SUBSTRATA

Vol. 1

DECODING THE CONTEXT

Scales and Parameters of Analysis

Editor: Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ ION MINCU

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EDITOR: Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

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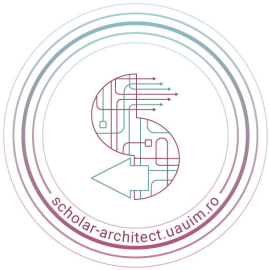

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[0.1] SERIES FOREWORD

Nowadays, mere access to databases or libraries will give you information about almost anything, no matter how general or specific the topic you wish to learn about. You only need a first idea, however vague, and then all the questions you ask yourself in regard to that idea can lead you to relevant knowledge, to new perspectives, to new approaches, to unanticipated developments. Thus, the documentation process is easier than before as well as fascinating, but other issues emerge in parallel. You have to synthesize the findings and develop a coherent narrative based on all the data that you gather. You must relate it to and correlate it with your own subject and your own context. You need to develop your critical thinking.

None of this is particularly straightforward, especially for students. Finding a path through all the literature written in architecture, urban planning and, most of all, in related domains and subdomains, from anthropology to ecology, requires patience, perseverance and time to sift through a large amount of information, much of which might not be of interest to you. You need logical thinking to help you through the decision-making process as well as to envision how all the aspects link to each other. This often becomes overwhelming, but it should not lead to abandoning the task; instead, a thread should be found and followed, and various methods for finding clarity should be employed.

The *Substrata* series aims to open threads and points of access into topics rooted in the fundamental objectives of architectural education. The volumes are meant to delve into the complexity of the current wealth of information, organising it in a way that highlights the importance of everyone's capacity of making sense of it and interpreting it. The volumes are invitations to pursue a deeper and more daring exploration of these topics, nurturing curiosity.

The series addresses five major themes, in five separate volumes:

Vol. 1 Decoding the Context. Scales and Parameters of Analysis discusses the multiplicity of dimensions that can be investigated through various parameters, regarded at different scales of analysis, in order to integrate architectural solutions in any type of context.

Vol. 2 Defining the Brief. Relating Site, Programme and Theme regards architecture in its complexity, viewing it as a response to how the three components can reinforce one another, leading to a positive impact on the broader context in which they are considered.

Vol. 3 Substantiated Designs. From Background Research to Project Development delves into research as a means of informing any aspect of the design, thus uncovering the arguments that ground the solution within the specific context framed by each author.

Vol. 4 Narratives. Presentation and Representation of Architectural Designs considers discourse and graphic representation as an integral part of the project, conveying keys of understanding and articulating the author's arguments both visually and in oral presentations.

Vol. 5 Complexity and Innovation. Contemporary Visions tackles a subject of ongoing focus in architecture, one constantly open to consideration and recognised for some years now as indicative of disciplinary progress – that of projects which demonstrate a complex and innovative approach, with these two characteristics broadly varying in scope, nature or scale.

The structure of the volumes will be somewhat fluid, dependent on the subject approached and how it is best addressed. Each volume will offer an overview of the topic and present various perspectives, from academia, research and/or practice, that will highlight the various possibilities of subject exploration through nuanced interpretations. Additionally, examples will be provided of how some of the aspects discussed have been integrated and explored in diploma projects defended over the years at the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning in Bucharest, Romania. Each volume will also encourage further personal exploration through the references included and annotated bibliographies.

As part of this series, which frames each of the five major themes as a *substratum* (or underlying complex element that must also work with the others), the volumes will emphasize the multiplicity of layers that make up a well-thought project. The discussions will be grounded in both conceptual and practical contemporary perspectives on the profession, thereby validating any approach that coherently and comprehensively responds to its guiding questions or aim.

Series coordinator,
Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

[0.2] VOLUME FOREWORD

During my years in academia, I have uncovered, with each new generation I have taught and in every studio I have been part of, with each theme, each crit, and most of all with each diploma session, a series of intellectual blocks that partly derive from an insufficient understanding of aspects considered fundamental in architectural education. All these aspects are, in fact, extensively discussed during studio hours or in classes as well as debated in professional literature, yet no matter how much time you spend explaining, exemplifying, testing didactic methods that should lead to the desired results and no matter how many references you give, you end up saying the same things over and over again and something still always gets lost. That is because these aspects are not viewed within the bigger picture, nor are their interconnections fully grasped. Decoding a context is one of these insufficiently comprehended aspects, despite its vital importance, given that its correct application is a didactic objective in itself, closely tied to the development of a substantiated design.

With each student presentation, it is obvious whether or not the project is based on a deep understanding of the context it frames (from a physical to a conceptual one). By exploring the context in which you work, its dimensions, its relevant parameters that form layers of understanding, you gain arguments that become cues for your project, that guide the design process. However, decoding a context is often reduced to analysing a couple of aspects related to the site and its surroundings. The figure–ground analysis, the analysis of alignments, heights, circulations, green spaces or functions are basic. In a way, they are rather first readings of a site through standard analysis which can lead, in parallel with other types of readings and research, to questions that further develop into the specific design theme. Subsequently, a few more analyses like that of historic evolution (of the urban fabric, of the streets, of the plots etc.), of landmarks or public spaces begin to introduce nuances. The idea of this volume started from the observation that many students stop at either the first or second step, mainly because envisioning other parameters for decoding a context requires knowledge, data and a more complex framing of one's research theme. Acquiring or reaching all of these takes time that the students (and teachers) would rather invest in developing the design, but the shortening of the analysis process often results in a project that lacks convincing arguments.

This volume, as well as those that will follow, aims to put in writing notions that not only define the considered objective as a substratum in architectural education but also invite further exploration and reflection, in search of a personal but well-informed approach.

The introductory chapter explores what a context means and what defines it, opening new perspectives through the lists of dimensions and parameters that could be researched. Their role is to illustrate what we mean when we say that there is much more to be drawn from a context and to spark intrigue and curiosity about searching for the relevant parameters and discovering how various parameters and the links between them lead to a particular interpretation of

a situation. The diagram drawn on the basis of this chapter can become an instrument, to be used both in the studio or by each student trying to discover new lenses through which to look at a site.

The following three chapters delve into the subject of context decoding by presenting personal views, methods and particular modes of investigation. Andra Panait starts from the word "code" and its meaning to interpret decoding as a way of uncovering what is otherwise invisible; she demonstrates her long-tested and perceptive approach through the presentation of an extensive decoding process carried out in the studio she guides at UAUIM. Cosmin Caciuc launches a phenomenological debate that focuses on the delimitation of context and the limits of context analysis in architectural education, grounded in theoretical inquiries and personal studio experience; his advocacy for a more flexible design brings further depth to the central idea of this volume. Ruxandra Păduraru applies an anthropological lens to the discussion, presenting research methods that shift the attention on users and their needs; besides her explicit presentation and insights from field research, the recommendations she offers to those less familiar with such methods are equally valuable.

The international perspectives shared by four leading professors from different universities around the globe (Lilly Kudic from London South Bank University, Rita Occhiuto from the University of Liège, Adrian Phiffer from the University of Toronto, and Giovangiuseppe Vannelli from the University of Naples Federico II) and the round tables held with professors from the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning in Bucharest, Romania speak of various didactic strategies of decoding context that have been implemented in educational settings. I consider such insights to be of great value and very inspiring as they highlight challenges and opportunities perceived from both personal and institutional viewpoints.

Diploma Research is a chapter that brings fresh voices to the discussion. If the chapters before fit within an educational discourse, the three diplomas presented by Andreea Diana Roman, Patricia Stan and Alexandra Müller as young postgraduates are examples of how research in general and decoding a specific context as a form of research in particular can inform the design. Thus, they are examples of decoding processes integrated into the broader process of design, in the case of a site, programme and theme decided by the architect-to-be for their own final project.

The volume ends with an annotated bibliography, reflecting my ongoing commitment to assure students that specialist literature is an invaluable resource that offers various keys for understanding the world in which we design as well as architectural design itself. They only need to find the kind of writings that inspires them and aligns with their own academic and non-academic interests.

I am deeply grateful to all those who contributed to this volume, giving it the form and depth that I hoped it would achieve. My sincere thanks go to the authors of each chapter as well as to the Scholar Architect 2024 research team and to the professors who accepted our invitation to answer questions on decoding context, either in writing, in online interviews or by participating in the round tables.

Also, I express my sincere gratitude to Florina Tufescu, Scholar Architect's invaluable support and guide in English editing and proofreading for many years now. Her patience, professionalism and openness to dialogue in search for the best ways of expression transformed the process into a dynamic and most educative one.

Last but not least, this volume would not have been as beautifully put together without the tremendous effort of Ștefania Bîgiu, who undertook with it her first serious DTP assignment. Her enthusiasm and hard work were an inspiration and I am also grateful for the constant positive energy she brought to the process.

I also extend my gratitude to all those who directly and indirectly contributed to this volume and the series it is part of – to Professor Georgică Mitrache who often guided me in organising my thoughts and seeing the bigger picture; to Professor Simona Munteanu who, as Vice-Rector for Operational Academic Management, Research and Digitisation, alongside other members of the UAUIM leadership and of the Research Department, always supported the Scholar Architect initiatives; to the UAUIM Information and Documentation Department led by Cosmina Grafu whose collaboration was not only appreciated but also a continuous encouragement in promoting access to scientific literature; and to many others who deserve my thanks, with apologies for not naming everyone.

Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

[00] CONTENTS

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If we regard built space as an element in the vast network of elements that define the realities within which our lives unfold (from unmediated physical reality to imagined realities), the idea of decoding context becomes all the more exciting and inspiring. So we take up the problem of understanding the elements, the relationships, the role played by each element within the network, aware that any intervention will have an impact on other elements, bringing changes, however small or significant, to the system. Any architectural object, whether actually built or at the design stage, transforms, or sets out to transform, its context. This chapter will present the idea of context in the broader sense, covering not only the presence of architecture in actual physical reality but also, for example, architecture defined through meanings, whether individual or collective, that are attributed to it by its author or by users (actual or potential). The directions from which context investigations can begin, the types of approaches and the perspectives can be extremely varied and they can all lead to noteworthy results. My intention is to encourage context explorations that are as in-depth, nuanced and fully assumed as possible by offering a broad view, supported by explanations and examples.

[1] DECODING THE CONTEXT.

From a First Reading to an Informed Design

Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

INTRODUCTION

Context does not refer merely to the physical context, most definitely not. Even when we say that we are developing a project in the absence of/outside a context, there is still a series of determining factors that form a different type of context, be it only philosophical. Therefore, this introductory chapter aims to explore how context is defined, which are its key elements and how it can be investigated so as to yield impactful conclusions for the project. We start from the idea of the validity of any type of approach and of any design process for the architectural project, especially in the educational context, while emphasizing the need to always develop a coherent attitude. Although I will attempt to go into as much detail as possible, there is no intention of providing exhaustive coverage of the topic. This chapter and indeed the entire volume aim to inspire and encourage students of architecture, urban planning and related disciplines to explore context by pursuing diverse dimensions and parameters of analysis. These can bring out a series of nuances and less obvious contextual meanings capable of conferring much greater depth to projects, leading to particularised, innovative approaches that are related to a consciously understood and interpreted reality.

Even when we say that we are developing a project in the absence of/outside a context, there is still a series of determining factors that form a different type of context.

The research underpinning this book started from a few basic questions, which might even be deemed banal, connected to this topic that we generally consider ourselves to be sufficiently well-acquainted with. Yet they are motivated by academic interactions which have shown that this is more difficult than we realise: to define a context, to determine its limits, to decide what is relevant for analysis and to draw conclusions that eventually have a direct impact on the solution. At first sight, a correct approach might presuppose above all a closer look at the context and more leisure for reading and analysing it. Yet time is limited in the case of most projects, which then makes it easier to analyse context by applying clear, almost universally valid parameters – from the analysis of built/unbuilt space that can yield conclusions related to the typology of the urban fabric to building height analysis that can define project limits for generating a well-designed image and so on.

Some of the questions that we consider fundamental for understanding context in general and the possible directions of analysis for decoding it will be answered in the following pages. They are based on ample bibliographical research and on synthesis leading to the identification of a series of dimensions and of both quantitative and qualitative parameters applied in the contemporary context analysis. The large number of retrieved parameters highlights the fact that, depending on context, site, programme and theme, almost anything can become analytically relevant. Some of the works consulted are listed in the annotated bibliography that accompanies this volume. Most of them capture parameters as determining elements in particular contexts rather than parameters as such. Thus, the aim of the annotated bibliography is to provide references that illustrate

different types of approaches, at different scales, which follow a clear logical thread and make obvious the role of parameters viewed in specific situations, thereby leading to a proper understanding of the following synthesis through illustrative examples.

Depending on context, site, programme and theme, almost anything can become analytically relevant.

Other questions will be answered in the other chapters that grew from the authors' individual research as well as from debates, round tables and interviews, thus highlighting the diversity of the ways in which the theme of decoding context can be approached as well as the multiplicity of perspectives at the national and international level. Research has been confined to the context of projects developed in the academic environment in order to emphasize the numerous possibilities available to students in creating personal approaches, pursuing their own interests and interpreting specific requirements. Yet the freedom granted by faculty projects is accompanied by a relatively high degree of difficulty arising from each student's responsibility to define the relevant context. From a didactic perspective, the issue is also complex, raising questions about how the approach to context decoding corresponds to pedagogical objectives, about the guidance strategies that lead students to acquire the necessary competencies, etc. In order to illustrate not only possible approaches but also the ways in which context decoding can be carried over into projects, this volume includes presentations of the decoding process in several diploma projects completed at the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning over the last few years.

WHAT WE UNDERSTAND BY CONTEXT

Context is a key term in architecture. We discuss context especially in the initial stages of the design process; we analyse it, we try to understand it and to regard it from a critical distance, yet we often take it as such. We rarely think about defining the concept of context although we must always define the actual context and determine its limits. Context makes us think first of all of physical surroundings, but it actually means considerably more and in the following pages we seek to understand its complexity, vastness and significance. Our intention is to focus on the identification of boundaries, on types of context and relevant parameters for its analysis as important steps in the design process. All of these play a role in establishing the rationale of interventions regardless of the type of approach (Sfinteș, 2023; Sfinteș et al., 2022) or the way of relating to the context, which does not necessarily entail the integration of the architectural object into the context but its being understood as part of it:

> Architecture is always part of a context and at the same time forms context. It is dependent on the context and at the same time it changes and interprets it. It cannot escape this interaction. For even if the local context is ignored, every architectural intervention and every arbitrary setting generates its new contextual references. (Wolfrum & Janson, 2019, p. 56)

But how do we define context? De Jong & van Duin provide a comprehensive, albeit still vague, definition, raising new questions. They state that, in architecture, context refers to whatever has an impact on the architectural object and to anything that the architectural object has an impact on:

> Architectural context entails everything (...) that could have bearing upon the spatial object being considered (...) or vice versa. (de Jong & van Duin, 2002, p. 89)

So we are left wondering what this *anything* means... The design of the architectural object can be influenced by its physical surroundings, by climate conditions, by the needs that led to the design brief, by building requirements, but also by the broader context of the developed programme. The following sections will provide an inventory of these possible dimensions, but what I wish to emphasize at this point is that, in the circumstances where *anything* creates a context, establishing the relevant dimensions that shape and define it turns out to be very important. Some dimensions are easier to identify since they result from the theme data specifying the requirements that must be met by the project proposal. Others, however, result from research and the identification of factors that can have any kind of influence on the project. For example: Is it important to take into account particular categories of users? Is it important to optimise certain functional aspects? Does the proposed building need to comply with particular standards to obtain certification? Are there specific sustainability criteria that must be met? Does the building have to be adaptable? The countless questions that could be raised are not the subject of this volume, but the defining elements (however vague) must be clarified and ranked before research can begin. In parallel with the exploratory research (a pre-requisite of context analysis, especially at the initial stage), the aim of the project must be defined in order to enable progress from exploratory to well-directed research, to context decoding as an understanding not only of specific conditions but also of a possible impact on the context, investigated through the project.

Not only decoding but also defining context is subjective since it depends on numerous factors. However objective the preliminary details of a project might be, or the criteria which it must eventually meet, the approach, from beginning to end, will ultimately always be subjective, linked to the visions, knowledge, interests, biases, creativity and even the negotiation abilities of the architect in their attempt to always achieve more than required through the design (Sfinteș & Păduraru, 2023) – one of the key aspects of quality architecture. The correct understanding of context depends on the relevance of the considered factors, thus highlighting the importance of properly conducted, responsible research:

> The societal relevance of a given project is highly dependent on contextual factors. How does the research distinctively contribute to making that place, process, or socio-economic or political dynamic – and perhaps other places, processes, or dynamics – better? (Verloo & Bertolini, 2020, p. 14)

Regardless of whether our project aim is for the architectural object to be integrated into the context (however discreetly or explicitly) or to stand in

contrast to it, the built object will always have an impact on the context, which means that the architect is responsible towards everything that is potentially affected or changed by it, for example from the route of people who might have used the plot as a shortcut to their homes to mentalities and behaviours. Some responsibilities are more significant than others, but this potential impact must be acknowledged regardless of scale. As stated by Ray Lucas (2020), "[we have] to be mindful of what each of those changes might result in" (p. 38). While in the case of university projects the impact is hypothetical and awareness remains at the level of an academic exercise, in practice this impact is implicitly assumed, being either felt directly or as an absence:

> If the site's existing contextual conditions are poorly understood, the site's development may detrimentally impact people, property, and the environment. Or, more commonly, opportunities to maximize the site's social, economic, and environmental value will be missed. (LaGro, 2013, p. 27)

In becoming aware of the impact, we understand not only that the context must be identified and understood, but that the data derived from it must be exploited in the solution. The argumentative foundation of a project consists, inter alia, in highlighting how research conclusions are addressed/solved through architecture (Mitrea & Milea, 2023b). Research, in this instance, refers to far more than context decoding, even in its broader sense, but these issues will be debated in a subsequent publication. Here, we focus on context as an essential and defining element in the development of any project, drawing some conclusions from the points discussed so far:

_context is something that needs to be identified, and its defining elements as well;

_any element can be defining for a specific context, meaning that it is necessary to have a hierarchy of elements and to establish their relevance by considering project aims;

_context cannot be detached from the project as result;

_decoding context means translating context-derived data into the project, making them part of its rationale.

> Thus, we define the general context of a project as the sum of specific contexts generated by the relevant elements pertaining to different dimensions, defined and ranked in the decoding process, evaluated from the perspective of their consciously assumed possible impact, viewed from both sides – of the architectural object on the respective context and the other way round.

The above discussion and the resulting definition lead us in turn to a series of questions like:

_how can we identify/establish the context?

_which are the relevant contextual dimensions?

_what gives relevance to the research parameters in a specific context?

_what does decoding context involve?

_how can the results of decoding be carried over into projects?

