

Columbia University

Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation

Advanced Architectural Design, Spring 2019

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Intersectional Landscapes¹

// The Yucatan



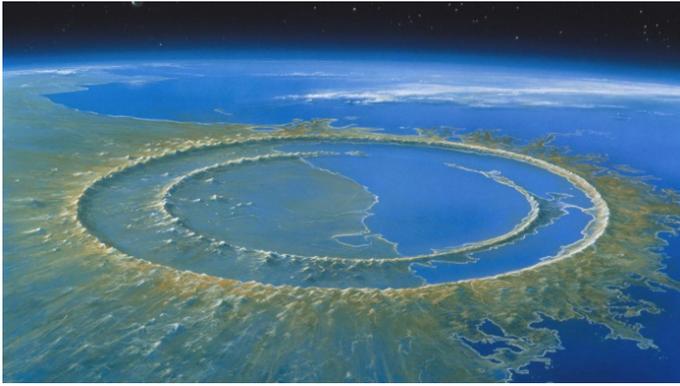
One, we will use intersectionality as a way to frame the research of the studio by acknowledging that race, gender, culture, economy and place are all part and parcel of a condition of space. We will focus specifically on those rural areas that have been labeled as the stagnant subservient hinterlands to sprawling cities.

Two, distinct forms and typologies have created the language of power and materialize in different ideologies throughout history. Architecture is the material manifestation of power. A wall separates; depending how it is placed it has the potential to divide a country, act as the guarantor of privacy or isolate people while diminishing the spread of disease. It organizes human relationships for better or worse.

Within the context of the Yucatan we want to test the unique power of architecture, big and small, how an object can provoke, how architecture can act as the instigator of change! We will experiment and study methods as to how “an

architectural object” can function as a bridge, a provocateur, a functional element that actively engages the sociopolitical conditions surrounding our studies.

Every landscape has been transformed throughout its history by environmental events and the people that inhabit, conquer and work it. We want to understand this landscape through all the elements that assemble its history to the present and we will build tools to try to formulate a possibility of its future. The intersectional landscape is a landscape that people have both thrived off economically through the exploitation of its land and has suffered in consequence. Space that once was populated turned into a state of isolation. Architecture has not only been the witness of these events but it has actively informed them. Through the understanding of what assembles these landscapes today we will imagine new possibilities for architecture and try to locate it’s unique potential within this environment.



Artist's reconstruction of Chicxulub crater soon after impact, 66 million years ago. DETLEV VAN RAVENSWAAY/SCIENCE SOURCE

Context

66 million years ago the Yucatan was the center of the destruction of 75% of the world's plant and animal species. In recent times the Yucatan has lived through the rise and fall of a civilization, a pause, a subsequent colonization and an early agro industrial revolution. All have left their imprint on the landscape.

The asteroid has transformed the region into a limestone sponge that absorbs most of all of tropic precipitation into its innards. The underlying aquifer is one of the largest karst aquifers in the world and one of the most important groundwater reservoirs in Mexico. Yet its rhizomatic connectedness makes it vulnerable to contamination anywhere on the peninsula.

The flat topography is only interrupted by small bumps rising out of the landscape that in most cases turn out to be Mayan grave sites and in more spectacular instances the remnants of the high rises of cities of a grand long lasting civilization of the Mayas: the ruins of Uxmal, Chichen Itza, Labna, Izamal, Dzibilchaltun and plenty more. It is a landscape where one's backyard might butt up against a pyramid, in which ¼ of

the living population speaks an indigenous language and where century old technology still reflects in typologies and construction techniques that hold up better to the rough climate of heat, humidity and hurricanes than many contemporary structures.

Mexico has a complicated colonial history and the Yucatan played an important role as enabler of that history. Architecture acts as the material witness. Religious sites and sites of power were systematically reconfigured into religious sites and sites of power of the colonizers. The ruin of a former religious site was transformed into a franciscan convent (Convento de San Antonio de Padua en Izamal). The capital of the State is erected on top of what for centuries had been the center of Mayan culture (Merida).

