Graduation Reflection

The assignment of the Complex Projects graduation studio was based on 600 acre postindustrial site in South Chicago. The main focus of the studio was to create an alternative to the existing masterplan, that due to economic slump and ambiguous location, adjoining Lake Michigan on one side and the troubled neighbourhood on the other, has been on hold. The final product of the studio was an architectural design on the site within the proposed masterplan.

Because of the complexity of non-physical context, multiplicity of issues to be addressed and interests involved, scale of the site coupled with relative lack of clues coming from physical context, from the very beginning we had to find own position on how to prioritize problems and create own assignment within this studio brief. In the process, every step taken on a way was meant to sharpen this position, until it becomes a solid foundation and the context for the building design. Subsequently, the initial approach could be traced back through all the scales from the masterplan to the detail level. As a result, the final architectural design became an architectural expression of an urban strategy.

Due to vastness of the assignment, we started with defining the scope for our work. Our approach was to create the a kick-off project, minimum initial intervention, that would bring a "critical mass" of investment and start a ripple effect of development. This meant that our project did not aim to provide the alternative to the existing masterplan, but rather to find a way for it to be realized. What we found was a factor that jeopardized current vision was no relation with the existing neighbourhood with it’s specific problems. Therefore our strategy would not only incorporate the top down investment but also a bottom up feed from the local community. That would not only enable the masterplan to be built, but would also create a meaningful contribution to the urban environment and address contemporary problems of the city of Chicago and the more broad issues of social and economic sustainability. What we chose to be our project was a catalytic fragment of the masterplan coupled with a robust framework to could accommodate an unforeseen future growth.

Having to design only one building from the masterplan was a good way to test and explore capabilities of architecture to convey an urban strategy and power to impact and redefine surroundings. In that sense, working on an empty, 600 acre site, resembled an excerise in urban transformation or acupunctural architectural intervention which is a legacy of the former Hybrid Building studio.

What I believe was the biggest challenge for my own project was the location on the intersection of the proposed masterplan and existing neighbourhood. There has been the tension between the constrains and logic of what we proposed and reality neighbourhood, that could no longer be regarded as an overal "condition" but rather was concrete and particular physical context, that I initially overlooked.
In result the project grew to the great complexity, mediating existing an proposed, local and external, interests and needs and accommodating multiple functions and users, which I think was only possible because there was a thread, a continued thought that originated from the strategy and that spanned throughout the scales to which all the design problems coule be realted.
I believe this has been a universal lesson on how to tackle the design problem.