The question on decoding context will be answered in this chapter while the other questions are debated in the subsequent chapters of this volume. We begin by reviewing contextual scales and dimensions in order to understand context in its full extent and complexity. Then we examine the steps to be followed in decoding with a view to understanding the necessity of a coherent trajectory even though we speak of a path that cannot be linear but presupposes returning and re-analysing. This process leads to filtering information and determining relevance, with some analyses becoming irrelevant in the course of research. We continue with a list of parameters of analysis to illustrate the diversity of applicable criteria and to emphasize all the more the necessity of determining relevance but also the importance of developing analyses that go beyond standard criteria.

CONTEXT SCALES AND DIMENSIONS

Before outlining possible steps in decoding context, it might be useful to take a look at context scales and dimensions in order to understand the multitude of possible directions to follow. The lists are far from exhaustive and they are not intended to emphasize a particular approach. Instead, they aim to illustrate the multiplicity of dimensions that could be taken into consideration, leaving it to the researcher to establish the relevance of each depending on the project to be developed. Similarly, the relevant scale of analysis must be determined by considering the scale of the context that can influence the solution or the scale at which the solution can have an impact.

Thus, we can take into consideration one of the following scales:

GLOBAL

INTERNATIONAL

EUROPEAN

NATIONAL

REGIONAL

COUNTY

URBAN/RURAL

LOCAL – sector, district, neighbourhood, etc.

Yet within the same project, the scale at which a certain contextual dimension is examined can differ from that of another, just like the analyses can have different boundaries, imposed by the elements that make them relevant. So while it may

be meaningful to examine the defining elements of a specific programme at the international scale, developing a solution may only require context analysis at the scale of the immediate neighbourhood (for example, when the programme is based on a theme that is very widely discussed, as is the case of many debates linked to sustainability or resilience, but the architectural object itself is designed for a very small community). Situations may arise where the analyses are at comparable scales, yet the boundaries may differ. In *Being Urban: A Sociology of City Life*, Karp et al. (2015) describe the results of research undertaken in 1954 with the aim of establishing the characteristics of urban areas through the lens of different criteria; their conclusion is that zoning actually differs from one criterion to another, leading them to highlight the necessity of defining the appropriate boundaries, on a case-by-case basis, depending on the chosen dimensions and parameters:

> The researchers create three maps of the city—a topological map, a demographic map, and an interactional map—and then look to see how much overlap exists among the three. Their finding: there is practically no correspondence among the three maps; there is virtually no overlapping. (Karp et al., 2015, p. 66)

Concerning dimensions, these can be regarded as interdisciplinary domains whose exploration can bring out different perspectives on the chosen subject. By relating the project to issues specific to each dimension (and provided the research is properly conducted), it is possible to ensure a good knowledge and understanding of influences and impact, which are essential since the built architectural object will never be isolated, cut off from any type of context. The list below will clarify the possibility of delineating specific contexts, related to each relevant dimension, while the general context is defined as the sum and superposition of the specific contexts. The relevant dimensions can vary from one case to another and each of them can further direct the process towards certain types of analyses focused on specific parameters, as the accompanying diagram seeks to illustrate. The list of dimensions, which should not be regarded as exhaustive, has been alphabetically ordered to maintain impartiality. Yet in the case of one's own project, selection and hierarchy are of vital importance since each of the dimensions, moved to a different position, can reframe the entire process. What needs to be stressed, however, is not so much this risk or difficulty, but the opportunity to innovate, created by the decisions of addressing a particular set of dimensions. For example, we highlight the types of research questions underpinning contemporary architectural projects which seek to discover: how can a project be developed through contemporary technologies that are nevertheless related to traditional techniques, in the attempt to express through architecture an identity that is evolving in its turn? Or: how can architecture redefine a place so as to contribute to social changes that have an impact on sustainability policies?

Yet in the case of one's own project, selection and hierarchy are of vital importance since each of the dimensions, moved to a different position, can reframe the entire process.

> You can practice by trying to identify and rank the dimensions that should be examined from the list below for these two examples of themes. Would a different hierarchy be possible without changing the question? Does a different hierarchy alter the result? We can undoubtedly answer these questions in the affirmative, but it brings us back to the coherence that must be pursued in argumentation, which results from addressing the relevant aspects in a well-justified manner. At the same time, each of the dimensions below can form the object of analyses at different scales.

A list of possible dimensions generating specific contexts that can be addressed through architecture is the following:

ARCHITECTURAL
CONCEPTUAL
CULTURAL
ECOLOGICAL
ECONOMIC
EDUCATIONAL
ENERGETIC
ENVIRONMENTAL
ETHICAL
ETHNIC
EXPERIENTIAL
FUNCTIONAL
GEOGRAPHICAL
HISTORICAL
HUMANISTIC
LEGAL
MORPHOLOGICAL
PERCEPTUAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL
PHILOSOPHICAL
POLITICAL
PROFESSIONAL
PSYCHOLOGICAL
RELIGIOUS
SCIENTIFIC
SOCIAL
SUSTAINABLE
SYMBOLIC
TECHNOLOGICAL
TEMPORAL
THEORETICAL
TOURISTIC
URBAN
VIRTUAL
VISUAL

These dimensions, seen as such, appear vague, but they become clearer in relation to the project aim (even if it is not the final one), to research questions

and also through identifying the relevant parameters of analysis for their subsequent exploration. Each of the above dimensions can be viewed in different ways resulting in different meanings or leading to different conclusions or results. For example, we may consider the environmental dimension: a) to identify environmental characteristics that we must bear in mind when designing to ensure comfort; b) to intervene and modify the environment for different requirements; c) to identify environmental features that can be used to increase sustainability or resilience; d) to identify ways of ensuring a healthy environment, etc. The social dimension can be considered in the attempt to discover: a) the needs of communities active in a particular area so as to provide a linkage to functions of the new proposal; b) the elements that can be exploited to adapt the space to user needs; c) the functions that must be proposed to increase the degree of community interaction or involvement within the proposed new building; d) how architecture can contribute to forming and sustaining certain communities; e) how architecture can transform a zone into an inclusive, resilient or sustainable one from the social point of view; f) how architecture must be configured to induce a feeling of safety or to reduce conflict; g) what the current uses of a space are and how they can be exploited to generate positive social changes; h) how architecture can reflect identities and promote the values of the communities it is intended for, etc.

> You can practice by trying to identify from the following list the parameters that you could apply in your research to address any of the questions raised above.

THE DECODING PROCESS

Having discovered the multiplicity of analysable dimensions and how differently they can be approached, we now move to the discussion of the steps required by decoding, highlighting several key elements and some widely used research methods for each stage. The goal is to bring out the expectations related to the decoding process for a better understanding of the necessity of correctly identifying the suitable parameters.

We begin from the premise that decoding is a process undertaken with the aim of translating research results into conclusions that have an impact on the project, which means that decoding context entails:

_a first context reading – an overview which aims at the identification of relevant dimensions;

_context analysis – applying analysis criteria for the purpose of identifying characteristics and drawing useful conclusions;

_a synthesis of the analysis, which presupposes an understanding of the context and of all its determining elements as part of a system, accompanied by an awareness of how they are connected;

_interpretation of the retrieved data – the well-argued translation of one's understanding of the context into project decisions.

The first question that needs to be answered is what precisely constitutes context. Augustin & Coleman (2012), in *The Designer's Guide to Doing Research: Applying Knowledge to Inform Design*, point out the main questions that require answers for context to be detailed. The questions – *Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?* – are common to all research projects, yet they acquire different nuances, depending on the aim. The answers to these questions are interdependent, which means that, especially in the first stage of a faculty project, there may be room for negotiation between the provisional answers until a coherent structure is set in place.

In our case, the answer to *Who?* can bring the users into focus, with the description providing as much relevant data as possible to build their profile. It is easy to realise that the dimensions these answers would lead towards can be social, economic, cultural, political, psychological and that, depending on the aim and on the answers to the other initial questions, other dimensions like the educational, touristic and symbolic might also be relevant.

The *What?* question can clarify the programme to be developed and the proposed functions, with possible details of the requirements that must be met. The architectural dimension but also the urban, artistic, technological, economic and cultural dimensions could be examined among others.

The question *Where?* aims quite clearly at the site and all the characteristics or data that can be obtained in relation to it, with the urban, environmental, geographical and ecological dimensions being the first we might consider. Yet the social dimension, with countless nuances in light of its subdimensions (for example the idea of community) could be equally relevant, as might any other dimension that has the potential to shape decisions regarding that particular place.

When? can lead to clearer details concerning usage, type of use (un)connected to the season, day and hour, or it can aim towards subsequent opportunities of development, adaptability, etc. Equally, visionary projects pointing to the remote future can be proposed, in which case the enlarged timeframe allows multiple freedoms for many of the dimensions (with the clearest example being the technological), depending on the imagined scenario.

Why? is among the most important questions because it is the one leading to the rationale of the proposal. It addresses the theme that the project seeks to explore and it can illustrate the ability to identify complex relationships connecting the site, the programme and the theme.

How? ...is the fundamental question in fact, and the answer is given through the project itself, seen as the totality of well-founded decisions. As we have become accustomed, the answer is here the object of a continuous search, until the project is delivered. Yet it is important to understand how this answer depends on all the other answers: we have provided a particular solution to the problem (the why) in a specific place (the where) by having in mind a particular timeframe (the when) and what needs to be done (the what) for specific beneficiaries (the who). This answer can even determine or at least clarify the hierarchy of the different dimensions, and the approaches detailed in *START. Scholar Architect* (Sfinteș, 2023) are illustrative in this regard. For example, it is obvious that when

the answer to the question *How?* is of the type "in a sustainable manner", the most important dimension will be the sustainable one, and this approach will already determine a series of other dimensions to consider as well as specific research and design methods and techniques.

Reading

Reading refers to the first stages in launching a project, when the initial data are investigated somewhat chaotically in the attempt to discover the guiding thread of research. Sometimes, the theme also specifies a site and, implicitly, a physical context (whose boundaries must nevertheless be defined). In other cases, a programme or theme is provided and the appropriate physical context must be identified. Beyond the physical context, which is indeed the clearest and perhaps the easiest to deal with, a sufficient number of defining elements must be identified that concern the relationship between site, programme and theme (an issue that will be explored in detail in the second volume of the Substrata series) and that can further guide the research and design process.

Reading implies: a) actual reading – of any kind of written material or information that can clarify any of the answers, but also b) reading the site, as a first overview of the site(s) under consideration. Reading is exploration without a clear purpose and in search of one, but, if it is to uncover possibilities that are as well anchored as feasible in the examined reality, it should not start from preconceived notions or personal wishes:

> without an uninhibited exploration of possibilities, an exploration which is non-judgemental and non-critical, there is little material from which a designer can develop a rich proposal. (Plowright, 2014, p. 78)

In a faculty project, the site and/or programme and/or theme may be specified from the very beginning. Regardless of which, it is easiest for the reading to begin from a line dictated by any of the initial data. If we are given the programme, we try to understand what it involves, what current challenges it responds to, which are its defining spaces and functions. If challenged with a theme, we try to understand its underlying reasons, its implications, the perspectives from which it can be approached, etc. When we know the site – we visit it, we consult all kinds of documents related to it and we try to retrieve as much information connected to it as possible, not looking for answers, but rather generating as many questions as we can:

> the direct confrontation with the site by means of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and experiencing it—accompanied by the constant, deliberate questioning of the observations—represents a source of unique knowledge and learning about the built environment[.] (Tabačková, 2024, p. 199)

In other words, all the information gathered at the reading stage should not be taken as such but questioned and subsequently analysed, precisely in order to understand causalities, motivations, meanings, etc. that are valid for that context.

The research methods generally used at this stage are exploratory and consist of bibliographical study, data collection (text, image, video), observation and informal discussions. The information acquired from any type of reading leads us further towards analysis as the stage that focuses, in much greater depth, on the first aspects identified as important.

Analysis

The analysis stage is fairly clear in principle since it involves applying certain criteria and following certain parameters leading to the identification of context characteristics. It can still be exploratory, yet it acquires an increasingly definite direction as our focus gradually becomes clear in the process of understanding the context and the relevance of the parameters to the respective context. At the analysis stage, contextual dimensions, context limits and parameters are always viewed together and subjected to renewed analyses to test their coherence and relevance. For example, the boundary of a physical context to be studied in relation to a particular community, context to which certain analytical criteria will be applied, can only be established following other analyses that reveal the zones in which the respective community is actively present. This means that the defining elements of the community must be identified: a potential geographical area, certain attributes, landmark spaces in which its members are active, etc. (Karp et al., 2015). It might also be necessary to analyse community behaviours in certain contexts that are relevant to the research (for example, the spaces used for meetings, the spaces they appropriate, or in which they display certain behaviours – of the leisure but also of the activism and protest type, etc.). I stress again the conclusion of the study by Karp et al., which shows that the limits of these contexts can differ and if this is the case, the analyses need to take the identified differences into account for a more accurate rendering of reality. Therefore, analyses evolve alongside research and it is important to link them all the time to the answers given to *Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?*, to the increasingly well-delineated project aim and objectives. Gradually, then, some analyses may become irrelevant, while others need to be refined, modified, expanded, etc. What proves useful at this stage is the constant interrogation of the different elements, of the reasons for conducting an analysis and of the relations between parameters. Gehl & Svarre, referring to the analysis of public space users, state that:

> It is necessary to ask questions systematically and divide the variety of activities and people into subcategories in order to get specific and useful knowledge about the complex interaction of life and form in public space. (Gehl & Svarre, 2013, p. 11)

Therefore, analysis, with all it encompasses and entails, is a form of research in itself, not the application of simple criteria on a more or less randomly selected area. An excellent example of this is the flourishing of the concept of landscape. Specific types of analysis have been developed as well as specific approaches starting from different landscapes, understood in a nuanced fashion. We are referring to: soundscapes (Ruiz Arana, 2024), smellscapes (Henshaw, 2014), walkscapes, lightscapes (Casciani, 2020), tastescapes, viewscapes, nightscapes

(Shaw, 2018), memoryscapes, streetscapes, etc. Each implies a different type of experience, being identified by elements that make it possible to focus on a particular context, with the exploration of all the other landscapes at other times being irrelevant. For example, if the night-time landscape is an important element of research, analysis can start from the following idea:

> The night-time city is at once an intensified urban form of living and a timespace in which the city loses many of its inherent characteristics. (Shaw, 2018, p. 119)

> You can practice by trying to discover the parameters you could use to identify the characteristics of the night-time landscape in the centre of your hometown or of a city that you find fascinating.

At the analysis stage, mapping is the most widely used method, but it can be accompanied and/or based on ethnographical, sociological or anthropological research methods (from descriptions and observation to surveys, interviews, etc. – some of these are discussed by Ruxandra Păduraru in another chapter of this volume). Case studies can also be useful. Not least, we recall drawing as a research method (see ch. 14 from Lucas, 2016).

Synthesis

Analysis yields numerous conclusions which, taken together, lead to an understanding of context – to the identification and understanding of the characteristics, interrelations and role played by each defining element within the totality. Therefore, it constitutes a very important step in decoding context, which demonstrates the relevance of the parameters considered at the analysis stage, emphasizing their shaping and causal role. At the same time, the synthesis shows how and why to intervene within the context, providing the direction that justifies interventions. That is to say, it underlines those elements that the solution will be related to and possible ways of connecting to the context in order to obtain a particular result:

> the synthesis represents the series of arguments (the argumentation) which show the functioning of the study area. Thus, the statements based on the conclusions of the analyses must be clear and linked together into a convincing argument. The synthesis therefore supports the solution proposed in the project. (Mitrea & Milea, 2023a, p. 105)

In other words, it presupposes a critically minded investigation of the context, which questions the relationships between the observed elements in the attempt to discover how a particular context can be approached to attain the project aim. By contrast to the analysis stage which requires something closer to divergent thinking, reliant on exploration, synthesis entails convergent thinking, which reduces the amount of information to a minimum that nevertheless captures the essential:

> Synthesis is about combining elements that engage with each other to produce a unique and new entity. While synthesis is generative because it makes something new, it is a reductive process. It reduces complexity by selecting elements, organizing relationships, and eliminating other possibilities. (Plowright, 2014, p. 78)

Synthesis, therefore, is a search for the coherence of the process, which connects all relevant information in a manner that justifies one's approach. The synthesis clarifies the *Why?*, which means that selecting the information to be kept is an essential step. Any element that is retained as part of the argumentation without showing its relevance by referencing the overall aim and the data derived from analysis and synthesis can only weaken the project.

The synthesis is generally presented by mapping overlapping layers of data, using specific types of diagrams and distinctive drawings that adopt different representational modes to convey the idea as fully as possible.

Interpretation

Although all the stages above inevitably involve a certain degree of subjectivity – generated, for example, by the simple fact that each of us notices certain features or that our attention is drawn to different things – interpretation is quite obviously subjective. It entails viewing the context through personal lenses, placing its understanding in an individual perspective. Nevertheless, I stress the need for this interpretation to be coherently related to the data derived from analysis and synthesis. For example, analysis and synthesis can yield conclusions connected to conflict situations that arise as a result of pedestrians' trespassing on private property, used as a shortcut to different destinations. This situation can be negatively as well as positively interpreted. Negatively viewed, it is a situation that must be resolved by strictly controlling access. Positively viewed, it can be transformed into a resource and lead to envisaging a particular type of intervention that allows transit, via the same or a modified route, but in a manner that does not affect the other activities proposed on the site. Trespassing, as in our example, frequently demonstrates people's need to arrive more quickly at a place, emphasizing territorial connections that are not designed but lived, which means that taking them into account in the proposed solutions could benefit both parties. This may of course not always be possible, but interpreting context on the basis of analysis, together with the opportunities given by the design brief, contributes to the adequate justification of such decisions.

> The conclusions of the analysis should be part of the interpretation, integrated into a scenario/a coherent vision. Otherwise, the analysis becomes irrelevant and the interpretation – a story without meaning.

The conclusions of the analysis and especially the key elements captured by the synthesis should be part of the interpretation, integrated into a scenario/a

coherent vision. Otherwise, the analysis becomes irrelevant and the interpretation – a story without meaning.

Interpretation is a personal manner of relating context to design decisions, offering others the key to understanding one's approach given that each of us, in the same context, would undoubtedly form a different vision albeit starting from the same data. That is why interpretation must be framed within a coherent and persuasive scenario that delineates the criteria on the basis of which the project should be assessed (Plowright, 2014).

Interpretation is a creative process and is therefore creatively illustrated, by collages or graphic representations that convey information in a manner that is unique to the author. Interpretation can also be conveyed through text, poetry, storytelling, typography, etc.

PARAMETERS OF ANALYSIS

We discuss parameters of analysis at the end, having seen where we can start from and how far we can reach in decoding context, in order to understand that these give the researcher a very high degree of freedom and flexibility. Correlating scales of analysis with contextual dimensions and superposing the relevant parameters of analysis (which demonstrate an in-depth understanding of contextual reality, of the evolution and functioning mechanisms of the context) results in a higher degree of complexity. The coherent further interpretation of specific parameters greatly increases the potential for the approach to be innovative and for the solution as a response to the context to stand out, regardless of what that context might be.

