

Baku, Azerbaijan Studio – Project Brief

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Mega-cityfication/Syncretism:

A New Island in the Caspian Sea

Baku, Azerbaijan



Khazar Islands

If the Caspian Sea would turn from water to land, it would perhaps become the most important real estate in the world, connecting Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. While we see mega-developments around the world implementing predictable development models, Baku has the opportunity to be more than an hyper luxurious carbon copy of Doha and Abu-Dhabi: It could become a platform for a multi religious, economic, sustainable and multicultural society.

Background and Context:

Azerbaijan has a long history of occupation from Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, the Seljuks, the Mongols, the Persians, the Ottomans and the Soviet Union. Since it's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan has not only become a key figure in the geopolitical power play, but has also cultivated relationships with Europe, the United States, Russia, and Asia.

Since its independence, Azerbaijan, with its wealth of crude oil and natural gas, has experienced economic growth including an unmeasured boom in ambitious mega real estate development projects. Despite ongoing conflicts in the region – namely in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia; a broiling conflict between Russia and Georgia; conflicts in neighboring Iran – and even protests within Azerbaijan itself, the capital city Baku is growing rapidly with multi billion-dollar developments.

The Heydar Aliyev Center, designed by Zaha Hadid, is about to open its doors to the public. Unlike Stalinist architecture, the center evokes a sense of liberation and its fluid lines suggest a liberal non-totalitarian leadership.

Other large developments include Baku White City, which will have over 500 acres of luxury apartments. This is as opposed to Black City, where oil barons had built refineries a century ago. Furthermore, Crystal Hall, a 23,000-seat arena overlooking the Caspian, was built in 2012 to host the European Song Contest.

However, Baku's most ambitious project to date is Khazar Islands. The island will house 1 Million Residents, schools, hospitals, cultural centers, shopping malls, universities, and a Formula1 race Track. The Azerbaijan Tower, which will be located on the island, is scheduled to become the tallest building in the world.

Studio Summary:

After the death of Stalin in 1953, and ultimately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, architecture has shifted from catering to an instrument of political propaganda, to a tool for establishing symbols of wealth. Baku is ambitiously taking its place within the global family of modern mega cities, and like China, is establishing itself with the world of international mega buildings.

In this context, can neoliberalism and globalization promote a new form of architecture and social fabric? Will architecture have the power and tools to express a political agenda? Can architects and urban planners invent a new political agenda and form urban systems rather than solitary objects?

The studio will start by establishing a new idealized philosophy for living. Then, rather than designing an architectural object, the students will design buildings within the micro city of the Island to reflect, manifest and promote a new socio-political system.

Each manifesto will become the basis for a master planning methodology, which will guide the design of a new high-density development on the coast of Baku.

During the trip to Baku the studio will collect data and interview urban planners, architects, designers, city officials, and residents. The data will become the basis for designing both a master planning methodology and an environment for a new

neighborhood that will be a symbiotic or mutualistic relationship between multiple socio-economic cultures.

Studio Travel:

The studio will travel to Moscow for 6 days and take part in a joint workshop with the Istanbul - Moscow studio and will then travel to Azerbaijan for 7 days. Not only will the studio profit from relationships and contacts already made in Moscow on previous trips, but will also glean the influence of the Soviet Union on Azerbaijan. Russia has long been regarded to be the father of political art and architecture. From avant-garde movements such as Suprematism, Constructivism, Productivism, to Heroic Realism and government controlled Socialist Realism, Russia had its fair share of a power-play between architecture and politics.

Studio Project:

The goal will be to develop a master planning methodology and an informed built environment for a new high-density neighborhood. This neighborhood will be a new model for development: a new independent social fabric.

The studio will develop spatial, economic, social, technological and cultural strategies in support of developing a strong identity for Azerbaijan and the Islands 1 million residents. In this context special consideration will be given to environmental issues.

Site:

Students will select their own location and size for the island at the cost of Baku.

Phase 1: 2 weeks

In the first phase of the studio, we will dive directly into developing a master planning methodology for a new island. This methodology will equip the studio to create a new, perhaps ideal, urban DNA. We will look at the relationship between urban planning tools such as FAR, building height, street width, setbacks, etc., and the urban landscapes these create. We will visualize, concretize and test the results of different permutations of these rules with digital models and rapid prototyped physical models and animations. We will question the standard urban planning tools and, when necessary, create new tools and methodologies for ordering urban fabric and to formalize an architectural platform for a independent society.

Phase 2: 2 weeks

The studio will come together and collaborate on a single set of integrated planning concepts that form a cohesive master-planning proposal, with an emphasis on conceptual clarity and specific goals. This proposal will take abstract ideas for the previous phase and test them against the manmade islands' masterplan. Zoning, infrastructure, new traffic patterns and models, and connectivity to the mainland will be organized and defined in preparation for the final phase.

Phase 3: 10 weeks

In the third phase of the studio, we will break up the island into smaller parcels and the focus will be the implementation of goals developed in the first two phases at an architectural scale. The designs will be somewhere between the scale of a neighborhood and a building. They will be developed in detail and goals will be tested against the specifics of the site and context. Again, modeling and animations will be used to simulate and analyze the architectural proposal. The emphasis will be on the creation of a fully developed architectural scheme. We will invite environmental, civil, and structural engineering consultants.

Program: Phase 1 & 2:

The ambition is to design an island, which will become the home and workplace to 1 million people. Using the above tools, the task will be to hyper program the island to curate a society with varying income levels, multiple religions, and opposite political beliefs. It will have a symbiosis between work and recreational spaces, between cultural and educational facilities, and between environmentally sustainable models and smart building systems. Diverse programming will be fundamental to its sustainable long-term development, while being situated in the largest inland body of water in the world: The Caspian Sea.

Schedule:

2 weeks abstract programming and massing
2 weeks developing structural/transport/social/environmental/etc goals
14 day Research Trip to Moscow and Baku, Azerbaijan
2 weeks placement of program and massing on the Island

Midterm Review (outlining findings, goals/ massing model studies)

4 weeks design: designing a typology and building
2 weeks final presentation preparation
Final Review (animations, models, renderings & floor plans)

Studio Research List:

- Development Strategies
- Mobility
- Community engagement & incremental growth
- Cultural, religious and social cohesion
- Spatial DNA of community and city
- Economic stability & asset mapping
- Global exchanges and tourism
- Governance structures and decision making systems
- Availability and access to public space
- Urban narratives and memory
- Changing demographics and immigration

- New technologies and associated livelihoods
- Food supply and demand
- Public health and socio-economic Impact
- Infrastructure and economic inter-dependence
- Educational systems and social impact
- Waste management
- Political structure
- Climate and ecology, especially earthquake protections

Planning Considerations:

- What is the relationship between Baku and the larger regional and global political economy?
- How do these issues intersect with social, spatial and environmental priorities?
- How can local needs be balanced against city-wide or global development pressures?
- How can we gather, document, and analyze a city's spatial, cultural, social, economic, and political DNA?
- Using this DNA, how can we enhance the found potential, and isolate the gaps in function without destroying the DNA itself?
- What possibilities exist for Baku? Can globally existing strategies be scaled up, implemented, manipulated? Can the transformation of Baku provide models for other countries?
- Can we contextualize an architectural language for an independent society?

Reading List/Links:

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