COMPOSITE COUNTRYSIDE
A SHED FOR PRODUCTION

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P5 reflection

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The graduation project “Composite Countryside: a Shed for Production” is enforced as an Explore Lab thesis project. It is situated in Võrumaa, Estonia and focuses itself on the countryside – its landscapes, its dynamics and its inherent contemporary potentials. Following the Explore Lab framework, “Composite Countryside” is divided into two main parts: the research project with the subtitle “The Project of Reading Landscapes” and the design project subtitled “A Shed for Production”.

The project was initially driven by a fascination towards a ruin of a building located in Võrumaa. When confronted with a 1000-m² architectural project on the Estonian countryside, I felt I lacked the vocabulary and insight to sensibly deal with its circumstances. Aiming to redesign the building to serve its contemporary locality, it became evident that the locality’s formative forces and aspects do not conform to an urban reading. Hence, I chose to focus my research on revealing the instrumental aspects that shape the countryside and on overcoming the over-romanticisation, over-rationalisation and other forms of simplified objectification of it. Although light on built structures, the countryside is heavy on constructed environments that manifest themselves in mental and physical landscapes forming an appropriate basis for a spatial study.

THE PROJECT OF READING LANDSCAPES

I began my research from two directions. Firstly, because of my lack of knowledge in landscape architecture theory, I started out with a literature survey of collections of essays on the topic. Secondly, and in parallel, I was doing preliminary and on site research on an approximately 100 km²-large area in Võrumaa. Whereas it was rather easy for me to compose the knowledge I gained from the readings into an essay, I found it difficult to include the more informal but also more sensitive research I did in the case-study region into a final research product. The chosen research methods, among them accompanying people in their everyday doings, silent observation and sketching/mapping, were only vaguely spatial, but well chosen and informative in terms of understanding the territory as a whole, instead of solely focusing on one homestead, one building, agricultural production or the like. Eventually, they provided me with the necessary information for a subsequent study of the landscapes as spatial constructs.

Mapping¹ the case study region became the third method to bridge the gap between abstract theory, in situ studies and their actual spatial effects. This method was not foreseen in my graduation plan submitted before the P2 and was something that was developed based on the need to synthesize the gained knowledge. The aim of the

¹ Hereby the verb ‘mapping’ is used as a verb meaning the process of making mappings instead of maps. Thus, mappings contain more and less informal and speculative instances of map-making.
mappings became to materialise the research, but also to investigate the interrelation of the different agents. In the case of this research project, mappings were instrumental in two ways: firstly, in providing new insights for the discussion about the spatial aspects of various ways of using and perceiving rural landscapes and secondly, by allowing the territory to be questioned and reinvestigated through lesser known aspects of the terrain. The readings became the base for the general theorisation of landscape formation, whereas the research trip and the mappings based on a strip of countryside in Võrumaa, South Estonia provided the theory with a real example. Additionally, the mappings became independent bodies of research for the chosen territory.

The outcome of the research is a collection of prints accompanied by an essay. Together they form a conceptual project envisioning possible approaches to understanding and approaching the countryside. The essay is a general introduction to the topic of countryside landscapes, whereas the prints approach the topic with more specificity through the case study region.

With my research I learned about the countryside as a centre of its own with its own dynamics and formative logic, about the several layers transforming our perception and the physical space of it. Dualities such as individual/collective, private/public, strategic/scenic become less rigid on landscapes. They are overruled by fluid spatial, seasonal and social dynamics that are implicitly but collectively understood. Even though we can make these abstractions for analytical reasons, it is important to understand that on the countryside, it is their interrelation that is central to the shaping of the environment.

By differentiating between political and vernacular landscapes, this research used six abstract layers occurring on top of, intertwined with and next to each other to analyse the spatial implications different points of views and modes of operation have. These layers are: landscape as heritage, landscape as industry, landscape as commodity, landscape as cult, landscape as habitat and landscape as contemporary habitat. There are always several contesting semiotic realities concerning one physical area. For planning and management a central issue becomes accommodating several, often conflicting, of them. This process involves careful survey, identification, criticism, inventive analyses and the implementation of spatial strategies.
A SHED FOR PRODUCTION
THE PROGRAMME

The key to what became the most important understanding I developed with the research is that the countryside landscapes are processes and activities, rather than stable scenes. The fetishization of the way landscapes look does not take the changing needs of their inhabitants into consideration – the changing needs and habits of the inhabitants mean a changing landscape. For it is not so important for the countryside to maintain its current appearance, but to recover or retain its viability, be accessible for people, be a habitat with its own dynamic. This does not necessarily entail protecting landscapes, or any other form of simplification, but understanding the processes behind their formation.

