Title: Redefining Commute: Cultural Transportation Hub in Midway, Chicago.

Introduction

The complexities and intricate layers that define cities in the 21st century and our responsibility as designers to engage with socio-cultural and global issues at both the local and global scale call for a non-linear, traditional research and design approach to cities, where Planning, Urban Design and Architecture function as separate entities. On the contrary, these approaches should be integrated, interconnected and inform each other in order to lead to meaningful projects that contribute to the future welfare and development of our societies. This non-linear approach characterizes how I pursue design, working with different scales and different actors and defines the ‘Complex Projects’ working method that I wished to challenge myself with, in a city such as Chicago which is currently facing a socio-cultural and economic challenge.

The relationship between research and design - Urban Strategy

Infrastructure and transportation constitute defining elements on the urban, cultural and social environment of Chicago. Although Chicago is very well interconnected by the rail, airport and highway network and can be considered the main transportation hub for the USA, the city itself lacks accessibility through public transportation as well as connectivity, both physical, cultural and social.

Even though Chicago has a diverse urban environment it is mainly defined by the ‘Loop’ which acts as the heart of the city and presents the culturally, socially and economically vibrant and alive character of Chicago, leaving the outskirts underdeveloped with a deteriorating character, especially in the socio-cultural realm. The lack of public infrastructure in the suburbs of Chicago has greatly
contributed to this, making Chicago a Loop oriented and car oriented city, where the Loop acts essentially as a dead end; everything goes to and passes from the Loop.

By introducing a new green public train network based on the idea of the Lime line connecting vertically, from north to south the suburbs where easy public accessibility is currently absent a new potential arises. This new mode of transportation identifies the potential to make this infrastructure network not only act as a means of physical connectivity but provide a new experience of commute, an alternative destination to the Loop, transform the deteriorating character of the suburbs and revive them, increase alive public spaces and add public functions making the suburbs a safer environment, act as a continuous system that unifies socially, culturally and economically segregated areas and finally, identify the potential of making Midway and O’Hare airport act as one.

Individual design

For the gradual realization of this vision, key nodes from where development would be initiated have been identified. The under-utilized Midway airport area which is in itself a transportation system within our infrastructure proposal presented a great interest and potential and became my area of focus. The Midway airport is a key economical factor for the area which is mainly residential. It is bisected by the airport which appears as an ‘island’ within the neighborhood, with little to no connection with its surroundings when this unique phenomenon of an airport within such a close proximity to residential neighborhoods could have clearly been celebrated and further defined its character. The residential neighborhoods are also defined by large highways with only a few amenities, services and public functions leading to a very little street activity. Essentially, this forces the community to be car depended and increases further the significance of the Loop.

How can we therefore make the Midway area node a destination as part of the green network and benefit the local neighborhoods as well? For answering that question I began exploring the possible functions that would fit an airport with a currently neglected experience of commute (airport terminal, car parking, CTA line) and benefit the local societies at the same time. As mentioned before, the Loop is solely the artistic heart of Chicago. Much research has been undertaken showing the importance of cultural provision contributing to the cohesion and cultural integration of the social fabric and the development of a sense of social responsibility. I decided therefore, to design a cultural transportation hub in the place of the airport terminal that would redefine the experience of commute while creating synergy between the airport, the local neighborhoods and the city.

The decision for the final artistic program that would be incorporated into the integrated airport terminal and train station followed a ‘trial and error’ form based on circulation and site analysis and transformed throughout the design process. I was able to keep up pretty well with the research,
design practices and requirements followed by the studio up until the P2. After researching airport terminals and train stations and even though these would work as individual spaces for the purpose they were designed for, what I found that what missing was integrating rather than just incorporating other activities that would contribute to this experience of commute. A big challenge was to form a design for the airport terminal that would fuse art into the building itself rather than representing two separate entities. Therefore, it took much longer time to translate this idea into a design and not end up with a conventional airport as we know it, especially because there weren't any precedents for that matter, leaving other aspects such as the construction and climatic considerations behind.

However, finally, the design does not define actual gallery spaces nor is authoritative for that matter. It rather forms the conditions to facilitate the existence of art and airport functions through varying platforms that reflect the flow of movement as a journey, accentuates its values and qualities by forming changing light conditions through perforations that contribute to the experiential qualities of the space as well and tries to celebrate this unique airport phenomenon by increasing the connectivity between the terminal, the airport and the surroundings.

Another big challenge for me was to translate the architectural concept into the construction of the building which unfortunately came rather late. The language of the building implied uninterrupted open spaces with free flow of movement. However, the large spans of the building (60m x 300) made that difficult. Therefore, I had to undertake a lot of research about construction methods with large spans, (bridges, airports etc), something that I was completely unfamiliar with and which frustrated me because of the lost time. On the contrary with climatic considerations, which were informing my design throughout, there were times that I felt that the construction was being forced into the design rather the one complement each other. Therefore, one thing that I definitely wish to address in the future is no matter the difficulties during the design process and how many times this may change, is to consider all aspects of the design simultaneously rather than addressing it after the other has finished.