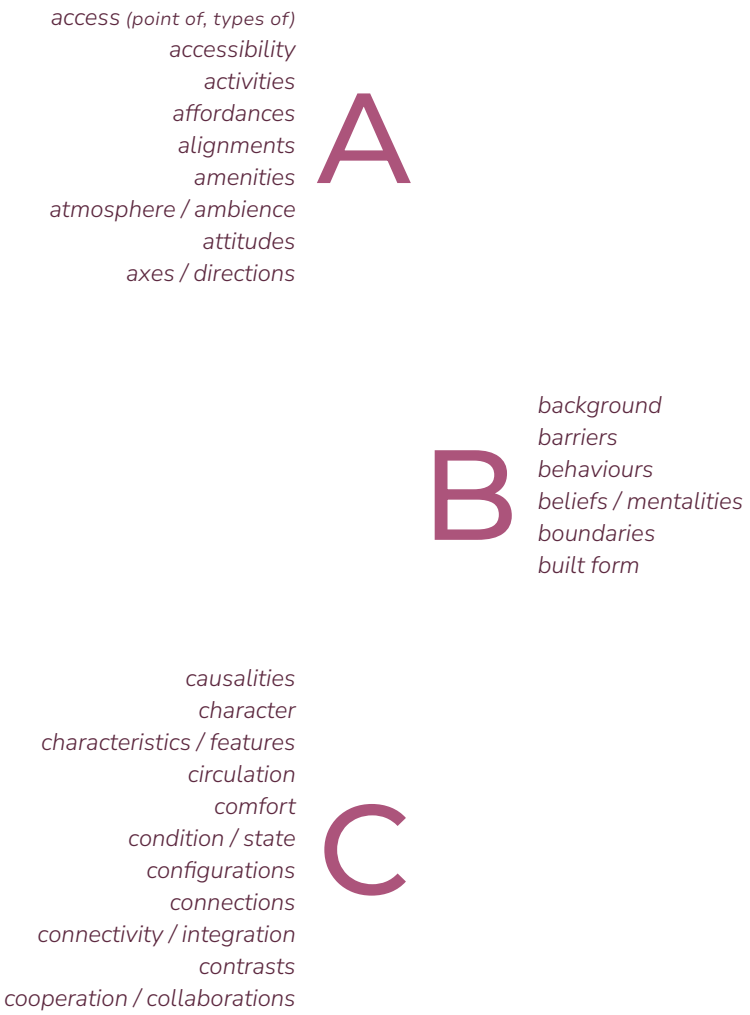
The parameters below are simply listed and can be seen as key terms in decoding context. Each of them can be linked to other terms, or related to different dimensions and scales, thus leading to tailored analyses and distinct modes of understanding context characteristics. For example:

> If one looks closely enough, dog parks, neighborhood bars and coffee shops, farmers markets, libraries, apartment buildings, and any other locales where urbanites live out their lives are full of interactions and accounts that, taken together, tell a larger story about social order, meaning, and identity in cities. (Gubrium, 2023, p. 119)

The following parameters must be selected, ordered, ranked and grouped on the basis of criteria that make them relevant to the context. The aim of this chapter has been simply to open up a path to more in-depth views in the attempt to decipher a context. Some of the terms in the list below could be considered synonymous, yet they have unique connotations that could make one of them more appropriate in a particular context. For instance, *limit, delimitation, enclosure* are similar terms that can refer to the way of relating a plot to neighbourhoods, but at the same time the limit can refer to relating the exterior to the interior or vice versa, it can be hard, vague, or even spatial, it can be not only physical, but also psychological. Enclosure can refer to the perceived open or closed aspect of a building in relation to users or neighbourhoods etc. Other terms can be

placed on differently ranked dimensions, leading to increasingly detailed views: for example, we can analyse all the urban actors in a particular area, then we can retrieve analyses referring to the types of actors that are of interest for our project. If we consider that actors can be non-human as well as human – plants and animals, natural phenomena, technologies, goods (Giseke et al., 2021, pp. 191–198), the analysis already moves in new directions, leading to types of results that place in a different perspective elements we would have otherwise overlooked. Keeping for now to examples of analysis centred on human actors, we can filter the selected categories further on the basis of other parameters like their allegiance to particular subcultures, ethnical identity, etc.

Nevertheless, in order to emphasize the multiplicity of the ways of combining dimensions, the list is accompanied by a diagram that seeks to identify the different interrelations that can emerge between dimensions and parameters, without aiming to be an exhaustive or unique interpretive version, but only a possible illustration.



D

degradations
details
deteriorations
demography
density
dimensions
distinctive elements
distinctions
diversity
dysfunctions

E

enclosures / partitions
engagement
evolution / changes (over time, throughout time)

F

facilities
flow (of people, information, goods, etc.)
forces
frames
functions

H

habits
heights
hierarchies
history

I

identity / identities
image
intensity
interactions
interdependencies
interests
issues

L

layout
limits
links

M

marks
materials
materiality
meanings
memory
microclimate
mobility
morphology
movement

N

needs
networks
nodes

O

obstacles
obstructions
occupations / professions
occupancy
openness
orientation

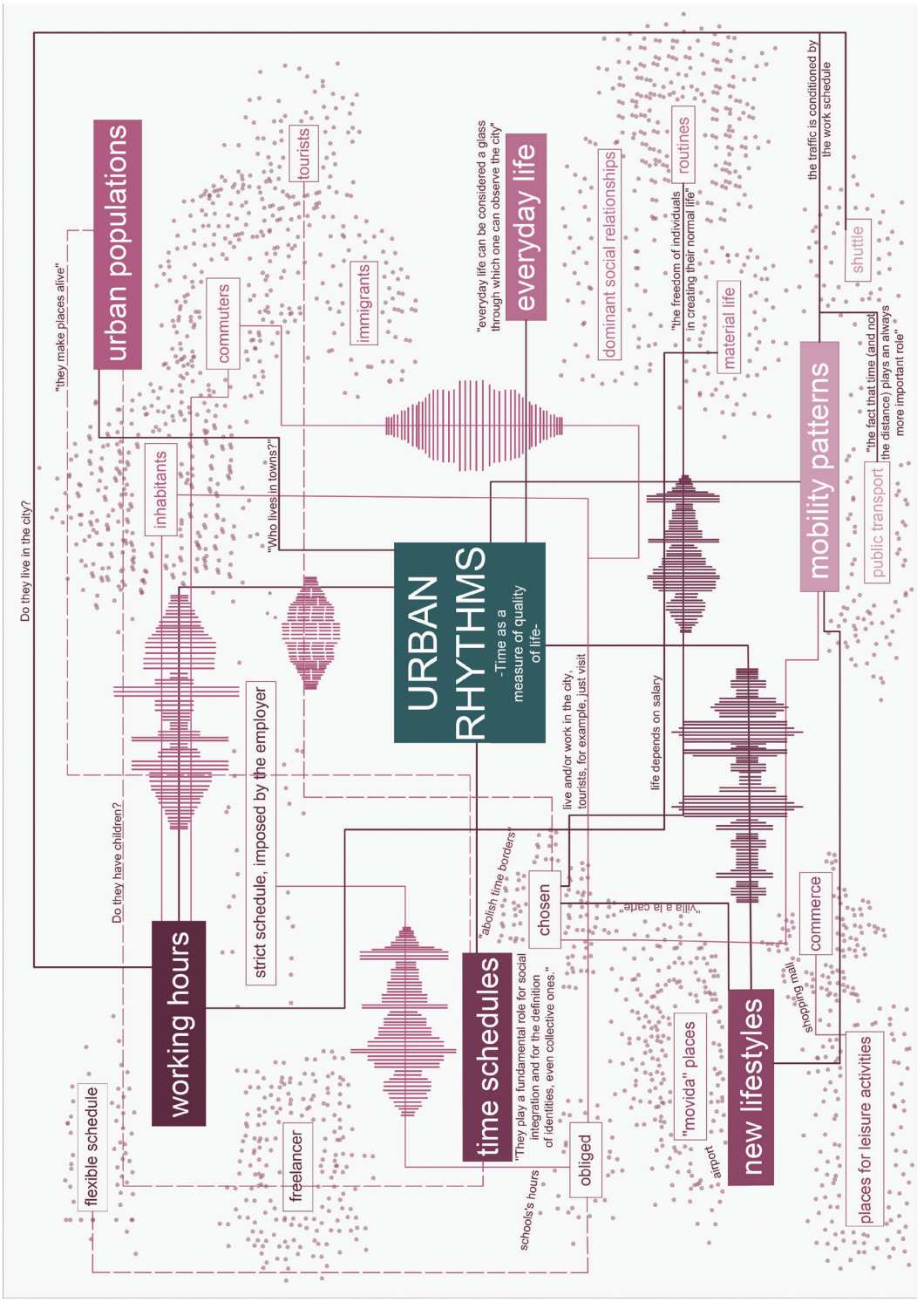


Figure 1. Urban rhythms, broken down as a parameter through theoretical research to develop understanding for subsequent application in context decoding.

Source: Drawn by Ștefania Bîgiu based on Mareggi (2013) during the Text [re]presentation[4] workshop, held as part of the Scholar Architect project, 15-21 May 2024

P

participation
patterns
perceptions
permeability (visual, physical)
perspectives
plots
points of interest
porosity
preferences
privacy
profile
proximities

Q

quality / qualities

R

relations
restrictions
rhythms (vertical, horizontal, urban, etc.)
rituals
routes / paths
routines

S

safety / security
scenes
sections
segregation
senses
sequences
services
spatial experiences
spatial practices
status (usage, legal etc.)
stimuli
style

T

temporalities
tensions
textures
thresholds
time frames
traces
traffic
transportation
transitions
types / typologies

U

urban fabric
usage / use

V

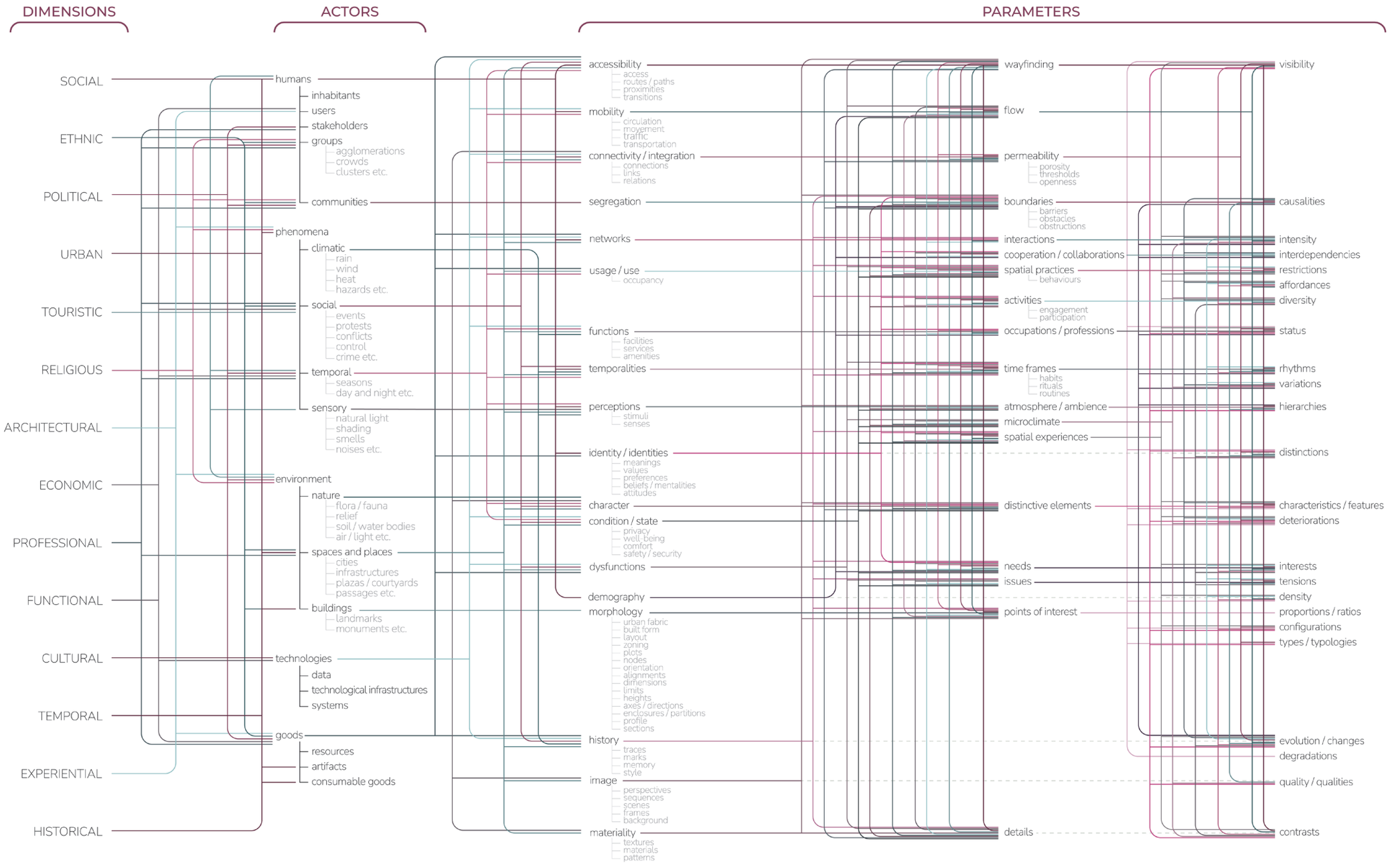
values
variations (built/unbuilt, new/old, day/night etc.)
visibility

W

wayfinding
well-being

Z

zoning



This diagram, which illustrates a possible configuration of dimensions, actors and parameters, is designed to intrigue and to encourage its users into pursuing further in-depth research. It depicts potential interrelations, drawn from the literature, that nevertheless remain dependent on the actual context. It is meant to be used as a tool – either in the studio or for individual work – to facilitate the process of identifying relevant parameters of analysis, thereby enabling a nuanced decoding of context that reflects its complexity. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of adopting a standpoint that prioritises a particular dimension and, above all, on the importance of considering a broader range of actors.

In the printed version of this volume you can find this diagram in a larger format in the back pocket of the cover. You can also scan the QR code to access the diagram online, at a better resolution.

Figure 2. A possible diagrammatic visualisation of links between dimensions, actors, and parameters.

Source: Drawn by Mădălina Dobrescu based on sketches by the author.

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Context is not just history or urban texture; it is also a code. A hidden system shaping what is built, how people live, what gets forgotten and what is reinvented. The problem? Many architects treat it as a static data sheet rather than a living equation that requires interpretation and rewriting. This chapter draws a parallel with the Enigma machine, a system whose unbroken code once seemed to dictate the course of war. When Alan Turing deciphered it, the course of history shifted. Architecture works the same way: spotting an old building and calling it “historic” isn’t enough. You need to understand why it exists, how it came to be, and what happens if you intervene. Decoding context means seeing the invisible – social rhythms, past traces, economic tensions, daily behaviours. The context transforms a city from a rigid set of rules into a living palimpsest.

As a case study, this chapter examines Bucharest’s Tei neighbourhood: at first glance, a fragmented mix of socialist blocks, interwar houses, industrial relics, a park and a circus. But reading the code reveals hidden networks: a former railway line now overtaken by garages and improvised structures, an underutilised park, abandoned buildings suspended between memory and oblivion. Decoding these tensions reveals new possibilities: a green corridor breathing life into forgotten infrastructure, a library as a community hub, a reimagined identity for a neighbourhood waiting to be rediscovered.

Decoding a place is not about accumulating data but about discerning what truly matters. Get it right and you will have more than a well-drawn volume: you will have created architecture that not only responds to context but rewrites it with intelligence and purpose.

[2] ENIGMA: A GUIDE TO DECODING CONTEXT

Andra PANAIT

INTRODUCTION

In architecture, as in other creative disciplines, understanding and integrating context is a subtle process, like deciphering a hidden message. This chapter explores precisely these invisible layers and systems that, although not always obvious, underpin and influence the final composition of a project.

Derived from the Latin *codex* – originally referring to wooden tablets used for writing and later to collections of written rules – the term "decode" literally means to reverse the coding process. Figuratively, decoding is a complex process of interpreting hidden or implied meanings, whether in language, cultural contexts, signals or symbolic structures.

But what does decoding context really mean? How can we transform an amalgam of factors – physical, cultural, social or natural – into a coherent whole that reflects the specificity of a place?

An interesting parallel can be drawn with the decryption machines needed to decipher the Enigma codes used by Germany during World War II and considered almost impossible to crack at the time. Invented in the 1920s for commercial use, the Enigma was adapted and improved by the German army and became an essential tool during the war. Its structure consisted of several interchangeable electric rotors, each with 26 positions corresponding to the letters of the alphabet. Their configuration continuously altered the codes, generating an immense number of possible combinations. The decoding of the messages was largely accomplished by the team led by Alan Turing, which developed Bombe (Fig. 1) – a type of machine designed to identify the likely configurations of the Enigma rotors. By cracking the code, the Allies were able to intercept and interpret key strategic messages, changing the course of the war. *Alan Turing: The Enigma* biography by Andrew Hodges (1983) provides an in-depth account of Turing's life and contributions, detailing how his genius was pivotal in unravelling the Enigma codes. For a broader context, David Kahn (1996), in *The Codebreakers: The Story of Secret Writing*, situates Turing's achievements within the larger history of cryptography.

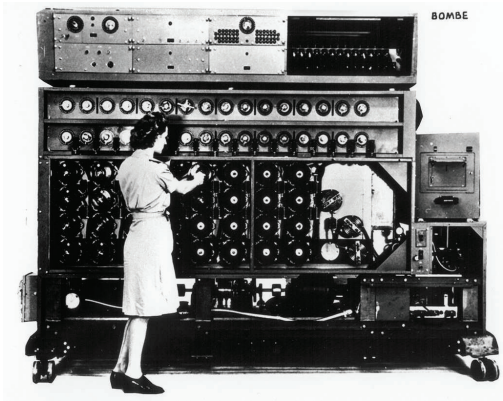

Figure 1. Bombe – the machine developed by Alan Turing and his team.
Source: NSA, Public Domain, https://itoldya420.getarchive.net/amp/media/bombe-fa96af

Some theorists draw on metaphors from cryptography to explain how we "read" and interpret built environments. *In Cryptographic City: Decoding the Smart Metropolis*, Richard Coyne (2023) explores the city through the lens of cryptography, suggesting that urban spaces are layered with hidden codes and secret meanings that citizens decipher. Coyne explains that just as cryptographic systems conceal and reveal information, cities embed messages in architecture, urban layouts and digital infrastructures that require interpretation. This metaphor of architectural decoding aligns with ideas in architectural semiotics – e.g. Charles Jencks's (1977) notion of architecture as a language of signs –, bridging the gap between physical design and the communication of meaning.

The process of decoding an architectural context involves revealing invisible structures within seemingly chaotic information.

Similarly, the process of decoding an architectural context involves revealing invisible structures within seemingly chaotic information. It calls for an interpretative, analytical, perhaps even poetic approach, one that demands careful observation and a perceptiveness attuned to the invisible.