The concept of looking at landscapes as processes rather than products assumes the role of an open-ended strategy to a project. The task of the project becomes staging and setting up future conditions, restoring and preparing sites for unforeseeable futures. A shift towards strategies means identifying possibilities and asking questions like how things work, what do they do, how do they interact and what agency they might have over time.

The most straightforward and linear connection between my research and the design project became, thus, the choice for the programme for the redesign of the pre-existing structure. Increasingly, the agency behind the formation of the rural landscapes today is in the hands of large corporations and other kinds of political influencers and the role of the inhabitants is dwindling. I was looking for a way to nurture the countryside as a habitat and to propose a program that could embrace the needs of the changing population: a population that is increasingly interested in ways of inhabiting the countryside without binding themselves fully with intensive agricultural production. The inspiration came from a building typology well known to the countryside – the shed. Appearing in many sizes and forms in all the homesteads, the sheds are simple wooden structures with a degree of specificity to accommodate a function and a series of unforeseeable activities that cannot be undertaken outside or in the house. In this case, the shed-typology was translated into a larger scale for it to be able to accommodate modes of production too big to fit on a homestead. Such a shed could accommodate a wood workshop, a linen factory, a distillery or another productive program on an artisan scale that is in a direct relationship with the surrounding landscapes.

The productive program I chose to work with is the distillery. This decision was based on the main characteristics of the production process – the local soil being suitable for growing rye, the traditional raw material for Estonian vodka, and the waste products of the production being easily usable in local agriculture.
THE LAYERS

The decision for the programme was taken quite early on in the process and although sometimes was stuck with it, it eventually benefitted from developing alongside the research project. In parallel to the investigation of the countryside through the six layers, I came to experience and investigate the design through those very same layers.

The linear production process and the structural logic of the pre-existing ruin set a rather strict framework for structural and logistic decisions. At the same time, the more subjective romantic qualities existing in the degrading ruin as found, initiated more informal and vernacular design decisions, that have equally to do with the lay-out of the programme, the choice of materials and the nature of the structure. The very initial studies I conducted in the ruin itself were the cleaning and painting a part of it. Paradoxically, these studies eventually turned from early inspiration into design decisions.

Initially, it seemed enough for me to draw the justification for the programme and the overall approach from the research, but ultimately I found it equally important to include the more ambiguous knowledge I gained from it too. This knowledge was interpreted into small-scale design decisions, such as the ephemerality and performance of the timber skin, the simplicity of the pre-cast load-bearing structure, the basic joints, and the type of brick wall based on presumed available skills. The found interrelations between local industry and habitat also informed me when taking decisions in how the building should be heated.

Looking back, I could have benefitted more from moments of reflection to realize the essence and full potential of some of the intuitively made decisions. There was too much time put into hesitating about going in certain directions that slowed down the work. Towards the end of the process I became more trusting towards either simply making something without imagining the necessity of its outcome or periodically distancing myself from my initial objectives to be able to judge them anew. This substantially accelerated the process and allowed me to go in more depth with the decisions.

CONCLUSION

The freedom offered by Explore Lab and my mentors allowed me, on the one hand, to try out various methods, among which the most important were these carried out on site and these based on informal material gathered from the site. That being said, the biggest struggle was to overcome the anxiety that I experienced when structuring my own
process. Although working individually removed the unnecessary comparisons with other students, it often lead to being stuck in my own head. Normally, this would be quite easy to overcome in a studio environment in discussion with others working on similar issues.

This project is an experimental start to investigating the countryside from its own spatial perspective. Even though my focus is limited to Estonia, many of the points raised share characteristics with other places. The research project discusses the influence of various agents on the countryside and the design project proposes a direction for a project as an open-ended strategy where the architect interferes to nurture the discussed qualities.