



Context in Architecture

Nikhil Sanghvi

Junior Architect, A. Mridul Architects, Jodhpur, (Rajasthan), INDIA

(Corresponding author: Nikhil Sanghvi)

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ABSTRACT: Environs of the 21st century are a complex mix of natural as well as built environment. Where it was important to place a structure holistically with nature, it has become equally important to place it in harmony with its built surroundings. With rapid urbanization and cities turning into urban jungles, in the race of creating 'star-architecture' there is often a tendency to create 'Stark-architecture' which makes me wonder whether a building would really look 'different' if all of them are different! Is it fine to create contemporary scapes which are not necessarily in sync with the vernacular?

Designing in a given setting, there is always a battle between context and contrast. Though contrast renders the building eye catching at an initial glance, eventually, with the addition of more contrasting designs, it loses its uniqueness. The idea was to explore ways to design while inventing within existing style without disrupting the surrounding fabric. The research led to identification of a few defining parameters which aid in the designing of buildings in a contextually rich setting. The results showed that the element of surprise turns out to be a one-time phenomenon and after a point, simply appears chaotic.

Keywords: Context, Urban, Fabric, Nativity, Holistic, Assimilative, Raas Haveli, Raghukul, Umaid heritage, The Louvre, Pompidou Centre.

I. INTRODUCTION

'A landscape whose every rock tells a story may make difficult the creation of fresh stories' (Lynch, 1960)

The quality of environment of a settlement is the outcome of natural and built environment. As a result of rapid development, the environment is constantly being degraded due to increasing population, depleting vegetation and water resources, climate change, pollution and ecological imbalance, which constitutes the natural environment. What happens within the city? How does the to be built, affect the built?

What is context?

Context is defined as the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

In the words of Frank Gehry, "Architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness." Architecture should be connected to when and where it is being built, and yet, it should still stand out. As per Oxford dictionary, context is the circumstance that forms the setting for an event, statement or idea in terms of which it can be fully understood. Context, in simpler words, can be defined as the interconnected whole which is formed by its parts, just like words combine to form a meaningful sentence and stanzas combine to form a poem.

Contextual architecture responds to its surroundings by respecting what is already there, unlike de-constructivism or constructivism which deliberately works against established norms of design and fabric. Deliberate opposition breaking the uniformity of the surroundings makes the buildings contrast with their surroundings.

Research problem: Today, everyone wants 'star buildings' that stand out of the context and destroy the relationship between the old and the new. Would they continue to be different when all of them are different?

During the designing process, sometimes there is rejection of context while sometimes there is acceptance for the design to exist in coherent fashion. Occasionally, there is a tendency to deplete the historical architecture while opting for contrasting designs to make the building stark and eye catching at a quick glance while at other times there are approaches that add value to the existing context.

Within contextual thought, design should be approached in a current and contemporary fashion. At the same time, the necessity of positioning new designs in a space between past and future designs is important. As put forward, it is possible to state that contextualism is at the centre of our thoughts regarding the built environment. Architecture is the tool for expressing culture and reflecting the fascination and concerns of our time.

Types of context

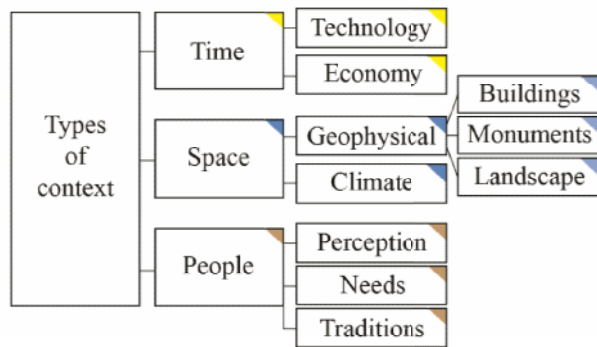


Fig. 1. Types of context.

Ways of Designing In Context

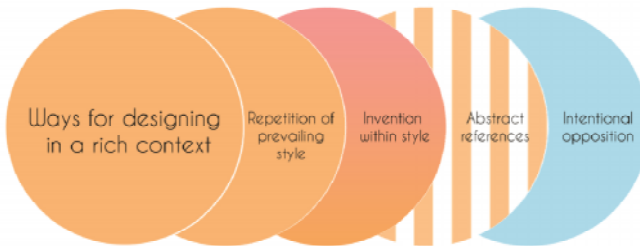


Fig. 2. Ways of designing in context.

II. DESIGN CONSTRAINTS AND DESIGN AIDS

In a rich context, architecture has to respond to the whole rather than being an entity in itself; in such cases, context or the buildings coherence has an impact on the surroundings which may enhance, degrade or have no visible effect on the architectural character of the surroundings.

The following content talks about design constraints and aids and includes a survey conducted with architecture students to find out if they consider context to be a constraint or an aid (Fig 3 and Fig 4).

Design constraints: A design constraint refers to some limitation on the conditions under which a design is to be developed, or on the requirements of the design. It influences the design tremendously and nudges the design in a specific direction.

Design aids: A design aid refers to factors that facilitate the process as well as the outcome of architectural designs. They act as aids in the development of designs and enhance the overall experience of a building.

Above reference shows that students don't consider context as a very useful design aid. As a matter of fact, they think it restricts their designing capabilities (Fig 3 and Fig 4).