In the case of architecture, the message is a deep understanding of the layers that define a place. Just as in warfare, where success depended on the ability to identify subtle patterns and correlate disparate fragments, architects must decode the relationships between the visible (topography, materials, infrastructure) and the invisible (histories, symbols, social rhythms) when approaching a new project. Just like Enigma, through the complexity of its configurations, required continuous decryption efforts, so too does decoding the architectural context demand a layered and multidisciplinary iterative analysis.

The codes are often implicit, hidden in the behavioural patterns of communities, the invisible structures of collective memory or the subtle logic of the natural landscape. The tools for this decoding range from phenomenological observation, which uncovers the nuances of spatial experience, to systemic analysis, which identifies relationships between parameters. Finding the code is both an act of reading and understanding. However, true decoding goes beyond mere data collection; it requires critical interpretation to identify correlations and tensions between layers, ultimately transforming them into meaningful design cues. These codes are not fixed but continuously evolve in response to urban dynamics. In this sense, we do not merely interpret a code; we actively contribute to its rewriting. For example, a site with an industrial heritage can be decoded through an understanding of its productive past and its potential for urban regeneration, integrating both dimensions in the architectural proposal. Decoding thus becomes a hermeneutic act, engaging authentically with the site's specificity. Ultimately, the success of decoding lies in the ability to transform the complexity of the context into a clear matrix that coherently supports the architectural idea, becoming a conceptual map that guides the design process.

Contextual considerations are emphasized by theorists such as Norberg-Schulz and Frampton. Norberg-Schulz (1979) introduced the idea of *genius loci* as a guiding principle, arguing that design must respond to the tangible and intangible

qualities of a site. Similarly, Frampton (1983) calls for an architecture grounded in local context and culture as a counter to homogenising global trends. These works underscore that understanding the surrounding environment, history and culture is crucial in architectural design.

Naturally, a place is not only a collection of physical and historical data but also a lived space, imbued with emotions, memory and symbols. Decoding this subjective dimension requires a phenomenological approach, in which direct sensory experience of the space – light, sounds, texture of materials – becomes an essential tool. Equally crucial is the observation of how people interact with, perceive and transform space in everyday life. Phenomenological approaches to architecture focus on human experience and sensory engagement. The philosophical treatise *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard (1964) invites readers to consider how intimate spaces (such as houses, rooms and corners) shape our imagination and perceptions. Bachelard's work, though not written by an architect, has profoundly influenced architects' understanding of how spaces evoke memories and feelings through lived experience. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2012) builds on this perspective, critiquing the dominance of vision in architecture and advocating a multi-sensory design approach. Pallasmaa argues that architecture should engage all the senses – sight, touch, smell, hearing – to create more humane and profound spatial experiences. Both authors underscore phenomenology's key insight: architecture is not merely visual; it is fully embodied and sensory in nature.

> True decoding goes beyond mere data collection; it requires critical interpretation to identify correlations and tensions between layers, ultimately transforming them into meaningful design cues.

TYPES OF CODES

We can say, therefore, that finding the context code involves a pendulum swing between the interpretation of measurable data and urban indicators, objective analysis and subjective intuition. Decoding provides a way to preserve the uniqueness of places; these codes can be understood as elements, relationships or patterns that structure the identity and functioning of a place, similar to "keys" that, once discovered, provide access to a deep understanding of the future project site.

The codes we refer to can be regarded as grouped parameters (as outlined in the broader discussion on context in the introductory chapter by Anda-Ioana Sfinteș), classifiable according to specific dimensions for the coherent deciphering of a specific context.

We classify codes into several categories: physical codes, time codes, cultural and symbolic codes, social codes and economic and movement codes. The following subsections detail a few aspects that these codes can refer to, underlining their role in architecture and urban planning.

Physical Codes

The topography of a place, including elevation changes and orientation, significantly influences architectural form and spatial organisation (Corner, 1999). Natural and historical routes, such as trade paths or pilgrimage routes, have historically shaped urban layouts and transportation networks (Mumford, 1961). The use of local materials not only enhances the sustainability of a building but also reinforces its connection to the cultural and environmental context (Frampton, 1983).

Time Codes

Historical evolution highlights the overlapping of architectural layers, which coexist over time, creating a continuity between past and present. Daily or seasonal rhythms show how space is used and transformed according to the time of day or year, reflecting the dynamics of daily life. Urban environments often serve as repositories of cultural memory and symbolism. Aldo Rossi (1982) argues that the city's form and architecture are collective artefacts of memory, embodying history and meaning in their very structure. Rossi introduces the concept of urban artefacts and the city as a locus of collective memory, suggesting architects should respect and reinterpret historical layers.

The lessons derived from studying the evolution of urban spaces over time, with specific morpho-typological characteristics, are essential, beyond the complex relationships inherent in housing typologies and the delicate balance between built and unbuilt spaces, collective and individual areas, as well as the public and private realms (Panait et al., 2024).

Cultural and Symbolic Codes

Community traditions and customs reflect a place's identity through local rituals and practices that give it meaning. Symbolic structures, monuments or cultural landmarks reinforce this identity through their significance; collective memory, shaped by historical events, also shapes the community's perception of and relationship with the place. Christine Boyer (1994) explores how cities are experienced through shared memories, images and symbolic "architectural entertainments". Boyer's work delves into how monuments, maps and city planning encode cultural narratives, reinforcing the idea that urban spaces are interpreted through the lens of memory and symbolism.

Social Codes

Population density and community organisation reveal neighbourhood relationships and social structure, influencing the distribution and use of spaces. Public spaces, from squares to parks, illustrate how people interact with and

transform places through everyday use. Social tensions, such as inequality or segregation, can generate latent conflicts that become visible in the urban structure. William H. Whyte (1980) documented patterns of plaza, street and park use in his observational study *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces.* Whyte identified key factors – such as seating arrangement, sunlight, and food vendors – that foster vibrant social life, providing evidence-based guidelines for designing successful public spaces. Similarly, Jan Gehl (2011) examines the relationship between urban form and social activity. Gehl emphasizes that inviting, pedestrian-friendly environments encourage lingering, interaction and what he refers to as "life between buildings". Such spaces play a crucial role not only in shaping urban form but also in defining how it is experienced. They are a determining factor in the way people interact with and perceive the built environment. The pandemic has further highlighted that architecture relies on direct human engagement – without the act of perceiving and using space, its very essence is diminished (Panait & Stan, 2022).

In contemporary architectural discourse, public space is no longer perceived merely as a void between buildings or as a fixed stage for urban life, but as a dynamic system capable of integrating and reflecting social, cultural and economic transformations. Viewed as an interdependent relationship between architecture and the realities in which it stands, it becomes a territory of negotiation and adaptability, where material structures and human flows shape one another. This perspective underscores the capacity of public space to respond to change and context, thereby reinforcing its role as a catalyst for interactions and urban regeneration (Panait et al., 2021).

Economic and Movement Codes

The functionality of space is influenced by urban hubs, industries, markets, or local resources, which determine the use and development of urban areas, as well as the large-scale movement of people to and from these places. Roads and transportation systems, in turn, define connectivity and spatial dynamics. Classic works in urban studies trace how cities develop and function over time. Jane Jacobs (1961) provides a seminal critique of mid-20th-century urban planning, highlighting the importance of organic street life and community-scale design. Jacobs's observations challenged modernist planning orthodoxy and they remain influential in urban theory. In a broader historical scope, Lewis Mumford (1961) examines the evolution of urban form from ancient settlements to the modern metropolis. Mumford's comprehensive narrative connects technological and social changes to urban development, illustrating how cities reflect their historical and economical contexts and their prospects.

DISCUSSION

Yet these codes need to be integrated, not simply juxtaposed, just like previously separate compounds are made into a new whole through chemical synthesis; this is one of the delicate moments in the design process, which requires the ability to extract and prioritise important data from the context. Some buildings

are composites – the fruit of an organic process of integration – while others are merely mixtures of disparate elements, juxtaposed without a deep connection. The essence of design is therefore precisely the ability to go beyond mere juxtaposition and generate a harmonious composite that is more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, the context is not just a given to be passively accepted; it is an active partner in the creative process. We, as architects, listen to all these voices – of the place, of the users, of our own formation – and we become mediators.

The context is not just a given to be passively accepted; it is an active partner in the creative process. We, as architects, listen to all these voices – of the place, of the users, of our own formation – and we become mediators.

In cinematography too, there are many conceptual and methodological similarities. A film that can be seen as a metaphor for the reading and reinterpretation of context and which explores this relationship between memory, time and place is *La Jetée* directed by Chris Marker (1962). Constructed almost entirely from still photographs, the film takes place in a Paris destroyed by nuclear war. The survivors are living underground and the scientists are trying to save humanity by experimenting with time travel. The main character is chosen for the experiment because he has a clear and powerful childhood memory: the image of a woman on an airport tarmac and of a man dying there. This image becomes the focus of the whole story. Sent to the past, he begins to build a relationship with the woman in his memory while in the future he encounters an advanced civilisation that offers him a technology to save his post-apocalyptic present. After the success of his experiments, the main character realises that the scientists want to eliminate him. Those from the future offer him the chance to stay with them, but he chooses to return to the past to be with the woman he loves. At the airport, he returns to the moment in his childhood memory and realises that the obsessive image of the man dying was, in fact, his own death.

Why this parenthesis? Just as cities bear traces of their past and their transformations, the narrative of *La Jetée* suggests that any context must be understood through the temporal layers that define it. The airport apron becomes a symbolic space of memory and identity, where the meeting of past and present produces new meaning. The film emphasizes the role of subjectivity in understanding and experiencing space in the same way that in architecture the perception of space is influenced by memory and experience.

In the visual arts, a painting is not perceived as an isolated object but rather as a coded message that reveals its meanings only in relation to a broader context – be it social, cultural, biographical or even intertextual. The work thus becomes a rejoinder to an existing discourse or a statement that comments on, polemicises with or extends an already articulated system of meanings.

The critic Victor Ieronim Stoichiță (2012), known for his concepts related to the dialogic nature of artwork and on meta-painting, explores the relationship between image, context and meaning. He explains art as a form of contextualised communication, in which the author's intentions are interwoven with external influences, artistic tradition, as well as with their personal relationships or

with other works, contemporary or from the past. Without a decoding of these multiple layers – cultural history, period-specific symbolism, dialogue with other works – the picture remains incompletely understood.

For example, in Anselm Kiefer's works, the historical and cultural context of post-war Germany is integrated through symbolic materials – lead, straw, ashes – to reflect on collective memory, ruins and trauma. His paintings not only reconstruct a space or a history, but also criticise, subvert and ultimately rewrite their implicit meanings.

Urd, Werdandi, Skuld (Fig. 2) is part of a series of works that Kiefer has been creating since 2005 in dialogue with the poetic work of Paul Celan. In this piece, as in others from the same series, Germanic mythology is also present through the three sisters of fate (Norns): Urd, Werdandi and Skuld. Urd [that which has become] represents the foundation of what is coming into existence; Werdandi [that which is becoming] designates what is in the process of formation; Skuld represents guilt or, equally, the necessity and consequence of one's actions. In our cultural framework, these are often associated with the past, present and future.

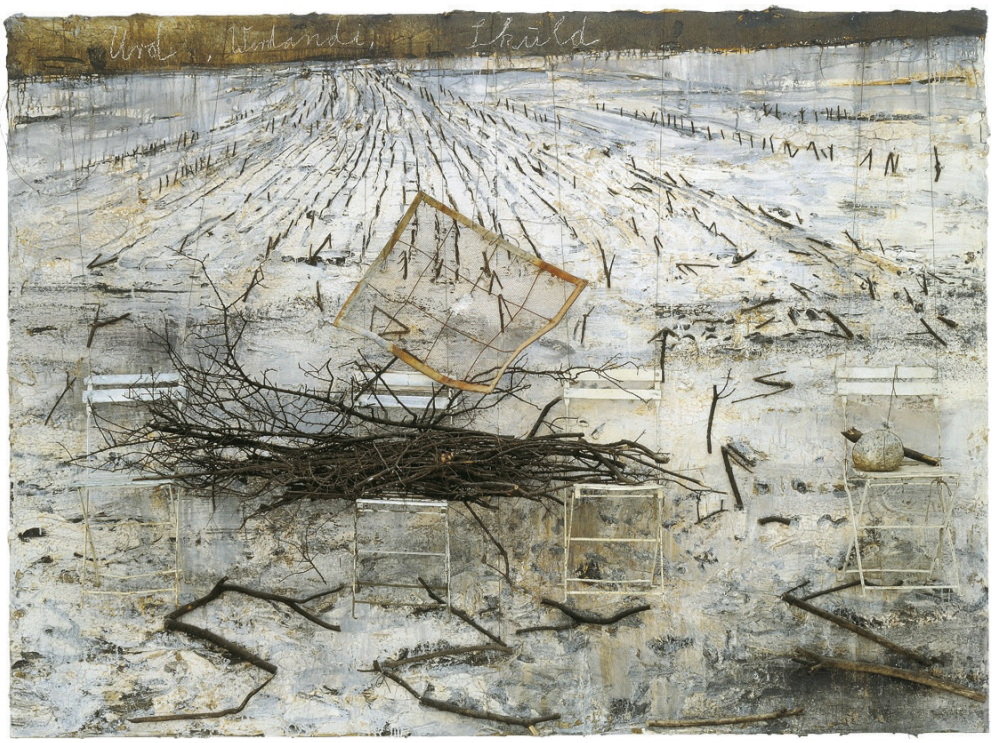

Figure 2. Anselm Kiefer: *Urd, Werdandi, Skuld*.
Source: museum-digital:baden-württember, © Sammlung Würth, https://global.museum-digital.org/singleimage?noiiif=1&&imagenr=88401

The concept of the Norns as weavers of time – where the past (Urd) conditions the present (Werdandi) and projects into the future (Skuld) – resonates deeply with architectural and urban readings of memory and context. The interpretation of place does not function as a static entity but as a dynamic construct, where historical layers (Urd) provide the framework for present interventions (Werdandi), which in turn shape the trajectory of what is to come (Skuld).

This perspective aligns with the idea that urban fractures, residual spaces and heterogeneous landscapes should not be perceived as deficiencies but as latent narratives that inform future transformation. Just as the Norns weave the fabric of time, the reading of a site involves an active negotiation between what has been, what is unfolding and what will inevitably follow. The urban memory embedded in materials, spatial configurations and residual traces acts as a palimpsest – a stratified text where interventions inscribe themselves within an evolving discourse rather than erasing what came before. Thus, the Norns' cyclical vision of time offers a powerful metaphor for site-specific interventions: to decode the context is to understand the interwoven layers of its becoming, ensuring that any transformation remains attuned to the intricate dialogue between presence, history and anticipation.

We have seen so far that decoding context is a central process not only in architecture but also in the visual arts. In all these disciplines, meaning emerges from the relationship between the work, the creator and the viewer, demonstrating that only by interpreting and integrating context into the work can we generate creations that reflect the complexity and specificity of the contemporary world.

CASE STUDY

I will illustrate these types of codes using as examples the two projects I coordinated in my studio (Studio 32) during the first semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, working with Year III Architecture students at "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning. The project themes were 1. Places of the City I+II | Urban Devices – Identity Kit (studio theme) and 2. Neighbourhood Library (year III general theme). These two projects are intrinsically linked, forming a sequential and interdependent investigation of public space and urban identity within the context of Bucharest, Romania. The overarching theme for the year was rooted in the hypothesis of a linear green route in the Tei neighbourhood, envisioned as a structuring intervention aimed at fostering urban regeneration and connectivity.

The Tei neighbourhood is a historically layered and functionally diverse area in north-eastern Bucharest, shaped by a mix of post-war residential developments, industrial sites and green spaces. Anchored by Lake Tei and Tei Park, the neighbourhood has seen gradual transformations, with public space interventions playing a key role in improving connectivity and urban life. Despite its fragmented fabric, Tei retains a strong local identity, shaped by its industrial heritage, the presence of various institutions and evolving residential dynamics.

The first project addressed the entire area from the perspective of exterior public space, focusing on urban devices, materiality (paving strategies, textures and

configurations), vegetation and site-specific interventions. This large-scale analytical approach provided a critical framework for spatial interpretation, facilitating the identification of latent urban dynamics. The insights and spatial strategies developed in this phase were subsequently transposed and integrated into the second project, which proposed a neighbourhood library sited along the pedestrian network conceptualised in the initial phase.

The site for the second project included two study plots: Plot A, containing an industrial site without monument status, but with valuable architectural elements that could be integrated into a new ensemble; Plot B, advantaged by its proximity to a former railroad, proposed for redevelopment as a green pedestrian space that would link disparate areas of the city. The theme called for the creation of a master plan for the urban island, proposing a public library on one parcel and a community centre on the other. The codes studied will be detailed further.

Physical Codes

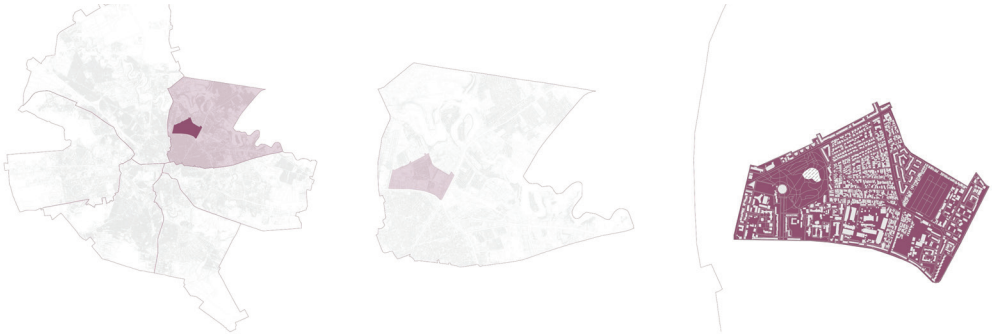

Figure 3. Location. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Elena Conțeanu.

Delimitation of the study area. The study area is delimited by Ștefan cel Mare Road to the south, Lacul Tei Boulevard to the north, Barbu Văcărescu Boulevard to the west and Colentina Road to the east (Fig. 3).

Type of context. The once peripheral area with a former industrial past has been transformed after socialist interventions (new blocks, Circului Park on the sites of former brick factories and mills) and it continues to evolve through residential projects and individual transformations. However, it suffers from a lack of public social and cultural amenities, hence the timeliness of the two themes.

Identification of urban fragments. The site is defined by three major components:

_the area of blocks of flats from the 1970s, conceived as an urban screen for the grand boulevards (in our case Ștefan cel Mare);

_the area of houses with a mixed character, alternating between the wagon type and the semi-detached houses of Tei Boulevard;

_the industrial area, represented by URAC, the main workshop of STB (Bucharest Public Transport Company).

The map of the urban fragments (Fig. 4) was needed to identify the relationships between the coexisting entities influencing both the functionality and the perception of the public space in the vicinity, whether we are talking about the relationship between the housing area and the STB main workshop or about the way in which the blocks around Circului Park relate to it. The solutions focused precisely on these areas of mediation.

