COMMON GROUND
SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS
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Studio methodology
Our studio Complex Projects has a distinct methodology which has provided a framework to examine different scales and actors involved in our assignment based in Chicago South-works, a former thriving Industrial area of steel production, and now, lies abandoned. This has resulted in a complex situation of environmental, social, spatial and economic conditions.

The methodology to gain an understanding of these conditions has been as follows:

Phase one: exploratory and descriptive
Firstly journalistic research has been conducted on three topics on sustainability, identity and shrinking of Chicago (and multiple other scales). To investigate the three topics, the group was divided into three sub-groups all with their own topic to investigate. These topics were, “eco logic, identity, and shrinking.” I chose to be part of the group “eco-logic”, investigating the matter of sustainability in Chicago and multiple other scales. Although the three groups had their own field of expertise, every week group-presentations provided everyone with knowledge on all three topics. This method has been experimental and flexible, giving us more freedom in the topics to be researched. The main idea was to gain as much information on sustainability as possible on multiple levels and scales. As we were researching quantities (measurable variables) as well as qualitative topics (such as culture and identity) the research method was flexible, allowing us to be more free in our choices of topics. This exploratory research led to an abundance of information, which had to be categorized and evaluated.

At the same time, we conducted descriptive research, the topics became categorised, analysed and evaluated within the story we as a group wanted to tell. After sharpening, dropping and adding subjects and information, everything was converted into a coherent story presented and bundled in a book. All groups produced such a book which gave of us a basic understanding (but even more questions) on our design assignment.

This first research phase has been supported by previous research books, seminars and courses, essays, and a visit to Chicago including workshops and seminars.

Phase two: explanatory
After the journalistic research on three topics had been conducted, the groups where re-arranged again to take a position within the abundance of information found, the assignment was to form a manifest. The manifest was formed by fierce discussions as we tried to explore relevant links and relations, filtering the abundance of (often contradictive) information. The exploratory and descriptive research done in the first phase was summarized by explanatory research in the second phase. We as a group tried to explain and guide the contradicting information found towards a statement and position. A position describing the environmental, social, spatial and economic conditions, problems and opportunities found in Chicago and Chicago Southworks.

Phase three: iterative design
The manifest gave us 7 main topics, which where articulated into a strategy of 7 layers with the aim tackle the environmental, social, spatial and economic problems on site. Instead of designing a masterplan, we created rules for different scales. On the scale of Chicago, Chicago South and Chicago Southworks. A Multitude of design techniques were used to investigate and sharpen the spatial possibilities of the strategy: sketches, diagrams, 3d models, physical models, sections, plans, and impressions.
Phase four: problem statement
The first, second and third phase took place in the first half year of the graduation trajectory. The followed methodology had been pre-assigned and guided by the studio until this phase. The last step in this methodology was to formulate a research question for a building coherent on all scales, from 1:500 until the level of detailing. After reflecting on the previous phases, I was able to form a problem statement dealing with the social, economic, and environmental issues raised in the manifest and urban strategy. My problem statement had been formulated as follows: My thesis will research and attempt to understand the future role agricultural education has in the notion of common ground and sustainability within the United States of America. By learning from examples in the field of agricultural education, I will arrive at a model for a centre of advanced urban agriculture within a larger framework of agricultural education and research.

Phase five until P2: Individual methodology, exploration of problem statement: trial and error
The individual design-phase commenced and I continued using the methodology similar to the first phases of the design methodology of the Complex Projects Studio. I adopted the exploratory and descriptive phases, researching agricultural education and its architecture, sustainable food systems, and at the same time the implementation of this knowledge into the context and spatial design. Looking back, the mistake I made was that I commenced the iterative design process too early, without a thorough phase 3: the explanatory phase (drawing the right conclusions). I was unable to use the various architectural design techniques at my disposal to investigate in a clear and directed way spatial solutions. I was finding solutions, but not the best solutions. A Lack of evaluation, conceptual focus and good references resulted in trial and error design, relying heavily on intuitive design, trying to find
grip in a field which was unfamiliar for me: agricultural education and food production. That is why until P2, I did mainly conduct exploratory and descriptive research. Only during the summer vacation after P2, I took the time to evaluate the work and consciously started explanatory research, which gave me a more clear direction to investigate the design question, test various options, refine these options, evaluate, and conceptualize. This proved to be difficult as the base of the design had been formulated by trial and error.

Phase six until P3: relational methodology and iterative design process
It took an incredible amount of time to filter, evaluate and redesign the building, to bind all design solutions into a design which was coherent on all scales. By the end of this phase, I re-found my design focus and actual design question: the spatial implementation of food production in the city. I researched this by looking at spatial solutions for environmental, social, and economic questions on different scales and their relations with food production. I focussed more on references and existing projects, which provided me more knowledge on the state of the art and Architectural possibilities. I investigated the spatial implementation of food production by testing relations on different scales. The design tools I used have been as follows:

Contextual relations scales 1:5000, 1:1000, 1:500, 1:200 (diagrams, plans, model and facade)

Programmatic relations: diagrams and plans
Spatial relations: sketches, impressions, sections and models on scale 1:200, 1:100, 1:50
Environmental relations and food production: diagrams and sections 1:100 & 1:50, details 1:20 & 1:5 including structural, climate and detail design

Phase seven until P4: relational methodology, iterative design process, and re-evaluation
I continued the iterative design process on all scales simultaneously, being more conscious of evaluating, and conceptualizing ideas and spatial solutions. Re-evaluating my research question led to a sharper definition: In response to our current state of (over)consumption, how can a building re-introduce food production into the city while addressing the environmental, social, spatial and economic values described in the strategy for common ground? The urban strategy shows a distinct relation between consumption and production of food. We state that all developments within the urban plan are responsible for production of part of their necessary food. The urban strategy implements agriculture on an urban level at large scale, touching multiple actors and their interests. Which means a new understanding and knowledge of this field is necessary. My project will attempt to address the issue of the role of Architecture and design within the field of sustainable consumption and production of food. With all
the technological possibilities we see in current day society, it must be possible to change this untenable state and re-introduce food production into the city again, renewing the relationship food and the city while supplying fresh products for inner city dwellers, creating new and jobs and other opportunities on a local scale. To achieve this, we need test-sites, research and educational facilities, public and private initiatives and collaboration of city-dwellers. That is why I will design a school for advanced urban food systems. I found that the atrium had a binding role in the environmental, social, and economic questions raised by the strategy and our studio. My focus point had always been on this part of the design, but was primarily based on intuition. During this phase, and with the help of tutoring I was able to change intuitive design into a more structured design, although I believe that I still can rely on my intuition as well as it has proven to lead me to interesting design questions and solutions. The task is to be more aware that this has to lead to structured and focussed research. The positive side of the trial and error phase was that I allowed myself to make mistakes, which helped me understand my project.

Again, and still, I have to be honest, my process has not been entirely stable, mainly because of planning conclusions and evaluation into the design process. When I actively planned in evaluation moments, I noticed that my design process became more stable, and my decisions more structured.