

CONTEXTUALISM AS A BASIS FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract— This article is about so-called “contextualism” of 80’s, once a rigorous, discursive approach in architecture proposing a conceptualization of the relation between architectural and urban designs with their physical and cultural environment. While setting globalism and its effects on contemporary architecture as a problem for environmentally responsible architecture it revisits the basic ideas of contextualism from the viewpoint of two intellectual frameworks from arts, to establish a more inclusive view of contextualism towards understanding and conceptualizing the present situation. It identifies the great match between the present situation and the conditions that led contextualism to arise, and tries to show how contextualism is in a position to say something about the present “predicament” of contemporary architecture and how it contains a potential to contribute to environmentally responsive architecture today.

Index Terms— environmentally responsible architecture, contextualism, Colin Rowe, Collage City, globalization, globalism

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalism is shaping everything, including our environment; built, natural, cultural or otherwise. Providing one “big” environment itself, globalization is becoming one single power, bypassing all others, determining all; around the world differences are evened out, places start to lose their identity, we are at the eve of a “world with chamfered peaks and valleys.” This is one of the basic problems for architecture, which itself once was about difference, not sameness; about identity; about the environment; about what surrounds it, about specificity; about places. Now it seems that architecture only has to follow the latest “global” bandwagon.

This article is about so-called “contextualism” once a valuable approach in architecture proposing a rigorous conceptualization of the relation between architectural and urban designs with their physical and cultural environment. The study aims to revisit the basic ideas of contextualism afresh, which in turn would provide insights towards the present problem situation. It reviews contextualism from the viewpoint of two different but related intellectual frameworks; thus it presents a re-reading of contextualism from a wider inclusive framework. It was intended that such a reading will contribute to the rich intellectual framework mired in the discourse of contextualism which in turn will help us to bring them to the service of architecture towards coping with the set of problems related with globalism.

II. ON ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXTUALISM

Contextualism is the name given to the particular studies, which are the products of the urban design master program conducted by Colin Rowe, started in Cornell in 1963. The word contextualism first

appeared in 1965. In one of his interviews, Schumacher stated that, he believed that the approach was first called “contextualism” as an attempt of combining the words “context” and “texture”. When the visuals of the period projects are examined, it is seen that their main focus is the “urban” texture. Thus, the departure point of the problem situation focuses on its relation to the texture. Rather than the term with a “textual” emphasis, the word “contextualism” was then adopted as a more appropriate term for representing the complexity as well as discursivity in the essence of the approach. The new term fit better to the conceptual content of the contextualism argument. Contextualism may seem like a product of a limited framework, targeting a problematic area that is particularly limited with current understanding, but in essence, the approach is not a uniform, homogeneous, and limited with a narrow perspective. Rowe and Koetter give an extraordinary wealth of conceptual and theoretical framework of the approach in their article and then in their book of a similar name the *Collage City*. The content in the book is highly discursive, but beyond some implications neither is the contextualism mentioned, nor does the book contain materials for its practice. It appears that the main aim of the book is to state the problems and to focus on analytical strategies. From this point of view, the *Collage City* and it’s one of the greatest contents contextualism can be characterized mainly as critical. It was the duty of the members of this community to develop and enlarge the lines implied by the intellectual framework emerging from Cornell's environment. In various articles, the model is taken from different viewpoints and refined. Significant examples in that sense are Steven Peterson's "Urban Design Tactics," and "Space and Anti-Space;" Colin Rowe's "The Present Urban Predicament;" Thomas Schumacher's "Contextualism: Urban Ideals and

Deformations;" Stuart Cohen's "Physical Context / Cultural Context: Including it All;" William Ellis's "Type and Context in Urbanism;" and Steven Hurtt's "Conjectures on Urban Form". They contributed to the understanding of concept of urban form, also to the development of the scope and the distribution of the effect of the approach. Among these, especially the work of Cohen, Hurtt and Schumacher, have moved the issue of context beyond the framework of Rowe's urban design studio. In this way, the conceptual scope of context and contextualism has expanded and the impact area of the model has moved from the urban design towards architecture. While at first "context" seemed to be denoting a limited sense of the notion referring to either the immediate surrounding of a building or a physical context, it later on departed towards a more inclusive definition that encompasses a wider physical context and more important the cultural context. On the other hand, throughout this evolution, "methodological" or "practice-oriented" gap left in *Collage City* has been extended towards what was operational and towards practice keeping its "descriptive" and "critical" essence. Contextualism tried to teach us how to respect and to that degree be critical to what lies before us, whether physical, environmental, cultural or otherwise, while proposing something new, something not only departs from what existed but also contributes to it; it emphasized identity and difference. Contextualism has become one of the theoretical cornerstones in the architecture of the 1980s.

III. TOWARDS A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Before all these context and contextualism, have already been an issue in the field of arts. As we have stated in elsewhere, among these, two critical models are particularly important for our purposes. The conception of context and contextualism in these models and the rich intellectual structure surrounding them are thought to be useful in producing an environmentally conscious approach and a reinterpretation of an architectural contextualism in an expanded framework.

