

MSc4 Methods & Analysis: Positions in Practice - The Commons / Bogota, Colombia

by Yoana Yordanova and Valentina Bencic

The centre of a city is a valuable part of the urban fabric, as it is a common point for trade, celebration and encounters. The centre is a place where the whole city converges providing a sample of the whole.

The starting point for the project was the diagnosis that the centre of Bogota was in decline. The cause of this decline can be attributed to many historic events such as the Bogotazo riots in 1948 when many buildings were destroyed and other issues such as the development of other sub-centres causing an evacuation of residents. However, what is more fascinating is the fact that despite these issues the centre of Bogota remains as a point of interest. We come to ask ourselves how and why?

It is clear that the historic value of the centre is one of the reasons. The idea of memory plays an important role in the creation of the centre in the first place and its further development. However, after the fieldtrip our research lead us to believe that there are other forces at hand. Hence, we recognise that memory can be separated into tangible and intangible memory. During our exploration of the centre we recognised that the street, as the climate allows it, is the main stage where many local practices and activities converge. These include street vendors, who are the most frequent, emerald dealers, who embody the spirit of informal trading, street performers with a variety of activities and many more. It is this intangible memory which keeps the historic centre afloat.

Furthermore, the term 'historic' implies an inclusive method encompassing not only architecture, but also social practices, relations and rituals. In the thorough investigation into these practices we discovered that the strengthening of the **intangible memory** is the key to start the organic process of healing for the centre.

The list of problems which suffocate the centre, such as relocation of functions to other sub-centres, the loss of centrality, and the loss of residents, social polarization and the loss of diversity of urban life are reoccurring problems for many modern cities. This inspired the first stage of the project, in developing a series of general principles compiled in what we refer to as the **Handbook**.

Hence, the centre of Bogota becomes a **laboratory**, in which these principles can be exercised in order to explore the relationship between the generic and the specific, or the abstract and the contextual.

It was at this point, inspired by the graduation studio's approach of taking a position, we devised four characters which would allow us to speculate on the possible outcomes of using the Handbook; each of them is representing an extreme position in architecture. The **Economist** is interested in the most efficient but impactful solution. The **Symbolist** is the type of architect who craves interventions incorporating a commentary on social and spatial context of the city. The **Activist** takes a strong interest in the socio-political sphere. The **Craftsman** takes great care in tailoring his interventions to the users, underlining their importance.

In order to have a clear and comparable starting point we decided to create a competition in which the four characters can participate in. Apart from the brief and a set of work

requirements, we selected four sites in the historic centre. Each site has a theme attached to it. Site 1 has the theme of 'The Forum', at present there are different actors in the space however they do not interact with each other. Site 2 has the theme of the 'Living room' exploring the idea of the public interior. Site 3 is a street connecting the main square (Plaza Bolívar) to a busy road (10th Avenue) giving an exciting opportunity for the theme of 'The Promenade'. Site 4 is a left over space in an urban block, which comes under the theme 'The Void'.

We have so far delayed the definition of The Commons, this is because the first part of our work was crucial in understanding and defining the term. It has become clear for us that the Commons is not a place; that is not to say that it does not have a physical presence, but that it is guided by a series of actors performing through time. To put it simply, the Commons is where different actors and their interests converge. The element of time is the framework for both history and memory. This is something that we do naturally and which reflects on the city daily.

Hence, this is also what the laboratory we have set up examines. As the competition is won by all four architects, hence they have to work together in order to produce a combined project for each site, also meeting the requirements of the existing local actors. In this way the project becomes the ultimate commons, dealing with the interests of many different actors, the idea of time and the tension between the tangible and intangible memory.