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Re: Review of ‘Science without Borders: Interdisciplinary Research Center’ by Vladyslav Alyeksyenko

Its not hard to invent interesting projects—such as retrofitting and oil rig—the challenge is to ask a research question that has relevance for the discipline of architecture and society more broadly. So, my first question in response to this portfolio is: “What’s the question being asked and why does this question matter?”

If the question is “Can we retrofit oil-rigs?” then it’s too simple, because of course the answer is yes. Maybe then the question has to be more technical, such as “what is the capacity of a post-production oil rig to sustain human life” or more aesthetic, such as “what kind of architecture could emerge from an iconic post-industrial ruin and what is the symbolism of such architecture?”. Or perhaps a more social and behavioral question such as can psychologically healthy spaces be made in extreme environments, and if so how?

There is also a 5th and most difficult question that all ‘research’ projects have to ask – and that is; “how does my project make an original contribution to the field in which I am working”? To do that the project has to be located within the discipline of architecture and set in relation to and critically against certain historical movements and case studies and also positioned within a literature, that reflects the current discourse in the field. In short the thesis should declare that it relates to theories by XX, precedents such as YY and in relation to these this project is trying to develop ZZ.

This portfolio answers question 1 but doesn’t delve into the others, as I think it could have. That said, I wish to be clear that in the time allocated to this project and its unorthodox ‘site’ this thesis is a solid and thorough piece of work. It is thoughtful, well planned and intentionally unspectacular. We could build it! Nonetheless the project misses an opportunity to engage with meaning (the climate emergency) and the poetics of space that could have been explored in this sublime situation.

The question I think the project raises is how do we design when there is no context? Or rather, what happens when the context is overwhelmingly sublime – in this case reduced to the pure horizon, deep water, sky, light etc). To help understand itself in this extreme situation the project needed to situate itself more deeply in this environmental context and then also situate itself within the history and theory of architecture. These are the 2 important contexts for the project and they should have been used to give it much more interesting shape.

For example, by way of precedents one should study the typologies and technologies of remote research stations (say in the Antarctic) or perhaps space-stations (both real and imaginary). One could also place this project within another tradition of iconic buildings in picturesque locations such as health retreats, eco-resorts, and spectacular private villas in pristine landscapes. The other aspect worth considering is of course the aesthetic of ruins and their role in the history of landscape and architecture. The disused oil rig also lends itself to the aesthetics of eco-utopias and dystopias but the project engages none of these tropes and thus misses an opportunity for theatricality and metaphor. You only need to ‘google’ architecture + oil rigs to see a whole new class of “green machines” magically emerging from photoshop and I feel this project should have been aware of these images and positioned itself in dialogue with them.

Perhaps the best precedent of all is the story of Biosphere II (Arizona) which was built as an ecological and technological prototype pointing to our eventual colonization of other planets.

As well as such precedents the project would also be helped by situating itself in regard to other architects. For example, there is a clear lineage to Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller, Constant, Archigram, the Metabolists etc. Alternatively, on the darker side there is El Lissitzky, Lebbeus Woods, and today an entire world of dark, melancholy monuments to the Anthropocene in contemporary design culture.

Concept/Program

The concept of using oil rigs as a skeleton to re-inhabit is not original, but it’s a nice idea for a design project and has lots of potential.

Making a rig into a research center is a good idea but again the project is presented without a strong argument as to why a research center is the best idea for oil rig reuse. And if it is then the project should also have done some research into how contemporary research environments are being designed to maximize human creativity and innovation. The research question then would be “what kinds of spaces get the most creative outputs from people and can these be adapted to this situation”? The argument of the project seems to be that if we put up to 250 people in this situation it will be ‘better’ than if we did it on the land... but why?

I don't know why it needs to be a research center for just a handful of selected sciences. This level of prescription seems too much. For example, the Rockefellers have a famous and very beautiful renaissance villa in Bellagio for research, but they don't say what kind of research should happen there. Certainly, they don't have laboratories – they just offer beautiful space for people to come together. Different groups use it for different things at different times. If you want to be more specific then obviously then ocean (the coming blue revolution) related research would make sense. Or it could be a place for artists and philosophers. For example, the American Academy in Rome. An oil rig full of creative people also opens the door to the possibility that this project is not finished by the architect now but changes and adapts over time as many people live with it and change it. Alternatively, I can also imagine the oil rig is a good place for political events, like peace talks, or environmental debates, a global think tank related to climate change would be something. As to funding and branding, I think the project sits squarely at the feet of the big petrochemical companies, and the obvious theme the site lends itself to above any other, is how we transition to the post-carbon world.

Planning

The project seems well planned and resolved, though the resultant spaces are technocratic and generic.

Aesthetics

As I said, if you just google architecture and oil rigs you will see hundreds of such projects. They are all more “fantastic” than this project. So, this project is either a criticism of this tendency for fantasy in contemporary architectural representation, which is good, or it lacks utopian and dystopian imagination entirely, which is not so good!

What is clear is that the architecture is supposed to be modular and practical. Fair enough, but is that all? What is surprising is that the project seems to try and avoid symbolism entirely and nor does it “enjoy” its extraordinary context. Many of the renders are of generic, banal architectural space that could be any type of building, anywhere in the world. In most renders there is no sense that we are even in the ocean. It's as if the project wants to shut out its greatest asset – its sublime location. There was a huge opportunity here for an architecture that engaged the 360-degree experience of the world around us, above us and beneath us. The project could have been much more radically and intimately stretched between interiority and exteriority. There is also, oddly, very little dialogue between the original rig and the new architecture. It's hard from the renders to get a sense of the materiality and atmosphere of the spaces.... Aesthetically, the project is a missed opportunity.

Conclusion

This is a missed opportunity, but it is an accomplished and thorough engagement with a novel idea and I commend its honesty and rigor.

I would rank the project as C (good).

Sincerely,



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