The first model of contextual criticism is related to the notion of "composition" in art; especially in modernist art in its formalist traditions. According to this understanding, an artwork is an inseparable whole composed of a set of internally related parts. The concept of composition in art (especially in the painting) is related to this particular kind of contextualism. According to Ellis, the modernist picture is contextual, because every part that composes the whole is dedicated to the overall composition of the work of art. Hence, not the individual objects, but how they come together and make a whole, in other words how they create an "inner context" of the work, is important. In the field of art, this approach can be

seen from Cubism and Futurism to Elementarism, Neo-Plasticism, Suprematism and Purism.

It is possible to observe the kind of contextualism mentioned here in the context of the "contextualist criticism" of the formal school called *New Criticism*. "Contextualist criticism" considers the work of art as a closed whole, and that art criticism should be done with reference to this "inner context". From this perspective, the artfulness of a work is related to its success in bringing together an internal integrity without any external reference and ability to form an independent/autonomous system.

The second approach, on the other hand is different from the first one. As it is also typical in the field of architecture, here contextualism is inherently related to what is external to an artwork.

Eric J. Fox defines contextualism as "a philosophical worldview in which any event is interpreted as an ongoing act inseparable from its current and historical context". The foundations of this worldview are based on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Friedrich Schiller, Henri Bergson, George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. According to Stephen C. Pepper, these studies have emerged in the form of operationalism in science, instrumentalism in logic, and objective relativism in ethics and social theory. The effects of these studies are known in the field of art, and Pepper says that the best expression for such an effect can be called "contextualist aesthetic." He also defines contextualist criticism as a critique that takes into account all the circumstances surrounding a work of art and evaluates it in this "context". Contextualism in this sense gives high value to "environment" or "conditions", not to descriptions, recipes, formulas, or powers determining all. Thus, in assessing a work, how and in what way the work is affected by its environment and also how and in what manner it contributes to its environment is important.

The two critical contextualist approaches, which seem to emphasize the different qualities of one phenomenon, may form a holistic mature framework for a novel expanded reading of an architectural contextualism.

IV. FROM THE MODERN TO THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CONTEXT

The critique of urban production of Modern Architecture, and the contextualist approach as a solution to this problem in *Collage City* can be re-considered in the light of the abovementioned two approaches. This would help us to reconsider the provided intellectual framework and bring it about to understand the present "predicament" related with globalism's affects upon built environment.

In the urban scale, Modern Architecture is indifferent

to pursue any relationship between objects; That is to say, it disregards how the parts forming the whole (composition). Undoubtedly, there is a logic that brings together parts in such an approach, but since modernist urbanism bases itself on an essentially functionalist view, rather than aiming to establish interrelationships between objects it focuses on organizing their positions within a space with reference to their functional relations. Modernist urban products are isolated "self-referenced" organizations, hence their "objects in space" constructs have no ability to constitute a "gestalt" or to use a contextualist jargon an "inner context". The phenomenon sharply manifests itself on a higher scale: if we take the whole city as providing some type of (inner) context or environment, and assume it as the "design" of time, then it is clearly seen that a typical modernist urban design proposal can be described as a conscious disruption of that inner context of the city, to that degree the continuity of the time.

This attitude can be analyzed from two aspects: the first one is about the internal logic of design proposal. This pure functionalist, mechanical and autonomous logic determines both the internal organization and the resultant form leading from this organization. The second is about the relationship of design proposal with everything that lies before it (physical, cultural, historical...etc.). Modern architecture was already claiming to break with what existed before it: it does not take both its immediate surrounding and the architectural tradition into consideration. This rejection is not only morphological and historical but it may resurface in various means. For example at the later stages of architectural modernism it is known that "brise soleil," a shading device originally developed with respect to the environmental conditions just become a stylistic element, was started to be applied to every climate (even if that climate does not demand an element as such) or every façade of a building (even if it was East, West or North facades those demand different elements) regardless of its origin and environmental relations.

From the framework of such an approach each "modern" design proposal, whether on architectural or on urban scale, is almost an assertion to determine its own physical, cultural and historical origin. Modernist urban design, failed to create an internal context in itself and if not tried itself to fit to, rejected to establish any type of relation what surrounds it.

In *Collage City* authors just reverse this. Here urban design is not seen as a hermetically sealed, hygienic and clean process based on a positivist functionalist epistemological framework. Process as such can only be described as "mechanical" and by nature such an approach would not be able to provide an environment in which life arose nor does it allow changes or developments that may be necessary over time. The whole is the sum of its parts and does not form an

internal "context". As part of the dominant interpretation of functionalism, modern architecture argues that like soap bubbles formed from inside out, this totality is the result of a function-based process. On the other hand, the kind of integrity implied by contextualism is far from the functionalist mechanics, rather it is in parallel with the intellectual infrastructures and strategies of approaches such as cubist painting and collage.

