P5 Reflection
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1. Relation to studio, department, faculty.

How is China’s main strategy for foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative a research topic at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment?

The Belt and Road Initiative is a geopolitical tool designed to foster a new kind of globalisation. The enterprise unprecedented in scale and complexity has attracted a lot of attention of politicians, economists and journalists. A lot is not clear yet, as the initiative is in the early stage of development. Therefore it is very hard to make solid assumptions about the impact the BRI will have in the future. The starting point for this thesis is the fundamental fact that eventually all processes of human activities, both physical and virtual, reflect in the built environment and affect the way we use and change them. As a geopolitical tool the BRI, aims to facilitate social and economic processes through implementation of infrastructure and political agreements, this way inevitably changing the spaces in question.

Urbanism department and in particular the Complex Cities research studio focus on the complex interplay of space and society, an interplay depending on which the BRI can either fail or succeed. In line with another interest of the Complex Cities studio - the changing role of urbanism, I started off with the aim to rethink the way globalisation driven urbanisation can happen in the future. Believing that the BRI will trigger urbanisation in one way or another, I wanted to explore with this thesis what could be the alternative to the current uniform urban environments and new-towns taking over the world. In this my point was to go further than assessing the architectural expression of buildings or conserving the local environments out of critique for globalisation.

These explorations uncovered a bigger debate that all graduates of the studio deal with in one way or another, the interaction between the local and the global. My perspective on this vast research theme revolved around the potential impact globalisation bears towards the fragile authenticity of the local context. What interested me is how international globalisation driven developments interact with the local identity of a place, meaning here to the tangible and intangible heritage, spatial context, specifics of social interactions. Finally, the broad scope of the studio allowed to continuously reframe the problem and enrich it with new insights. In order to facilitate a mindful change on the local context, the global perspectives need to be guided too. The specifics of my project led to the exploration of more planning oriented themes like territorial collaboration which revealed itself to be in close relation to border challenges. The broad orientation and focus on planning in the studio allowed me to work towards an integrated picture, which then could translate in design solutions.
The planning oriented studio provided me with tools like vision, structural plan and strategy that allowed me to continuously explore and design across the local and global scales and understand the different roles (mediate, facilitate, connect, envision) design can have in such complex contexts.

2. Research and design relation
A great proportion of research process was dedicated towards understanding what exactly the BRI initiative entails. As the topic is emerging just recently and hasn’t been covered yet in academic literature outside of diplomacy and economics, the quest to frame the initiative in clear terms and with it to define the relevant problem statement was long and iterative. I studied the BRI from two perspectives; global (top-down) through media coverage, and local (bottom up) through the site visit to the case-study Khorgos and surrounding region. Both groups of findings combined led me to a set of themes that seemed relevant to address through design. The design adaptation of the ICBC itself triggered rethinking its function and led to development of a new concept, capable of mitigating the BRI course of development towards a more culture inclusive one. As such the design opened a new research direction that could be developed further.

3. Reflection on the method
My approach can be described as quite intuitive and people-oriented, journalistic in some sense as I collected a lot of information through conversations and various media coverage. This method can easily fall victim to subjectivity, using it forced me to continuously re-question my findings and assumptions, until I would be able to uncover the intrinsic logic of things. As such, my research process was a lot about finding the right questions to ask through analysis and design. Therefore the design phase started relatively late, only after the findings on the global scale synthesised with the findings and problems on the local scale and translated in development goals for the site. My process was a continuous switching between the global scale of the BRI and the local conditions of the case Khorgos Gateway. This was a disorienting, explorative process of searching for the common ground between the extremes in order to find the point of application through which both could be mediated by design.

Due to its explorative nature it might be lacking a solid support through academic data. But also due to its explorative nature it connects many dots, reaching out towards various theories and approaches, and as such becoming an inspirational roadmap for more fundamental future research, that I would love to continue doing after graduation.

4. Relevance
Social Relevance

BRI’s ‘win-win’ claim in context of globalisation and culture

Under the trend of globalization the world is becoming smaller. Companies collaborate across opposite sides of the world, missiles can reach over continents in minutes and people migrate further than ever before, creating a new kind of dynamic multicultural society.

The globalization we speak of, a rapid development of the last century aided by industrial and digital revolutions, develops faster than our societies are able to adapt to. More than ever before we need to coordinate our efforts and collaborate through all scales. However, more than ever before this is becoming an extremely difficult task to execute in this world of growing complexity.
We cannot solely rely on diplomacy as the main institution for global collaboration, when our cities are melting pots of cultures from all over the globe. Diplomacy between the heads of state doesn’t solve the daily challenges of coexistence in multicultural communities, nor can it fully influence the way companies execute global visions locally.

Our different cultures provide a rich set of solutions and approaches to problem solving. Culture as a set of ideas, habits and social behaviours plays a role through all scales and is especially influential on the fundamental level of human-to-human communication. Our built environment provides the common ground for this interaction.

With the BRI China claims to start of ‘a new era of globalization’ and a win-win collaboration for all the parties involved. Western media and scholars in the fields of economy and diplomacy are highly sceptical of the noble intentions behind the BRI and fear that it will grow out to be a form of colonisation in best case similar to America’s Marshall Plan for Europe. Taking the benefit of the doubt in this discussion, my thesis rests on the critique of the BRI’s current approach towards generating win-win outcomes. As it happens the current set up of the BRI enterprise mainly consists of political and economic agreements, as well as large-scale infrastructure proposals. Globally it’s easy to see how such agreements can be beneficial for cooperating nations. But a true ‘win-win and fostering people to people friendship’ as the Chinese President envisioned, happens on the ground between people. As of now the BRI has no clear strategies or tools outlined that can connect through the scales and leaves the urban environments out of the concern, subservient to logistic and strategic centres.

