Graduation Reflection
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The agenda of the graduation studio in the Garfield Park area in Chicago considers a complex set of social and economic processes associated with the transitional state of many once prosperous cities in the current postfordist paradigm. The examined area is located in the west part of the city and it incorporates two neighborhoods, East and West Garfield Park. This district represents the glorious history and troublesome present of Chicago by giving an example of a widely encountered in big industrial cities situation in which ethnic minorities from working class gradually infiltrate the urban area and replace previously residing there middle-class groups, creating a cluster of homogeneous low-income population.

The format of the research preliminary to architectural intervention was formulated from the outset by the decision makers in the Complex projects chair. The proposed journalistic research involves the study of the way the area is used: it implies the examination of both hard and soft (socioeconomic, political, cultural) conditions. The research was conducted in group and included investigation of the most important aspects related to the problems in the area: community relations, crime situation, segregation issues and education.

Given the complexity and non-linearity of contemporary urban context, the long-term and large-scale planning is too rigid to keep up with the pace of urban metamorphoses, giving way to local strategic interventions, which contribute to the area improvement by targeting particular problems an providing immediate solutions at pressure points. This strategy was employed during the team work to develop a master-plan: identifying the most urgent issues in the area and analysis its socio-demographic and economic composition resulted in a proposal of a development consisting of a series of programmatic elements on the intersections of functional and spatial layers.
The topic I chose to focus on was educational opportunities and performance in the area, which are crucial characteristics for understanding any community and are often influencing the other socioeconomic aspects. In modern society the concepts of knowledge and human capital play an increasingly important role, being associated not only with higher income and career prospects, but also with highly developed social skills and opportunities for self-actualization.

The research revealed that the situation with education in general can be assessed as unsatisfactory. Although the performance rates in elementary and middle school exceed the average state level, due to the extremely poor situation in high school the overall performance of the students remains below the state average mainly due to complicated socio-economic situation of students and their parents. While there are jobs that offer high wages and demand high skilled labor, schools are not designed to provide such professionals.

As some of the most acute problems in the researched area are related to lack of skills, low academic performance and involvement, I addressed the problem of educational and cultural activities participation by means of establishing a youth center where the youngsters can participate in various activities in unobtrusive and supportive atmosphere. The program combines a general body of non-profit activities for teenagers with commercial functions, such as conducting concerts, conferences or community events. This organization corresponds with one of the aspects of the Complex Projects studio agenda referring to the involvement of private sector in projects facilitating public interest.
The design of the youth-center aims at the dialogue with existing environment by employing the mat-building typology – a cluster of spaces arranged in a way ensuring social interaction and interflowing of different functions and groups of people. The layout of the building is organized as directing corridors-paths, aligned with the existing guidelines (railway line, greenhouse outline), and aggregation of rooms clustered alongside them. The axes of the corridors are emphasized by the surfaces of the load bearing walls that extend to the exterior. Another way to highlight that direction is achieved by the use of contrasting materials: the massive walls in prevailing direction are made of concrete, while the surface of the transversal walls is glazed and is visually split by timber lamelas, which additionally stress the dominant direction.
My ambition in the beginning of this project was to learn how to apply research techniques to a certain area in order to identify the most beneficial direction of further development, and to try to derive the guidelines for the design from the situation. By the end of this course I can admit that the results of the research can be ambiguous due to the complexity of interdependent factors, but with focus on one particular field, e.g. education, one can attain the required level of clarity and successfully apply it to deliver a congenial design proposal.