P5 Reflection

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Introduction

In my graduation project I studied ecotourism as an alternative form of development in the Andean landscape of Ecuador. Ecotourism is seen as a key piece of the puzzle to achieve a sustainable development of the country. The government has stated that it should be one of the main sources of income in the future, replacing the current dependency on oil exports. In order to enable the development of the ecotourism sector it is important to study what are its possibilities in relation to the landscapes were it takes place. How can architecture contribute to a development which brings benefits to both nature and society?

I started from a site 40 km south of Quito. Literature studies into the theory behind ecotourism and its planning aspects and case studies from projects in similar contexts formed the frame of reference to evaluate the potential of the site and start developing a plan. A broad range of information considered relevant as a possible input for the plan was gathered and studied. This information is presented in the research report, it includes: a diagnostic for the site, the program for the project (defined as a set of activities, facilities, and services), and a set of insights for the design. In addition to this a desirable future vision is sketched.

The plan was then developed based on the desirable future vision for the site, looking how it could be implemented taking into account both the contextual conditions and sustainability considerations (closing cycles).

The project is described in various levels, from a rural development scenario through a site plan, landscape elements, and architectural elements into details. Sustainability aspects such as use of resources and closing of cycles have also been addressed.

The choice of the building to be worked out in detail was based on the consideration that it is representative for the intention of the plan and contains interesting architectural puzzles (most of the solutions are applicable to the other buildings in the plan).

Method in relation to research and design

The methodological approach used to organize the work in general and define the transition from research to design was mainly based on the educational variant of the Backcasting Framework. This framework was introduced in the course Engineering for Sustainable Development, which is a mandatory course for the TSD specialization. The four steps from this framework were used to structure the development of the project.

Suggestions about methods made in the mentor interviews held at the beginning of the project have been implemented to complement the Backcasting framework. The literature, field and design studies also provided a lot of complementary input into how to carry out the project. Looking back on the methodological approach taken in my graduation project I think that the chosen framework worked well in the sense that it was defined in a general way, while it still provided a specific structure to organize the work. It is tempting to make an analogy to scaffolding: the framework supported the development of the project by structuring it, and serving as an empty template. This template was then complemented by thematically specific methods and information.

Freedom

The thematic freedom provided by Explorelab made it possible to develop the graduation project from scratch on a topic which I find interesting and which is also relevant and interesting to many other disciplines. Starting from a fascination was useful because it allowed me to work with a specific topic in a direct and more comprehensive way. In former projects, the work usually started with the interpretation an existing design brief. In this project the design brief was defined following cues from the research.

Time wise some more organizational structuring would have been welcomed in my case. This can be done for example by fixing the number and rhythm of consultations with the mentors at the beginning of the project. And not having the P’s as the only defined structure.

Conclusion

My graduation project addresses an existing need for concrete plans which deal with the question of how tourism could be sustainably implemented in Ecuador. As it was mentioned in the introduction, according to the Ecuadorian Government, tourism is to be one of the main sources of income for the country in the future. Ecuador is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, and its natural landscapes provide many services to society. With protected natural areas as one of the main attractions for tourists, this can be seen both as a risk and an opportunity. The risk would be the degradation of those natural areas with all the related effects that can bring. But it can be also seen as an opportunity to actively promote conservation and compatible productive activities. Ecotourism has the potential to bring ecological and social benefits if it’s well planned and implemented.

I would be interested in studying how Ecotourism could be implemented in other types of landscapes in Ecuador. This theme brings many of my fascinations together.