

The Invisible in Architecture could be conceived as context. The context cannot be captured in a single truth; it is the rest of the world, that which is provisionally ignored but in fact has a bearing on the subject under discussion. There is always a context. It is unthinkable that we or our cultural artefacts could exist without it. In the absence of a sense of contextuality, there can be no sense of either reality or of viable possibility.

Our culture is permeated by the realisation that everything is relative, that everything acquires its meaning in relation to an environment. Objectivity does not exist, let alone absoluteness. He who fails to think in terms of context is politically incorrect and a shady customer. Since this is a reputation nobody relishes, our culture is engaged in a major undertaking to map out the context. All kinds of forgotten corners are being discovered, and formerly implicit agreements are being discussed openly. We have become conscious of the Other – and we have even become conscious of the fact that we become conscious of ourselves through the Other.

Before the days of Modernitas, this ‘universal surround’ had another name: God. He was the all-encompassing, the spiritual connective tissue in an infinity that was always presupposed although only partially visible. But now we have declared God dead and sanctified the context as His worldly successor. Belief in context takes the place of a waning belief in truth. In the circumstances, the search for what was previously overlooked easily becomes a goal in its own right, without the least emancipatory intent. The final result is a morally detached ‘complexity’ in which the context has become the text.

Although the context is actually infinite, we can only be aware of one or two aspects when we focus our attention on it. Thus we fool ourselves into thinking that we contextualise everything, but there are many aspects of the context we still prefer to dis-

Context

regard. The purveyors of today’s culture restrict their attention to precisely those individual contexts that support their personal ambitions and their (contextualised) theoretical hobby-horses. The political contexts of social systems and their potential alternatives remain invisible. All attention is reserved for the symbolic context. Thus effectively a contextualisation takes place that remains restricted to the surface and does not extend to the social content under the surface. Awareness of context gives us an illusion of liberation, but it really leaves us trapped in all those contexts we would rather not know about. We often protect ‘our’ context by saying that we ‘don’t understand’ other contexts and would therefore rather not express an opinion about them. Conversely, we reject the interference of those who do not share our own context.

With the ‘context’ vector as our tool, we should like to probe the limits of this selective awareness. We must avoid the pitfall of a deconstructive exercise that obfuscates the responsibility for our actions. Thus in our examination of architectural oeuvres, our attention to context must go deeper than merely a biography of the architect and an assessment of his position within the professional field. We must also consider non-professional contexts: these will shed a very different light on the ‘autonomous’ discourse.

One could say that Post-Modernism is a wide-scale rehabilitation of the context. The Modern project, although clearly of a secular character and thus different from the God-given metaphysical narratives, always presupposed a totalising, all-encompassing perspective. Things could be better in this world, and to achieve that betterment various matters had to be excluded. In this respect, Modernism was a destructive machine that ran on dissatisfaction and was accompanied by a perilous agenda of hypothetical utopias. Post-Modernism is a reaction against both the dissatisfactions and the enthusiastic projections by which they were stifled. This world is by no means the worst of all possible worlds. There is no reason to be either discontented or



exaggeratedly optimistic. And you cannot allow yourself to exclude aspects, not even in the interests of a better world – after all, that invariably leads to catastrophes and deceptions. This is a nomadic attitude: it does not ‘design’ in time, but ‘finds’ in space. The cartography of the context that this nomadism so strongly stimulates has meanwhile brought us into contact with quite a few ‘forgotten’ dimensions of our existence.

And there is more. Inclusivism, the urge to recognise the forgotten, is the core of the contextualism in much of present-day philosophy and architecture. In succession, history, social background, ecology, race and gender have become the catchwords of the growing awareness of the Other – an awareness that plays a significant role in the difference thinking that has been so prominent in philosophy since Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Initially stimulated by the idea of Enlightenment, this thinking has by now reached the very roots of that idea: the notion that things ought to be better than they are. Since even that notion is open to doubt, difference has become a drifting theoretical concept that lacks a project or goal but enters into everything. As a result, the context seems to have changed from being a subject of research into a new morality. But it is a morality of the culture reserve: contextualisation is becoming more and more a luxury problem for a privileged elite. Attention to context seems to have taken on the function of an indulgence, a remedy to lull the uneasy conscience. Admittedly, we are highly sensitive to context in our theories, our debates, our teaching and our art; but in daily life we get by without qualms under our capitalist consumerism, fret about our careers, never venture a thought about what could be different, and remain captive in patterns that sustain the misery of others. In our prosperous corners of the world, universal suffrage has given us freedom of speech and we make ample use of it in our contextual chit-chat. But in doing so we also sanction the impasse. We have become apolitical.

At first sight, the context in which we find ourselves is bafflingly complex. We have now explored countless contextual dimensions of our existence and live, as a result, in a heterotopia of opinions, roles and paradigms. A huge diversity of possibilities lies within our conceptual grasp and our freedom of choice seems vastly enlarged. But, remarkably enough, this does not give us the least existential angst or heightened urge to act. The media present us with the multiplicity of contexts in a comprehensible, entertaining and reassuring way. However, this domestication of heterotopia has become part of our context in its own right, and, moreover, precisely the part we do not talk about. The obsessive interest in personal micro-narratives has thrust the macro-historical and macro-economic context into the background. The context is our morality, but in this morality we ignore the context.

