The Buffer Zone

Magdalena Melon
Student number: 4182529

The Buffer Zone is a project set in Warsaw. The site was chosen due to the complex socio-spatial problem at hand. At the moment there is a conflict between two stakeholders in the area: the existing and operational steel plant and a proposal for a housing estate directly next to it. Both parties are arguing whether there is a possibility of coexistence between the two and as for now the steel plant executives strongly oppose would-be neighbourhood in fear of being forced to limit or cease production altogether. The deadlock continues and so far there is no satisfactory solution that could be implemented in the foreseeable future. Therefore the main focus of the project is to propose a scenario for the border between the two sites that would allow both sides to function without nuisance.

The first step was to critically assess why it would be beneficial (and for whom) to place residential site in such context. Upon analyzing the urban growth prognosis for Warsaw, the district’s SWOT document and several other sociological and environmental aspects of Warsaw’s sprawl I concluded that it is in fact a viable possibility to create an unusual neighborhood. Further investigation of steel plant’s impact on the environment produced a list of relevant issues that should be addressed by the Buffer Zone design.

Next, the important issue was to analyze the housing proposal provided by the developer. The setup for a border is unsuitable for the task at hand, that is protecting the residents from industrial noise. In order to mitigate between the very different neighbors it is essential to understand what both parties are afraid of should the design be implemented. Hence the idea of a buffer occurred to be a possible solution. Since a buffer is a zone that either segregates or conjoins the spaces on opposing sides, my design question was whether it is feasible to achieve both: segregation (limiting the negative impact) and conjunction (enhancement of positive aspects of imposed parties).

The idea of a connective yet separating zone needs careful consideration of a program. Part of the original proposal was preserved and several other functions were added in order to create a zone that needs both sides to flourish and which both sides need to coexist. The most important part of this is a greenhouse (suited to grow tropical crops) that follows the border and which provides a noise barrier for the housing, a trade partner for the steel plant and a view diffuser for both. Along the greenhouse on the residential side a linear public space is provided, closed by the office buildings. The whole Buffer Zone is a mixed-use environment accessible for both sides.

However, I decided to include a school design in the Buffer to create a community node right on the edge to emphasize and utilize the unusual context. The school and preschool complex with community spaces such as library and sport facilities are vital in every residential site and provide a sense of belonging and locality for the residents. Because of that I found it interesting to include the school in the Buffer Zone as a landmark of the would-be community rather than leave it where the original proposal set it. The apparent juxtaposition of the two very different entities resulted in an educational facility wrapped in a greenhouse.