly simplest geometries and a softly curved form gently influencing the user, which I had envisioned. I realized that working with curved geometries requires a great deal of sensitivity. One needs to be more considerate while drawing a curved line than while drawing a straight one. At the same time curves have a great potential of expressing feelings such as tension and relief. The presence of curves can introduce many nuances to the environment.

In the final design the inclines of the floor are very subtle. In many cases user may not be entirely able to conceive exactly how the floor behaves. The bodily sensations prevail. The body resists or complies. It falls or stretches. It is sheltered and exposed.

7| Craft

I chose to design the entry square as a possibly most natural system. I reduced the extensiveness and intensiveness of intervention. The project can be largely raised by reshaping the soil already present on the site. Where possible I relayed the on capability of the ground layers to handle the processes of water circulation. The introduced system allows to capture the water, clean it and reuse it by the inhabitants of the neighborhood.

8| Reflection on the outcome

In order to be able to reflect on the outcome of my Master project I decided to design the entry square at Carrera 45. I chose this square as it appeared to be most unlike the square at Calle 26 and I was hoping that it would give me the broadest perspective.

While designing it I was constantly recalling the first square. I was questioning some of my decisions, wondering which actions actually lead to thickening a threshold. Moreover I was hoping to mobilize different tools than the ones I had previously used and by the means of that to formulate a conclusive set of rules.

In my proposals I have been trying not to follow the dictate of the spatial properties of the sites. Where centrality, symmetry, uniformity, parallelism, uniform rhythm were imposing themselves, I acted contrariwise. I introduced diagonals, deviations, disruptions.

The entry squares are paved in a gradient pattern. The gradient is stretched over tens of meters across the gate. This operation is aimed at achieving an effect of a blurred transition, where no edge or boundary can be distinguished. In this giant weave various accents, points, pauses and phrases are distributed. They are open to interpretation, they underline forms, accentuate directions, they conceal to allow other things reveal themselves.

These totems left in the environment do not try to force a reaction of the user, however one would not be indifferent to them. They make the form more readable. They complete the intuitions of the body.

A. The proposal in the context of Universidad Nacional de Colombia and the surrounding neighborhoods

The intervention by Calle 26 gives a bit of structure to the flows of people in the outer part of the entry space. At the same time it brings assymetry, disturbance of hierarchy to the regular interior between the faculties of Graphic Design, Agricultural Engineering, Edificio Antonio Narino and the building of Postgradual Economical Studies. The submersion on the campus side fragments the mentioned interior, which in my feeling is too big and hence very stagnant. The submersion disrupts the flatness and the regularity this space. This intervention points at a possibility of giving individual character to the different parts of this space.

At Carrera 45 the intervention is knitted on a very long funnel leading to the center of the campus. The passage from Carrera 45 to Plaza Che is a sequence of multiple wide views blurred into one another. It is a city scale without the intensity of city life or city infrastructure. The proposal for this space, with the use of a shift to the

side of the gate, tries to suggest an alternative direction of development, that is along the boundary of the campus.

In its early years the campus has been designed with an idea of establishing hierarchies of center and periphery by the means of road infrastructure. In the following years architects have been trying to relate the the existing situation. At present buildings are very loosely arranged along streets. The concept of thickening divisions by giving them meaning involves working with infrastructure. Thickening the threshold attempts at **reintroducing the possibility of forming conjunctions between the unrelated buildings to the University Campus**. It offers an alternative to a city defined as an agglomeration of identifiable enclaves.

B. Comma and the final project

Comma has been imprinted into this project in many ways during this year. It is present in the understanding of public space as a place that is a subject of interpretation and in particular which bestows the user with many understatements, suggestions but not many commands or directions.

Moreover, the concept of comma has left a very strong mark on my broad assumptions regarding the composition of the thickened threshold. The search for the ways of connecting which do not eradicate the individual features of neither of the parts as well do not draw an impassable line between them has been within my main line of inquiry throughout the entire year.