The relationship of architecture to context is inevitable. Architecture is an applied art. The building must inevitably relate to an institutional, material and spatial context. This has always been true, but in the last few decades the contextuality of architecture has enjoyed our special attention. Context is now a term that crops up with unerring regularity in discussions of architecture. The notion of context that figures here is generally narrowed down to the relationship of the built object to its material environment. Interest is focused on the relation of the project to the built environment. The architect chooses an aspect of the context that catches his attention and incorporates this into his project in some way or another, so that the building is ‘in harmony’ with its surroundings. In this approach, the context is usually regarded as a tradition of style or materials, or an urban or functional typology. References to social conditions, ecological problems or prevailing ideologies are much more unusual. And rare indeed is a critical intervention in the programme inherent in the context. Naturally, architecture always articulates a value judgement about the context. If this judgement is an unfavourable one, it can, in the best cases, stimulate a striving for an alternative. This alternative, too, is invariably ‘contextual’: it is located both in the context of the existing circumstances and in a context of current critical ideas.

Contextuality is inescapable. Nor is it easy to evade a specific context in the practice of architecture. The statements archi-

ecture makes about a context are often no more than marginal. They are recognisable in the three-dimensional structure but leave no mark on the programme it accommodates. Even in architecture that is intentionally critical towards the context, its functional content is often continuous with the programme implicit in the context.

Three strategies and three architects Practically all architects nowadays justify their work at least in part by an appeal to the context. In the arguments by which they back this appeal, there are clear differences of accent. We distinguish the following:

Archaism Archaism seeks its context chiefly in enduring attributes such as topography, ground, location, region and nature. It is inclined to shield itself from excessive or excessively abstract context. Rather than latching onto the image of the instant, archaistic architecture seeks a relation with the tangible surroundings and with a concrete human being. This architecture summons to its aid a context conceived in tactile and tectonic terms, and deploys this to evoke an authentic embodied experience. For this purpose, a modest bearing is essential.

In his architecture, **Steven Holl** does not attempt to delimit the individual in any way. He wishes only to offer that individual some peace of mind. Materials and space operate in unison to produce a synthetic gesture. Holl concentrates increasingly on a psychological refinement of experience. His motive is to anchor his architecture in firm ground, both literally and figuratively.

Façadism Façadism presupposes the notion that it is possible to refer directly to the (cultural) context by means of overt signs on the facade. After Modernism, which was context-free in this respect, it is now permissible to 'mean' things once more. Façadism uses the ABC of the visual language. It aims to achieve legibility, and is hence by definition contextual at a visual level. This architecture therefore relies extensively on a publicly recognisable formal vocabulary. In the architecture of **Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown**, the emphasis is on 'both/and' inclusivism. No semi-otic idiom, no taste culture, is excluded *a priori*. Everything is aimed at 'serving' the public, whoever that may be. The public gets what it wants: legibility, identity and a little irony. In this, it is invariably the will of the majority that prevails. There is barely any questioning. The figuration is reassuring and seems to say: yes, this building is for you.

Fascinism Fascinism does not interpret context as the spatial and visual surroundings, but as our current historical period. This is characterised by a profound decontextualisation, at least in the sense that everything merges into the flux of *Modernitas*. Under this strategy, it is a small step from contextuality to intertextuality: it is then no longer the value of the context that matters, but the context as a system of signs. Things, images, words, everything, can be read as text. This reading has moreover become a value-free activity. Where but in an urban periphery, a chaotic zone where absence of centre is palpable, can the fascist attitude draw its inspiration? **Nigel Coates and Doug Branson** do not so much react to the context as become part of it. Since the whole culture is permeated with a metropolitan attitude to life, architecture can best aim to generate a metropolitan ambience. Thus Coates and Branson conceive a hyperactive, almost neurotic environment, in which a general atmosphere rather than objects predominates. There is hardly any room left for individual self-development in this context. It resembles Art Nouveau in which the biotope of nature has been replaced by that of the metropolis.

True organic architecture can only exist when it is in harmony with the totality, for through a limitation in one place, expansion elsewhere is possible. The point is to find one's organic place in the total social structure. **Ton Alberts & Max van Huut**

What is necessary is not to promote the myth that 'progress' is everything, nor to react to this myth by returning to the past or mischievously referring to the vernacular for expression. I value cultural treasures and would like to develop them in a creative way. My architecture basically follows the tradition of the Modernist compositional and formal methodologies; however, I emphasise the geographic and natural environmental context and climate, as well as historical and cultural heritage. My architecture evolves from the interaction of these elements. **Tadao Ando**

Context is physical, but it is also in the mind. The french mind for instance is made up of sweeping designs, ordered regularity, Classicism; and the projects we realised in France all integrate with this specific context. You have to dialogue with the context, yield to it, resist it, transform it, distort it, and create it. Pyramids are mountains.

