Thesis Reflection

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studio info:

chair: Complex Projects, prof. ir. Kees Kaan
theme: Border: The Architecture of Violence
studio leader: Mitesh Dixit
teachers: Karel Vollers, Sven Jansse, James Westcott, Hrvoje Šmidihen
title: Mexicali- Calexico Food Factory
The relationship between the studio theme and the thesis proposal:

The idea of the graduation studio in the Msc3 phase was to detect social, economical, political and spatial problematic of the US-Mexican border and try to re-examine the existance of the physical border. The studio started with researching “soft” data (immigration issues, cultural clash, demographics...) and “hard” mapping (shared energy resources, transportation routes, agricultural and urban areas along the border...). This was done on the regional scale, resulting in a theoretical proposal for a re-definition of the border region. The phenomenon of the formal border dividing two countries is transcended in the so-called “twin cities”. These cities are divided on the northern American and southern Mexican part and they are the proof that the international border-line is materialized into a literal physical element present on the human scale that doesn't only formally divide countries but also physically divides neighborhoods and streets. This characteristic of the border is what made it possible to span the research from regional to neighborhood scale and still not lose the main focus of the studio: the border.

As a result of a more detailed study of the the cities of Mexicali and Calexico, in the Msc4 phase of the studio three individual projects decided to deal with the border between these two cities trying to re-connect them in different ways. The food factory proposal is located on the sharp linear edge between the city of Mexicali and the agricultural land of Calexico. On the regional scale it addresses the problem of food production which is partially a result of the border *and partially a result of a global issue of production in the capitalist system**. On the scale of the building itself, the proposal still deals with the notion of the border. It examines the condition of the border as an edge between two conditions, when there is no longer a physical fence dividing the two cities (as determined in the regional studio plan).

* exploitation of cheap Mexican labour in the production of food for American consumption
** absurdly, it has become more economically feasible for companies to locate production thousands of miles away from the actual agricultural land where the product is grown
The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student:

The thesis is based on the research done in the Msc3 phase of the studio on the level of the whole studio group. The initial research, which had the difficult task to grasp the whole border region, was divided into smaller groups of three students that dealt with different ecoregions along the border. The final product of the whole studio group was a detailed atlas that collected maps of the regions and border cities in each of them. A road trip along the border was organised in order for students to try to understand the issues of the region first-hand. In San Antonio meetings were organized with local academics from the College of Architecture at the University of Texas in order to discuss other student projects dealing with the issue of the border. In San Diego a series of lectures with prof. Teddy Cruz was organized at the University of San Diego where he and his students talked about recent projects and studios dealing with the San Diego - Tijuana border. This “inside info” is what made the studio project more real. The Msc3 semester served as an important research portion of the studio because it diagnosed the problems of the border region that the students were completely unaware of before making the atlas and going on the road trip. In individual projects in Msc4 emphasis was put on dealing with real issues of the region and cities that the studio visited. In the case of the Mexicali-Calexico food factory, the individual project started with additional development and research of the agricultural problematic detected on the regional scale, which then helped in choosing both the site and the program of the building.

The relationship between research and design:

The main feature of the Complex Projects studio is extensive research that is necessary for contemporary architects to quickly understand the main issues of their future site, which is nowadays often far away from the architect’s local condition. The data collected during the research is also a source of inspiration for the future project. In this case, the condition of maquiladora factories discovered during the research was one of the reasons to go further into investigating how factories came to be “exiled” from cities into the outskirts, while the lack of connection between agriculture and the city started the topic of the current state of agricultural production. A more in-depth research of the process of food production opened up a possibility to redefine a food factory as a linear complex instead of a compact one. All of this resulted in a design of a linear factory which occupies a longitudinal “no-man's land” between the fields and the city. The proposed complex is a mediator between the city as a consumer and the agricultural land as the producer of food. It doesn't only host pure production but is also trying to incorporate public program that is tightly connected to certain parts of the production process such as a whole market, auction hall, research center and food market.

Relevance in wider social context:

In the Msc3 phase the studio tried to go far beyond the usual architectural research; it tried to grasp the political, economical and social aspects of the region, architecture itself being just a small part of it. In Msc4 the studio went back to the scale of the built environment of the city and tried to answer the discovered questions through the medium of architecture. The only architectural element that transcends all scales is the border, which the studio discovered to be the main cause of problems and an answer to them at the same time. The border as the studio’s main topic was completely open for interpretation and it was left to students to conclude whether it’s effects on the region were positive or negative. Therefore, the set-up of the studio itself questions the role of a future architect; to what extent can (and should) an architect understand complex social and political issues of the site he is dealing with? How does an architect both identify the problem and react to it?

The suggested design of the food factory tries to reconsider the relationship between the factory and the city, but also between the factory and the agricultural land. It is an investigation of the production process and the typology of the factory as well as a critique of the global state of food production. Following the premise of the studio, the smaller-scale project tries to have a strong tie with greater regional issues.
typology research