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STUDIO
Design as Politics - New Utopias on the Ruins of the Welfare State

PROJECT
The Lottery of Architecture - Finishing what was started at Cumbernauld

TUTORS
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P4 REFLECTION

On the relationship between the Theme of the graduation lab and the subject chosen by the student

The theme of the graduation lab invited students to design a New Utopia on the Ruins of the Welfare State, leading me to consider the plight of the New Town at Cumbernauld, Scotland’s enormously ambitious utopia of the Welfare State more recently condemned as ‘Kabul of the North’. I began the project by attempting to understand the extent to which the perceived failure of Cumbernauld should be considered as a failure of architecture and planning or as a failure of politics and ideology as means of reconciling the ‘practical’ with the ‘theoretical’. Through research and design which ran concurrently, I use the trajectory of ideologically charged, architecturally Modern, working-class Cumbernauld to reflect more broadly on Britain’s transition from Welfare State socialism to neoliberalism, and through the design of a massive Housing Wall, where housing is understood as a key indicator of social inequality, to challenge the devolution of housing design produced by this transition.

Positioned within a Utopia of Lottery, the project treads a path between the recognisable physical and tectonic reality of architecture with a distinctively utopian vision of a Lottocratic society.
On the relationship between the research and design

The design proposal from MSc4 is based upon the research findings from MSc3, during which time I attempted to understand the complex interplay between politics, design and class at Cumbernauld, their role in the dissolution of Cumbernauld’s specific planning qualities and their role in the condemnation of Geoffrey Copcutt’s megastructural Town Centre. Having identified housing form and provision both as a key ‘battleground’ in our unequal society and a recurring theme in the design of good Town Centres, I pursued the design of a Housing Block as a building type which might ensure that any Utopian proposal remained relevant to contemporary architectural debate.

During research into the provision of housing I attempted to separate the spatial potential of massive architecture from their perceived architectural failure, which research led me to believe was substantially a failure of politics and society in which the buildings became convenient scapegoats, condemned for their association with a defunct political ideology. Therefore, studies into mass housing projects focussed on their spatial arrangements whilst imagining how they might have been reorganised or have thrived had they taken place under Lottery.

Research also revealed the retreat from massive architecture from the 1970s onwards, with the architectural objects produced by contemporary volume-house builders in the individualistic, trickle-down aesthetic of the Home Counties, failing to speak the same spatial language as Cumbernauld. This led to a design approach which sought to use the massive uncompromising Housing Wall, as a type appropriate to Cumbernauld, which might avoid the same social pathologies associated with it. Conversations with Local Planning Officials on the limited range of housing at Cumbernauld and on the consequences of contemporary ownership patterns led to a design approach which sought to radically diversify Cumbernauld’s housing stock.

In parallel, research into ideas around the megastructure influenced my retreat from a specific design intervention where the design of the external landscape and megaform precipitates the recanting of the megastructure, reversing the trend established in the 1970s as businesses and institutions fled the building. As I depict the megastructure in the background throughout the project, I avoid glorification of the building as an architectural object, since the richness of the megastructure arises not from a specific aesthetic quality - the grounds on which it has been attacked relentlessly since the 1960s - but as the built counterpart to the megaform, on which the project focuses.

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

The graduation lab began with the identification and elaboration of a utopian concept through a series of workshops, which I used to guide my understanding of Cumbernauld as a ‘utopia ruined’ and also to imagine what a future utopia in Cumbernauld might look like. This led to the research question which asked to what the extent the failure of Cumbernauld should be considered a failure of politics and ideology or architecture and planning. I took the position that class - as the product of politics and ideology - was the major factor affecting the failure of the town so posited a utopia which dismantled the class system (ie. The Lottery)

Encouragement to engage with the specific political and economic structures present on Cumbernauld led to conversations with local planning officials with a long term professional understanding of the town and engagement with the mechanisms leading to its ‘ruination.’ These conversations were supplemented by visits to local archives for in depth study of historical and contemporary plans for the town.
Conversations with the local planning officials often centred on the trajectory of housing in the town and the interference of market forces overseeing housing built at distance from the Town Centre, with Cumbernauld as encapsulating nationwide trends. This led to defining a housing project not only as a principal architectural indicator of the inequalities in contemporary society but also as a key factor in producing sustainable and dynamic Town Centres.

Since many of the interests and directions were present in the 1950s ‘utopian’ proposals for Cumbernauld, the design process took place in a position between understanding and improving the original proposals, integrated with changes made in the intervening years, and confrontation of contemporary market-led urban planning.

On the relationship between the project and the wider social context

The impulse for Utopia evident in the ‘Yes’ campaign literature for the Scottish Independence Referendum arose not from nationalistic sentiment but from a deep dissatisfaction with the inequalities of contemporary Britain, leading to a debate on how a future Scotland might be organised and governed, leading me to contribute my own Utopian model. The project presents a radical alternative where, rather than seeking to diminish inequality, the Lottery increases the dynamic range of market-modernity but instrumentalises equal participation for all citizens through the mechanism of Lottery, a model of distribution returning to fashion in contemporary political and economic circles (van Reybrouck et al).

The architectural potential of this social, structural change is explored through the design of the project and despite taking place in a Utopia, I believe the project raises some significant points regarding the contemporary debate on the Cumbernauld megastructure and future of the town. As the research, design and illustration of the project suggests, Scotland has a globally significant and unique urban situation at Cumbernauld but has passed over the design and upkeep of the Town to private businesses with no interests in cultivating a dynamic urban landscape, rather the opposite. The limited participation in this urban experiment by a constituency condemned for their social standing condemns, by extension, the experiment, and leads us to value sameness over difference. According to the status quo, Cumbernauld’s dismal reputation is unavoidable. Rather than retreating from experiment, the Lottery proposes our collective, national participation in Cumbernauld, as one valid urban experiment amongst many, where urban longevity is a product of a dynamic, changing population and a complete urban vision.