THE URBAN LAB
TOWARDS A MIDCITY CENTRAL

P4 REFLECTIONS

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The value of a “complex” research

It happens, from time to time, that an architect finds himself struggling in the aim of participating in that natural process which is the evolution of society, through the redefinition of an element, such as the built/unbuilt environment, that we believe more than any other relates and could actively affect the social patchwork that inhabits it. In such a perspective, the great dilemmas of the contemporary American city offers the best opportunity to stress out this tension and involve the graduating student in the definition of a design which is not only a mere fact of shapes or spaces, but the more deep achievement in understanding an ever evolving specific reality. And possibly to intervene, if needed.

Complex Project has been investigating the Chicago case for years. Emblematic representation of the American Dream and its controversies, the city nowadays seems stuck in a condition of no perspectives, striving between an endless but any longer sustainable iconic capitalistic development and the even more pressing shrinking economies that affect the political as much the societal dynamics of Chicago. Trying to comprehend such a conflict, the Graduating studio questioned this relation in its most effective representation, the Loop and the West Side, contingent parts of a unique urban reality, nevertheless as distant as desert and the sea.

Starting from the proposal of new infrastructural rings of public transports set by a local ONG, Complex Project Chicago Studio developed a series of analysis aimed to gain a deeper view over the critical condition of Chicago western neighbourhoods. Why the
need of such an infrastructure? The expected achievements? Where are the roots of this initiative and, more than other, which degree of effectiveness will be obtain, and over which scale? A two-months-long research dug into those questions unravelling the complex dynamics at the base of the current abandonment, urban deterioration and social decay even beyond the apparent proximity with the city Loop, informing a wide understanding of the West Side context that would have become then the roots for a conscious design. An awareness that the original ONG proposal lacked since the beginning.

**West Side or MidCity?**

Indeed, could alone a new transit line, the Lime Line, solve all the major critical issues of Chicago West Side just running across all the western neighbourhoods and linking the extremities of the existing transit network? Even if the first reactions could be extremely positive and elicit the natural enthusiasm for the changes led by the progress, the statement demands in itself a prospectus of analysis that no one ever produced, leading once again to a stalemate of uncertainties. How can such an infrastructure be developed without a vision of what could it be, not the line itself, but the very fragment of the city in the near future?

In order to answer to such a question, the Graduation has been planned around the idea of the “what could it be” of Chicago West Side given a period of 30 years. Following a trend intended to overcome the current impasse of a number of American cities, the design evolved within the multilayered frame of a suggested future scenario, an hypothetical “Chicago 2050”, informed by the raising values of the green and sharing economies as a countermeasure against the devolving effects of the capitalistic crises of our time. A scenario that is the physical translation of an alternative Manifesto for the emerging of new, sustainable,
prosperous, public-focused, healthy American communities.

In the West Side struggle to survive despite the shrinking dynamics of the eastern rich Downtown and the western wealthy Suburbs, reduced to nothing more than a border between these two realms, the Manifesto intervenes to carve in this leftover space a third strong urban fragment, oppoed and evolution of the two aforementioned, according to four main layer of the urban organization, hierarchy of movements, the system of open spaces and the efficiency of the whole organism.

In this perspective is therefore possible to reframe the role of such infrastructure in a no man area as part of a wider reflection over the current condition of the post-industrialized city, as the constitutive element in the quest for an effective shift in the American society. Thus not the Lime Line in se, but as the triggering component of a comprehensive urban, a social, economic revolution capable to explicit a new identity in an abandoned “border” land, a characterization though intended to express and anticipate a new generation of Urbanity emancipated by the actual definiton of the American city. The “complex” therefore will be no longer how to reconnect the West Side with the Loop, how to realize a new set of transit connections, but
how to transform the West Side in something new, a powerful, potentially independent, alternative: MidCity

Given such a long-term perspective, then, the need for the pragmatic actuation of such a vision led to a more accurate definition of steps and decisions. First of all, the infrastructure: the reconsideration of the West Side in such a wider understanding claimed the revision of the originally proposed set of interventions, deviating the main focus from an axis coming from nowhere and reaching nowhere in a north-south direction towards indeed the possibility of rapidly linking through the same corridor the two major Chicago airports, the international gate and the continental hub. A new sort of more powerful, stronger, permeating dynamics could therefore invest the West Side, now as an effective infrastructural centre of Chicago economic flows and space for real changes.

In order to foster an effective chain of events, we envisioned the re-establishment of the collective dimension as the key for success. A strategy that aims to reconcile a society torn apart by the ongoing economic crisis, and through the idea of sharing strive to introduce a new way, more participative, more active, more sustainable to live the city, appropriate the urban realm, take advantage of the opportunities that it has to offers, create a different, prosperous path towards future.

The proximity becomes then a founding principle in framing such a transformation, and new concentrated urban realities arise in the form of defined, condensed districts, absorbing the deleterious waste of the present urban sprawl while regenerating with an overabundance of relations a framed existing tissue in the re-established dimension of what is urban and what is not.