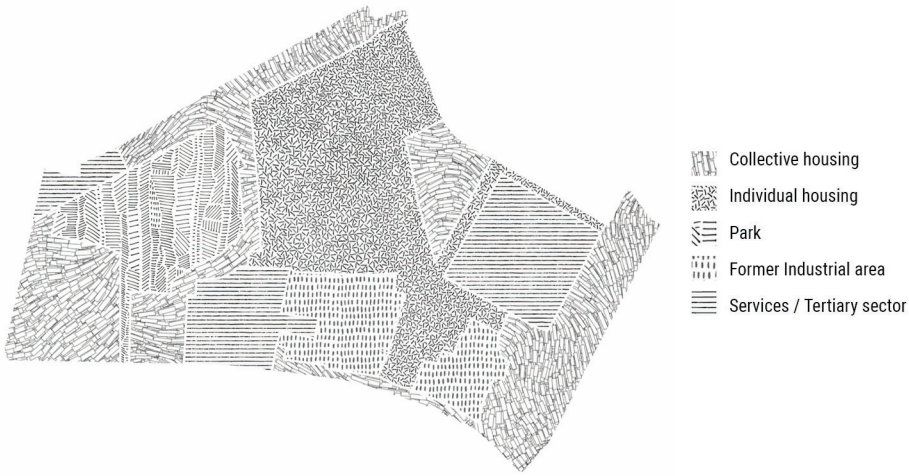

Figure 4. Urban fragments. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Gabriela Bica & Daria Penovici.

Time Codes

Identification of historical layers. The stages of evolution as well as the distinct presence of the former Bucharest Băneasa–Herăstrău–Obor–23 August railroad line are observed (Fig. 5). This observation has led to the creation of a pedestrian route that will activate the strip of land on which the former railway line was located, from Lizeanu Street, Vagonului Entrance up to the entrance to Circului Park. This contextual element raises questions on:

_the creation of an identity of the area as well as on theories related to adaptive reuse;

_the incorporation of elements that refer to the history of the railway line and the industrial culture of the neighbourhood;

_the integration of nature into an urban context in the form of a green corridor that refers to the former poplar alignment;

_the problematic adjacency with the private residential fabric developed chaotically through a series of temporary parasitic constructions right on the former railway cut and elsewhere.

Figure 5. Evolution of the built environment. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation boards by Maria Cimpoiaș, Diana Dragomir, Daria Nistoroiu.

Cultural Codes

Identification of urban stabilisers. Monuments and landmarks that help maintain the functional, social, aesthetic or ecological balance of the city were subsequently mapped (Fig. 6). They may have various forms and roles, but essentially they function as resistance or adaptation mechanisms to rapid changes or disturbances in the urban environment. It is important to identify them because they give continuity and stability to an urban community despite the complex dynamics of the city.

Figure 6. Urban anchors. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation boards by Maria Cimpoiaș, Diana Dragomir, Daria Nistoroiu.

Symbolic Codes Associated with the Context (or Its Particular Elements)

Extraction of keywords. To crack this code, we drew on linguistic associations that the railroad, the park and the circus evoked, which could then be translated into design principles. Below is an exercise from the study in which, following a joint session, we extracted together various words that could then be transformed into design principles (Table 1) and subsequently implemented in the second project – the Neighbourhood Library.

Table 1. Keywords for a design process. Table created during the Places of the City exercise.

Keywords for a Design Process Integrating Historical Heritage, Natural and Cultural Elements

Urban installations can reflect these symbols, creating a coherent, interactive space that is meaningful in terms of place memory.

Former Railway	The Park	The Circus
Route – evokes direction, continuity and movement, an element that can be translated into the linear structure of furniture.	**Foliage** – evokes naturalness and organicity, inspiring curved and fluid forms in furniture.	**Arena** – represents the centre of attention, inspiring circular gathering or interaction spaces.
Rails – symbolise fixed paths, order and guidance, potentially inspiring rigid geometric forms and repeatable modules.	**Reflection** – the mirroring of water and vegetation in lakes, suggesting glossy surfaces or reflective textures.	**Dome** – evokes protection and enclosure, being used in shelter structures or semi-circular furniture.
Interweaving – refers to connections, intersections of lines and trajectories, suitable for modular structures and visible joints.	**Lake** – signifies calmness and fluidity, potentially represented through undulating or dynamic forms.	**Balance** – a central concept in the circus, suggesting designs that juggle between stability and visual instability.
Platform – suggests resting or interaction surfaces, which can be integrated into public spaces.	**Canopy** – conveys the idea of temporary shelter or permanence, integrating into the design of benches and pergolas.	**Tent** – a symbol of temporariness and flexibility, which can be applied in the case of modular and reconfigurable structures.
Rhythm – alludes to the sound of a train on the tracks, translated into the repetition and order of design elements.	**Branches** – suggest expansion and interconnectivity, inspiring branching structures in furniture.	**Rotation** – symbolises circular motion and cyclicality, suitable for interactive, rotating or circular furniture.
Carriages – modular units that suggest compartments or enclosed spaces, used to create congenial public areas.	**Sinuous line** – the natural, fluid pathway that can be framed by benches and alleys to create an organic experience.	**Illusion** – the concept of optical play, suitable for integrating surprising or dynamic elements into design.
Passage – a link between two points, a symbol of movement and transition, translated into pathways and walkways.	**Alley** – a symbol of controlled itinerary, inspiring the design of paved paths and walkways.	**Spectacle** – associated with captivating and memorable experiences, which can inspire furniture with a striking or thematic design.

Symbolic Codes Associated with the Programme

Identification of possible concepts. From a semiotic and semantic perspective, the library has a complex symbolism with multiple metaphorical valences. We discussed with the students concepts and words associated with the library that they would like to develop in the future concept as well as the processes by which to evoke these notions (Table 2).

Table 2. Concepts and Symbolic Words. Table created during the Places of the City exercise.

Concepts and Symbolic Words Associated with the Library		
Memory – An archive of knowledge, a temporally layered space	**Grid – The universal ordering of space, a system of organisation**	**Refuge – An intimate, protective space for thought and introspection**
Stratification: Levels or thematic zones reflecting the passage of time. **Spatial sequences**: Organisation of spaces to suggest a chronology. **Weathered materials**: Surfaces that age naturally (stone, oxidised metal).	**Modular configurations:** Arrangement of spaces in coherent networks. **Visible geometry**: Exposed structural elements following a grid. **Structural flexibility:** The ability to modify space within a grid system.	**Intimate niches**: Small, sheltered spaces. **Diffuse lighting:** A calm, soothing atmosphere. **Warm materials:** Wood, textiles or natural finishes.
Labyrinth – A physical and intellectual journey exploring the complexity of search	**Infinity – Represented through repetition, expandability or infinite reflections**	**Time – Materialised through sequentiality, rhythm or patina**
Complex pathways: Branching corridors that encourage exploration. **Unexpected intersections:** Turning points or sudden changes in direction. **Variable textures:** Contrasting materials used to either guide or create ambiguity.	**Modularity:** Architectural systems that can be infinitely expanded. **Reflective surfaces:** Glass walls or mirrors that extend the visual space. **Long axes:** Perspectives that fade into the horizon.	**Patina**: Materials that change texture over time. **Sequentiality**: Organisation of spaces to suggest the passage of time. **Kinetic effects:** Moving elements that reflect temporal flow.

Social Codes

Uses and users. Next, demographic profiles were studied to establish the types of users of the planned interventions and to analyse their behaviours in the public space.

The predominance of private spaces plays a crucial role in the structure of the community (Fig. 7). These spaces, characterised by intimacy and limited accessibility, create a secure yet isolated residential environment. Although public spaces do exist, they are insufficient to foster social interaction. In contrast, hybrid spaces, which blend private and public elements, have the potential to enhance community cohesion and revitalise social life.

Figure 7. Public-private. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Carla Ivan & Andrei Țițeică.

From a demographic perspective, the Tei neighbourhood is predominantly occupied by families, given the numerous primary and preschool education centres in the area, as well as by students residing in dormitories and nearby collective housing (Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Users. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Carla Ivan & Andrei Țițeică.

Reînvierii Street is a transit area for pedestrians who must navigate an unsuitable environment: they are forced to walk on the roadway due to the narrow sidewalks or, in some sections, the complete absence of sidewalks on the side opposite the cemetery (Fig. 9). Parked cars occupy more than half of the sidewalk width. At the same time, the area is frequently used by cyclists who, in the absence of a designated bike lane, are compelled to ride on the roadway, weaving between cars or parallel to the tram. Within a one-hour interval (between 9:30 and 10:30am), a flow of 40 cyclists was recorded, suggesting that the daily average is around 400 cyclists. These statistics highlight the need to improve accessibility and safety in the area through a dedicated and properly marked cycling route.

Figure 9. Current uses of public space. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Isabela Chirică & Sophia Panaitescu.

Movement Codes

Figure 10. Classification of traffic arteries. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Robert Aad & Sophia Panaitescu.

Flows and movement. Flows and movement are becoming central components of urban life. They include the daily movements of people (commuting, recreation), the movement of goods, but also the transfer of ideas and cultural resources. The rhythms and intensity of these flows influence both the functionality of public spaces and their perception. In view of this, different street sections were mapped (Fig. 10) in order to study the various relationships at street and public space level.

A summary of these codes can be seen in Fig. 11.

Figure 11. Mental map of the area. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Alexandra Bărăgan & Ema Ozsvath

GOING FROM MACRO TO SMALL SCALE

Moving from the scale of the territory to the site of the library meant identifying the different features of the urban segments and noting the particularities of each one, to be translated into intervention principles.

Along the path of the former railway, a gradual transition can be observed (Fig. 12) from a high-rise building regime to an increasingly lower one, accompanied by a shift in atmosphere – from the bustling city, influenced by heavily trafficked arteries, to the quiet residential area of individual houses. These distinct features are noticeable in each specific zone. Zone 1: This segment is characterised by the presence of high-rise collective housing. The area still retains an image of old Bucharest, both in the pavement, with the presence of cobblestone, and in the atmosphere reminiscent of former industrial zones. Zone 2: In this next area of interest, a sudden expansion of the corridor is noticeable due to an intersection with heavy traffic. Additionally, this marks the transition to a lower building height regime. Zone 3: This urban fabric is defined by its domestic character, evident both from the private nature of the individual houses lining the pedestrian path and from the fact that gravel is still found in the area.

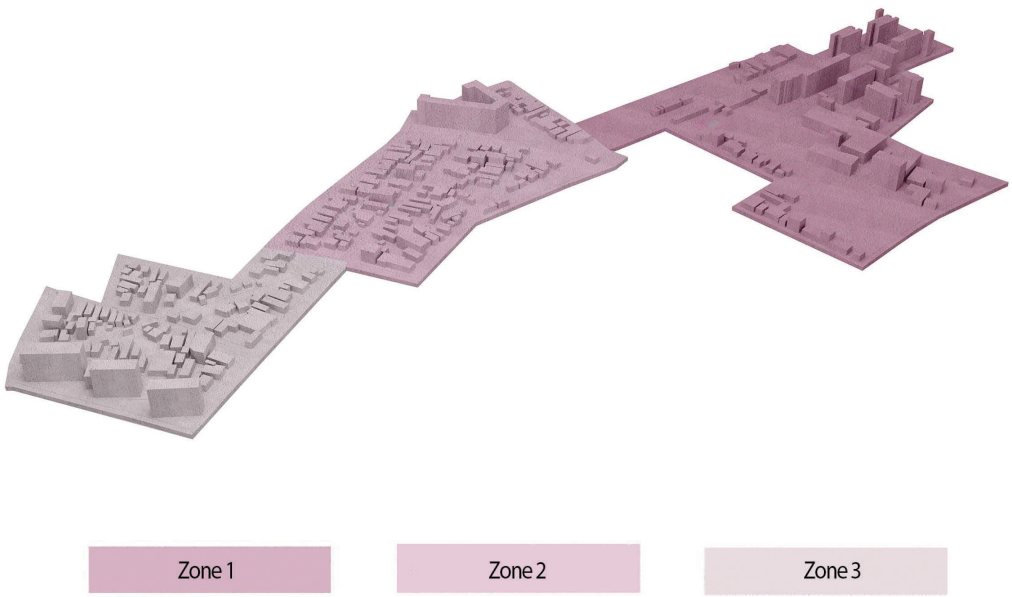

Figure 12. The Different characteristics of the route. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Claudiu Ignat & Daria Nistoroiu.

Table 3. General and Particular Principles. Table created during the Places of the City exercise.

General principles for the entire proposed route	Principles for each subzone based on its character
1. **Elimination of parasitic elements –** Removing obstructive or unnecessary elements that hinder spatial coherence. 2. **Creation of a green corridor –** Enhancing and integrating existing vegetation to reinforce ecological continuity. 3. **Pedestrian priority –** Ensuring uninterrupted pedestrian circulation along the entire route, minimising obstacles. 4. **Preservation of site memory –** Maintaining historical materials in public spaces, such as cobblestone and gravel finishes. 5. **Establishing a unified street profile –** Proposing a cohesive street character, including the integration of a dedicated bicycle lane. 6. **Revitalisation of the former railway –** Reinventing its role within the urban fabric to enhance connectivity and historical continuity.	**ZONE 1:** 1. Highlighting and enhancing the presence of a significant monument. 2. Improving the visual quality of public space (addressing the presence of the cemetery and the long, opaque concrete fence at pedestrian level). 3. Creating a **shared space** to encourage coexistence between different types of users. **ZONE 2:** 1. Reconfiguring the intersection to enhance pedestrian circulation fluidity. 2. Phasing the continuity of the diagonal route with two possible approaches: a. Diverting the route onto an adjacent street; b. Completing the diagonal path by removing obstructive elements. **ZONE 3:** 1. Establishing an exclusively pedestrian route. 2. Preserving the **residential character** of the area. 3. Reconfiguring intersections to mediate between different spatial typologies. 4. Introducing **new functions** to revitalise the pedestrian path and encourage activity along the route.

An example of intervention following these principles can be seen in Fig. 13. After the demolition of parasitic elements (garages) from the pedestrian area, the freed space has been transformed into a green corridor, bringing a fresh dynamic and revitalising the entire zone. This strip of vegetation not only enhances the aesthetic quality of the area but also contributes to creating a more inviting and comfortable pedestrian space, providing a tranquil urban refuge.

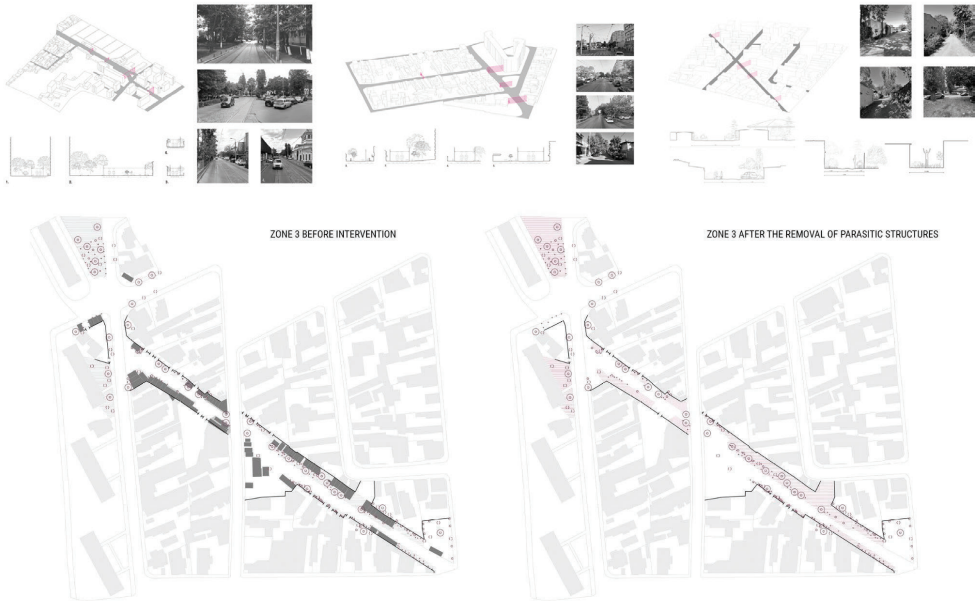

Figure 13. Intervention principles. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Isabela Chirică & Sophia Panaitescu, Ilinca Dima & Maria Grigore.

Decryption recommendations for students

This mini-guide outlines essential steps for students to engage critically with site analysis, moving beyond surface observations to a deeper, interdisciplinary reading of place. By integrating direct observation, sensory perception, historical research and behavioural analysis, students can construct a nuanced understanding that informs meaningful design choices.

Direct site observation and data collection

The first step of any project begins with a close reading of the site. Observe the physical features: topography, orientation to the cardinal points, vegetation, existing materials and proximities. Note how the sun, wind and other natural elements influence the space. Document through sketches, photographs and audio recordings, paying attention to details that may seem insignificant.

Sensory perception

Experience space through all your senses. Listen to sounds, feel textures, observe the movement of people and how they use the place. Try to understand the overall atmosphere – is the space lively, quiet, chaotic or harmonious? Phenomenological perception will help you identify the subtle qualities of the place.

Historical and cultural documentation

Study the site's past. Search archives, old photographs, historical maps or local stories. Identify events or transformations that have shaped the

place. Ask yourself: What collective memories are associated with this space? How have local history and culture influenced its current identity?

Social and behavioural analysis

Observe how the space is used. Who uses it, when and how? What are the traffic flows, meeting places or avoided areas? You can conduct interviews or participatory observations to better understand the social dynamics. Draw inspiration from Jane Jacobs' method, which analyses people's everyday behaviour in urban spaces.

Mapping relationships and perceptions

Create maps that reflect not only physical data but also perceptions and emotions about the space. Mark areas of interest, main routes, boundaries and transitions. These diagrams can become the starting point for developing a conceptual strategy.

Interdisciplinary analysis

Explore the site through multiple lenses – sociological, ecological, economic or anthropological. For example, understand the relationship between space and community, the impact of existing infrastructure or the economic dynamics of the area.

Identifying latent codes

In every site there are hidden elements such as cultural symbols, social rituals or invisible structures of collective memory. Ask: What defining elements are hidden behind the evidence? How can these be integrated into the project?

Setting priorities and a conceptual strategy

Once you have collected and analysed the information, determine which are most relevant to your project. Identify key points that can guide the design – a visual landmark, an unexplored history, a specific social dynamic. Think about how you can integrate these elements to create a harmonious yet innovative intervention.

Testing scenarios and hypotheses

Experiment with different scenarios to understand how your project can influence the context. Make diagrams, models or digital simulations to test your ideas. Ensure that solutions are flexible and adaptable, reflecting site dynamics.

Formulating a clear narrative

Your project should tell a coherent story. Explain how your site analysis influenced your design decisions. Justify each choice – from orientation and materiality to relationship to existing structures – with a clear link to the conclusions drawn from the context.

Integrate local sensitivity and universal vision

Think about how your project can go beyond site specificity to communicate universal ideas. Combine respect for context with a creative and contemporary approach. How can your intervention be relevant not only to the site, but also to a wider discussion about architecture?

