

## Exploration of Architectural Context from Aesthetics View

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### Abstract

With the change of the material environment on which architect depends and inter-infiltration of environmental sciences, ecological science, and humane studies, architectural theories and practices have been developed and completed continuously toward a more scientific, ethnic, and local direction. This paper gets the historical basis and judgment standards of Chinese modern architecture creation by providing detailed illustration of the current situation of Chinese and other countries' architecture fields, development of Western architectural theories and Chinese traditional architectural culture, and influences process of regional culture on Chinese modern architectural creation. This paper also gives out some advantageous methods and research conclusions by summing up Contextualism related theories and systematic research on typical cases in the architecture history.

**Key words:** Contextualism; City; Architecture

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### I. DEFINITION OF CONTEXT AND CONTEXTUALISM

The word context was generated from the field of linguistics. It developed within a specific historical category which contains extremely far-ranging contents. In a narrow sense, context can be understood as the

language of an article or the connection between each sentence. It is a word that used for limiting language and meaning of an article. As an object, article can be treated as a linear (one-dimensional) form, and context is the expansion before and after the one-dimensional form. Presently, the commonly accepted explanation is that context is the background of certain region (nation, city, scenic zone) which includes physiographic condition, cultural atmosphere, cultural transmission, and social and cultural background.

Therefore, the so called Contextualism is an interpretation of the whole environment, partial characteristics, or the structure. Specific speaking, it is the correlations between squareness, geography, drainage, plants, street pattern, fundamental space structure, locations of buildings seen from the city, architecture style, and architectural complex features (ZHANG, 1993).

### II. HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEXT

The ancient Greek architecture builders had intentionally or unintentionally applied the concept, design principles and methods of the context in their designs and architectures. They had paid great attention to the organic and harmonic contextual concept between human and the nature in architectural environment, and also national tradition and regional features. Thereby, a lot of masterpieces were born from the hands of ancient Greeks and most of them are still highly praised nowadays.

Similarly, in the Renaissance, different times' buildings co-existed harmoniously in the Piazza San Marco of which the construction of the architectural complex lasted about ten centuries. The main buildings of the Piazza San Marco belong to the styles of Byzantium, Gothic, and the renaissance respectively. There are also fusions of different architectural styles. Therefore, the Piazza San Marco is called "the most beautiful parlor of Europe" (Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
The Piazza San Marco

With the end of the World WAR, all neglected tasks had been undertaken again. In such historical circumstance, modernist architecture started to pursue unconventional or unorthodox trends. Unique performance of designers and newly generated works via exploring new forms of languages had become the main stream of aesthetics in architecture. People of this age thought that everything should be got out of the past. For this reason, behind the language of “creation” only originality is the motive power of creation. However, American architect Robert Venturi first brought out the concept of context in the field of architecture in 1950. He discussed the architectural patterns related contextual tendency by standing at the point of criticizing the modernism.

In late 1980s, people started to have negative attitude toward Contextualism since there was no coordination between many buildings constructed under the Contextualism and current environmental situations and the design of them were also very conservative.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1990s, the social economic system has promptly developed toward globalization. In addition, information technology has also been popularized in recent years. Under this environment, our life and buildings and cities which serve as our containers and places have been changing from time to time. People feel it is not possible to live without history and tradition. It is the reason that the concept of context was rethinking again.

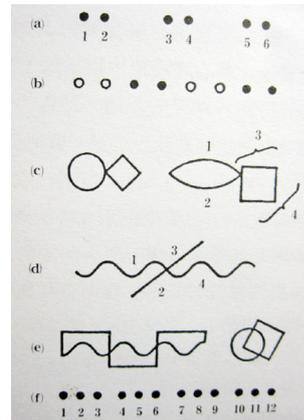
### III. THE Z MODE OF THE RELATION BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND CONTEXT AND ITS REASON

#### 3.1 The Aesthetic Foundation of Context

German psychologist Max Wertheimer and his colleagues set up the Gestalt psychology in early 1920s. He grouped some simple images with dots and lines and raised the Gestalt principles (Figure 2). It is that to group the whole into several parts and make several parts separated.

Although we cannot find directly the word context in Gestalt psychology, obviously, the essential parts of the Gestalt psychology is connected with context. For example, town houses in England adopted the continuous

dwelling house style and therefore form the composite type of streets, roads and squares. It is a typical example of city environment construction and from which we can see the Gestalt psychology has built a scientific basis for aesthetics, what is more, it explains the relationship between parts and the whole.



**Figure 2**  
Gestalt Principles

The basic aesthetic point of Contextualism is to against any inclination that only accepting exquisite culture but not mass culture. Robert Venturi criticized modernism in architecture in his classic book *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi, 1972) and also asserted to learn from pop art.