This thesis explores the impact the BRI carries and the potentials it holds for the dynamic global society if the urban development is addressed more consciously. I believe that working with this fundamental issue through space will contribute to social cohesion, collaboration and understanding on all scales and as such create openings for many other economic, environmental and societal solutions.

This thesis contributes practical design guidelines and planning recommendations that could be applied in future developments similar to the study case Khorgos Gateway.

**Scientific relevance**

*Belt and Road Initiative through the lens of urbanism.*

One of the aims of this thesis is to present and address the spatial challenges of the geopolitical Belt and Road Initiative. Academic interest towards this topic is rapidly increasing, however it has not yet appeared in the academic discourse of urban planning and design. This explorative thesis is a call for a more systematic and in-depth research of the BRI as a carrier of urbanisation.

By researching the BRI as a spatial phenomenon on both local and global scales this thesis identifies five goals through which urban planning and design applications can have the most impact for a socio-spatially sustainable development of the BRI. This is the first step in developing a multiscale system to guide the spatial development of the BRI in the future.
Touching upon the themes of borders and culture (as local spatial context and social interactions) this thesis develops an experimental BRI feature, the International Border Collaboration Centre in Khorgos into a new type of urban environment that makes it possible to embed a globalised development into the local context and foster interaction and synergy between the global and the local.

**Ethical issues**

*Win-win or colonisation?*

China faces a lot of scepticism towards the sincerity of the win-win spirit behind the Belt and Road Initiative. Western thinkers tend to see the BRI as a tool towards world domination and define it as another form of modern colonisation. The evidence for this is the economic dependence of developing partner countries through the loans and services China provides for realisation of BRI projects. Chinese industries need such an outlet to stay competitive in business. The analysis of Khorgos Gateway in this thesis shows that the BRI-projects can serve as catalyst for development or revival of a region, but also that in order to fully exploit this potential, the proposed developments need to be carefully tailored to the local context. A dilemma that becomes urgent at this point is who gets a say in how the developments are shaped? To be democratic, everyone's voice needs to be heard, but in order to make rapid progress someone has to make the decisions and bear the responsibility it brings along. The approach taken towards design in this thesis was an attempt to find this balance and resulted in the following compromise: include as many as possible perspectives in problem definition phase, in order to make well informed decisions in the design phase. In practice, this also implies an evaluation of the design project through various global and local perspectives.

5. **Transferability of the project**

“[...] our most advanced contemporary environments appear repetitive and uniform. [...] However, the environments we produce today shelter a society that prides itself on individual freedom of choice and self expression. This betrays a misalignment between our present social culture and its physical environment.

When it comes to transferability of the design and strategies proposed in the thesis, I have considered three possibilities described below.

*Mirroring the design to the other side of the Sino-Kazakh border.*

In original BRI plans, Khorgos Gateway was proposed to function as one cross-border city. Because of the existence of the border some logistic elements, such as railway station and industrial area appear on both sides of the border. The goals I proposed for the ICBC are applicable to the Chinese side of the border, however the strategies and implementations need to be tailored to the new sites after a detailed analysis of strengths and potentials of the region. One issue would require special attention when applying the proposed concept for Chinese side of Khorgos. My proposal for the ICBC is meant to reinforce the interaction between the local population and the international inhabitants of the ICBC. However this degree of openness might be challenged by the political situation in Xinjiang region. The Uyghur Muslim minority is being suppressed by the Chinese government, as is said out of safety considerations. The region has a turbulent, rebellious past and especially the minority people are being refrained from active contact with foreigners (see Appendix for an elaborate description of the situation). Given this fact the free exchange between the Chinese minorities and the internationals will
be most likely prevented. This political problem is difficult to address solely through design and even the BRI developments are unlikely to change the current situation, as China has experience in successfully maintaining political isolation while providing favourable conditions for free trade and international business in the eastern cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong and Shenzhen. However in perspective of the border cooperation centre being a net kind of instrument within the BRI, certain policies can be imposed onto the limited and protected territory of the ICBC, ensuring that once the visitor is granted access to the centre they enjoy the freedom without consequences of being screened or detained.

Transferring within the BRI network and globally.
On a broader scale the 5 development goals defined for the ICBC might be too specific to be readapted directly, after all they were tailored to the specifics of the given context. However the framework of local and global interaction that I used in order to generate these goals provides the opportunity to evaluate the relation between the global developments and the local context in many other places. A location or a project can be the first evaluated using the domains ‘business’, ‘culture’, ‘urban’, ‘infrastructure’ and ‘accessibility’ in order to define how the global and local elements meet each other. After that based on specific strengths and weaknesses of the location the development goals can be defined in order to design the needed strategies and implementations. In such a way the proposed model is both transferable as well as adaptable.

So far within the BRI network, I anticipate that the concept could successfully be reapplied in other BRI developed (dry) ports, like Gwadar in Pakistan, and Brest where the gauge changes again on the border of Poland and Kazakhstan or for embedding other kinds of infrastructure driven developments into the local context. The border cooperation centre (ICBC) as a concept could be reapplied within the BRI and globally. There are a significant amount of cities split by a national border, or functioning as a pair across the border (see map page …). There the ICBC could be the place of knowledge exchange and mediation between the two sides, at the same time connecting to the global network.