The fairly skinny soil layer on top of the limestone provides a difficult environment for agriculture. Yet during the 19th century it turned out to be the ideal habitat to grow henequen. Henequen provides a natural fibre for twine and fabrics for domestic, commercial, agricultural and industrial use. The late 19th century war in the Manila hemp producing Philippines resulted in a price hike for henequen fibre that catapulted the Yucatan into becoming the world largest monocrop industry of henequen until the mid 20th century. For a moment it made the Yucatan the richest state in Mexico. The jungle was erased and the landscape dominated by the agave in between a network of haciendas. Political circumstances and the advent of synthetic fibres put an end to the "green gold". The jungle grew back as a dense brush and the haciendas disappeared into it. They constitute the new ruins of another era.

The sociopolitical structures of this past are still inscribed into the geography. The then rebellious southeast of the state is one of the most neglected of the country. Poverty runs high. The contemporary wealth is largely produced through tourism, commerce and real estate. A large infrastructural project of the current president to connect the most neglected areas of the region by means of a new train instills some hope for rural Mexico.



Project

The studio will be divided into three phases:

1. Research: A portrait of the Yucatan
2. Tool Making
3. Response

The first stage will concentrate on developing a general understanding of the surrounding municipalities of Merida, narrowing down to a specific locality that you would like your project to develop on. Part two will focus on building tools to help articulate a material response. We will study precedents of man made objects, devices, typologies and environments that have the capacity to shape and transform human interaction, and, how we can reconfigure and re-apply them into a different context. Once we contextually grasp our playing field, we will narrow the frame onto a specific architectural intervention on a specific site, our response. We will mashup, fuse, recycle and re-insert previous studies and let them play out on their respective environment.

Phase 1, a portrait of the Yucatan

1.1, A formal response to a sociopolitical climate
Jumping into cold water. Immerse yourself in

the subject matter, examine it and respond with an architectural object. This assignment is a formal experiment, to test the abilities of design to respond to a sociopolitical condition. You have to find and create an object that responds or relates to the sociopolitical climate that will be presented to you on day one.

1.2, Research: developing a portrait of the Yucatan.

Data is power. During this phase, you will dig deep into The Yucatan Peninsula. Starting with the generals and zooming into the specifics. In order to understand the present condition you must understand the past, who was there before? And what architecture witness did they leave behind?

You are expected to source the data and then transform it into maps, diagrams, collages, drawings or models that allow you to communicate your findings with a bigger audience. And will become the introduction to your final project. The data and research will become a guidebook that you will present on your mid-term with the selection of a site to develop your project on.

The research will start in groups that will take on the next general topics:

1. Natural Resources: Water, agriculture, oxygen...
2. Architecture typologies past, present and future
3. Demographics
4. Economy

What to look for:

- Follow the money!
- What is the main economy of the town and region? What are the secondary economies?
- Typologies: domestic, civic, religious, industrial,...
- Cultural specificities
- Working/living patterns
- Ordinances/Municipal Codes/Zoning/Preservation Guidelines
- The peculiar and the ordinary
- Follow your gut

Phase 2, Tool Making

2.1, what to do with our findings?

So now what? You have a thorough understanding of the subject you want to address, and you know the past, present and can maybe imagine a future of an element, site or place around Merida that you will like to address.

You have a lot of information that needs to be molded into a material response. The purpose of this assignment is to start narrowing the focus of your project and push it through a variety of design processes: Collages, drawings, models, renders, 3d modeling, or whatever design tools you feel comfortable in using that will help you test the agency of your design.

This is a time of testing of how form, materiality, texture, scale, ornament, color and others play a role in the way your design communicates with its environment. This is the time to play, to be extreme and subversive.

So it is time to translate it into a project. We will have roundtable conversations on how to engage this proposals but for the midterm you must present a first glance on what is to be your project. Remember it is not about scale, we are exploring the abilities of an object to affect its surroundings.

