

REFELECTION PAPER

STUDIO TOPIC

I Midtown Change

THESIS TOPIC

I Crossing Borders in Cities



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1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

New York City is and has been playing a vital role in the history of the United States and often described as the cultural, financial, and economical capital of the world. The city underwent rapid growth. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the existing squared meters of Midtown Manhattan were built between the 1900s and 1930s. Midtown Manhattan is defined by its radical rectangular grid composed of streets and avenues. This condition assured the cities growth to what it is now and created a framework that resulted in the hyper densified and unique urban fabric. However, today Midtown Manhattan opposes new challenges, many buildings have reached or overreach their lifespan, new mega developments occur and slow traffic makes the area congested. From the group strategy the underdeveloped areas along the waterfront and the contrast between the commercial zone and the village like character of Kips Bay are both aspects taken into account with the personal design brief. Which contrast is shown in the image below.



Collage Empire Village

The research leads to focus on one particular area: Kips Bay and the Medical City. In particular, the site of Kips Bay Court will be subjected to an attempt of redesign. This has to do from a more morphological point of view, the

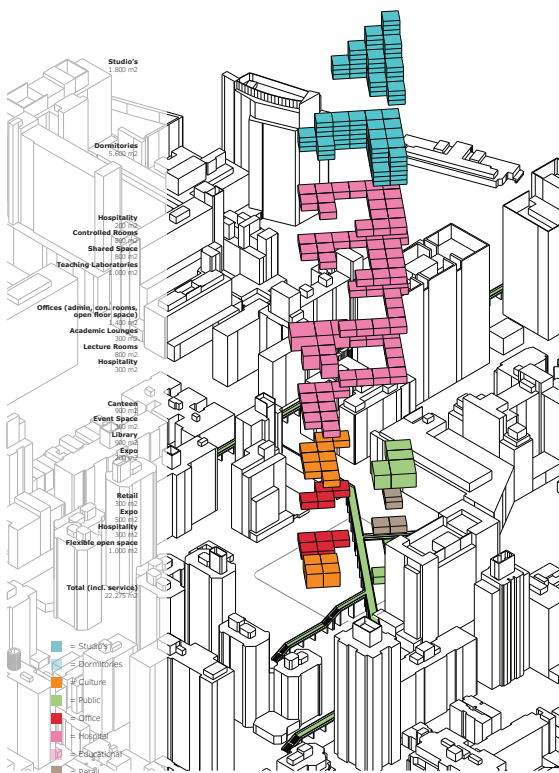
dissolvment of the strong grid towards the waterfront. In Empire Village the type of functions is showing a contrast. As theorized by Jane Jacobs in 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' it is explained how monofunctional blocks form borders in cities. The streets adjoining them are of generalized use. This causes it to be a dead end place with scant users, creating a so called border vacuum. Understanding the drawbacks of borders should help rescue us from producing them (Jacobs, 1961). On the other hand, a metropole, like New York City, does need these universities, medical centres and large parks for metropolitan attraction. It is more about how to deal with a city's border condition caused by massive single uses. In Empire Village, two of these single uses appear, the Medical City and the FDR Highway. Precedent illustrated analysis prove that the appearance of as well commuters, residents and visitors decrease while going towards the waterfront and resulting even in an empty spot in the lower-right corner. This change in function is shown by the transition going from smaller blocks to bigger footprints. However, is this a problem? Or is it just a change in the morphology and the functions? The two large areas, the Medical City and the FDR Highway, are having an impact on the people living next to it. The people living in Kips Bay are aware of this and do demonstrate about their worries of crime and public safety which is caused by the area (Thompson, 2017). Next to this the residents living in Kips Bay Court do not sound that positive about the area as well. How could this be possible in the middle of Midtown Manhattan? The question arises: what to do with these border vacuums?



Collage Fascination

The lessons learned after the carried out research, show the importance of the interaction between the building and the street with the help of a public plinth. This lack of safety and underused area has mainly to do with the lack of interaction of the building and the street creating a human friendly area which is safe enough to reside in. But, can permeability soften the border condition between the village like character of Kips Bay and the institutional area also known as The Medical City?