#### 3.2 Reasons for the Changes of Context Concept

##### 3.2.1 Deficiency of Reasons

Most buildings cannot be integrated organically into traditional and non-modern environment, basically speaking, has certain inevitabilities. Modern architectures are products of the industrial revolution, thus, modernism architects usually treats architectures as industrial products. As long as they are industrial products, they have to be built and constructed in the modern way in quantity. They also have to be dumping to other places around the world like commodities which makes it very difficult to pay attention to the architectural form in their environment.

Of course, there are also subjective factors from architects. Modernisms usually pursue uniqueness and innovation: if a building does not stand out of its surroundings, then it is a failure which can never be thought as creation. Due to this personal desire for showing off, architects started do their business on their own without concerning others' creations which have made ultimate chaos in both architectural and urban environment.

##### 3.2.2 Pay Attention to Reasons

At present, the whole society has been transforming form industrial society to post-industrial society. The contributions brought by the industrial revolution, science and technologies are obvious to all of us. However,

there are also a lot of catastrophic effects generated with these contributions. People's life has been threatened by environmental contamination, energy dilemma, and so on which made people to reconsider the relation between human being, nature, society, and ego. Due to various new products brought by scientific technologies in economic life, both companies and individuals feel strong pressure in their respective fields. All these aspects require aesthetic innovation objectively to keep balance with the overall society economic structure. The current social phenomenon and complexity and changes of art thoughts have connection with its objective requirement. The renaissance of the concept and principle of context has also been influenced and controlled by this objective inevitability.

#### IV. HOW TO ENHANCE THE APPLICATION OF CONTEXTUALISM IN ARCHITECTURE DESIGN

When we change our concept from neglecting Contextualism to paying attention to it, there are still a lot of problems in how to build context. Traditional design methods and architect skills have almost been discarded which has made today's architects confused when they really want to think about the context and design with it. In fact, there are many means can be used in designing new building in accordance with the context.

##### 4.1 Break up the Whole into Parts

From the Openbare Bibliotheek En Leeszaal of Amsterdam (Figure 3), we can see the obvious likeness of the new and the old buildings: they both use the same materials and have the same decorations. Apparently, this set of buildings look new but in fact they are not. The previous buildings' facades are fairly narrow and show their gable walls to the street. Therefore, the architect divided the overall façade into sections on purpose in order to fit the vertical face of the existing street buildings



Figure 3  
Openbare Bibliotheek En Leeszaal of Amsterdam

This is the only resolution for new buildings to fit the whole street's dimension. At the same time, dividing the façade into sections can make the new and the old buildings exist harmoniously. Although there are a lot of obvious differences between the new building and the old, the traditional shape of these buildings have kept their strong continuity with the context.

##### 4.2 Indirect Correspondences

Gunnar Asplund is one of the pioneers of Contextualism. His design method characteristic is paying great attention to the relation between the building and its surroundings. His work "Skogskyrkogården" was built in 1940 (Figure 4). It does not show the stately image of a cemetery deliberately but makes up the dignified religious form by using simple and serious modality. It has created a landscape surpassing a building by combining continuous red earth terrain, tombstones, cross, building, lawn, trees. It is a memorable work of the modern architecture history and was recognized as the world cultural heritage in 1994.

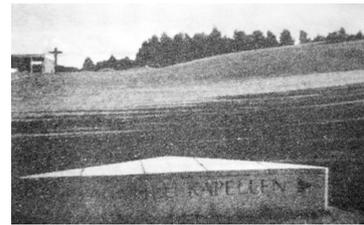


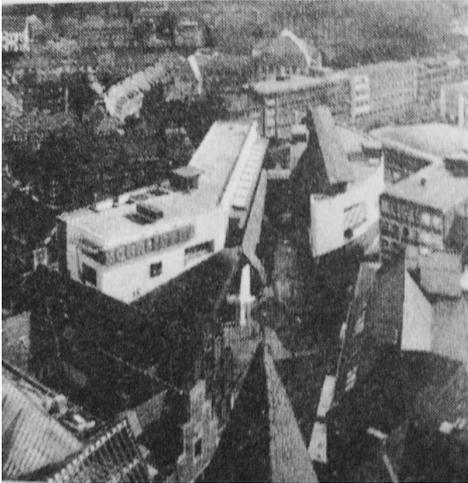
Figure 4  
Skogskyrkogården

##### 4.3 Sensuous Imitation

There are various kinds of reference techniques in architecture. Or we might think this way: if we do not rely on other existing forms, then it is impossible for us to create new forms from totally nothing. Forms exist in forms.

Among European traditional cities, sensuous imitation has formed a continuous and harmonious relationship. Take Julia Bowles and Peter Wilson's design Münster city library as example (Figure 5). This library locates in the old street which has plenty of medieval style architectures. The basic form of architecture is divided into "thick plate" and "sailboat shape". The thick plate buildings have the gentle curve surface which becomes one part of surrounding buildings and forms a triangular street block. While the sailboat shape exists as an independent building which acts in cooperation with the triangular street block and forms a surround from outside and depicts a relative solid image. Footpath has divided the building into two separate ones which was covered with tall and slant copper slates. Right under the two copper slates, there is the road to the inside of the buildings. The ground floor uses French windows which forms transparent relationship with outside space visually. The whole building has been separated with carefully designed footpath into two parts.