Impact assessment

Finally, ask: How will your project change the place? What impact will it have on the community, on collective memory or the environment? This reflection will help you create a responsible and sustainable intervention.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of cryptography is to protect sensitive secrets and ensure that messages reach their destination intact. In architecture, these secrets are nothing but the delicate features of the urban fabric, a palimpsest of meanings and memories that we try to preserve, respect and sometimes rewrite. Just as cryptography depends on keys for decryption, architecture relies on specific methods of decoding, which highlights the importance of systematic approaches that combine history, sociology, phenomenology, ecology and the architect's intuition with their sensitivity to the nuances of a site. This process is a profound act of discovery and synthesis based on identifying patterns, interpreting hidden layers and integrating seemingly disparate elements into a meaningful whole.

In essence, decoding is not only about understanding what a place is, but also about imagining what it can become.

In essence, decoding is not only about understanding what a place is, but also about imagining what it can become.

In essence, decoding is not only about understanding what a place is, but also about imagining what it can become. It involves listening to the voices of the site and contributing to its ongoing rewriting. Thus, the act of decoding is both analytical and creative, scientific and poetic. It bridges the visible and the invisible, transforming raw data into a conceptual framework that guides design.

Ultimately, decoding context is a critical practice of interpretation and mediation, one that engages the capacity to respond authentically to place, community and time. Students are therefore invited to explore the invisible layers of a project and to understand how each decision is anchored in a complex substratum of relationships. A number of questions still remain open: for example, how to quantify the success of an architectural decoding?

The answer depends on multiple variables, but it remains an exercise in critical reflection. If the purpose of architectural decoding is to decipher the complexity of a place and translate it into a coherent intervention, then its success can be judged not only by quantitative measures but also by its qualitative impact on the context and the community.

In an ever-changing world, the question of success becomes rather an invitation to dialogue. It challenges architects and students to redefine the criteria of evaluation, to include diverse perspectives and to recognise that often the real value of a decoding cannot be fully measured, but felt in the organic relationship between space, time and those who experience it.

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Many books are available today to provide us with methods for urban analysis, most of them guided by rational principles imported from the exact sciences, most probably because arguments for investments are usually based on communicative rationality. I do not dispute the fact that these books dedicated to site analysis represent fundamental theoretical and methodological contributions, already capable of providing well-argued answers to the current debate on decoding context: on approaches, strategies, evolution, relevant scales and levels of analysis, consequences in design and architectural education. Against the background of this professional tradition, I discuss two major phenomenological difficulties of the methods of decoding context and translating it into architectural language: the delimitation of context in interpretation and the limits of traditions in context analysis, based on predefined criteria and parameters. The highlighted difficulties suggest the need for a more flexible design methodology guided by place-specific hermeneutics.

[3] DECODING THE CONTEXT AS PLACE INTERPRETATION

Cosmin CACIUC

CONTEXT DELIMITATION IN INTERPRETATION AND RECENT CRITIQUES

Research dedicated to understanding context, precisely systematised by interpretation criteria and levels of analysis, such as *Site Analysis. Informing Context-Sensitive and Sustainable Site Planning and Design* (LaGro, 2013), *Site Diagramming Information for Architectural Design Analysis* (White, 1983) and *Public Places, Urban Spaces. The Dimensions of Urban Design* (Carmona, 2021), represents a solid starting point not only for architecture students, but also for designers sensitive to the condition of place in their own projects. Beyond the multi-criteria methodologies, rationally ordered in these studies to suit the needs of any architectural office of today, a series of ontological aspects remain regarding the legitimacy of context delimitations as such in interpretation. Context is primarily a place, an existential situation. Place opens a world through our way of being in that place, through our specific concern and through our way of inhabiting it. Place delimitation implies a limit to its understanding: the scale of interpreting the context in an architectural project is a measure of the place itself and of the project anchored in that place. A phenomenological approach can specify the sense of place based on which we feel the appropriate scale in interpretation and through which the place opens to us as presence. I emphasize here a topology of thought or philosophical topology (Malpas, 2018, 2021) that implies the weakening of rationalist methods of site analysis, which are based on the separation between the analysing subject (the designer confronted with a site) and the analysed object (the site to which the project is dedicated). The condition of place presupposes relationality, historicity, and identity (Augé, 1992/1995). Place refers to concrete fragments of the world of everyday life that vary from the scale of furniture to that of geographical regions and are experienced and understood in diverse ways, through human intentionality and actions, as existential centres (Relph, 1976).

Context is primarily a place, an existential situation. Place opens a world through our way of being in that place, through our specific concern and through our way of inhabiting it.

Recent philosophical topology understands place as a complex unity, as an interweaving of people and things, which is both a delimitation and a bringing into presence of phenomena (Malpas, 2006). From a phenomenological perspective, a specific site cannot be reduced to a portion of land cut out of homogeneous, absolute, abstract and infinite space; a building site can be a part of a larger place, it can contain smaller places within it, it can be a place by itself.

Noting that the perception of a place involves a sense of it (Eyles, 1985; Feld & Basso, 1996; Vanclay et al., 2008) and adding that a place can be contained within larger ones as well as include smaller places within it, we consider an approach that could disentangle the designer who demands from architectural theory rational methods of classification, analysis, evaluation and ultimately of solving dwelling problems. In fact, without having yet reached the problems of place, we confront with the way in which we understand place and its limits.

In the post-war theory of architecture, the concept of place became the basis of existential space, distinguished from other conceptual categories like pragmatic space, perceptual space, cognitive space and logical space (Norberg-Schulz, 1971). Existential space as a socio-cultural totality implies a collectively recognised figurability through centrality, delimitation and extension, interwoven with paths and thresholds, being approachable at a series of scales related to the body that experiences places. The most extensive scale is that of the geographical domain and implies a cultural and political dimension, followed by the scale of the landscape (defined by a domain or a region), the scale of the city (defined by paths), the scale of architecture (defined by centres) and the scale of furniture objects (the smallest in this decreasing series, but also the closest to the relationship with the human body, being defined by foci of interest) (Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Auret, 2019). This approach was later challenged from the perspective of how scale categories are structurally generated and of the problematic way in which phenomena could a priori fit into categories (Auret, 2019). I note four observations regarding levels of context analysis, translated into architectural design:

_All categories and levels imposed by analysis, through the implicit division they support between the analysing subject and the analysed object, reduce the wealth of meanings that emerge by phenomenological interpretation from the life of place multiplicity. Our being in the world through care, dwelling among our fellow beings, reveals to us more nuances of place than we can impose through a rational methodology, regardless of whether we refer to the scale of approach, to the context or to the structure of these levels. Interpretation, in the sense of a hermeneutic approach, is not laboratory analysis.

_Reading the place is not in fact a linguistic decoding, a conversion from one code to another, but rather an existential revelation of meanings by the fact that we already inhabit language and narrative. Interpretation thus becomes a dynamic interaction between parts and whole that cannot be programmed in advance by any methods, but cultivated through a care for the situation, a care that is already circularly relevant both for the parts and for the whole they form (*the hermeneutic circle)*. It is not a hierarchy to be followed in descending or ascending manner, but an interplay between the component fragments and the integral tissue of which they are part; the hermeneutic circle maintains the irreducible complexity of the whole and reveals understanding as recognition of meanings and as a “wonder” in relation to this revelation, without prescribing methods (Malpas, 2012).

_Such a perspective is in clear opposition to a rationalist approach to the system of spaces, based on a priori systematisation and classification which starts from ideal categories and abstract concepts to look downward at some concrete, intractable, confused situation which resists those categories or concepts that are imposed on it through analysis. Interpretation of the place thus becomes involvement with the place, capable of bringing to light the layers of meaning that intentionally concern the designer while hiding other layers that are not yet catalysed by the care of interpretation or by “listening” to the place.

Interpretation is not validated by verifying logical correctness in relation to pre-established ideal categories and levels; instead, it gives the designer the freedom to engage with their own horizon of concern, grounded in their existential pre-understanding and inevitably confronted with other horizons in a collective, professional and urban interaction.

_Collective and existential interaction cannot be reduced to cognitive or emotional aspects or to linguistic communication skills alone. The individual horizon reveals its truth of understanding in a "fusion of horizons", to use the expression of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2001). In the description of the American architect Steven Holl (2009), architecture is "the most fragile art" (p. 287), produced through collaboration and sharing of worldviews. Captured in collective interaction, the fusion of horizons produces a new reality, between and beyond the participants' realities in a dialogue: this most directly concerns the problem of understanding the context and the architectural project's adequacy to a world that opens through place interpretation.

Regarding context, the levels of analysis remain possible only to the extent that the designer tempers their allegiance to the rigid categories imposed by the normative ideals of reason and systems theory. Care for place does not imply an obligation to an ideal method, but an openness to the situation that can facilitate specific interpretation and the "surplus of being" in phenomenological expression, again referring to the hermeneutics theorised by Gadamer. Understood as a totality of situated life, place interpretation offers possibilities for the architectural project, generated by the designer's regions of concern, which are limited by our embodied thinking and by the fact that we measure the extent of places through situated care. Interpretation thus brings together various places, at different scales; it is not reduced to just the physical aspects. Place already implies dwelling, concern for the finitude of life, durability of civic and spiritual values, a response to a concrete situation between the earth (topographic sensitivity) and the sky (atmospheric qualities). Context thus becomes a domain of preoccupation within the horizon of phenomenological understanding, a place of multiple possibilities for our being.

Understood as a totality of situated life, place interpretation offers possibilities for the architectural project, generated by the designer's regions of concern, which are limited by our embodied thinking and by the fact that we measure the extent of places through situated care.

An example of phenomenological understanding is the way in which the Finnish architect Reima Pietilä captures in his hesitant sketches the poetic dimension of place, outside of conventional, ordering and calculated methods (Auret, 2019). His sketches were shaped by his own sense of place, released through yielding to the topographical and atmospheric condition of the site and paying attention to the life of the place within a delimited and stable expanse that protects the abundance of its existential meanings. Such a restrained and less reason-centric interpretation is never definitive; it appears as an interweaving of lines/threads, sometimes as a tangle, and fluctuates in capturing and transmitting the qualitative features of the place.

The restraint of interpretation in the sense of a well-tempered rationality arises from the difficulty of identifying with objective precision categories and scale levels in the reading of place. The region of concern is how the designer delimits their context, the selection of elements relevant to the interpretation, in terms of extension and content. At the basis of context selection is the sense of place, or the connection between the inhabitant and their world, which allows the perception of differences between parts of the environment based on their qualities, interweaving multisensory perception, memory and imagination. The sense of place engages identification with the perceived environment within a framework of social and cultural experiences. Place identity is made up of concrete forms (physical aspects of the environment), human activities (aspects of dwelling) and meanings (spiritual aspects in the most comprehensive sense), and the identity of inhabitants in relation to a place represents first and foremost their emotional involvement and existential projection on a geographical background, in the sense that the place actually enters into our personality (Relph, 2021). Approaching a specific place makes us aware of the fact that it inevitably interrelates with other much broader places, even on a planetary scale in the extended horizon of preoccupation regarding issues related to climate change, pandemics, migrations, globalisation and military conflicts. From a pedagogical point of view, I do not believe in preselecting the scale of place for analysis before understanding the place itself with the appropriate phenomenological means. Authentic concern for the place opens through hermeneutics and the understanding of the approachable limits of a situation in the case of a specific project and therefore through the idea of project finitude.

At the basis of context selection is the sense of place, which allows the perception of differences between parts of the environment based on their qualities, interweaving multisensory perception, memory and imagination.

TRADITIONS OF CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION AND THE LIMITS OF ANALYTICAL PARAMETERISATION

A context could be a text to be read; therefore, we could compare the design process with a textual interpretation. Design as an interpretive activity becomes a practice of understanding a living situation, motivated by the surplus of being within dwelling. Not limited to solving problems, design aims at generating places. Non-places are spaces of homogenisation also designed by architects, which mix with places in everyday experience (Augé, 1992/1995), but recent theory inspired by phenomenology insists on the need for a critical approach to the formation of places. From a phenomenological perspective, architects enter the design situation through a pre-understanding of what is acceptable and desirable in the project and therefore through a vague image of the configurational process. At the same time, they develop an understanding based on the interpretation of the parts that constitute the design situation. Interpreting the parts involves

deconstructing the place into levels of analysis for argumentation and explanation. Reconstruction of the situational whole following interpretation modifies, clarifies and refines the vague image initially resulting from pre-understanding. Therefore, we do not actually start from the atomistic decomposition of reality to explain it scientifically, followed by syntheses and design decisions based on what constitutes the architectural object. Design is in fact a fluid process of tentatively moving between pre-understanding and understanding: repetitive, continuous, hesitant, fragile in its ontological dimension and loaded with care or concern for the existential situation itself. How could we reduce this living process of projective clarification, which appears as an interweaving or entanglement, to scientific methods or rationalised methodologies?

The ability to understand place with theoretical means refers to how this understanding is expressed and justified based on a series of personal filters.

Phenomenology emphasizes those complex and emotionally charged narratives about personal and collective identity, memory and anticipation, hope and fears, desires and beliefs, alienation and loss. Most of our consciousness is non-representational pre-understanding (subconscious, unconscious) embodied as everyday wisdom, allowing for affective and intellectual knowledge. The reduction of experience to images, to a privileging of visuality, is also a source of phenomenological criticism: images do not tell stories, it is only through language that we grant meanings to images, thus attributing them a narrative articulation in the lifeworld. Architectural design is inextricably linked to human existence as "life that takes place" and in this sense it is interrelational, affective and rational, subjective and objective, individual and collective.

The ability to understand place with theoretical means refers to how this understanding is expressed and justified based on a series of personal filters. At issue here are the theoretical sources, how they influence our thinking and their adequacy to the situation addressed. The complexity of this theoretical overview from several perspectives reveals in the most coherent way what expectations we can have from a place-oriented architectural project in which we are not talking about the separation between the objectives of an architecture for the city in urban design and architectural design itself. Both urban design and architecture have as their fundamental objective the configuration of better places, the avoidance of problems and the amplification of benefits. A good project must prove the ability to understand the great traditions of thought at its disposal: the visual-artistic tradition, the tradition of social usage, the tradition of placemaking and the tradition of sustainable approaches (Carmona, 2021). In addition, the architectural object is intertwined with urban processes, in a continuum of the life of the place. Reference contexts fluctuate: the local context (with its cultural, qualitative dimension), the global context (of sustainability and technology), and the power context (of economic markets and administrations). Morphological, perceptual and temporal dimensions define the local context; functional, social and visual dimensions articulate the global context; dimensions of place production and administration configure the power context (Carmona, 2021).

Beyond the morphological, perceptual, temporal, functional, social, visual, productive and administrative dimensions, there still remains in our understanding a dimension of ontological and phenomenological reflectivity, which aims to return to the origin of the place reading, to the essence of the act of observing, to the fact of being in a place, which always and already precedes any categories, dimensions or levels of analysis. The return to this depth is in fact related to the need to understand an ethics of architecture (Harries, 1998) and to the practice of an "art of life" (Norberg-Schulz, 2000).

A more recent contribution to the issue of place and architectural interpretation clarifies how fundamental ontological aspects in architecture could be addressed, including the very idea of parameter that underlies a wide range of different forms of design being discussed (Malpas, 2021). The model of "labelling", "categories", "variables" in general does not only presuppose digital technique: information technology is not equivalent to the idea of parameter; one can design conventionally, without a computer, based on predefined parameters, such as the criteria listed in a place analysis and a design concept. This can maintain an atomistic view of place, and phenomenology insists that the interpreting parameters are produced by the situation of human existence itself (*the life of place*), not by inserting them into the situation from an abstract conceptual space. We often face the problem of the quantitative dominating or suppressing the qualitative, especially in the case of investigating a sense of place or place attachment. It is obvious that the ontological perspective on the nature and types of parameters selected for place analysis become philosophical concerns for a theory of architecture dedicated to place. Place is not a geometric, social or emotional construction; place is not only a construction of human subjectivity; human subjectivity (with all its emotions) is determined by place/the situation of the lifeworld. The parameter or criterion becomes the measure, the delimitation in a fundamental sense: if the measure is only quantitative and abstract, the phenomenological observation on the eminently qualitative and singular character of the design situation will be lost sight of. Analysis criteria or parameters are not generated by computer programs, but by designers placing themselves in a specific situation; they define theoretical models and labels, thus returning the analysis to original observation and existential pre-understanding, which is not at all computational (Malpas, 2021).

Analysis criteria or parameters are not generated by computer programs, but by designers placing themselves in a specific situation.

In interpreting place, we are faced both with understanding the basic principles of architecture on a historical foundation, in which modern architecture plays a major role, and with developing an understanding of place that allows these principles to be manifested as an expression of our being and as existential meanings opened by the presence and care associated with place. Care is temporal and is the source of building, not just its result; lived time involves more than the idea of continuity and change in a linear history. The "art of care" in architecture becomes an articulation of our temporal existence, it is a comprehensive appreciation of *what is given in presence and in place*, a gratitude for the way in which we exist as a localised concern, a recognition of poetic adequacy to place. In this

way, the surplus of meaning that the place provides latently can influence the architectural project and achieve its attunement to the recognisable situation: these aspects weaken the language of architecture systematised into categories (typology, morphology, topology) and mark the concern for a grateful dwelling into the place that supports it (Auret, 2019).

CONCLUSION: FLEXIBLE DESIGN METHODOLOGY OR HERMENEUTICALLY DEVELOPED DESIGN

On a phenomenological level, place-based hermeneutics or *topohermeneutics*, as I defined it in the conclusion of a recent study (Caciuc, 2023), entails place figurability through the topographic interrelationship between a series of fundamental concepts: topology, place, space, dwelling, presence, truth, object, memory, humanism and holism. Observations formulated by Jeff Malpas (2006, 2012, 2018, 2021), Christian Norberg-Schulz (1971, 1979, 1985, 2000) and Hendrik Auret (2019) converge towards the idea of decoding context as a recognition of the language, subject to decipherment, in which the image of place and architecture in relation to it are ontologically constituted. On this phenomenological recognition is grafted the surplus of meaning when the designer and dweller read the context, understanding architecture as something anchored in place and generating place. Figurability intertwined with human life itself therefore presupposes place and architecture as narrative language, an anticipation of the meaning in the dialogue between place and architecture, the idea of meaning that depends on the adequacy to a situation and on our belonging to a tradition of thought, being aware of our limitations and prejudices in interpretation.

Snodgrass & Coyne (1996) overturn the scientific model of analysis and design based on the verification of hypotheses, on induction and conclusions drawn logically from premises by taking Gadamerian phenomenology as their direct source of inspiration (Gadamer, 1960/2001). The project as "crystallized time" represents a provisional image, configured only from the designer's specific situation of understanding; it involves a series of future expectations, a concern for the present and a past experience. Our understanding is permanently modified by "throwing into the future" and "recalling a past". The vague image of what needs to be achieved in the future depends on what we understand of the present and of the past: this is the meaning of anticipation. Decoding the context is not complete clarification; on the contrary, it is constantly reflected by a lack of intelligibility of the design tasks, but the place or life situation from which the architectural programme is born illuminates the design process and determines its development. Illumination expresses a figurability of the entire situation, a vague but motivating projection for the architectural intervention. Multiple, competing "illuminations" can occur, as possibilities in a multiplicity, of which one will be recognised in appropriateness to the place more than others.