From a wider perspective, a configuration, as described above, does not allow for the temporal dimension: since it considers itself as a fixed and absolute being, closed to criticism, it does not concern what is before and after itself. This kind of an approach does not allow the differences and the different parts to come together. From an inside-out mechanic logic does not interested in the boundary: It is not concerned with the context, nor is it interested in what was external to is, i.e., its environment its context. Similar to its final form, what was external is a kind of by-product.

On the other hand, the logic of "collage" and "bricolage" proposed by Rowe and Koetter, emphasizes forms of organization concentrating on an entirely ambiguous relationship, which allows for a different kind of complexity. Here, it is not possible to divide the whole into parts or to resolve the relations clearly that structure the whole. Such a configuration emphasizes uncertainty, flexibility, unpredictability, complexity in design, and it does not only allow for the temporal dimension, (both the past and the future), but encourages it by its nature, and sometimes even force one to do so. Between the tendency of full chaos and full control, the collage and bricolage logic do not lose the sense of gestalt, wholeness coming from the logic of inner context. In that sense, the approach allows the different constituents to come together, it enables change of parts and the whole responsive to changes at different times.

With the same view, the design proposals made for the city can also be evaluated: the city can be seen as a whole where different parts formed over time are brought together in complex relationships (Rowe and Koetter preferred to see it as a collage). In this context, every design proposal to the city, regardless of scale, is controlled by the "environment" that this whole provides. This environment can be thought of as the "external context" of the design proposal, but at the same time for the city, it is the "internal context," and a proposal must be seen as a contribution to this inner context which in turn change the nature of this "context" transforming it to provide a new environment. Here since the problem is twofold, the designer has to work in two different ways, no matter what scale he/she works the situation does not change. While dealing with the integrity/wholeness of the proposal (internal context), designer also designs a part of the city which, on the other hand, is not in his

own control but will be affected from the design proposed by him/her. Here control is not one-way and mechanical. It cannot be expressed and understood by positivist methods, cannot be expressed by formulas. It is uncertain, plastic and bi-directional. Existing situation affects the new proposal non-deterministically, new one on the other hand transforms and change the existing situation within a continuum.

An architectural work, in one way or another, is subject to a contextual framework which encompass two ends of the possible spectrum that extend from undefined to strictly defined. The scale, scope, and quality of context can vary depending on the scale and nature of the architectural (or urban) problem. Cultural as well as physical, climatic, geographical matters can be taken as context. Perhaps the most important of these is the context created by the tradition of architecture. The contextual framework provides an environment that encourages creativity not the other way round. As Henri Focillon said, it is not infinite freedom, but creativity in limitations; "a large number of experiments and variations is likely to occur whenever the artist's expression is at all confined, whereas unlimited freedom inevitably leads to imitation."

The aforementioned complex set of relationships can be addressed on the basis of two-fold structure provided here: "internal context" and "external context" and the ambiguous, variable and porous relationship between the two.

V. CONCLUSION: GLOBALISM AS A CONTEXTUAL/ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM

Contemporary architecture seems to be trying to establish itself on the basis of two seemingly contradictory problematic positions. First is about "absolute autonomy," which is advertised as one of the "merits" of contemporary architecture, claiming architecture to be anti-contextualist, "big" enough to have right not to consider what is external to it. Here the only emphasis is on the building itself, or the inner context (or logic) of the design, the environment is of no importance at all. In such approaches the design does not concern the external context, nor does it propose anything that is external to it. Although it is well established and popular in the globalized world, the weakness of such understanding is that it is a universal fact that no cultural product, including architecture, can attain a "bigness" that could go beyond all possible contexts that it was surrounded by. Related with the first, the second position is related to globalism. In this position, globalism operates as a kind of meta-context or a meta-environment. As having a tendency to bypass all other contextual layers, this meta-context claims to be the absolute

determinant of framing and shaping of the all cultural products, including architecture. Architectural environment in the globalized world is substantially linked with the existence of this deterministic single authority, the meta-context that bypasses all the possible contextual layers surrounding architectural products. As a result we can see every type of building, every style, every material, everywhere in the world regardless of environmental specificities, local differences, cultural patterns, so on so far: as it was stated earlier "differences are evened out, places start to lose their identity." From this perspective, each architectural-urban proposal is almost an "fons et origo" of its own physical, cultural and historical existence. Under the control of the meta-contextual framework, paradoxically it neither demand to create its own internal context nor acts as part of a larger context in which it could be a part of and it could contribute to. Global architecture claims to be an anti-contextualist but at the same time seeming to be adopting globalism as a ruling single authority, a meta-context that rules all.

It can be said that the present problematic situation summarized here greatly coincides with the "predicament," which modern architecture was faced at the beginning of the last century: As seen from this perspective it can be stated that the situation coming out of contemporary architecture attempting to place itself in abovementioned uncanny binary position, shows great similarities with the case addressed by architectural contextualism of the last century. This just turns contextualist intellectual framework of 80's in a position say something about the present "predicament." Beyond its limited, reductive and superficial interpretations, contextualism may provide us with an understanding, a critical approach, as well as an inclusive worldview towards environmentally responsible architecture and architectural design, again.

This paper can be seen as a first step towards this.

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