At the same time, concerning the relationship between the library and a nearby church, the library's axis is consistent with the overlook direction at the top of the church.



**Figure 5**  
**Münster city library**

#### 4.4 influence of Social Customs and Fashion

In modern architects, Richard Meier is the one who can express Contextualism by architectures. He is called the "the Whites" which means use white and smooth wall space to construct architecture space. In fact, the essential part of Meier's design is the correspondence with the architecture location's context which shows his unique soft and moist method but not just "white". He is used to adjust measures to local conditions, and uses bricks, ceramic tiles, natural stones and other "The Whites" architectural materials.



**Figure 6**  
**The Athenaeum**

One of Meier's magnum opuses is the Athenaeum (Figure 6). It was built on a historical site of Indiana. It seems like an independent project. However, as the start point of walking around the historical location, Meier tried his best to connect the basic plane grids with the parallel arrangement of the gridding and then united the basic grids with 10° twisted stairs and ramp facing the landmark transfer bridge in the entrance.

#### 4.5 Mutualism of Blankness and Fullness

The Paris Louvre Palace is one of the world largest museums exhibiting paintings, sculptures and other arts. Since 1980, visitors has been increasing drastically. Because there is no enough space in the museum, many people can only view the Palace in crowd. In addition, there are also many other art works cannot be exhibited. Therefore, the French decided to reconstruct the Louvre Palace on its original foundation. They invited architect Pei Leoh-ming from the USA to design the reconstruction. The Louvre palace was the royal family's residence in the past. From the outside, houses have formed an up side down "U" shape. The Louvre palace's roof, windows, and doors are valuable art works, therefore, they cannot be changed during the reconstruction.



**Figure 7**  
**Louvre Pyramid**

Pei Leoh Ming has his own way in reconstructing the Louvre Palace: his idea is to build a 70 feet high pyramid which can attract 15, 000 visitors per hour. According to Al-Jizah's typical Egyptian pyramid size, he designed the Louvre pyramid with 3 small pyramids around and a triangle fountain. Pei tried to use this unique "bright symbolic structure" to avoid stealing the thunder of the Louvre Palace. He thought that there is no extension can be merged together elegantly with this palace of which the light was taken off by time. However, a transparent pyramid can reflect Louvre's honey brown stones as if greets to the building's sublime status. Pyramid is a geometric figure which can show the largest area of structure by using the smallest area, thus, it will not be too eye catching. The interesting part is the old architectural form made by high-tech materials is not as old as the Louvre palace but shows its innovation in some points. The Louvre Pyramid has become every French people's honor. People assess Pei shortened the distance between the past and current spirit in the highest degree and also praise the Louvre Pyramid is a giant gem flying out of the Louvre Palace (Figure 7).

## V. DISCUSSIONS ON CURRENT CONDITIONS OF CHINESE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND CONTEXTUALISM RESEARCH

### 5.1 Negligence of context

With the trend of market economy, China has gradually turned into urbanization and modern times. Most architects think there should be contrast between the new and the old architectures but not continuity. It is because that they believe new buildings have to show their new features compared with the old ones. Consequently, like most European countries did in the past, Miesian style architectures have become fashionable around China. That is to say, high-rise buildings, office buildings, and commercial mansions which are different in functions, natures, and forms adopt the same steel structure and glass curtain wall to form homogeneous space.

In city planning, China also follows Western developed countries, pays too much attention on redevelopment and transformation while does not care about the protection of old streets and buildings.

### 5.2 Significance of insisting on Contextualism

Contextualism is very important in expressing traditional Chinese architecture culture by using advanced science and technologies.

The necessity of protecting urban environment should base on the protection of historical heritages. Preserve, restore, recover, alteration and addition and other historical environment protection tasks should be significant issues in architecture design and be taken great care of. At the same time, related contextual language should also be applied in the overall environment construction scope. The protection of historical buildings is not simply protection of high quality buildings.

Pay attention to surrounding architectural complex and its relation with related urban "historical continuity" and also environment history values. That is to say, when make buildings as objects, we should discuss their structures in both space and time dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

Like most human products, architecture has connection with people's material life in certain aspects but it also has connection with people's life in all aspects. It has the widest life foundation. Architecture has idiosyncratic artistic expressive force. Enormous consideration, permanent lifespan, the complexity of its organizational structure by comparing with other arts, close connection with environment, and containment of other arts have enriched the possibilities for expressing temperament and interest better.

The Contextualism gives us theoretical help for digging traditional architecture culture's essence. However, how to pay attention to the creation of Chinese style architecture in special circumstances and how to effectively arrange the contrast between overall context and financial investment, etc. are both need our considerations and investigations on Contextualism's new annotation and development.

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