Graduation project title:

Mending Varna: Authentic Landscape as a Fountainhead and Essential Element of Urban Continuity and Identity

Reflection report

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Relation of the research to the academic framework of Flowscape

Academic framework of Flowscape illustrates a new understanding of landscape architecture. The landscape is regarded as a dynamic system of various flows and processes, multiple connections and mutual influences. It refers to systems of infrastructures, such as blue-green networks, transportation and energy flows, that shape the link between natural and human systems, and have significant effect on the landscape. The goal of design experiments with the flowscapes is to enrich utilitarian value of infrastructures with multiple environmental and social meanings.

The vision of wide asphalt roads that surround architectural masterpieces in Varna, Bulgaria, is relevant to the majority of modern urban scenarios worldwide. As “a child of a big city” (Moscow, Russia), I have found it fascinatingly challenging to explore possibilities for the enhancement of such situation. I assumed to regard the authentic landscape of the area as an absolute initial source of inspiration for the research. My main goal was to investigate how understanding of a larger natural context of a city can inspire the enhancement of its fabric through the design. Interstitial spaces of the city have been regarded as the scene for the dynamic flowscapes. Special attention has been given to the “placeness” of urban environment, which refers to intangible qualities that shape a personal relation to the site, and makes it unique for its perceivers. I believe that such relation has a universal social value. The surroundings have a significant influence on self-understanding, character, and behaviour of people and their attitude toward the landscape. I believe that the greatest power of the design is in its possibility to envision the site in a different light, as an illustration of a different attitude.

Research by Design

The structure of graduation project follows the research-by-design approach, which supposes mutual inspiration between theory and practice in landscape architecture. However, throughout the year I felt a great tension between required methodical consciousness and creativity, open-ended nature of the research and necessity to predict its final results. The development of evident explanation to every step of the research is also a slow process. But, it allows formulation of the approach and its communication with others, and provides an opportunity to reconcile the logic of the story. The necessity to formulate goals, structure, and expected results gives a start and framework for further elaboration. Seeing the design through the scientific prism makes it richer and more evident, and adds a great value through formulation of generic principles. During the remaining study time I aim to create a harmonious synergy between the theory of landscape architecture, and its practical application.

Evaluation of the research strategy

Analysis of the site through layers and scales, with attention to the gradient between natural context and urban environment, is a logic research strategy. Research through the scales reminded me of the fractals (see fig. 1). During the year, formulation of the prospective future steps and final results has been reconciled several times: from a series of “spots” in the city to the series of streets at one “spot”, to a specific place at one of the streets. Meanwhile, the logic of flowscapes remains similar.

The entities of “streams, sites and actors” (see fig. 2) which were discovered within methodology course seem to be quite a logic generic approach for understanding any location at any scale, despite the difficulties in application of such division to the further elaboration of story line of the current research.

As for the initial hypothesis of the prevailing role of the authentic landscape in the design, later it has been accompanied by urban characteristics and qualities. Lifestyle of people and their values contribute to spatial organization of the city and its identity. Relation of the city to the landscape allows comprehension of specific urban logic. The greatest natural hazards and the stories of the place which were not visible at the actual site have shown the greatest design potential. I have found quite fascinating the process of translation of diverse qualities of the site into a set of principles applicable for the design. Definition of the “library” of identical values of the place is an enormously rich approach, which remains open-ended. Of course, special evidence for the research is also gained through consultation with local people about values, struggles and hopes concerning their environment. Authentic landscape has allowed the re-discovery of the city. I have assured that understanding of the natural context is an initial point for understanding the urban environment. However, started from a large-scale idea linked to the large landscape context, local scale interventions have emerged, open to realization as self-sufficient entities, which keep a potential to be a part of a greater system. It is a certain reference to the tension between top-down and bottom-up strategies. However, realization of a larger scale strategy can have a stronger social and environmental meaning. That might be the approach: to regard the site in a greater context, to search for the most meaningful processes, strongest narratives, associations, materials, spatial qualities, and, on the other hand, for the most drastic hazards. These outstanding features are those that can define a place, - objectively, and yet leaving a room for endless subjective experiences. The results of the current research hopefully will illustrate the formative power of a landscape architectural gaze at a specific location.

Process

Conceptual guidance provided by my mentors allowed a deeper understanding of the problem which I posed in the beginning of the research. I was inspired to regard the urban environment as a uniquely shaped landscape.

Also the opportunity to see the diversity of projects developed by other students illustrates flexibility and richness of the concept of flowscapes. It inspires my own work by showing endless possibilities in design thinking and expression. As for my own technical preferences, I have assured in the value of hand drawing. This process is a medium to learn the subject of the depiction, and to think of new design possibilities. Further I aim to combine both hand and digital techniques.

During this year I also learned more about the system of scientific community. It gave me understanding of my strengths and weaknesses within academic and professional field. Academic consciousness has been a personal challenge for me as, apparently, an intuitive thinker and practitioner. I believe that the site contains most of the answers to any positioned design problem. I appreciate the expressive power of the design, and its openness to interpretation by perceivers.

I have also assured that less fear in the design thinking expressed through the priority of “what?” before “how?” allows keeping “a dream” alive, which is essential for the development of a strong concept. I have noticed how during elaboration the design becomes more and more subtle, integrated into a specific context from social and environmental perspective.

Role of the research in my professional growth

The knowledge gained during the last two years has become a great continuation to my former education and work experience in architecture and interior architecture. I believe that the three disciplines belong to a single field, they are dependent on each other, and to a certain extent they follow similar principles. However, design in landscape architecture tends to have less limits in spatial, social and environmental terms, and in practice its results are less predictable, ever-changing, and they become visible much slower. In general, I can conclude that I have discovered a new vision of the built environment, which gives me a hope for a positive synergy between man-made and natural systems.

Figure 1. Fractals in nature: Athyrium Filix Femina

Figure 2. Actors within the urban sites (flow-places), led by the flowscapes.
Thank you