The Sandbox
Communal activity incubator in Garfield Park

Reflection P4

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The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework (location/object)
The area of investigation of 2014 – 2015 Complex Projects graduation studio, was the western neighborhood of Chicago. Chicago has a prominent place in U.S.A’s heritage and identity. Historically, this city was place of innovation, science, commerce, industry and to large extent politics on America’s map. Especially in field of architecture, Chicago has witnessed the birth of first skyscraper, and is place where architects such as Daniel Burnham, Luis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mies van der Rohe, left their legacy.
In recent decade like many cities in the U.S. Chicago seems to be struggling, polarization and segregation is in it’s peak, gap between rich and poor growing wider than it was in the 30’s of XX century. With all these shortcomings, naturally come high crime rates, unemployment, that undermine the economy, to add insult to injury Chicago is loosing it’s Population, which in turn leads to massive vacancy rates and foreclosures in many areas of the city.
Western neighborhoods seem to be most affected, which is even more painful since shortly before the crisis of 2008 it was believed that this area is on short way to urban renaissance but no such thing happened. Despite all this, the stagnated area of research still shows promise of hidden urban potential that is to be explored in this studio.
The studio itself concentrated on 3 different areas within Chicago’s West Side, namely: Garfield Park, Midway Airport, and Lime Line. The area of study of this graduation project is Garfield Park. The graduation project, tries to take advantage of already existing potentials of the area (physical social alike) and use them in favor of local communities.

Many pathologies overlap the problematic neighborhood of Garfield Park
The relationship between research and design

Garfield Park, which was the designated area of the architectural intervention, is among the worst struck neighborhoods in terms of quality of life. One of highest, crime rates in the city, ethnically segregated, high unemployment, re offenders, high school dropout rates, and lack of economical perspectives, vacancies, all are at large in Garfield Park area. The research group focused mostly on examining the mechanisms behind socio-economic aspects of the area, such as education, crime, unemployment, social initiatives, culture, economics, sustainability, and morphology of the neighborhood. Though being personally involved in topic research of sustainability, it became soon clear that the term itself encompasses the previously mentioned “mechanisms” and needs to be analyzed from a holistic perspective. During this research the connection between “resilience of space” as sustainability, became more apparent. Garfield Park itself is one of the very few areas in the neighborhood that remained more or less intact throughout last century, while its surroundings experienced growth and later decline. Thus creating building that would utilize the remaining strengths of the site, with program that addresses the social issues of the locals became to crystallize throughout the course of work in last two semesters. This building would be also determined with input from city master plan perspective, and down to overcoming very physical obstacles found in the local urban context.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

Since Complex Projects is a research studio, great deal of time was spent on data analysis and understanding of the complexity of the space and it’s mechanics. Work in teams allowed us, students, to make an in depth analysis of selected problematic in order to have a really firm grasp of the characteristics of the place. With so much effort put in research further group work where first strategies would take form. This gave a framework within which my personal design process could be handled with greater confidence, and assist with future decision making. In addition, I also resorted to cross referencing to projects that also tried to tackle similar problematic in order to see what works and what not. The final periods of second semester had a more technical bias, where the project became building that had to fulfill given programmatic and technical requirements.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

As mentioned before, Garfield Park highly impoverished, and troubled neighborhood. Through the line of research on sustainability it became apparent that isolated character of the site can be alleviated by multitude of social programs on the one hand, and by providing new physical element that would emphasize the identity of the area. After on site visit, research and interviews it became evident that especially youth is often left without occupation, and productive alternatives to spend their time, thus often resorting to crime. Older population however, often being ex – convicts, struggles to find any employment. „Sandbox” is aimed at socially sustainable problematic of Garfield Park, by providing residents with criminal past with chance to find employment (restaurant, cultural center), and serve as a cultural node, with facilities such as creativity incubators, studios, exhibition spaces, conference halls, and recording studios. It is known that providing population with access to such facilities greatly helps to alleviate the situation. Other than that the projects aims to give the local population necessary tools for personal development, with hopes to establish a firm platform for future neighborhood revival. In this sense the projects is to act as a bridge, physical and symbolic, connecting the ghettoized
neighborhood of Garfield park to the rest of city of Chicago.

*Building as a bridge between people and spaces. Early concept stage.*