MSC3+4 COMPLEX PROJECTS CHICAGO

REFLECTION

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Chicago’s industrial layout and buildings have not changed over time, although production demand has largely disappeared since the 1970’s. Jobs have been vanished and many buildings became deserted. The outcome is a twofold: urban decay and social issues as a result of economic downfall.

Due to a lacking social system and moderate prosperity in Chicago’s Mid City, is has to deal with a racial segregation. By interpreting demographic data in a spatial manner, we now better understand Tripoints: the areas where at least three different racial communities come together. Not only ethnicity, but a variety of administrative and demographic parameters contribute to the spatial and social separation. The aim of this research is to reveal hidden potentials in order to formulate projects that sustainably enrich these locations.

Built upon it’s production demand, Chicago’s urban layout and buildings were built in an effective industrial plan. The spatial tissues have not changed, although industrial demand has largely disappeared. This means that sever since, jobs have been vanished and many buildings became deserted. The outcome is a twofold: urban decay and social issues as a result of economic downfall. The areas where industry is located, are nowadays laying between the central Loop and the large suburban areas outside Chicago, and they are therefore called the Mid City.

Due to a lacking social system and moderate prosperity in this in-between area, Mid City is dealing with a slightly decreasing racial segregation. By interpreting demographic data in a spacial manner, we now better understand Tripoints: the areas where at least three different racial communities come together. Not only ethnicity, but a variety of administrative and demographic parameters contribute to the spatial and social separation. The aim of this research is to reveal hidden potentials in order to formulate projects that sustainably enrich these locations.

Former industrial areas, as found out are always lying on Tripoints, are experienced as hard and anonymous borders often next to residential areas. The challenge this research brings forward is to either soften the borders or to strengthen them in order to create a more pronounced identity, much more suitable to its contextual needs.

The research question sprouted from the complexity of this project is being reflected.

**How can a single intervention trigger an attractive production neighborhood to facilitate economic growth in a decaying industrial area?**

M.F. Hercules
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From the start, the design of MIICA (MidCity Integrated Institute of Culinary Arts) has been a process fundamentally aiming at social aspects of the location. The research question developed in to the permanent question that was being asked throughout the research process: how can architectural design generate a sustaining cash flow using the existing infrastructure and using local knowledge, labor, and most importantly social demands?

Meaning, that the community of Belmont Gracin is in desperate need of long term jobs, without having to depend on governmental resources (as they won’t come quickly enough). They are the ones that need jobs the most, as they are an almost isolated group of people due to their arrears of education, language and the industrial corridor operating as a spatial separation.

These social questions, most importantly the ability to educate and provide jobs for the target group, has been in constant relation to decision-making throughout the iterative design process.

**Example 1:** The building design naturally sprouted from the ‘small masterplan’ (Galewood industrial corridor), which respectively followed the ‘larger masterplan’ (Chicago’s MidCity) as presented at the P2 phase.

**Example 2:** The design process, organically adapting to important design challenges such as the construction and the climate, never compromised principles and starting points that followed from the theoretical research.

**Example 3:** While still fitting in a realistic contextual framework, the design outcome has continuously been essayed to meet programmatic demands that followed from earlier phases.
The theme of graduation lab Complex Projects Chicago was to finding a spatial intervention in an area of industrial decay. The area, the size of a city on its own, was once designed on economic growth as a production outskirt of Chicago. Its national connections and cheap grounds were quickly filled with grid infrastructure and catalogue housing blocks. However, economy disappeared and most population moved to the new suburbs, leaving the area to its current identity: the In Between.

The question remains: How can architecture bring back economic prosperity and identity to an area of urban decay?

The spatial intervention as a result of design, is directly answering this question. The MiICCA building interacts with its surrounding social conditions, generating a new theme and identity on an existing infrastructural framework. The building literally encloses car and train connections to other urban hubs, allowing Mid City to compete again with its larger brother The Loop, the suburbs, and other American cities.

Example 1: Complex Project Chicago started with an image of urban decay in a deserted area between suburbs and the city center. The studio continued with the suggestion of changing Chicago’s radial rail network by introducing a North-South connection called The Limeline.

In my research, the question really should be: How can we stop urban decay in the deserted areas and bring these areas back to life? How can we make them relevant again? What kind of spatial interventions are needed to supply for actual, realistic and contemporary demand? The graduation research focuses on these urban questions as they are more relevant in the bigger picture. After all, the studio aims at repositioning Chicago among more successful American city, and the Limeline alone is not going to make that happen.
The studio has its unique process guidelines, as all TU Delft architecture studio’s have. Complex Projects focuses on what they call a non-linear process of integrated design. It aims at bringing together a complexity of layers and scales, without simplifying the problem. The chair gives these guidelines to develop each own methods, tailored to the subject of choice. Eventually, each project must have been an analytical, critical process.

The chosen methodology fits within the vision of Complex Projects. The process was quite literally, about understanding social demographic, economic, infrastructural and spatial layers. These themes have been analyzed in a way that questions current situation and is being followed by logical decision making in the design process. The hardest part of the method was overviewing a smooth transition to different scales, as smaller scales need larger ones to fit in. During the masterplan phase, this was quite a struggle.

The process roughly zoomed in from urban peripheries to the actual site. Somewhere in between, the small scale master plan was a struggle to fully fit in the existing urban tissue. Without having it finished, a more architectural scale had to be developed parallel to the masterplan. This raised many questions to be answered before being able to continue in the architecture scale that quickly zoomed in to the level of 1:5 junction detail.

For the first time during my education, this was a non-linear process. Being aware of the new Complex Projects approach helped a lot to overviewing the complexity of layers and scales. The design jam during the transition from master planning to architectural building seemed to me impossible to solve. Eventually, this could have been smoother but the architectural design was in the end still possible to develop parallel to finishing the master plan phase.
4 Relationship between the project and the wider social context

Official social systems are lacking in Chicago. The educational amenities rely on local tax income. In my opinion, this is the very core of the problem that has led to urban decay. The economic freedom America offers, eventually segregates different tax regions. This conclusion was a result of the demographic research done before P2 and has directly led to prioritizing social opportunities in my design.

While still demographically framing the research and its goals, it was clear that tripoints are geographically industrial sites. They operate as what we later called hard borders. Opposing soft borders, that are not a clear result of spatial interruption, hard borders are most frequently the cause of result of wide industrial corridors, separating communities and neighborhoods. The design has led to clear insights in the described social context.

Example 1: The borders of the industrial corridor have been reconsidered. They cannot be omitted but instead, at strategic points they have been made soft or green. Predicting the outcome accordingly, this will soften the social segregation.

Example 2: The communities are brought together without forcing them to. Instead, the existing infrastructure is used, but made more attractive for a wider range of commuters. In addition, perforating the corridor has become the destination by strategically choosing the right program in the design.

Example 3: A program has been chosen that directly offers a job that the right community needs, and the right education that the community wants. A vocational school in the field of culinary arts will attract and inspire a young generation of non-English speaking people that will actually make money, by exploiting their talent. This realistic target group will sustainingly gentrify a larger area.
In conclusion, it can be said that a very relevant and realistic research has been done and has led to a design that strategically intervenes in the right social fields. The iterative methodology followed the Complex Projects guidelines. Despite the struggle during the master plan phase, the overview was kept, allowing for a simultaneous development on the architectural scale.

The building concept as well as the technology involved in realizing it, are of a higher standard than any of my previous designs. I have found a professional position towards the subject in the academic architectural debate. Indeed, the social, economic and spatial layers come together synergetically in all scales necessary to fully understanding this project and its location.