

Reflection

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Graduation Studio: Methods and Analysis

Research methodology and studio focus

The Methods and Analysis graduation studio reconsiders the position of the architect, in light of new architectural and urban challenges being posed in rapidly growing cities, such as Bogotá. By working in a position of displacement we, as students of architecture, must adapt to foreign conditions and find new ways to respond to an alternative context. On the more general level, the studio investigates 'Constructing the Commons' - ways in which we can rethink the commons in response to the changes in contemporary society. This includes recent trends such as the shift in who holds agency in urban space projects, how spatial resources are distributed across the city, and the emergence of new types of space that are neither strictly public or private.

In response to this, my areas of research broadly fall into two main categories - theoretical reorientation; a brief foundation in the historical, socio-political, cultural and architectural context of Bogota and Latin America, and case study analyses; a spatial investigations based on first hand experiences and personal observations. The theoretical body can be further divided into examining architecture (of and around Colombia) from a position of displacement and, on a more general level, exploring modern day interpretations of the commons. By combining radically different methods of gathering information, I aimed to have a well rounded understanding of the context.

First of all, given that the Latin American context is largely uninvestigated in our Western-focused architectural education, I wanted to tackle this gap in my knowledge from the beginning, and have basic foundation in the native architectural and historiographical discourse. This reorientation of my knowledge took me down several routes including: post-colonial theories of 20th century Latin America, their desire to redefine their identity on their own terms, and the approaches of Western architects in foreign contexts.

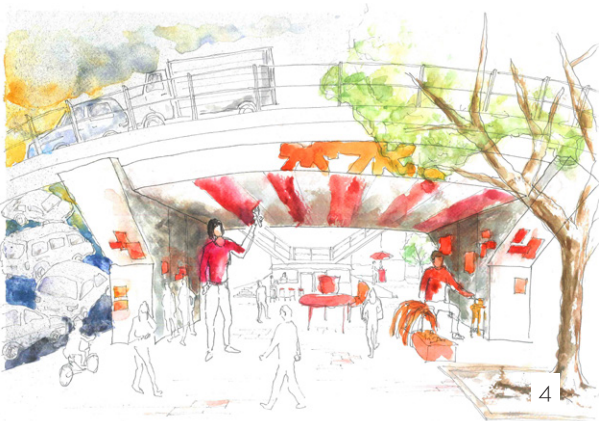
Secondly, I became interested in many different theories about defining the commons in today's world; where the state continues to relinquish responsibility and private companies can swell to the equivalent of nations' incomes. In this respect, what is still left of the commons? I examined the writings of key architects, urbanists and social scientists, including Manuel de Solà-Morales, Henri Lefebvre and Rahul Mehrota. Between them, they scope out urban issues of the contemporary city such as: the importance of 'collective spaces' that are typically ignored by architects, that the space of the city is made by and exists only because of its citizens' activity, and how 'kinetic cities' are characterised by patterns of activity rather than the spectacle of grand architecture. From this, I developed my own design

brief to involve a collection of varying spaces that conflate ideas of private, public and common spaces, and experiments with how to translate these notions into a language of complex, overlapping hybrid space.

Thirdly, during our field trip to Bogotá, I was particularly interested in how public spaces were appropriated by various people for different purposes, and how particular spatial qualities or affordances would draw people in. My curiosity was linked to my initial premise of acting from a position of displacement, because I was fascinated by people's use of and relationship to space, which was very different to my own experience of European civic life. I chose a handful of important spaces in the neighbourhood to analyse the relationship between the social activities, the spatial conditions in each location and the urban context.

On reflection, the early research I conducted on the supra-context of Latin America and their native architectural discourse has had the least influence on my design work. My questions about how Western architects can re-orient their assumptions about post-colonial contexts is one that is certainly relevant to the contemporary architectural debate and to the studio's line of enquiry. However, issues about national identity and the politics of conducting architecture are beyond the scope of my project, which explores to making of an alternative spatial experience in the urban context of Bogota. Regardless, I feel that my protracted, yet slight, research on the vast topic of Latin American discourse was useful as an introduction to a field of study that was previously unknown to me.

