P5 Reflections

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Explorelab 20

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Premise.

The graduation project carried out within the ambit of the Explorelab studio allowed me to undertake an independent route, in which I was able to explore my interests and bring them together in a final design. The studio structure promotes the development of two separate tasks: one concerning a theoretical research and the other one entailing a design project, in which the assumptions of the research are put into practice. These two tasks were developed in parallel during the course of the graduation year, in a way that the research could continuously feed the practice, and vice versa. The choice I have made and the processes I have followed are here outlined in a logical order; however this does not coincide with the chronological order according to which the two tasks have been carried out; in fact even later decisions in the design have contributed to the drawing of conclusions in the theoretical research.

The research.

Landscaping common space. An affordance-based approach to design.

The initial fascination that drove the development of my research concerned the modes of fruition of contemporary public spaces. I began exploring the notion of public space in Western countries, which led me to discover its often-neglected exclusionary and constrictive character. In particular, I observed how the enforcement of this exclusion is deployed both through policies and spatial means, such as the realisation of highly formalised built environments – in which people’s behavioural freedom is greatly reduced. The research brought forth a relational approach to urban analysis, for which space is conceived as an on-going production of people’s practices. In particular, the notion of public space was integrated by that of common space, which conceptualises space in its relation to a public.

The same mutuality of people and space was a central concept in the development of my design method. The main assumption is that of architecture as an open-ended process, in which the architect can be seen just as a catalyst of a series of forces, which will subsequently bring the building into a future that is unforeseen by the designer. The central concept of this approach is that of affordances, which can be considered as the action possibilities offered to humans by the environment. By imagining space as a set of action possibilities for people’s practices, architect design an environment open –ideally – to differing actualisation, restoring the agency of space and fostering a free appropriation of urban space.
Urban project interface: introverted urban block.
The project.

Below the canopy. Extension of a railway station in Downtown San Diego.

As for the design task, I have decided to engage with a building that could allow me to explore and test the assumptions of my theoretical research. The railway station stood out among many types, firstly due to its character of “public” building. In fact, besides being commonly perceived symbols of civic life, stations are as well one of the few spaces in contemporary society that allow an almost unimpeded accessibility. Moreover, the careful consideration that has to be given to the technical requirements makes the station a challenging ground to test my suppositions, as extreme functionality had to be coupled with possibilities of appropriation.

After having visited Downtown San Diego, it appeared to me that the city could have been an interesting location for the development of my project. The realisation of the High Speed railway corridor in California, with San Diego as Southern terminal station, presented itself as an occasion to explore a challenging architectural type and, at the same time, to investigate the condition of an urban space characterised by a high degree of formalisation, to which the superimposition of a grid has contributed greatly. The project entailed the extension of the existing small station, Santa Fe Depot, located in the hearth of the district and in strict relation with the waterfront. Due to technical requirement of high-speed trains, the existing train platforms were moved underground, leaving free space in the inner part of the urban block.

Undoubtedly, the hardest part of the project has been that of bringing together the wider urban scale with the tiniest detail of the structure, and attempting at the same time to be consistent with the relational, affordance-based approach above-mentioned. When dealing with the interface between the project and the city, the objective was that of granting the accessibility and especially permeability of the urban block, avoiding to realise an isolated object that would constitute a border within the space of the city. As for the interface between project and publics, the aim was that of avoiding a program-based approach in favour of a practice-based approach, which only in a second moment lead to a definition of a program, developed upon the study of trajectories, flows and potentialities of action within the project area. Lastly, the interface between project and individual allowed me to apply more “literally” an affordance-based design; in doing so, the elements of project are thought in view of the relation they might engage with the individual, in the hope that new use of the space will be ventured in the future.
Public project interface:
flows and practices generate landscape.
Individual project interface:
a gradient of action possibilities.

Perspective cross section of the intervention.
The outcome of the project has been crystalized in an underground station and a landscaped ground floor identified by a canopy, which might accommodate different types of spatial fruations. The main goal of the project, namely bringing together the planned (such as technical requirements of the station, security) and the unplanned (free appropriation of urban space) has been sought by imagining a gradient of action possibilities within the built environment: from the more “controlled” underground environment to the freer landscape below the canopy.