Reflection: Integrating street vendors in Jakarta’s architecture

The research focusses on the street vendors of Jakarta and the possibility to integrate them into architecture. The Explore Lab graduation lab allowed me to study my fascination, which in this case extends beyond architecture and urbanism: it actually reaches into the history and culture of the megacity of Jakarta, Indonesia. In any other studio I would have been limited to a predefined location or theme. In the case of integrating street vendors the form is yet very unclear and therefore the freedom to explore this subject in this specific city was necessary. The freedom Explore Lab brings is a big challenge, but at the same time as it is important to continuously set and reset your framework if necessary.

Explore Lab does not have a specific methodical line of approach. The studio encourages you to adopt a method that suits your subject and ambition. My research and design process have been very intuitive and mostly based on observations I made during my stay in Jakarta and analysis of relevant papers and articles. By reading news articles it became clear that street vendors are a sensitive subject and that there is not yet a proper way to deal with them in the contemporary city. The current measures are not effective, which results in street vendors returning to the streets after having been more or less forcibly relocated. Researching several case studies of relocation projects in Jakarta gave me an understanding of the preconditions underlying possible success or failure. The case studies revealed that to successfully integrate street vendors in the formal structures of the city, it is necessary to offer them financial, organisational and educational guidance instead of only applying integration into (existing) architecture or proposing other spatial solutions.

I chose to visit Jakarta quite early in the research process, as observing the situation and talking to different people would provide me with valuable input: both for the development of my research and for the possible design outcome. My research mainly evolved around observing and interpretation as the complexity of the phenomenon of street vendors is deeply rooted, not only in the architecture and urbanism, but also in the sociological, cultural and historical context of the city of Jakarta. Key findings included socio-spatial fragmentation, poor infrastructure and urban informality; three areas which have influenced the street vendors and their livelihood. It became apparent that in Jakarta there are only a few public places where different social classes are able to meet, which gave my design ambition another dimension. Instead of ‘just’ focussing on the street vendors, a successful design should accommodate multiple users as they are inextricably linked to one another. The needs and problems that emerged from my user research formed a base for the design brief.

The final design extends into the public realm by creating an open kind of architecture with a field of canopies. On the borders of the location an open mall rises with office and housing towers, proposing a multifunctional program. By applying zoning and layering there is space for the users to define their own story within the design. Street vendors are not only facilitated and included, but actually integrated as they occupy the main square, the public space. The canopy structure does not only provide space but also plays an important role in the experience of the outdoors and public life, which has
become quite rare in Jakarta, unfortunately. The street vendors have become part of the architecture as a temporal element, as they appear and disappear in the grids of the square.

**on the role of the architect**

In this research and design process I found myself trying to define my role as an architect. In this process, I perceive the role of the architect as a catalyst, a person who sees the potential of change and initiates spatial and social processes. Instead of trying to fit the informal into a fixed structure through the architectural reproduction, the architect should provide space for change and transformation suited to the changing needs of the users. Of course the architect does not excel in all areas and it is important to make use of the knowledge of professionals in other fields: on how to fund this project and the organisational aspects, but also the technical and climatological design on how to create architecture that is functional, efficient and elegant. I see the role of the architect as the one who can oversee the total balance and create a working and efficient concept, but mostly a design people will love and enjoy.

**on the application in other situations**

What I found most crucial in my graduation process is that proper research is necessary to create certain conditions as an architect. This seems to be a basic understanding, but in my case the results of poor research will be apparent right away. An example is the relocation of street vendors in Tanah Abang, which I discussed in my research. Street vendors are dependent on the presence of their customers. When the design only focuses on the street vendors and neglects their position within the context, the design is not likely to be successful. In the case of Tanah Abang where the street vendors where relocated into an empty market building, it did not take long before the street vendors found their way back to the streets. Merely connecting the need for space of street vendors and certain facilities to available space in the city has proven not to be successful.

My graduation project therefore does not necessarily portraits the design solution for the problem that is so relevant in the world, but rather shows the importance of an integrated approach. I have attempted to grasp the complexity of the situation evolving around the street vendors in Jakarta and translate this into a design which answers to these conditions. Building this canopy structure somewhere else could be a possibility, though it would not have the same quality as in this situation. The canopy structure is part of a whole, of the design as a whole, but also the total economic and organisational structure. In other situations proper research could very well lead to other design solutions.