By contrast my case study analyses of appropriated spaces, alongside a number of reference projects, turned out to be the most useful parts of my research for the design process. The first hand experience of being at these sites gave me a strong anchor to which I could repeatedly go back and evaluate the situation from different perspectives. For example, the type of atmospheres or activities happening in specific instances; the proportions, scale or materiality of a particular place. In particular, this experience also provided me the opportunity to engage with the project on a more personal level as a designer, and to project and experiment with my ideas within a real context. Furthermore, the explorative, drawing-based analysis of the urban context was more fruitful as I was looking more critically at how spaces can and do work. Similarly, my studies of reference buildings and artists (including the Xul Solar museum in Buenos Aires, the STUK arts centre in Leuven, Centro Cultural Gabriel García Márquez in Bogotá, the works of Krijn de Koning and Jorge Oteiza, and others) were instructive in dealing with particular spatial connections and flows.



1. House turned library and cafe; Casa Tomada
2. Rooftop topography invites people to wander;
Faculty of Human Sciences at Universidad Nacional
3. Monument as a meeting and gathering space; Parkway
4. Vendors appropriate and personalise spaces under a bridge;
Calle 45

In these paintings of the four case study spaces, I tried to capture the story of each space; how they were being appropriated, and the spatial conditions that facilitated these different activities.

Project design and studio focus

My project deals with the thresholds that mediate between inside and outside, between public and private, and how these ambiguous spaces can stimulate play in the city. This is explored in two key ways - firstly, on a spatial and material level it involves complex overlapping geometries that result in a rich collection of implied spaces, spaces of tension, and spatial affordances that invite people to explore the topography, and wander at will. Secondly, the project reinterprets traditional notions of public and private program. It is an open structure designed as a playground for performing arts, with multiple levels and stages, differing in proportion and atmosphere; spaces framed by each other. By creating a project that is almost entirely open, the space welcomes any user group for any activity, and creates an alternative urban experience in a city that is otherwise defined by sharp divisions of space.

These themes of public and private, open and closed, are closely linked to the studio's wider investigation of constructing the commons in today's society. Given the challenges posed by in cities of the Latin American Metropolis, my project offers a possible solution on stitching together the fragmented urban condition.

Research and design relationship

Following from the case study research, I concluded that the spaces of appropriation, though varying in scale and context, had the common feature of offering a sense of enclosure. The spaces are delimited, while maintaining an openly accessible space to members of the public. Key to their function was the different means by which this delimitation was materialised, whether it was tall fences and thick vegetation, or the implication of a spatial boundary, a roof above protecting from rain.

The design phase has a direct relationship to this part of the research, as it builds on this language of thresholds; planes and edges that play with the traditional relationship between street and structure. Thus, from the case study research, I hypothesised a general rule that explains the situation. I then extrapolated that idea, and proposed a more complex application of this rule, thereby creating a new presence based on transforming existing logics of space.

Wider social, professional and scientific framework

A central theme of the project is about how attractive, exciting spaces with potential for activities can be made open to the public. It proposes an alternative to the public-private dichotomy, and the strict distinction between them, that is present in the site area. More than the traditional strategy of public buildings that provide a small concession to the urban tissue by way of a courtyard or square, the project reinterprets how buildings themselves can be peeled open into a series of open spaces for anyone to use.

This is relevant to the now common issue of public spaces being ceded to private domains, where private interests increasingly strive to co-opt the public realm. In Bogotá, there is a fragmentation of urban space, and many areas can be characterised by a number of boundary conditions (inactive edges). These types of spaces can isolate whole neighbourhoods from each other and important resources. My project is a study in how threshold conditions can be articulated, and explores alternatives for providing spatial exchange, or border conditions; common spaces that are both secure and accessible to people. Potentially it could provide an example for how this problem can be dealt with in other places, both in Bogotá and other cities.

Final elaboration

Moving forward with the next stage of the design, I will further develop the materiality of the surfaces, and the junctions between them, as these details are crucial to the overarching theme of how the threshold is experienced spatially. I would also like to evolve some of the scenarios I put forward on how these spaces may be used, in order that the spaces can be better represented and imagined.

Overall Reflection

In this graduation project, I have really learnt something by challenging myself to design architecture based on spatial principles and bigger concepts, as opposed to by pre-defined program, traditional notions of context, or other modes of design that I am already well practiced in. This made the process exceedingly difficult for me, but I feel that I have benefited from having the freedom to test and explore ideas with a more open mindset.



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- 5. Framed spaces creating visual relationships; Faculty of Human Sciences at Universidad Nacional
- 6. Open architectural promenade; Cultural Centre Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- 7. Vendors appropriating covered space; Bridge at Calle 45
- 8. Use of planar language to alter spatial experience; Krijn de Koning
- 9. Intersecting elements that imply spaces without enclosing them; Own model of Xul Solar Museum
- 10. Framing a diagonal connection across sites; Sketch model of project proposal