The project is a 25,000 m2 campus and residential complex working as an urban connector from the village towards the waterfront, creating permeability with the use of footbridges with a focus on a public plinth.



Programme Distribution

2. RELATIONSHIP RESEARCH & DESIGN

Research and design should not be divided but are strongly related. Both give feedbacks to each other and drive the development of the project. Research allows architects to find out evidence and position in a random and unfamiliar situation, while designing interprets and tests the research. Within Complex Projects studio the research is done in an extensive and elaborate way. Until the P2 the focus of the studio is mainly about researching the environment and its aspects. This extensive research is used to formulate your personal fascination and design approach. By gathering lots of data and information on different topics the fascination topic of the design is a well thought and formulated topic which is linked back to the research.

After the P2 presentations the research still carried on and kept on working on visions, research topics and questions. This shows that the research is not only the beginning of a design project but certain aspects can be investigated upon while the design process is already in progress.

However, I do feel that in architecture education we dive into our professionalism too early and trust our instincts too much. Sometimes we do achieve graphically satisfied drawings, but without even knowing why we choose this specific way of drawing and perspective. Sometimes our instincts of composition and eager for perfect geometry blinds us from a systematic understanding of the design approach.

While designing, the questions 'why?', 'for whom?' and 'for what?' constantly played a role in not losing myself in the artistic compositions and geometries. The studio constantly forces you to re-think, re-question and re-draw the elements of the design which helped me to compare and being critical about different approaches and how to deal with new issues by improving or combining different methods.

The research and design together is a heuristic approach. In architectural education and practice, we are pushed to produce new ideas. Creativity has been understood as denying history or context in order to produce new ideas. "As architects, we are not solving problems but inventing them" (Stavros Kousoulas, Lecture Series New Urban Questions, TU Delft, 21-11-2019). We need to emphasize more the role of research and study of the existing material before we start designing. As learned from the Complex Graduation Studio it is necessary that research should be involved in all the processes of the project. The heuristic process enables us to deconstruct and analyse the already produced knowledge in order to build further upon it and face new issues.

3. RELATIONSHIP GRADUATION, STUDIO, MASTER TRACK & MASTER PROGRAMME TOPIC

As mentioned before Midtown opposes new challenges. The studio topic is triggered by these changes and tries to investigate where Midtown will be led to. The design will eliminate the traditional and perhaps linear processes of past planning, urban design, and architecture. The design will respond to how the city is facing the changing demands and is dealing with a new urban challenges. This is done by challenging the strong urban grid, contrasting monotone functions and making the edges of Midtown attractive as well.

The graduation topic relates to the master track in a way that the focus of the design enhances a creative and innovative building that uses design as a means to deal with the technical, social and spatial challenges encountered in the built environment. The studio is always seeking for a change in the urban context. Basing on hard data, we are required to look into the context with a journalistic view and through a specific lens. Although, every research conclusion does not require firm evidence, every step you make should be logical and self-explained. The studio tries to address the research approach from a social, economic, environmental aspects but also in the end aligns with the practicality and technical background of the university.

Related to the master program (MSc AUBS) itself, it will have an international orientation and it blends in knowledge and skills from design practice, from the physical and social sciences, technology and engineering. The project explores innovative ways to create a more sustainable development which will be flexible in use and therefore adaptable in the future.

4. RELATIONSHIP STUDIO & RESEARCH METHOD

The research is clearly more suitable as a context led approach. According to Lucas, "allowing the context to take the lead in your research process is one way of establishing the primary importance of the physical, social or historical setting" (Lucas, 2016). The methodology and theory is aimed to understand and analyse the context. The theories and literature are forms of evidence that help to argue or predict the change within the context. New York is never lacking theories, it is a test bed that everyone want to execute experiments.

One of the methods which plays an important role is mapping. Mapping helps a lot to locate information in a geographical manner and enables us to overlay and compare different information in a comparable way. Within the studio the visualization of the data is crucial. This helps

to make the enormous amount of data visible and get a good grasp on it.

