REFLECTION

SOUTH WORKS CHICAGO STUDIO

SOUTH WORKS STATION

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The Chicago studio of the chair of Complex Projects poses a complex and multi-faceted design-question in which many aspects of social/political/spatial developments are to be considered. Placed within a city and a country that has really broadened my personal horizon and ways of thinking when it comes to dealing with large scale urban questions within the complex fabric of a city.
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The aim of this reflection is to look back and see if the chosen approach was fruitful, to understand the “how and why” and subsequently to learn from this. This reflection consist of an overview placed within a framework of 4 aspects or points of view. It will provide insight on how the final design came to be and how it relates to the extensive research that has been done throughout this final graduation year at the faculty of Architecture.
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This final graduation year has been divided into two semesters. The first half of the first semester focussed solely on conducting research. This research was done within groups of 4-5 people. Each group was assigned a specific topic or theme to focus their research on, our topic was ‘Shrinking Chicago’. Chicago’s diminishing population count, deteriorating housing stock and the city’s urban sprawl formed the core of our research. Looking back, it becomes obvious that the findings and conclusions derived from our analysis actively shaped the second half of the first semester: the design of the masterplan.

This second half of the first semester was again done within a group of 4-5 people, but this time the groups were created based on the personal interests that emerged during the research phase. This worked out quite well; conflicting interests were kept to a minimum.

The masterplan: “Made in South Works” poses a vision for the shrinking neighborhoods of the south of Chicago where the solution for the ongoing shrinkage is the concentration of the traditional mono-functional American urban sprawl into dense multi-functional nodes. The vast site of the former steel factory will have to be recolonized within the spirit of the new frontiers. The node proposed for the South Works site brings back manufacturing and returns the lost jobs.

Infrastructure and the newly found models for manufacturing are of paramount importance for the success of the project. This is why it was a rather logical and natural choice to design a multi-modal infrastructural hub with incorporated new ways of manufacturing as part of the final individual design.

The final individual design incorporates several functions, all making use of the masterplan’s infrastructural backbone: a train station, manufacturing, offices, public amenities, public squares and green spaces. The South Works Station forms the main gateway into the South Works manufacturing node, which is why the seamless integration into the context was one of the main design goals.
South Chicago is haunted by many deep-rooted problems. When the former steel industry left the area, many of its inhabitants were suddenly left without a job.

The question remains; how to turn south Chicago’s ongoing decline around by developing the empty industrial site on which the steel manufacturing of U.S. Steel used to provide jobs to the many inhabitants of the area.

This is exactly where the goal of the chair of Complex Projects comes into play. As stated in the Studio Description:

“Western cities have typically used large-scale commercial projects to rejuvenate or stimulate urban growth. However, the diminishing role of Public Works in Europe & The United States has necessitated the need of Public-private partnerships to organize and develop the large works, which have resulted in projects that have redefined traditional complexities such as scale, program, client, speed, etc., the result has created Complex Projects.”

In my opinion, this design for a multi-modal transportation hub, mixed with many accompanying programme is exactly what this studio is all about. By bringing several types of programme together into one project, many problems as well as solutions arise instantly.

Trying to find a balance between the massive scale of the project, with its train platforms, cargo distribution and large assembly halls and the human scale of the public spaces, comfortable offices, and public amenities actively shaped this project into what it came to be.

In the end, a very large and complex building has been placed right in the middle of this highly dense masterplan, without actually forming a border between both sides. Instead, it lets public life flow freely and provides much needed open spaces within the hectics of city life.
Every chair at the faculty of Architecture has its own design approach, goals and vision. To be able to conclude if the chosen methodology differs from the ways of the studio, we will first need to pin down the studio’s design method.

Studio Design Method:
“A nonlinear trajectory of integrated design studios and seminars will expose the multiple layers that define complex projects. Employing forensics, analysis, and documentation, one will develop a methodology to separate and examine the scales, actors, and systems that define the layers. The Chair’s ambition is to develop analytical and critical thinking skills that will allow one to successfully negotiate the multitudinous demands of a complex project.”

The chosen approach did not differ from the studio design method as mentioned above. For the majority of the time I was preoccupied with defining the different layers within both our masterplan and my individual design, which formed a strong analytical basis on which the designs could be based. However, especially when creating the tools for our masterplan and trying to figure out how to approach this immense tabula rasa, the majority of the solutions were implemented from a large scale / top-down point of view. I do believe this process could have gone smoother and better when we would have switched between these different scales even more. Learning to switch between these different scales, actors and systems is what the Complex Projects studio has been all about, and looking back I believe I was successful in doing just that.

One thing we did not do enough in my opinion was creating models of both our masterplan and my own personal design within this masterplan. Because the focus was on analysis and methodology so much, the actual physical testing of systems and models didn’t get the right amount of attention within the design process. Concluding, the chosen methodology followed up to the studio’s design method and was quite successful in creating a strong and critical masterplan as well as an interesting and well-rooted individual design within this plan.
Shrinking cities are a big problem in the current urban development of Western cities. The midwest of America has experienced an ongoing decline in population within its city centers since the middle of the 20th century and nothing has yet to be proven effective to turn this development around. Chicago is no exception to this phenomenon with many of its neighborhoods slowly but steadily diminishing and literally falling apart.

The masterplan for the South Works area proposes a new way of conducting urbanism in North America. By moving away from the heavily car-dependent mono-functional and low-density urban sprawl that characterizes most of Chicago’s urban areas, the vacancy strucken south of Chicago has a way to turn their ongoing decline around.

Our research shows that a concentration of people, functions and jobs into high-density nodes, along the major infrastructural axis that are still present around the Steel Works site, could greatly contribute to a revival of the area as well as bring back the manufacturing industry within these areas that are in dire need of jobs and amenities.

The individual design part of this graduation studio, concerning a multi-modal transportation hub incorporating new ways of manufacturing forms an essential part of the proposed master plan, which is centered around infrastructure and new ways of manufacturing.

The South Works station project opens up the normally ‘hidden’ manufacturing process by placing it right in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the hectic within a train station. People will be able to actively follow the process, from the arrival of individual parts, all the way down to finished projects which they can then buy, knowing the entire story behind it.

In a way, both the masterplan “Made in South Works” and the individual design for South Works Station are ways to really bring all-new forms of manufacturing back to Chicago and to form an example for many other American cities in dire need of change.