Ricardo Bofill

Context is where we find ourselves. In making architecture one brings new contexts into being – they are presented. **Julia Bolles & Peter Wilson**

It is my intention to produce buildings that are built for their environment and which seek a relationship with their surroundings. The aim is to reach once again an understanding between engineering and architecture in the sense of the creation of static, formal and plastic possibilities of the respective materials. Behind all this stands the search for a unity between the art of architecture and the art of engineering.

Santiago Calatrava

The new city must use every conceivable technique to flip meanings and throw the control of events back to the people performing them.

Nigel Coates & Doug Branson

The context is an intrigue of dialogues in different languages: that of physical forms, of history, economy, politics or love. **Pietro Derossi**

Today, conceptions of the body are radically changing. The Post-Modern body is heterogeneous, indeterminate and ubiquitous. It is deterritorialised from circuitries and information and in continuous flux between silicone, steroids, spandex and skin. We have come to understand the body as gendered and culturally inscribed, a product of 'political technologies'.

Elisabeth Diller & Ricardo Scofidio

Architecture is first and foremost about people and their needs, both privately as individuals and publicly as communities. In our work this theme of social context extends from the basics of shelter to the creation of symbolic spaces, the dynamic of movement and the poetry of natural light.

Norman Foster

The Joan Miró Library, situated in the Parc de l'Escorxador, lying in one of the clearings of the park's wooded areas, seeks the silence of the park while at the same time clearly belonging to the urban hierarchy of its surroundings. **Beth Galí**

My approach to architecture is different. I search out the work of artists, and use art as a means of inspiration. I try to rid myself and the other members of the firm, of the burden of culture and look for new ways to approach the work. I want to be open-ended. There are no rules, no right or wrong. I'm confused as to what's ugly and what's pretty. **Frank Gehry**

One of my interests is to make the familiarity of my work such that society can get into it. I think there is lots to say once you have access to the work. **Michael Graves**

A building that is used by many people, whatever its scale, ought to be designed not as an isolated work, but as a part of something larger. In other words it must have a quality of urbanity. My second major aim has been to try to eliminate the gap between the community and architecture and to give architecture a new social character. **Itsuko Hasegawa**

Context seduces people into believing they have a neighbour, they do have something to relate... **Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron**

Building transcends physical and functional requirements by fusing with a place, by gathering the meaning of a situation. Architecture does not so much intrude on a landscape as it serves to explain it. Architecture and site should have an experiential connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link. **Steven Holl**

Everything is architecture.

Hans Hollein

I think it is terribly dangerous to submit oneself to the inexorable forces of history.

Leon Krier

Taking the context into account simply means feeling part of the geographical, human, cultural, economic world you have chosen to operate in, not shutting yourself up in abstract and destructive forms of logic.

Lucien Kroll

Synchronicity is a way of describing the feeling of equal distance (or equal closeness) to all different cultures... The new syncretism must be based on the principle of equal distance between each culture of the world.

Kisho Kurokawa

When we design an office building that consists of large number of cells, we make those cells so transparent that the people who spend their time in them can feel they are working with other people, in a single building, in a single company. In our housing designs we try to avoid designing units that have no relationship to their surrounding, the world outside.

Lucien Lafour & Rikkert Wijk

In a time when architectural traditions are in a process of dissolution, the 'language of architecture' suggests more probing questions in the mind of man than what is said in that language. Thus style takes precedence as a problem over the content or substance of architecture. The public is less interested in what is actually disseminated – what architecture makes blatantly visible – and more seduced by the preconceptions that have gone into its formation.

Daniel Libeskind

The almighty notion of freedom implied by a carte blanche acceptance of personalised creation is, in reality, delimited by the world that presses on it. The 'context' in architecture – the surrounding environment and the circumstances that it encompasses – should not merely serve as a platform for one's creations; rather, it should be thought of as and constitute the very soil in which the edifice will emerge and grow. This notion of context as fertile ground in which an edifice will germinate and by natural process foster its own individual character, as opposed to the common interpretation of context as the backdrop against or within which a building must melt, blend, or, in effect, disappear, seems to me the most true and productive understanding of the word.

Rafael Moneo

One works within the discipline of architecture, as well as within an awareness of other fields – literature, philosophy, or even film theory.

Bernard Tschumi

To be relevant to their age architects should learn, from the cultural context, 'ways of doing things at a point in time'. Ways of doing buildings – how walls and roofs are built and doors are framed – can be discovered from the minor architecture of the day. Architects, we believe, should for the most part follow these conventions and, because in our time they derive from Modern architecture, we should, in general and in the major portions of our buildings, follow Modern conventions. In our opinion, contextual borrowings should never deceive; you should know what the real building consists of beneath the skin. For this reason our allusions are representations rather than copies of historic precedents. The deceit is only skin deep. As important, all buildings, even 'background' buildings, should add to their context, although the appropriateness of what they add should be subject to discussion.

This is the appropriate architectural role in the landscape and the city. Alternately, architecture that engages only in context is likely to be bland or banal. The architect who takes no care for context is a bore and the architect who cares only for context is a bore.

Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown