P4 Reflections
Veronika Mayr_4332504

Architecture of the enclave:
Three instances of good life in Casablanca.

02.03.2016

“If the city is like some large house and the house in turn like some small city, cannot the varied parts of the house be considered miniature buildings?”
– Leon Battista Alberti

On Methodology

This graduation studio understands the development of a project as a constant back and forth between an intense study of field and discipline and a concrete architectural intervention. This idea of an intervention loop between research and design taught us about the dynamic character of a project: rather than a finished off product, it is perceived as a framework of ideas that is able to adapt to a given condition and generate interventions. Providing merely a common urban condition as a testing ground, the Chair of Methods and Analysis challenges students to find their own research and design theme and reflect upon their methodology and position.

The research involved a two week field-trip to Casablanca, investigating the traces of Modernism and the contemporary condition of an upcoming international metropolis. The evaluation of information from the field was complemented by the reading of disciplinary and interdisciplinary literature as well as a hands-on research by design on multiple scales.

This thesis has been the collective effort of me and Aga Batkiewicz. The continuous confrontation and clash of positions have been both the highest challenge and the most precious benefit of the collaboration; The balance between individual introspection and a collective position involves an often painful process of conflict and negotiation; on the other hand the dynamic character and complexity achieved through multiple perspectives on a project proved to be extremely rewarding. The teamwork has been an integral part of this project and its investigation in the threshold between the individual and the collective; we strongly believe that it allowed for a deeper understanding and more refined elaboration of the work.
The way in which architecture generates knowledge and contributes to an intellectual debate is by knowing and using its tools. Freed from the narrow corset of immediate problem solving – a specific task for a specific commissioner on a specific site – architectural design is conceived as the development of an idea through space, thus, the reflection upon much broader, and maybe timeless disciplinary themes.

The main theme tackled in this graduation thesis is architecture’s struggle between openness and enclosure. The common understanding of “openness” in the contemporary architectural discourse tends to despise walls and conflict and to see productive consensus as the ultimate aim of architecture and urbanism. Still, the act of setting a boundary is and has always been the fundamental operation of architecture.

Ultimately, this question of openness and enclosure is yet another expression of the very basic conflict that continues to exist since the beginning of human settlement: the perpetual struggle between the individual and the collective. In a history of thousands of years, we have come to organize ourselves in large communities and cities that naturally bring about a continuous clash of interests and values. Despite the unease that any conflict involves, communal life has stayed a successful model because it is through conflict and not consensus that evolution occurs.

However, our interest only clarified when confronted with the context of Casablanca. It offered us a tangible architectural artifact alongside which these ubiquitous themes could be discussed: The figure of the enclave, highly reoccurring in post-colonial cities such as Casablanca, proved to be strong enough as a study object to carry out an in depth discussion in architectural terms.

Studying the historical development of Casablanca, three distinct phases in which the enclave played a role in building the city were identified.

1) The Ancient Citadel (Medina) of Anfa: In both the urban layout of the Medina and the architectural typology of the courtyard house a thick wall, hardly interrupted by openings creates a sharp limit between the outside and the inside. While in the courtyard house the purpose lays in a cultural and religious obligation to protect the privacy of the family from the public, on the urban scale the wall is needed to delineate space for the complexity of civilization from the harshness of wild nature and the attacks of enemies.

2) The Colonial City: An early map from 1908 shows how the occupation of Casablanca by European settlers anticipated the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1912. With the purpose of gaining control over an unknown territory, punctual interventions have been set according to two strategies a) military enclaves from the outside (camps surrounding the Medina) b) diplomatic enclaves from the inside (embassies within the Medina)

3) The Global City: In Casablanca, just as in many other highly ambitious upcoming cities of the Global South, the enclave is a symptom of an urban condition of growing extremes and the coexistence of parallel realities. Quite in reversal to the Islamic Medina, these enclaves are established to withdraw from the complexity of the metropolis into a constructed, simplified world.
The further reading of Casablanca's urban morphology was executed by an architectural archaeology on two levels:

1) Architectural archaeology: the very first European occupation camps, due to their strategic position and their strong fortification, proved to be strong enough to transcend regimes and, with only slight changes in morphology and program, remained core elements of the city.

2) Urban archaeology: deriving from colonial urban planning and its policy of segregation between the indigenous and European habitats, Casablanca can still be read as a patchwork of fragmented urban islands.

Enclaves in any case seem to be an individual's or a group's architectural way of negotiating this perpetual conflicts. Whether they are places of retreat (like a private dwelling, a citadel or a religious space) or exclusion (like a prison or a madhouse), the enclave makes the aforementioned conflict between the individual and the collective readable in architectural terms.

As the project aims to operate primarily on a formal level, we tried to understand the enclave’s constituting parts - its minimum formal configuration. We did so starting from a minimum space for a person (determined as 3 x 4.85 x 3m), and the minimum dimensions of the human body meeting space (in sitting, laying, standing position). To test out ways in which the human body could occupy this space, we dissected the volume into a shell and a core that could be inhabited and produced a series of variations on each of them.

