HEALTH FACTORY
PILSEN · COMPLEX PROJECTS · CHICAGO STUDIO 2015

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“In the past, Chicago urban area has been de place for a great industrial development which has left its traces in the city under many aspects, physical, social, economics. Now that industry and manufacturing starts to regain momentum in the ‘developed’ part of the world the question can be raised whether Chicago is able to meet the consequent challenges.”

Quoted from Syllabus CP Graduation Studio Spring 2015

Our studio was asked to investigate the question posed above. We began on a regional and sometimes even national scale and created three research books. We investigated (1) work-live relationships, (2) the link between education and manufacturing and (3) future industrial perspectives. The themes focused on the Industrial Corridors in the region of Chicago. Characteristic for the IC’s in Chicago is their placement inside the city boundaries, closely located near houses and schools. We took the Industrial Corridor of Pilsen as a case study, somewhat representative for the other 23 IC’s in the city.

To increase our knowledge about the Pilsen IC, we created an ‘Atlas’ of Pilsen, carefully mapping out numerous aspects like infrastructure, zoning, use and appearance.

From our research we stated the need and potential for industry in Chicago, but also acknowledged the fact that for industry to thrive within city boundaries, it had to change. There is a certain amount of friction between the industrial and residential areas. With our design team (Thijs van der Lely, Jesse van der Ploeg and myself) we suggested that these two groups, who are currently bothered by each other, should not simply co-reside next to each other. We want to make them work together, so they can benefit from one another. By proposing a gradient of different types of (sometimes new) industry over the Pilsen area, we relieve the friction and create a symbiosis.

Our architectural propositions are all to fulfill a catalyst function within this urban plan. They are
new and sometimes bold proposals of how industry and residents can work together to ensure their own future. In my case, I chose to design at the current (harsh) border between industrial and residential. The chosen location is located along important infrastructural lines like the highway access point and a bus route. The building focuses on this critical transition between working and living. It serves the worker while getting from -or going to- work, and at the same time it addresses a larger social problem: obesity and health of American citizens. By creating a multi-functional and diverse combination of sports, food and health functions, cleverly organized in a public and accessible building, I hope to create a positive connection between these two worlds.

The relationship between research and design

The perspective from the Complex Projects studio is always to begin on a large scale (national, regional) and go through each subsequent scale in order to get a clear and complete overview of the situation and problems at hand. Logically, this is the line our design studio followed. On one hand, a problem statement is easier to derive from extensive research on multiple levels, like our problem statement for Pilsen’s Industrial Corridor. We founded this statement on the research on multiple levels: the future potential for industry in the ‘developed world’, the characteristics of Chicagoan industry and our field-trip to Pilsen, where we saw the clash between industry and residents. These different levels helped us to understand the problem at hand.

In my opinion, however, there is a flip-side. While we can say that many of our design decisions are derived from our research, we cannot say that all our research led to design. We researched so many different topics and elements, that they could never all be incorporated in a design. This could be seen as a loss of time. I have collected a lot of information that did not benefit my design process. At most, it aided my development as a scholar. Within the studio,
there is a pretty clear division between the ‘research’ (roughly the first semester) and ‘design’ (roughly the second semester). Of course, when choosing a particular design theme, more specific research is needed, so research extended into both semesters. I believe that it could be beneficial to intertwine the research earlier with a more defined design task so these could be more mutually beneficial.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

The method of Complex Projects addresses multiple scale levels in the research. By doing this, it becomes very natural to always reflect your design decisions against these different levels. This can lead to new challenges but at the same time, it can pose a solution. By continuously posing my design in the urban context of our master plan, or the wider social context, design questions were sometimes easier to answer or similar solutions can be applied to the different scales. An example of this is the mutually beneficial relationships. We attempt to create them on the urban scale: residual heat of an industry can be used to heat an entire residential block, but they are also present in the architectural design. By positioning different functions on one plot, these functions can strengthen and support each other.

Furthermore, the Complex Projects graduation studio promotes positioning architecture within a broader social, cultural, political and economic context. This aspect gave me an important handle when it was time to choose ‘what to design’. It had to make sense, it had to be needed. To simply impose a chosen program on a site that does not ask for it, was not an option. But by researching not only the site, but also this wider context, it was easier to find an answer and it becomes easier to defend this choice.
The relationship between the project and the wider social context

This architectural proposition has a large social value. More than a third of all U.S. residents are obese, and this number has been increasing over the past three decades. Americans eat unhealthy and do not get enough exercise. Although there are many regulatory programs to improve this, like Obamacare or local city initiatives, this is not yet enough. The numbers keep rising. I believe it is important to make a healthy lifestyle an easy lifestyle, by embedding it in the physical and built environment. Architecture should not always comply with the way we behave. Sometimes it should change our behavior.

Encouraging a healthy lifestyle with a building crystallized in a very diverse building and program, because there is no single way to achieve this. For my design I chose four main themes: food, exercise, medical care and a healthy environment. These themes resulted in a healthy design on many different levels.

A first step is incorporating more stakeholders in the organization. By making the health of workers the (shared) responsibility of the government and the employer, these parties can work together on a mutual goal. This is not an element that has had any spatial consequences for my design, but yet I think it would be very important for the design to actually succeed.

Furthermore, the design contains accessible functions enhance a healthy lifestyle: several sports facilities, healthy and quick food options and small-scale healthcare. Finally, the design attempts to change people’s behavior in a more subtle way, by creating an ‘active building’: one that promotes physical activity. In the design, this is seen for example in the placement of the stairs, which are more prominent and usable than an elevator, or the way functions are often divided over more than one floor (restaurant, gym) to seduce people into moving just a little bit more often. I believe these methods could result in architecture that significantly increases the health of U.S. citizens and aids in the battle against obesity.