FIELDS + FABRICS

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Background

La Model is a former prison in the Eixample neighborhood of Barcelona. It was built in 1904 under the intention of becoming the modern standard for humane incarceration, implementing Jeremy Bentham’s 18th century panoptic vision and a “one cell, one prisoner” mantra. However, that number swelled to almost twenty per cell during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, and the prison was forever tainted with the memory of injustice, torture, and political executions. Overwhelming pressure led to the prison’s closure in 2017, and the community has spent the last few years collaborating with various government and non-profit agencies to envision a plan for La Model’s rebirth.

The Brief

The project brief is derived from the ongoing international design competition to re-envision La Model Prison in Barcelona. This brief has been prepared in response to a participatory process that has outlined the scope of the transformation regarding both programmatic and conservation requirements. The community is asking for a significant amount of public housing and green outdoor space, as well as education, recreation, and youth facilities. The central panopticon, administration, workshop, and geriatric buildings are to be retained due to their architectural and historical significance. One prison gallery is to be retained and preserved as a memorial.

The Studio

The studio is an urban project that integrates architecture and landscape with the community. The semester progressed through a series of scales. First, students were tasked with understanding the context through a series of personal cartographies ranging from city scale to neighborhood scale to site scale. Second, programmatic functions were organized following strategies synthesized from the contextual research. Third, two of the programs were articulated architecturally, with atmospheric snapshots that could imply the aesthetic quality of the whole. Overall, the project had to address issues of scale, community integration, adaptive reuse, urban landscapes, and collective memory.
Site Strategy

Fields + Fabrics is a proposal to transform La Model into a patchwork of green spaces and architectural additions. This patchwork reacts to the strict and monumental geometry of the panoptic prison by breaking down the scale and integrating the site with the neighborhood. The project employs three architectural strategies to address the needs of the communities: GRID, INSERT, and REVEAL.

The brief calls for a large variety of programs that require different architectural solutions. A regulating GRID inferred from the radial influence of the panopticon ensures cohesion across the entire site, despite the differing spatial requirements.

In contrast with monumental masonry of the existing architecture, new architectural additions will be delicately INSERTed into the site. A language of blocks and scaffolding lends to a dialogue of interior and exterior space, and the scale and proximities of volumes reference the internal courtyards of the surrounding Eixample residential blocks.

La Model is kept in isolation from the Eixample neighborhood behind a perimeter wall. The proposal seeks to destroy the dividing wall and invite the community inside. The rubble of the destroyed wall is used to form gabion retaining walls that frame REVEALs into the landscape, bringing light to the existing prison basements.

The Memorial

While the community has called for a number of new, exciting programs to benefit the neighborhood, they have been very clear in the importance of remembering the atrocities that occurred at the site. One prison gallery has been allocated as the location for a memorial site. The Fields + Fabrics proposal envisions this memorial as a procession of contrast and reflection. It is the only part of the site that is still held behind the confines of a wall. Within these walls is an airy ascent through the existing archways. This bright and upward march precedes a dark downward descent through the existing prison gallery by way of delicately
suspended ramp. This ramp offers a look into prison life, with viewpoints into a preserved prison cell, the original barbershop and library, and a 1950 mural painted by former prisoner Helios Gomez. Visitors exit the prison walk through the existing Patio entrance into a terraced courtyard. A gift shop and educational center is located at the base of the courtyard, and a monument to the last executed political prisoner is tucked away in a quiet garden. The memorial is open and free to the public and provides a place of sanctuary and contemplation.

*Public Housing*

Public housing forms the largest component of the program requirements. To address this demand, the Fields + Fabrics proposal takes into consideration the architectural and structural conditions of the site as well as the demographics of the group it caters to.

Public amenities and landscapes form the interface between the residential areas and the neighborhood. Gentle slopes and terraced parks allow for seamless navigation across the site. The residences themselves have been categorized based on unit capacities, with distinct blocks dedicated to collective housing, families, couples, and senior living. The units along the exterior façade retain much of the existing structure. These modest units occupy 3 prison cells each and are suitable for one to two occupants. To accommodate larger families, a delicate scaffolded intervention is placed in the internal courtyard. This scaffolding cradles semi-enclosed ‘galerias’ that mediate a tenuous balance between interior and exterior space. Such breezy balconies are characteristic of Eixample housing and the late 19th century paintings of Ramon Casas.

The patchwork motif of Fields + Fabrics also extends to vertical facades of the residences. Each occupant is given the freedom to personalize their own home, from the interior planning to exterior façade. A defined structural system and material palette ensure a degree of cohesion across the site while embracing self-expression. As such, the architecture simultaneously enables a sense of individuality and community that formed the premise of this competition.
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The **FIELDS + FABRICS** proposal seeks to transform La Model prison into a patchwork of vegetation and architectural additions to serve the community’s needs. The project removes the existing perimeter wall that separates the site from the neighborhood and invites locals inside to a public green space with schools, housing, retail, recreational facilities, and civic centers.
Our initial investigations into Barcelona focused on the unique and varied fabrics that comprise the city. Though many are familiar with the diagonal chamfered ‘Cerda Blocks’ of the Eixample district, there are many other scales and textures that warrant study. The intimate alleyways of Gracia have remained from it’s time as a sovereign nation, while the grand avenue of La Rambla has vestiges from the Gothic occupation. Newer urban experiments of pedestrian-friendly ‘Superblocks’ have taken shape in Sant Marti.

FIELDS + FABRICS seeks to create a new urban fabric derived from the panoptic grid of La Model prison.

Eixample was the urban realisation of Ildefons Cerda’s vision for a new Barcelona. His plan centered around carefully organized city blocks arranged on a 45° grid. These blocks were intended to be built only on two sides, framing a public courtyard. However, political and commercial interests corrupted his plan, and many of these courtyards have become isolated and privatized. There is now a scarcity of walkable greenspace in Eixample. FIELDS + FABRICS seeks to transform the two Cerda Block wide site of La Model into a public park and plaza to provide outdoor recreation space for the neighborhood.

FIELDS + FABRICS seeks to emphasize the panoptic condition through sectional differences and gridded organizations.
SITE STRATEGIES

GROUND LEVEL:

1. SCHOOL
2. RES. LOBBY
3. FITNESS CENTER
4. FARMER’S MARKET
5. BATHROOMS
6. GROCERY
7. CAFE
8. COMMUNITY CENTER
9. NURSERY
10. SENIOR LIVING
11. RES. COURTYARD
12. YOUTH CLUB
13. MEMORIAL

HISTORIC CONSERVATION
PANOPTIC REGULATING GRID
INSERT NEW ELEMENTS
GABION WALLS FRAME REVEALS INTO EARTH
LANDSCAPE ALONG THE GRID
THE MEMORIAL

LA MODEL PRISON MEMORIAL - PROCESSION

1. EXISTING PRISON BARBERSHOP
2. LA CAPELA GITANA MURAL BY HELIOS GOMEZ
3. EXISTING PRISON GALLERY
4. ASCENT
THE MEMORIAL

1 COURTYARD

EXISTING PRISON WALL MURAL

GABION WALL SECTION
PUBLIC HOUSING

FAÇADE PROPORTIONS BASED ON EXAMPLE GALERIAS

RESIDENTIAL PATCHWORK ELEVATION

MATERIAL PALETTE