2.3, let's go to the Yucatan

By now you should be acquainted with the social, economical and political conditions of the Yucatan. You have selected the area that you want to concentrate on.

It is time to pay those communities a visit! As your interests develop we will define what sites we will visit. We will plan the trip together.

Before visiting the site, make sure that you have an idea of what to look at and who to speak to. It is critical to test your assumptions against what you will encounter. Remember, you will be there only for a week and you need to document, interview and collect anything that might be helpful for your project. Keep in mind: you are looking at a fluid moment in time, a town in transformation due to migration, economic fluidity, etc.

Consider the future!

Phase 03, the answer

Testing is done, you know what you want to do, and you are ready to develop it. No matter the scale of your project, you need to get to a point of detail that allows for its existence. You can be as utopic and fictional as you want but you need an object. You need a tangible artefact that can have an impact within the frame that you have developed. It is time to re-imagine the agency of architecture in a sociopolitical environment and this is your chance to assess it.

Objectives

We are designers. We design according to our understanding of the world. Most design is the material manifestation of ideology and culture. Some design provokes profound change (think machines, industrial revolution, networks, smartphones and the likes). And then there is design that carries the potential to open up a critical and active dimension that can question a status quo and alter it.

We will communicate the accompanying research through a variety of media, question architectures roll within the subject matter and explore its limits. We will study socio cultural artefacts and typologies that surround us and learn how to manipulate them in order to transform their environment. Each student is expected to be able to formulate a framework for a project based on prior research, fieldwork and exercises, execute it into a formal and material response, and communicate it.

Schedule

P&J: Ana Paula Ruiz Galindo and Mecky Reuss
TA: Jessica Russell | JR

WEEK 1: January 21

W 01/23 - Lottery ; TH 01/24 - First Studio Meeting - Introduction to the Yucatan | P&J+TA

WEEK 2: January 28

Assignment one due on the 31st
M 28/TH 31 | P&J

WEEK 3: February 4

Developing the portrait of the Yucatan
M 4/TH 7 | JR

WEEK 4: February 11

M 11/ TH 14 - | P&J

WEEK 5: February 18

M 18/ TH 21 - | AP + JR

WEEK 6: February 25

M 25 | P&J+ JR
TH 28 - MID REVIEW | P&J+ JR

WEEK 7: March 4

M 4/ TH 7 - | JR

WEEK 8: March 11

KINNE WEEK: THE YUCATAN | P&J+ JR

WEEK 9: March 18

SPRING BREAK

WEEK 10: March 25

M 25- |TA
TH 28 | P&J+ JR

WEEK 11: April 1

M 1 / TH 4 - | P&J

WEEK 12: April 8

M 8 - |TA
TH 11 - |P&J -- Pinup

WEEK 13: April 15

M 15 / TH 18 | JR

WEEK 14: April 22

M 22/ TH 25 |P&J

WEEK 15: April 29

M 29 |P&J
TH 2 FINAL REVIEW

END OF YEAR SHOW Exhibit Installation
May 18: END OF YEAR SHOW OPENING

What to look at:

Readings:

- Revolution From Without, Yucatán, Mexico, And The United States, 1880-1924, Gilbert M. Joseph
- Labor, architecture, and the new feudalism: Urban space as experience, Norman M. Klein. The Architect as Worker, edited by Peggy Deamer
- A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time by John Brinckerhoff Jackson (yale university press, feb 1996)
- <https://www.lpi.usra.edu/science/kring/Chicxulub/discovery/>
- On Domestic Architecture (excerpt), Sebastiano Serlio
- Less is Enough: On Architecture and Asceticism, Pier Vittorio Aureli
- An Analogical Architecture, Aldo Rossi
- <http://www.promexico.gob.mx/es/mx/home> good source of information

[1] Intersectionality as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Is the understanding of how gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are part of a system of discrimination. Or “How certain intersectionality is not about identity” it is “about how structures make certain identities the consequence or the vehicle for vulnerability.” (Kimberlé Crenshaw - On Intersectionality - keynote - WOW 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DW4HLgYPIA>)