During the design phase of the project, typological studies are carried out to understand the different type and forms of buildings and to compare what already has been done and what can be improved.

However, gathering data by mapping or typological studies the personal fascination topic is not something which can be researched literally. A border vacuum is not just literal a wall or barrier, but it is something much more abstract which makes it difficult to grasp and understand. How to research such an abstract theme? For me this was a bit of a question in the beginning. But, by using two different research methodologies I tried to tackle it from different angles. The first one is based on a more tangible level, the morphological approach. The second one is more from a mentally point of view to do research on the users in the area, the praxeological approach.

The morphological approach led to my fascination of the dissolvment of the strong grid towards the shore caused by the large institutional areas and different characters of the avenues created by this change in the urban tissue. With this initial analysis, my interest towards the shore started to grow. I used this top-down mapping as my first approach to investigate the area. This first morphological mapping does not imply the character of the area, but the form of the urban tissue already gives me the first hints of what happens where.

After the top-down approach from mapping the area, I finally got the chance to visit the site. For me this was of great importance to experience the effect of massive single uses upon the people's behaviour on the streets and the people living next to it. As William H. Whyte explains, "To transform a border vacuum into a seamless and vibrant public space, you need to take a look at it from street level." On the spot, it showed me the lack of human activities on the streets adjacent to the massive single uses.

Not only I could see the decreasing human activity going towards the shore but it also opened my eyes to see the most affected area due to the lack of human activity caused by the massive single uses, namely the apartment buildings, the Kips Bay Court. Without having walked on the streets there, I was not able to feel the impact of the created border vacuum. In the end, the site visit resulted in my current design site.

For me, both aspects, a more top-down morphological approach and bottom-up praxeological approach, provided

different insides concerning the image of the city. The top-down approach opened my eyes to an area of interest and a research theme, while a bottom-up approach resulted in the discovery of my design site and program. The combination between these two perspectives makes the research more complete with both objective data and a sensitive touch.

5. RELATIONSHIP PROJECT, WIDER SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL & SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK

New York City has always been the test bed for urbanization and pioneer for metropolitan solutions. On the other hand, its extreme modernity also helped New York became confident of practicing radical urban and architectural ideas. However, the fabulosity of New York may blur the urgencies and anxieties the modernity and metropolis are facing. It is almost impossible to understand the whole context among humongous data in New York.

Working with the most dense and intense built environment can push the boundaries of architecture. Through the exercise of researching one of the most complex cities, it is explored how to deal with big data, new technologies, historical layers of a city, and work with stake holders. As a result, the process is an experiment and can be a theoretical solution that is not only based on current urban environment but also for future standard.

Next to this, institutional and monofunctional areas are being challenged, which are in most cities present and especially metropolises, by introducing the public plinth will help revitalize areas and reduce crime not only in Manhattan but in other cities as well.

Last, the global relevance of the project is the fact that the topics being researched on is of global importance and applicable to other cities worldwide. Namely, a shift in work rhythm, to a more diverse and flexible one, upcoming online shopping causing retail spaces to become vacant, internal city growth, the effect of globalization of urban centres which causes a more functionalistic approach towards a more mixed-use and flexible one.

6. ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

The main ethical issue for designing a project in New York City is to accept the “form follows finance”. In such a high capitalized city with such a high value of land, it is really difficult to address the different social groups. Anything that is transformed or newly built in Midtown will be much more expensive than other places. There might be a situation

that doing nothing, or minimum will make Midtown more affordable for everyone. What can architecture bring in such a dense city? As Nanne de Ru, founding partner of Powerhouse Company, mentioned: “if you would like to design something cute you should not be in New York, you have to design something extreme.” However, during the design process I figured out that designing something radical or extreme is not in my character. Next to that the area we as a group got assigned, Empire Village, is not characterized as the extreme urban context Midtown is known for. Instead, it is more characterized as a village and next to an empty institutional area. Therefore the approach of the design is something which I did not expect from designing in New York. Not making the most slender and tallest skyscraper but instead looking for what is needed for the existing neighbourhood and responding to its direct context.

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