Methods and Analysis

Constructing the Commons, Bogota

P4 Reflection  |  James Tanner 4245032

The given studio topic ‘Creating the Commons’ investigates ways in which the city acts as a shared resource for citizens. It proposes unconventional means of architectural intervention in challenging contexts and with limited means.

During the research phase (in partnership with Zi Wei Zhu), building types that provided space for the public in semi-controlled and internalised spaces were observed and recorded. These enclosures act as extensions of Bogota’s streets and plazas, containing and intensifying day-to-day activities of the public. Furthering these readings through a study of two courtyard buildings in Bogota, these enclosed voids were understood as spaces which were accessed via mediating elements. These architectural elements successfully distinguished the interior as it’s own space, without disconnecting it entirely from the outside condition. Theoretically this reading was aligned with Sennett’s concept of the open border, acknowledging the meeting point of different conditions as spaces of intense activity.

At an urban scale our fieldwork identified the widespread recurrence of parking voids within Bogota’s urban blocks. These sites share some of the features of the interiors that we studied, in that they meet the street with a thick mediating element (an inhabited gateway), and run deep into the urban block. Our observations suggested that these enclosures have the capacity to absorb some elements of street activity and to create a distinct, interiorised atmosphere. Furthermore they act as large courtyards for surrounding buildings, potentially creating new routes and points of access through the city. However, in their current condition they allow for only one use (car parking), creating places which are used but not enjoyed, passed through but not inhabited by the public.

For these reasons we created an urban framework that mapped this constellation of voids in two central neighbourhoods. This framework proposed that a multitude of small-scale interventions in these voids could collectively reactivate large areas of the city and positively affect otherwise underused adjacent buildings. The strategy relates to Stan Allen’s ‘Field Conditions’, which explores the effects produced by seriality and the relations between parts, rather than the parts themselves. This highlights the strength of interventions that operate as complex networks of simple parts, which preserve their qualities despite removal or addition of individual parts.

At the architectural scale our research provided a robust set of architectural principles concerning transition and enclosure, based on commonly found typologies in Bogota. These principles seeded an extensive spatial exploration through design, leading to initial schemes for intervention. This was carried out almost entirely using physical models to test spatial configurations and effects. These models were further influenced by two case study projects analysed in the Probing into Precedents seminar - Venice Hospital by Le Corbusier and Belen Library (Medellín) by Hiroshi Naito. Both projects were studied from the perspective of creating sequences of enclosure, which connected interiorised conditions to the wider city.
Until now the design process has focused very much on spatial exploration rather than a specific programme. Working in absence of a defined programme has been challenging as it shifts the arrangement of space from a problem-solving exercise to one that seeks to apply more general spatial principles observed in the fieldwork. In this sense the work contains elements of a typological approach - a position developed from Christopher Lee’s use of type to discuss the relationship between architecture and the city (Serie Architects) and Atelier Bow Wow’s reading of types as containing an ‘embodied intelligence’ from which one can learn about the relations between architecture and social practice.

The more intuitive means of developing the project iteratively and experimentally is related primarily to the method of physical modelling, switching between scales from 1:200 - 1:50. This reveals a second concern - of the phenomenological experience of the project. Following the study of Quinta de Bolivar in the fieldwork, an intention to connect to the landscape and climate to create a powerful sense of place, and to use movement and sequence as a design tool have become important ambitions. Jorn Utzon's writing on platforms and plateaus have highlighted the significance of both the ground and the sky as a means of achieving these qualities. As the project is placed in a dense, degraded urban condition, it strives to use the sky and the ever-present rain in Bogota as generators of atmosphere connecters to the wider landscape.

Following the scheme presented at P3, the project became a means of reflecting on issues of freedom and rights to the city. In Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, two incompatible but equally valid understandings of freedom are presented. Berlin takes the position the discord created between multiple understandings of freedom, and the irreconcilable tensions between them, prevent any one system dominating. For this reason he proposes a plurality of readings to establish a balance.

In the design, this led to challenging the nature of an enclosed space - a dualistic dynamic of ‘us and them’, ‘inside and outside’ and so on. Instead, the project aims create gradients of space, overlapping uses and different routes of access. At present, this has been addressed by treating the project as three layers. A ground plane, divided into bands of landscape suitable for different uses anticipate spaces of appropriation and commerce, but also quieter spaces of play and contemplation. At points, rooms on this surface connect to a second layer that floats above the ground. These spaces can be closed independently of the ground plane, making them suitable for fixed programme. An additional layer, the roof slope, is used to create spatial variation and to frame the sky and the rain.

The research and design process has often been one of uncertainty and experiment. By nature I tend to work intuitively and can find it difficult to rationalise design steps in a linear way. In combination with the open-ended nature of the brief, this has made it challenging at times to be clear on the nature of the project. However, this has also pushed me to interrogate my own work in more depth than in previous studios, which has been a valuable learning experience. For this reason the entire process has been immensely useful as a way of understanding myself and my working methods with new insight.