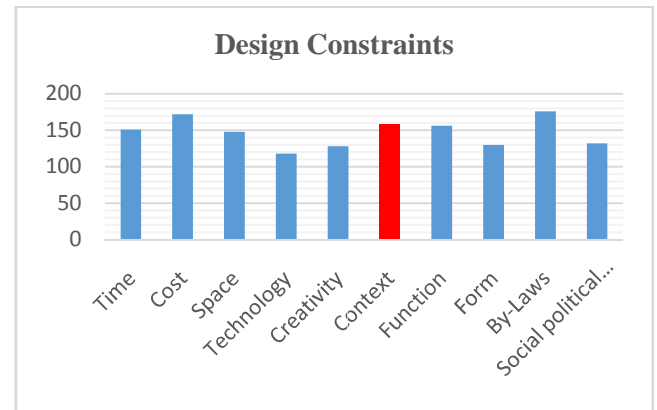


Fig. 3. Context, 3rd most restraining design constraint.

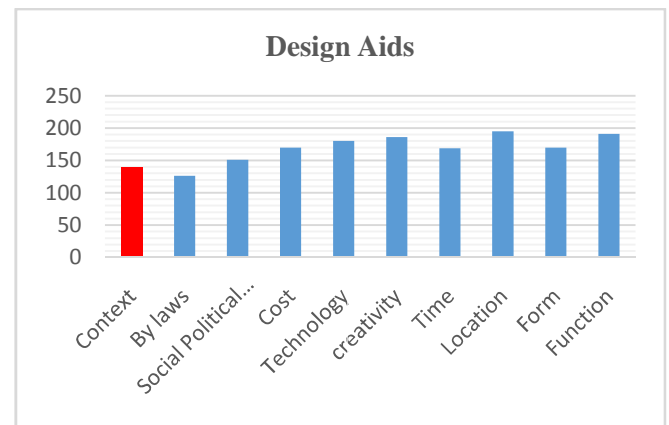


Fig. 4. Context, 2nd least helpful design aid.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

New architecture is increasingly being confused with the high gloss 'corporate' look. Architecture is moving towards global uniformity disregarding the long lineage of architectural heritage a place has acquired. A deep understanding of the surrounding fabric helps in encouraging a context sensitive approach. A few buildings, all existing in a historically rich context, were chosen and studied based on the parameters listed below. Raas Haveli (Jodhpur, India), Raghukul (Jodhpur, India) and Umaid heritage (Jodhpur, India) respond to the context in a positive manner whereas Georges Pompidou Centre (Paris, France) intentionally opposes it and The Louvre (Paris, France) strikes a balance between contrast and context in an unusual and a rather interesting manner.

3. Comparative Analysis		Raas Jodhpur	Raghukul Jodhpur	Umaid H. Jodhpur	Pompidou Center, Paris	Louvre Paris	
Context/surroundings							
S. No.	Criteria for Contextual analysis					Inferences	
1	Order A harmonious relationship between structures in terms of Vertical order Relationship between height Horizontal Order Relationship between width						Vertical order helps in maintaining the existing skyline. Buildings which preserve the order have a higher coherence with the existing fabric. Horizontal order: The street character should be maintained
2	Scale and proportions A relationship of elements within the same building (height, width, footprint).						A building which is out of scale and proportion breaks the existing fabric and thus disunites the building from its surroundings
3	Colours, materials and Textures Visual rendering of the building is by its colours and textures. Material, the matter from which the building is constructed						These form a direct visual link between the old and the new. Prevailing or referenced colours should be used, local or similar materials can be used
4	Symmetry Symmetry implies to the existence of the axis of symmetry in respect of which the two parts within or around the building are in sync						Symmetry makes the building seem static, steady and composed. Gives the buildings a positive appearance, most of the older buildings had a strong symmetry
5	Rhythm Repetition of elements in a harmonious way.						Rhythm of the building should be such that it doesn't break the uniformity of the surroundings
6	Detail A particular element of design which adds to the overall design.						Details are the smallest elements which contribute majorly to the overall picture. These can be replicated from the original design or can be interpreted in other ways to add to the historical design

Table 1: Conclusion (Based on study parameters).

Order	Vertical order: The vertical order of the surroundings shouldn't have sudden and out of proportion voids or additions.
	Horizontal order: This has a direct effect on the street character. Keeping the street character constant keeps the uniformity intact.
Scale and proportions	The building should be in proportion with its surroundings, sudden break of proportion makes the building contrasting to its surroundings. The scale of elements in the building should be in sync with the overall building.
Colours, materials and texture	Colour is the most visible and legible element. Local material and visual rendering similar to the surroundings impart a character which is legible to the people and in context with the surroundings.
Symmetry	Symmetry should not only be considered within the given project but also with the surroundings.
Rhythm	Rhythm is the repetition of materials, colours, details, patterns and other elements increase uniformity.
Details	Recreation or design innovation of various elements of the existing fabric instills a link between the old and the new.

IV. CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn from the case studies based on the selected parameters are listed in the table below.

Context is not an element of design, but various elements and principles of design combine to make a building in context. A combination of parameters stated above, when used with an in depth understanding of the surroundings will help weave together the old and the new. Contrast might work as a onetime wonder, repetition of which may lead to an urban jungle and over the course of time extinction of the then existing. Context has no conflict with the modern. Contextual design is in fact an assimilative design germinating from the native soil with resilient contemporariness that can acclimatize to the future.

Contextual design would invariably be a 'wise' design drawing from the rich storehouse of time-tested practices, responsive to the local climate, set in the socio-cultural milieu and in sync with the local ethos, characteristics that may evolve with time and attune to change but not altar in 'nativity'.

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