Reuniting the wall and the core, we came to the conclusion that this minimum room now necessarily consisted of three elements: a shell, a core and a space in-between. Trying to explore the boundaries of this finding, we developed three extreme configurations of it, setting one of the three elements to the maximum size. What we obtained were three models of quite distinct architectures: An architecture of the mass with the maximum shell (resembling an Egyptian tomb), an architecture of the space with the maximum in-between space (resembling the Roman basilica – the predecessor of the Maison Dom-ino) and a more balanced in-between configuration with the maximum core (resembling the classic Greek temple). At the same time, these three models in their operative logic, each seem to use one architectural element. The “tomb” operates through the volume, the “temple” through the wall and the “basilica” through the column.

In need of testing out these models on the urban condition of Casablanca, the city’s urban morphologies were treated in a similar manner, arrived to another triptic of most extreme configurations: the mass morphology (logic of sponge-
like urban morphologies such as the Medina or the bidonville), the courtyard morphology (logic of the European quarter) and the punctual morphology (logic of the Modernist housing blocks and contemporary tower developments). Interestingly, the *modus operandi* of the volume, wall and column can be read on this scale as well.

Our intervention proposes a formal experiment on the city by pairing the three city models with with the three room models – nine projects for Casablanca. From the nine sketched proposals, three were chosen and further developed. Each project has the ambition to create yet another enclave in Casablanca, proving the generative potential this figure bears.

In programmatic terms, it might seem obvious that the private dwelling (and the obsession with interior design and individual decoration) is the easiest way to escape a conflict, and so is the clearest form of an enclave; nevertheless, the idea of a collective enclave appeared much more promising. By retreating into a protected territory it suspends an existing order, allowing for the establishment of an alternative set of values. As such, enclaves not only become spaces of escape, but bear a potential for subversion – consider the importance of Hotel Chelsea for New York’s art scene or the role of university campuses in countries with totalitarian regimes. The three programs chosen all represent instances of the “good life” both opposed, and complementary to the function of dwelling: the hotel, the club and the garden.

The Club, placed in the context of the Modernist housing slabs of El Hank, uses the logic of a mass architecture (tomb), trying to make sense of it on both, a physical and metaphysical level. Investing in a highly irrational amount of material to perform protection, the model of the tomb has to house a sacred space - in its most general terms. Both on a formal and a programmatic level, the project contrasts the highly rational housing machine of the Modernist Maison Dom-ino. The Club is a large horizontal mass of which sequences of rooms are carved out. The thick, volumetric walls become sound barriers that completely disguise the club and its eccentric nightlife on the outside. At the same time, they create a metaphysical sense of remoteness from the outside, that allows for contemplation in solitude and as a collective. Transcendence of the modern individual into a collective oneness. On its edges, the mass is casting into the existing Modernist slabs, using their rational logic to house its necessary infrastructure.

The Hotel, situated as a temporary structure within a courtyard of the European district, explores the extremes of the architecture of space. The project represents an reflection upon the modern obsession with efficiency – from the rationalization of the city down to the normalization of the human body. As a critique of this condition, the Hotel reinterprets the ancient middle-eastern typology of the Caravanserai. The Caravansarai not only describes a place were traveling caravans stayed over night, but as a "house of the army" also a manifestation of ideological and political order. The Caravansarai consists of singular cells for the traveling individuals that constitute the perimeter, and a collective void in the middle. The mediating element between the two is a
threshold zone of arcades. The Hotel adapts this typological layering of individual cells - mediating arcades - collective courtyard.

The Garden, in the fragile context of the bidonville Sidi Moumen, operates with formal balance. The radicality of the garden manifests itself in its program: Slum dwelling, often displayed as as a life at the margins of society, here is seen as a potential model for building the city. We claim that there is little emancipatory power in a ready-made low income dwelling unit, and that rather then starting from the bottom of the pyramid of needs - shelter – we should start from the top: providing a space of contemplation and knowledge generation, a sphere of personal enhancement. The garden, in its initial form, was a tool to separate cultivated land from wild nature; as in the 21st century for most of the world’s population the city has become a second nature, the Garden is understood as a taming element within the urban wilderness of the slum. With a minimum material intervention, the project provides a rigid form that is strong enough to create a public space resilient over time.

In terms of materialization, we investigated how different formal configurations, programs and contexts would affect the constructive logic of a project; the Club is given the materiality of rammed concrete, an earth-concrete mixed man made stone, to be machine worked and cast in situ; the Hotel is to be constructed in a light steel construction, to be precisely prefabricated and easily assembled and disassembled; the Garden stands in-between also in terms of materiality and assembly mode: it is constructed in brick, to be hand-worked and erected on site. The focus in detailing has been put on the problems of joining (fragment within the project) and landing (fragment of the project confronting the context).

It is the ambition of this project to be an architecture of the city, that is able to investigate, critique and affect an urban condition in various layers.