In this process, the stage is set for the MidCity Manifesto revolution, a space of utopic actuation and experimentation over the possible consequences of alternative sustainable and efficient economies.

A projection into the different, in the yet-to-come, intended to affect all the
level of MidCity reality and open the stage for the student to trigger that participative tension as the redefinition of a society and its dynamics.

Framing the shift

Thus the complexity: we didn’t position ourselves in the existing pattern of human relations, issues and argumentations, we have not tried to “fix” an urban fact that is neither solvable nor desirable. Indeed, conscious of the chance offered by such a multifactorial decay, we took a position over the investigated present, and from this we have let germinate a dense set of visions as the most proper counter answers to the inefficacy of the contemporary American society. Facing the waste of the urban sprawl we imagine the dense, contained green city, to the massive speculation we oppose the sustainable urbanization, the enhancement of back-to-the-nature culture against the junk culture, the advancement of the collaborative “collective” instead of the consuming individualistic ego. A range of criticalities that define West Side (as a number of other American realities), a toolset of harsh turnabouts to create then something different.

Achieved such a background, how to cope then, to work with this projection into the future? Is the elaboration of dystopic urban lifestyles the key towards the proper design? The assumption of unthinkable technologies as the funding element of a new urbanity? The exasperation of the known typologies, or the creation of new ones?

Since the beginning, I’ve believed that such a process could have not been worked out without a conspicuous dose of pragmatism.

If 2050 it’s our destination, still the 2015 is where our MidCity revolution should start and so the big shift that we want to impress in the “American condition”. It became thus clear how then the matter is not the creation of something that “will fit”, but the definition of what “could start”. Taking advantage of the infrastructural set of physical transformations, I researched the possibility of triggering local processes of cultural evolution capable to frame the shift towards the idea of MidCity.

In order to do so, I assumed the cogent criticalities posed by the current economic crisis as the evident quest for new business models, capable to unlink whole fragment of the city from fickle one-man companies while providing the space for local economies to organize and emerge. An approach that aims to rethink the existing typology of the working space, reshaping its organization in order to grasp different dynamics, triggering an
evolution of relations in a deprived area in the perspective of the MidCity 2050 Manifesto. From a context of pressing de-industrialization and lack of top-down opportunities, the solution is no longer to attract and set new companies, re-enacting the same uncertainties of the past, but the creation of new set of tools capable indeed to empower the initiative of individuals, to allow everyone the possibility to create and formulate their own path, or more pragmatically their own business.

This could be possible only with a new model of business, locally rooted, flexible, virtually over connected, expression and a concrete possibility of the raising sharing economy. Started as an objection to the current economic world crisis, the need of “alternatives solutions” to the lack of economic resources, means and opportunity is nowadays leading to the germination of innovative mind-set that find in aggregation a powerful instrument to answer to the pressing privations of our time.

Thus, following the raise of these new dynamics, I believe that this emerging evolution could even be framed in a space that cannot any longer considered simply as a conventional workplace, but as an infrastructure that enhance indeed creative relations, promote connections, collaboration and progression delivering common
tools to face the current condition and reinvent the future. A space of services, a hub of facilities, a place where, according to the sharing economy principles, nobody directly owns but yet can take advantage of everything. The research therefore led me to focus and eventually position my design in the “new” category of co-working.

The design strives to create and enhance bottom-up opportunities, constituting a structured environment of organised services and facilities where individuals, creative and professionals get advantage of the provided tools and eventually gather together, developing ideas, forming start-ups, starting a major business. Therefore, the design aims for a second goal within the frame of a shared facilities hub: to promote connection, enhance cooperation, trigger new networks of social relations. Only the combination of the two aforementioned elements could lead to a successful prosperous intervention. With this mind-set stated clear, I reasoned on how to confirm the co-working principles as the instrumental elements for the characterization of a new typology.

The outcome is a building that preserve that apparent flexible genericness which is proper of the current state of co-working spaces and leaves room for possible re-interpretation through time. It starts from the appropriation of an existing former factory, converted in order to accommodate customizable working spaces, desks and laboratories, and it follows with the progressive realization of adjacent wings, as the enacted growing dynamics will require more space for more evolved services. Even apartments for creative workers are provided in order create a self-functioning complex. But what really makes the difference is the way through which the social relations are explored and enhanced: the connecting Spine, the interstitial system of customized platforms that constitutes the internal distribution system.

Key component of the whole design, the Spine is nothing more than an exploration of the possibilities offered through the radicalization of the principles that turned co-working in such a promising field. The otherwise “wasted” space of circulation is turned in a collection of opportunities, activities, environments, which trigger engagement, creativity, socialization, resulting in a condensed opportunity to gather, to come together, to share.

An approach, I believe, that could make the difference in defining a more solid characterization in architectural terms of such an emerging business typology, effectively shaping a type based over the space for creative relations and collaboration.
The building itself then becomes nothing more than the elastic prototype of a future category, rooted incubator molding the community that shall come, bringing together and practicing individuals in a new entity, that “collective” that the American cities are lacking of and that would be the key for the success of MidCity.