Recognition involves understanding the place through the figurability of the project, without the design process becoming a simple sequence of logical steps towards a predetermined result. The project has an anticipated end,

directed by the designer in a dialogical process that questions the validity of the solution through the continuous confrontation with the situation addressed by the project. This is the project dialogue with the place in a conversational circularity or throwing out for discussion of values, prejudices, preconceptions, taken for granted attitudes. The project becomes fragile, vulnerable if the openness is authentic and not simulated in the face of prejudices: openness is revealing disclosure both in the sense of discovering the presences related to the architectural work and as a self-construction of the designer in this process (self-discovery through the fact that preconceptions come to light). The project, like place reading, involves the designer's dialogue with the things and people of the place, in which oscillations occur between moments of familiarity and estrangement in relation to an existential situation. In the dialogue, both the situation and the dialogue change in the wake of the modification of the designer's understanding itself. We cannot speak of objectivity here: the reading of the place reveals what we expect it to reveal to us by virtue of our momentary pre-understandings.

From this point of view, a design constituted through dialogue with the life of the place predicts a whole captured in perception. The dialogue does not have coherent hypotheses and conclusions from which the solutions of the architectural form are extracted; instead, the project makes a vague prediction, subject to oscillating questioning, in agreement with a situation of the place that is progressively clarified in its particular aspects and by revealing the whole. The beginning of the project can be a certain aspect of the place, which is constituted as a triggering factor in a design field of interaction, capable of revealing a specific formal possibility. Each interrogation, through its own horizon of expectations with which the project begins, already sheds light on the answer, vaguely prefiguring the architectural object. The answer that is progressively clarified modifies the initial questions because the emerging doubts of the other participants in the dialogue reconfigure the designer's initial understanding. Interpretations refer to other interpretations in a transformative interweaving that encompasses all participants in the conversation. The contextual elements that enter the "design event" cannot be manipulated or controlled, but, in revealing themselves, they capture the designer in their creative process.

Books such as *Imaginând evidența* (*Imagining the Evident*, Siza, 1998/2024) or *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action* (Schön, 1983) bring to light the approach of well-tempered rationality, cultivated through understanding the context, anticipatory vision of meaning and the perception of holistic figurability against the horizon of the designer's care. The project is not just a geometric configuration to which meanings are subsequently attached, but a whole already significant in its context through pre-understanding. Architecture is permanently dependent on the situation to which it belongs; thus, it liberates our meaning in a non-arbitrary way, interweaving it between other interpretations, in a hesitant, uncertain manner, through gradual advance and validation (Snodgrass & Coyne, 1996). Only in this restrained and careful way can architecture catalyse a "fusion of horizons" in interpretation, taking the poetic measure of the "imprint of place", relating both to the concrete terrain of its specific conditions (material framework, physical support, foundation, context, texture) and to the world as a transformative source of civic and private life.

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Our projects would be better adapted to local urban contexts if the questions we asked ourselves and those we design for were the following: What do we know about this site? What does life look like in this space? How do different user categories want to live here? What kind of future do they want for their community? What are the current problems and how could we solve them? What connections exist to the past of the site? What value can we bring for citizens/society/vulnerable groups/city halls/companies/creative start-ups?

The aim of this article is to discover together how methods inspired by anthropology can contribute to a better understanding of sites and of the specific contexts they are embedded in – whether this concerns a broader understanding of the behaviours of space users or of the wider social, cultural, political and historical context.

I will briefly describe a few methods: the secondary analysis of documents, participatory and non-participatory observation, interview and photo elicitation, mental maps and public consultations. The basic rules for each method will be presented, together with advice for easier implementation.

> The nature of inquiry in the discipline of architecture is not different from research in other fields. The researcher observes the phenomenon or object, makes hypotheses, gathers data, undertakes rigorous analysis, and uses the data to draw conclusions that form the basis for action. (Woodcock, 2006, p. 37)

> [W]e have, first, to cease thinking of architecture as buildings. It is rather a discipline of study, a mode of inquiry, distinguished by a fascination with materials and structures, with surfaces and atmospheres, and with the fashioning of a multisensory environment that can become a place of habitation for both human and nonhuman beings. It is not that there are no buildings in architecture; rather, that every building asks questions of its inhabitants, of its materials, of its environment, to which the architect is bound to listen and respond. (Ingold, 2022, p. xiv)

[4] ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS OF DECODING THE URBAN CONTEXT

Ruxandra PĂDURARU

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE ACTING

When I was little, I lived in a typical socialist block of flats environment. Two streets away, there was a small park that had become a kind of community centre of the area – this was where children gathered after school, where old people came and played chess or sat on the benches in the shade, where neighbours from nearby blocks came out with their pets. Its design was minimalistic, consisting of a few swings, trees and benches, but people had started to adapt it to their needs: some brought foldable chairs, others blankets to lay on the ground; young people, especially in the evenings, preferred to sit on some cement blocks, slightly more secluded. Across the street there was a shop that sold all kinds of things: mini-pizzas, coffee, juice, beer, candy, tennis balls, dog food, caps, ice cream – it was perfect for any kind of park activity. Just before I finished eighth grade, the park underwent several months of redesign – more benches were installed, but in overly sunny places; new swings, seesaws and slides were brought in, but only suitable for very young children, which meant that primary and middle school children now felt out of place while three- to four-year olds had already gone to a different park, less noisy and more sheltered from traffic; grass was planted and "Please keep off the grass" signs emerged; the cement blocks were removed, the improvised chess tables disappeared, the paths were covered with gravel (which made it impossible to roller skate, play football tennis or use a wheelchair) and a sand pit for dogs was put in place – those of you who have dogs know how impractical that is. In short: the world of my childhood, that community centre which had brought together all kinds of neighbours, was "improved". To the point of no longer being used by anyone.

When we build cities, we also build the realities of those who inhabit them. From interventions that are a form of urban acupuncture to the planning of entire districts, the architect and the urban planner bear enormous responsibility. Which is why decoding the context refers to deciphering the entangled factors that operate in a particular site and understanding how our proposal affects or modulates the entire ecosystem. Architects and urban planners therefore need to develop an understanding that goes beyond their own cultural environment. Built space represents both the result of the design process (as an answer to specific and contextual needs) and of the way in which it is used – through interpretation, experimentation, understanding, negotiation and adaptation to the context of usage (https://antropoarh.ro). Architecture and anthropology thus acquire a key role in deciphering everyday reality.

Decoding the context refers to deciphering the entangled factors that operate in a particular site and understanding how our proposal affects or modulates the entire ecosystem.

Architecture is a reflection of social, historical, economic, political, religious and cultural contexts. To the same extent that these dimensions influence architecture, it can in its turn influence the formation of identities, social stratification, segregation, social infrastructures, the interaction between urban nature and

communities, the mediation of intercultural relationships, the experience of dwelling, place symbolism, the mediation of power relations, the perception and usage of space, as well as social transformations. Different forces interact in the spaces around us and they have the capacity to trigger major changes.

Design that does not consider the context can fragment the landscape, alter the perception of different spaces, generate social and aesthetic ruptures, amplify economic inequities, increase gentrification or feelings of alienation leading to social tensions, or change the socio-cultural profile of the area. Research on space syntax has revealed the essential role played by design in constructing society and social behaviours by means of structuring space (Hillier et al., 1976).

TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE URBAN CONTEXT

In previous articles (Sfinteș et al., 2023; the articles from the *Architectural Anthropology Journal* series on the Antropoarh blog – https://antropoarh.ro/category/blog) we described various standard anthropological methods of decoding space and achieving a better understanding of context before we start designing. In this chapter, I will discuss several methods at length and explain their role in decoding context. Research methods such as participatory and non-participatory observation, *in situ* informal discussions, interviews, focus groups, online and in-person surveys, expert debates, content analysis of dedicated pages and groups, round tables with the stakeholders, organising of idea contests, etc. make it possible to capture characteristics that contribute to a better understanding of sites. These methods will sometimes be connected to a concrete example (a public space in a city district, more precisely the one of my childhood, described above) to improve understanding, but the ideas can be adapted to any site/the decoding of multiple contexts.

Massey (1994) and other cultural geographers have amply demonstrated that space is charged with cultural and political meanings and several aspects can be taken into account for identifying them and decoding context. For example:

_The quality of living in the proximity of a site could be monitored by analysing parameters like: the characteristics of green spaces, activities or sports practiced in the open air, urban furniture and its suitability for different age groups, identity features of the area, natural hazards (seismic risk, extreme temperatures, weather conditions), as well as area-specific flora and fauna.

_Space functionality can be studied by analysing: current usage patterns, the degree of functional diversification and activation of adjacent areas, leisure patterns, cultural and recreational activities, the degree of socialisation and community spirit, the visibility of young people in the district, the level of inclusion of older people or people from vulnerable communities and groups, the degree of sensory integration.

_Mobility and infrastructure can be monitored by analysing: the degree of safety for different types of users, the quality of infrastructure for pedestrians and alternative means of transport, the ease of covering and deciphering different routes, the means of mediating potential conflicts caused by different usage patterns.

More simply put, if we wish to analyse the identity of an area, we can ask questions like: What is the profile of the users of the space? What is the state of green spaces and urban furniture? Are there enough of them? How are they used? By whom? Which are the places of meeting and interaction? What sports are practiced? What else might people wish to do? Which are the area landmarks? How do different inhabitants relate to them? What representative elements are there? Whom do they represent? Are there categories that lack representation or that have been neglected? Perhaps older people or persons with disabilities or children or teenagers. How are public spaces maintained? Are there patterns of usage depending on the season? Or on the time of day? What changes? Are certain forms of mobility favoured to the detriment of others? How safe do users feel in that space? Is the space easily read by a newcomer? and so on.

The questions never cease. This can be unnerving, but it should not deter us. We will never be able to answer all of them. Yet certain aspects remain valid for longer and they can help us find a direction or patterns which, once identified, steer us in the correct direction. How to ask the right questions is something we learn over time and especially with patience and the courage of putting into practice methods that enable us to acquire an overall image that is as clear as possible.

APPLICABLE METHODS

The methods presented below support the attempt to better understand an urban context. You may wonder why they are needed. It might not seem difficult to grasp at first sight the most suitable solutions for a particular space. But we are all human. The environment we grew up in, the people we interact with, the films we watch, the influencers we follow, all of these shape our concept of the world. We are inevitably more attuned to certain things and capable of completely ignoring others – not through malice, but because we have never even thought about them. These methods help us make room, to the extent possible, for other opinions than our own and not to judge through the lens of what we consider to be good and beautiful. To limit our personal biases. I have previously explored this topic on the Antropoarh blog, where I identify the possible origins of subjective assessments: one's cultural background, social milieu, education, personal experiences, media influences, etc. (Păduraru, 2023), but some key aspects are highlighted here as well.

These methods help us make room for other opinions than our own and not to judge through the lens of what we consider to be good and beautiful.

Limiting personal biases

As researchers, we become involved in most of the activities conducted by the people in the study area: it is a means of trying to learn the rules of their behaviour. Yet through our prior experience we also bring certain biases into the study. Although we make every possible effort to ensure objectivity, our biases can influence the way we see and understand the collected data and the way in which we interpret our experience. For example, our background and personal abilities could interfere with the understanding of another person's problems and actions. For certain types of problems, we may already have a set of solutions in mind and this may lead us to ignore alternative solutions (Qian et al., 2007).

Walking through the city and attempting to capture its hidden symbolic logic, its cultural, social and spatial codes, are strongly influenced by our own attitudes, perceptions and ways of attributing meaning. What we select depends on our knowledge, our recent readings and our research questions. As researchers, we directly influence the field through our presence and behaviour; the day, time and weather conditions have an enormous impact on the selection of our data (Genz, 2018).

We can do a little individual exercise and try to think of a moment when someone offered us a piece of advice or a solution that did not at all apply to our situation – because that someone did not know the context. Well, this is precisely what we will try to avoid doing in our turn by applying different decoding methods.

Secondary Analysis

In most cases, preliminary documentation is required in order to capture the most relevant elements in the course of the actual research process. You are already familiar with some of the factors that can be documented before starting research, such as sensory analysis, mobility analysis, urban structure, demographic or economic structure, analyses of the environment, of transport and utilities infrastructure, of the legal and institutional framework, etc. But there are other aspects that could be included as well.

Secondary analysis can encompass the analysis of diverse documents, the consultation of archives, content analysis of the information retrieved from social networks, etc. Documentary analysis is usually undertaken at the beginning of the research. Archival study can highlight the historical and social context of a site, the meanings it has held over time, its stages of development. It may be done by resorting to city hall archives, national archives, newspapers and periodicals from different years, specialist literature and catalogues. Accessing the National Archives can at first seem laborious but once you have become used to the logistics, you may discover real treasures. I use Ziarele Arcanum (https://adt.arcanum.com) to consult periodicals – a site with thousands of digitised newspapers and a very useful search engine.

Why would these steps be important? According to Willis (1996), within the universe of architectural documentation there are numerous artefacts and documents whose subject is architectural works (for example historical

monographies, critical reviews), or certain topographic maps, photos of individual buildings or even their plans and/or specifications (for example books containing the architects' works or architectural drawings). A careful analysis of these items may bring out aspects that we would be unable to discover through other methods.

Another type of analysis focuses on social media content. Content analysis is a research method that intensively analyses reiterated ideas and keywords, in this case comments and posts on social media channels such as Facebook pages and groups. Today, there are countless groups and pages dedicated to specific areas, especially on Facebook. They can be focused on a larger section of the city or on various districts or they may be groups with old photos of specific areas, pages of the local administration, social media accounts that citizens interact with, and the list goes on. Inevitably, these groups point out problems or praise initiatives, they give information on new projects or debate various topics, etc. The analysis of these interactions can prove beneficial to decoding context because the researcher follows general discussions taking place in the groups and the broad issues raised in posts but also specific issues of interest for projects linked to particular areas, green spaces, infrastructure, cleanliness, heritage, etc.

> **Recommendation:** you will notice that some people in these groups are more vocal – they reply more frequently to posts, they leave more comments and so on. These persons can become informal leaders. You can contact them via direct messages where you explain your interest in the respective area and try to arrange an interview. It is a means of entering the world of a city area where you don't already know someone.

The duration of this part of research can range from a few days to entire months, depending mostly on the overall time allocated for the project.

Observation

Observation is the central and defining method of research in cultural anthropology. It entails the examination of a site without the researcher's direct involvement (in the case of non-participatory observation) or with their involvement (in the case of participatory observation), through the explicit recording and analysis of this information (Anderson, 1983). Observation aims at identifying the behavioural patterns, preferences and necessities of the users of the concerned areas, at capturing interactions. The main objective is to observe how the space is used, when and by whom. It represents an exploratory stage, during which site visits are undertaken, possibly accompanied by informal discussions (spontaneous, unplanned discussions on specific issues) or by taking photos and videos, sketching site plans or capturing descriptions.

> **I recommend** walking through the entire area on different days and at different times to get a fuller image of what takes place there.

There are two types of observation:

_Non-participatory observation (the researcher is not directly involved in community activities). The aim is to obtain a clear image of flows, of highly frequented and less frequented places, but also of the behaviour of area users. For example, you sit on a bench in a public square and you observe the kinds of people that pass through this space, their characteristics, their activities, the areas they prefer depending on the time of day, whether adaptations are made, whether there are any conflicts in using the space, how natural elements are used, etc.

_Participatory observation (this method requires the observer's involvement in the different activities taking place in the area). The researcher has an active role and aims to understand the context "from the inside". This type of observation offers much more detailed data and can support the taking of better-informed decisions. For example, you can participate in sports or in the residents' socialising or routine activities, in district meetings, etc. It is difficult to realise how inadequate the pedestrian infrastructure is until we are placed in the position of carrying luggage, of pushing a pram or in any other situation that we cannot understand before experiencing it.

The research of public space can follow several relevant parameters of analysis. Depending on what we are interested in, here with reference to the community space under study, we could consider: who uses the space, when, how and why. It is important to observe how people interact, how they circulate, the visual and auditive clarity of the space. In addition, the social impact of different spaces and the ease with which they can be figured out must also be analysed. Another relevant aspect is user interaction with spatial details and partitions. Not least, it is necessary to consider the different seasons, times of day and moments of the week.

Usually, we take notes during observations – you should not rely on memory, which most often plays tricks on us. But imagine you are in a park with your friends, drinking juice and on a bench nearby there is someone staring and frantically writing things down in a notebook. That would make you uncomfortable, wouldn't it? So you might go up to this person and ask them what they are doing. Or you might change your behaviour. Or even leave. It is what any of us would do if we felt we were being watched. So when you go out to observe, remember you are not only looking but also being looked at.

The Interview

You have analysed the documents and conducted the observations. What comes next? The interview is the moment of direct interaction with the others, when we can ask different questions about what interests us. The difference between an interview and an informal discussion consists in the fact that the interview is in most cases guided by you and that you know where the questions are headed.

When talking to friends, we move quite swiftly from one topic to another. And it is not just one person asking questions – that would be a ludicrous situation, you would say it feels like being interrogated. Both you and the others try to leave some room for asking questions and sharing different things. In an interview situation, this balance of dialogue no longer applies – the person you are interviewing speaks more than you do and you only steer the discussion through specific questions.

Why do we conduct interviews? To deepen our knowledge of certain aspects and perceptions, to reach clarity on what we observed, to correlate different perspectives – belonging to people of different ages, of different backgrounds, ethnicities, etc. Through interviews we discover wishes and needs, why people do certain things in a particular way, what their grievances are. Through interviews we try to discover the reasons why people choose certain things to the detriment of others, their life stories, why they would want certain things, what bothers them and, most importantly, how they do things.

You set the theme of each interview based on what interests you and on what you have found out so far. It is useful to have some questions prepared or at least some guiding ideas for the discussion. Depending on the time available, if we take the example of the small children's park in the introduction, we could decide to talk to the users of the space (teenagers, children, older people, people with pets, people who work at the nearby shop, guards – if necessary, residents of the nearby blocks), experts from different fields (landscape architects, urban planners, architects, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, engineers, etc.), but also staff from the local authorities (police; lakes, parks and leisure administration and public domain administration, etc.).

A question I am often asked by my students is: How many interviews do we have to do? My answer does not always please: there is no set number. It depends on you, on your access to the space, on the time available, but ideally it should enable the inclusion of as wide a range of actors as possible and ensure that no social category of users has been omitted. In anthropology we talk about saturation – this means conducting interviews until the information starts to be reiterated. But it is up to each of you: you should do as many interviews as you perceive to be helpful in making responsible choices at the design stage. Yet it is important to bear in mind that the overall image resulting from just a few interviews will be fragmented and it will not be possible to make generalisations.