Finally the concept of comma has found its representation in the achieved material representation of the forms, where stronger and lighter lines expose and bring attention to the forms.

C. A manifesto of a thickened threshold

As a summary of my discoveries I wrote a manifesto of a thickened threshold which summarizes the conclusions, I have managed to make.

1. A thickened threshold is an action on a surface.

2. Center

The center of a thickened threshold does not lay at the gate.

3. A Field condition

In a thickened threshold functions are not articulated, represented or assigned to specific spaces. A thickened threshold questions the idea of dividing space into sub-spaces.

A thickened threshold questions functional space: of a gate as a check point, a square as an approach zone, a road as a surface destined for vehicular use, a park as a place of leisure.

In a thickened threshold the boundaries between spaces which serve strictly defined purposes are blurred. The spaces which serve different purposes are blurred into one another. Purposes are blurred. Spaces serve no purpose.

A thickened threshold questions the prevalent notion of 'efficiency'.

4. Continuous gestures

Folding, creasing, draping, cutting and weaving are gestures which are used upon the surface to transform it into a thickened threshold.

These gestures, when used upon the continuous fabric of the floor, have effects transmitted over large portions of the fabric. The gate, although limited in size can be changed by introducing changes in other distant parts of the fabric.

5. Unlocking the vertical dimension

In a thickened threshold unlocking the vertical dimension influences the bodily perceptions of the user and the reactions of his body.

Deviation

The floor deviates the movement of the pedestrian from the axis perpendicular to the fence.

Obstruction

The floor is like hurdles, which have to be avoided by the pedestrian.

6. Thirthing

In a thickened threshold the perception of the gate as the dominating built structure is changed by raising pavilions which capture the body and the sight of the passer-by while walking. The thickened threshold is a surface where many activities are enacted. Crossing the gate is of them.

7. Material

In a thickened threshold material is applied over the whole surface in a gradient pattern. Gradient merges the forms smoothly with one another. Changes of intensity and variety are achieved with gradient.

D. Thickening anything

Finally I am intrigued by the thickening itself. What does it mean to thicken? Can anything be thickened?

My understanding of thickening has been largely influenced by Greg Lynn's work 'Architectural Curvilinearity. The Folded, the pliant and the supple'.

In architecture contradictions, which have been recognized in the context, are embodied. The two main notions either propose representing contradictions or recovering unity. Reconstructing unity is achieved either through reviving the architectural language of a place, which is identified via historical analysis, or by identifying local consistencies resulting from climate, indigenous craft, materials etc. Unfortunately continuity extracted in this way represses contradictions and impoverishes.

Similarly the attempts to represent differences in conflicting forms do not allow other more complicated relations than the oppositional relation to be formed. Lynn attributes greater value to alliances between elements than to contradictions. Instead Lynn speaks of an emerging alternative practice which the reader of his essay gets to know as smoothing.

The exemplary projects, described by Lynn, try to incorporate their contexts with means that cause minimal resistance. Locations, characters and programs are folded, creamed and blended into one mixture without compromising their identity. This environment has the capability to expand through incorporation. The main quality of smooth systems lies in their ability of generating unexpected connections between elements.

I would propose a definition of thickening as connecting elements in a particular way. That is a way which specifically does not eradicate differences and does not represent the differences but incorporates them and uses them in the newly formed creation.

Further thickening can be understood as expanding concepts, as enabling a cross-contamination of concepts with other concepts. I find an example of such thinking in the works of architecture which question the customary programmatic understanding of things. In his design of Gabriel Garcia Marquez Cultural Center Rogelio Salmona questions the typical courtyard completely isolated from the street. He creates a courtyard visually connected with the street which can be reached via a sequence of public spaces. Therewith he develops a new completely unknown type and expands the knowledge of architectural types.

Similar thickening happens every time people find new purposes for things or places.