Some general suggestions for interviews

If you are recording the interviews, you should always ask for permission and assure the respondent of the confidentiality of their answers.
Try to formulate questions that do not influence the answers. For example, with questions like: "Isn't it true that you would like more green spaces?" or "It is very important to take care of the green spaces; what are you doing about it?" you are directing the answers.
Ask concise, clear questions that do not leave room for interpretation.
State the approximate duration of the interview at the beginning.
Encourage more developed answers by avoiding the closed, yes-no type of questions.

> Ask the respondent to give examples, to explain, to tell you more, to provide additional clarification.
> Adapt each interview to the context and person.
> Avoid using specialised vocabulary when talking to non-specialists: pediment, portico, functional adaptation, urban furniture, sustainable development, etc. are not terms familiar to all.
> The questions should be about the experience of the person interviewed and not about the opinions of others.
> Find as broad a diversity of respondents as possible.

I will detail several interview types below.

_In-depth interviews (one-to-one interviews). These create a comfortable atmosphere which enables the interviewees to express their needs and perceptions in sufficient detail, without being influenced by the opinions of others. Emphasis is laid on the respondents' personal experiences to the greatest extent possible.

_Focus groups (usually interviews with five to eight people at a time). These can provide enough room for initiating a dynamic dialogue and constructive debates and they give participants the opportunity to critically approach their own needs and those of the others. The focus group enables the emergence of a context that fosters debate and idea creation as it encourages free discussion between the participants. It also enables the collection of more data in a short time.

Both in-depth interviews and focus groups require a set of rules that lead to relaxed conversation and create a safe environment, where the respondents feel comfortable enough to freely and spontaneously participate in the discussion. They need to be told there are no right or wrong answers and to be encouraged to speak sincerely; the fact that the answers are anonymised must be underlined. In most cases, it is good to mention why you are asking these questions.

The interviews are conducted ideally in person but also online or by phone. Nevertheless, I think that in underprivileged environments, with less experience of civic involvement, the most appropriate method is to go in person and talk to people on specific issues at the relevant sites, both in order to ensure that a sufficiently large number of residents are included in the dialogue and to facilitate the kind of informal and open discussion where the respondents feel comfortable enough to make apposite contributions.

Interviews need not be static; there is also the possibility of doing them while walking. The interactions that occur during this type of interview can give rise to concrete and situated knowledge on elusive and intangible aspects of social reality. This is made possible by the fact that moving through space entails encountering people, sounds, images, smells, etc., thus opening the possibility of observing what is invisible and noticing what is taken for granted (Hall et al., 2008).

What to bear in mind

Interviews **cannot** lead to generalisations. If we talk to ten people, we cannot assert that the residents of district X wish for Y. Even if we try to diversify respondent typology, we cannot stipulate that all the people from that area agree to what has been said. To obtain generalisations we need to create surveys and representative samples. The sample is calculated by means of a mathematical formula. Since this is not the subject of the present chapter, I will not go into calculation details but merely stress the fact that this determination is not simple and must be rigorously carried out by experts in this field.

Photo Elicitation

Another method, closely linked to interviews, is what some experts call photo elicitation or interviews that start from pictures. The participants are able to use their cultural knowledge to encode (through photo-taking) and decode (narratively, in the course of the interview) the visual images from the photo interview (Kolb, 2008). In brief, interview discussions are guided by particular photos, whether they are taken by the researcher, from the archives, or even taken by the respondent. According to Church & Quilter (2021), photographs and drawings can be used to investigate experiences that might be omitted from a purely verbal account and to keep the conversation focused on spatial aspects. The photo interview method has proved to be especially useful in sustainability and environmental studies, where obtaining the community's point of view is essential to the research effort (Kolb, 2008).

I will exemplify with three instances of how the photo interview could be used in decoding the context.

Researchers bring photos to be discussed with the respondents

The photographs may have been taken by the researchers or retrieved from archives/other sources. They function as a communicative bridge between the interviewer and the interviewee. For example, they could be photos of different activities taking place in that space (playing chess, sitting on a bench, swinging, playing football tennis) or of different pieces of urban furniture – things that a discussion can start from. From the perspective of the different directions of social and cultural research (Harper, 2002; Prosser, 2007), visual research can contribute to the understanding of both the symbolic and physical meanings of the built environment (Petermans et al., 2014). These photographs facilitate discussion and encourage the respondents to draw personal associations to what they see.

The respondents themselves take photos

The photographs can include places, buildings, people, or local activities and businesses that are connected to the research question and have a meaning for the people we are talking to (Kolb, 2008). This method is used increasingly since it helps obtain participant-authored photos of contextual features, in relation to a few cues given by researchers. The photos can subsequently be used in an in-depth interview investigating their meanings (Tonge et al., 2013).

Researchers have shown ever greater interest "in handing the camera to those whose lives [they] wish to explore (...) because photography offers opportunities for research participants to express their subjectivities as – quite literally – their view of the world" (Warren, 2005, p. 865).

The participatory photo interview invites respondents to answer a research question by taking photos and explaining them to the researcher. An important aspect of this method is that it is the respondents – and not the researcher – who choose what to photograph. This approach, used in the context of participatory research, gives a voice to local residents within the framework of a scientific process (Kolb, 2008).

This method can be used with different age groups (children are often involved in this way in the research process). The photos can be taken using different devices, whether the respondents' own mobile phones or the cameras distributed by the researcher or Polaroid-type cameras with instant photo printing.

The participants are usually given a well-defined time period in which to take photos. This can range from a few hours to a day, a week or sometimes even longer intervals. They subsequently meet the research team and specifically discuss each photo. The questions should address not only what has been captured in the photos, but also the motivations and meanings behind them.

Figure 1. Photo elicitation during a workshop conducted with children from Chilia Veche, Tulcea County, as part of the project Patrimoniu ABC – Exploring Bălan and Chilia through anthropology, organised by Antropedia and co-funded by the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN).

Source: Antropedia.

Area residents are asked to bring photos from their personal archives

There may be cases when, in order to decode context, photos from different periods contribute to a clearer overall image. Some research teams choose to

notify the community that photos from personal archives are sought on different themes (leisure activities or a specific element). The photos are subsequently scanned and the originals returned.

Starting from these pictures, an exhibition with all the collected photos is organised and discussions take place at the venue, or interviews and focus groups may be set up with only some of the people. The images allow the participants to access the meanings, experiences and memories associated with their visit, where words, by themselves, cannot generate these perspectives (Bapiri et. al., 2020). In the course of the interview, when participants talk about their photos, their strategies and processes of photo-taking often become an important part of the narrative and can reflect their degree of involvement and sense of empowerment in relation to the research process (Kolb, 2008).

Participatory Mapping – Mental Maps

Try the following exercise: ask two friends to explain verbally (and optionally through gestures) how to get from point A to point B, by foot. You will see that although the directions may be identical, the landmarks will differ. Or even if the landmarks are similar, the way of perceiving distances is different (someone may tell you it is far, another that it is nearby). Many things can differ: the chosen route, which side of the road they refer to, the objects or buildings or shops or monuments they rely on as points of reference, the words used, the gestures, the way in which they redo the route in their head, the speed with which they give you the information, etc. This is because we create space maps in our minds in relation to subjective factors. That is why asking people to put their mental maps on paper can reveal some very important aspects of a particular space. By visualising spatial practices and interpreting a map, researchers can uncover surprising data, which include social and spatial practices, spatial interactions, etc.

> Cognitive mapping enables us to access ideas and spatial connections that we can bear in mind when thinking about significant spaces and places.

According to Nóżka (2016), mental maps refer both to the physical spatial properties and to the socio-cultural characteristics of a city; they contain information on objects as well as on their social and cultural attributes; they guide human perception, decisions and spatial behaviour and the way we navigate space; they imitate our spatial activities and show how we use space; they influence how we process the information received, including the process of reinterpreting, omitting and storing it.

Creating mental maps is a research method whereby "following the superposition of several such schematic representations made by users, researchers are able to obtain information on the significant characteristics of an area, as perceived by certain groups" (Urboteca, n.d.). Mental mapping is not the same as cartographic mapping: it only shows how the members of a given community imagine the environment (Lynch, 1960).

Figure 2. Participatory mapping during an event focused on the urban regeneration of a Bucharest neighbourhood.

Source: UrbanizeHub.

More precisely, urban anthropologists understand the cognitive (mental) mapping method as a technique for generating a (bidimensional) representation of spaces and actors' places as well as of the relationships between them. Thus, cognitive mapping enables us to access ideas and spatial connections that we can bear in mind when thinking about significant spaces and places, providing a means of making the invisible (or the obvious) visible (Genz, 2018).

For example, a mental map can represent the street plan that someone remembers when giving instructions to a friend, or it can be a mapped representation of people's attitudes to places, linked to geographic aspects.

According to Nawrocki (2017), such maps are used especially in studies on the perception of urban space. The sketches of the mental maps of a city enable the exploration of the spatial images that its residents have of it. Multiple studies using this method have shown that sketches correlated with socio-demographic data can provide information on how the city is perceived differently by men, women, older people and children. Sketching mental maps can be a useful tool in delimiting the areas of a city. By requesting sketches of the city centre we can verify which zones were included and which were not. At the same time, drawing mental maps has been frequently combined with noting evaluations (expressing opinions) and emotions (preferences) on sketches. Analysis can also include the descriptions placed in the sketches. Very often, but not always, the respondents indicate the names of the objects, districts and landmarks they draw. The terminology they use does not always include the officially recognised names and often refers to locally used names.

There are several ways of applying this method. Mental maps can be drawn or described, they can be done on blank sheets of paper or on top of pre-existing maps where people can write down different things or mark the routes they use.

I give below a few concrete examples of how this method can be used, but the cases far exceed my brief list. I remind you that this method is used to examine

people's way of relating to spaces, of using and adapting them and also to examine how spatial organisation can influence the residents' living patterns (Lewis et al., 2018).

> _We are interested in people's mobility in a particular district. So we ask different respondents to highlight in colour on a simple map, with the street names marked, their route to work, to school or to where they spend their free time (depending on what we are trying to find out). Each person will be given a map and the routes can be superposed at the end. We could also ask why a particular route has been chosen – there may be unsafe areas they avoid, a precarious infrastructure in some sections, or they might choose the more or less crowded areas, etc.
>
> _We are interested in how a space is perceived/used. We ask the respondents to draw on a blank sheet of paper a frame that represents, for example, the small children's park discussed at the beginning. Then we ask them to divide the space according to the activities that take place there at different times of day.
>
> _We are interested in which areas a person might perceive to be of interest (for example, open spaces for practicing sports, quiet streets to walk in, places for cultural or educational activities). We can offer them a district map and ask them to indicate certain landmarks or even to signal problems.
>
> _We are interested in finding out which identity features of a district resonate with different people. So we ask them to put on the map places that are emotionally significant to them or, if it is useful for us, the places that induce nostalgia. These can be spaces that have disappeared or that still exist.
>
> _We are interested in how accessible a place is. For example, people with reduced mobility can create mental maps of less accessible or even inaccessible areas. Thus, you can discuss the inclusivity of specific spaces and routes.

Maps are an accumulation of layered narratives; they say something about how different categories understand and define places. Thus, the instances and topics where we can use mental maps can expand indefinitely. You should adapt the method as much as possible to your research interests. My suggestion is to assure participants about the anonymisation of maps.

It is important to use the information to study aspects that are more difficult to learn about, such as but not limited to: existing tensions, problematic areas, highly frequented routes, etc. This method also involves the analysis of common models and of differences related to the participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

> **Pointer**. If you like this method, there are online applications for drawing mental maps, which allow you to superpose hundreds of them.

Public Consultations

We mind when others make decisions for us without consulting us beforehand, especially if these decisions have a dramatic impact on our daily lives. User participation in architectural/urban planning decisions that affect the spaces they live in or frequent is becoming increasingly important in light of the current complex problems at the social, political, environmental, educational and technological levels. No one has the necessary knowledge and abilities to independently understand and solve any of these problems. At the same time, different approaches are required to empower people to participate and take control over their own lives and the environment they live in (Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018).

The purpose of involving residents and stakeholders is to bring out the main problems they have identified in the respective perimeter and to gather design suggestions that are aligned with their needs. The goals of this method are diverse and depend on the stage at which we decide to organise the public consultation. Thus, the aim can be to inform about the planning process, to analyse the needs of the users of the space in question, to constantly receive feedback after the completion of each stage, to mediate possible conflicts, to co-create design proposals and, not least, to foster the development of democratic attitudes or to encourage transparency and communication between residents, stakeholders and authorities. This would entail locating the creativity of the design process not in the exceptional abilities of "creatives" like architects and designers but in the generative potential of social relationships which involve all the participants (Ingold, 2022).

Some ideas for involving communities in the participatory design process:

_Organising public consultations – either at the design stage or at the post-implementation/building stage. The main aim of public consultation is to create dialogue between residents, stakeholders impacted by the possible transformations of the area and local administration representatives who directly influence the project process. People get together despite or because of their different agendas, needs, knowledge and abilities (Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018) in order to find optimal solutions.

_Workshops with residents' participation – an approach to design that seeks to actively involve all the parties with an interest in the design process in order to ensure that the result is adapted to their needs and wishes. This method aims for the participants to bring ideas/proposals/suggestions/changes (in relation to the design of the park in our example) and may include details regarding materials, amenities, functions, types of configurations, types of usage, etc. In addition, the residents and stakeholders concerned will be encouraged to go into detail and mention aspects they do not wish to be implemented or aspects that the local administration should pay special attention to. Benz et al. (2024) claim that this methodology is useful and produces results which proactively facilitate the inclusion

of persons with disabilities and service providers by means of participatory research and community-based action.

_Round tables with the stakeholders. These can involve area residents, people who frequently pass through the space, commercial entities from the area, public authorities and institutions, schools, experts from different fields – biologists, landscape architects, architects, urban planners, anthropologists, civil engineers, local NGO representatives, academics, etc.

_Idea contests (ideally interdisciplinary) ...but organising these is more costly and the logistics are more complicated.

Figure 2. Public consultation using mood boards illustrating various urban interventions. Source: UrbanizeHub.

In the course of public consultations, residents may be presented with: photos of the respective districts (a collective photo elicitation), mood boards with different urban interventions (green spaces, recreational spaces, areas for sports, waterfront amenities, etc.), they can interact with a large map of the area where they can signal different problems/make suggestions (mental mapping) and the list could be expanded. The aim of the mood board type of collage is to generate discussion about what district residents want and especially about why they would choose something to the detriment of something else. This approach enables a more in-depth mapping of needs as well as confrontation with possible, tangible solutions. For example, in the case of the small children's park, if one wishes to redesign it, mood boards with different items of urban furniture, made from different materials, can be handed out, letting people choose what they would like and asking them to motivate their choices. Physical, printed versions are preferable for all materials, to facilitate interaction with all resident categories.

The motivations are important and not just the choices in themselves, in order to understand the reasoning and prioritise certain selections over others. The reasons can be aesthetic ("this seems to look better"), yet most often they have

practical significance (being connected to immediate needs and influencing the use or lack of use of the urban furniture). So in conducting the process we are interested not only in what the people concerned want, but also why. By understanding their reasons, we can suggest alternatives that fulfil the same needs or integrate these requirements in various ways.

According to Tim Ingold (2022), participatory planning offers several advantages. First of all, it could promote the idea of participation as authentic co-creation, which is mutually transformative, especially for the young generations. It could also recognise both design and its realisation as continuous and collaborative processes.

CONCLUSION

With any intervention we have to carry out in built/unbuilt space, we should attempt not only to minimise its negative impact on the communities and on dwelling, but to optimise its positive impact. To do this, we need to consider local characteristics and to adapt proposals to contextual realities. A building should demonstrate sensitivity to the natural and social context as well as the capacity to adapt (Roesler, 2010). Any intervention requires context decoding in order to understand and anticipate the effects it will produce.

Furthermore, decoding context contributes to facilitating the active use of space by residents through the integration of their ideas in the way of planning, building and managing the different areas, through the development of a sense of belonging, responsibility, justice and solidarity, through solving the power imbalance that exists between decision-makers and local communities.

Any intervention requires context decoding in order to understand and anticipate the effects it will produce.

The aim of researching context is to observe, understand, support and amplify user intentions and actions and it also involves identifying and evaluating norms, traditions, meanings and values by exploring nuances and complexities integrated into architecture over time so as to subsequently render the cultural context as reflected in the built environment. The essence of architectural documentation, in this context, includes the built environment entwined with life patterns and the fundamental elements of civilisation (Serra, 2016).

In the process of decoding a context, even if we choose to use just one of the methods described above, we will be one step closer to understanding what is happening in a given space and why.

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Taking as a given that a context is something that must be decoded and that analysis is one of the tools used in this regard, we asked academics from international schools of architecture and urban planning to answer a few questions regarding the theme of this volume. The aim was that of uncovering both a common ground and various understandings, defined by relevance and coherence. The questions were:

1. A specific context is framed by the site and its immediate or extended surroundings – ranging from local to international scales of analysis – as well as by specific issues related to the theme being studied, the site itself, or the programme, all considered within a broader framework. **Given the complexity and breadth of context, what does "decoding a context" imply?**

2. Framing and approaching a design theme in an academic context can sometimes differ from tackling it in real-world situations, depending on the learning outcomes. In the final years of study, especially during the diploma project, students should demonstrate the ability to frame and understand a broader and more intricate context. **Could you elaborate on the contextual categories and parameters that a student should consider as part of a complex architectural approach?**

3. **Do you have any recommendations for students on how to approach a context in order to decode it?** Although properly defining a context involves multiple considerations, we are particularly interested in identifying strategies that guide the process of uncovering its complexities.

[5] INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

4. Alongside complexity, coherence is a fundamental quality that should define the outcome of any design process – such as an architectural project developed within an academic studio or as part of a diploma project. This coherence should integrate every researched aspect into a cohesive narrative that frames the context and reinforces the design. **For coherence to be achieved, which factors determine the relevance of an analysis in a particular context?**

5. Given the variety of architectural approaches nowadays and the complex issues they address – whether on a local or global scale – and given the interdisciplinary nature and extent of any topic that can be explored through architectural design, **is there a specific parameter of context analysis that you regard as particularly important?**

Written answers to the call launched by the Scholar Architect team were provided by Lilly Kudic to Letiția Bărbuică and by Rita Occhiuto and Giovangiuseppe Vannelli to Melania Dulămea while Adrian Phiffer responded in an online interview with Anda Sfinteș.

[5.1] Lilly KUDIC

Head of Architecture /
London South Bank University /
United Kingdom

Context is absolutely not to be determined by strict adherence to regulatory codes and city ordinances. The problem with local legislation is that it is not absolute, but changes with political context; the life of a building is likely to be considerably longer than the life of local, regional or national development plans.

1. Given the complexity and breadth of context, what does “decoding a context” imply?

The initial implication of decoding a context is that a student has a full grasp of the inherent complexity of each specific site and surrounding locale such that they can define and articulate the unique DNA of “place” both to themselves and others. In undertaking proper contextual analysis, the further implications are that this work will provide solid clues, themes, and formal prompts for initial and detailed design.

2. Could you elaborate on the contextual categories and parameters that a student should consider as part of a complex architectural approach?

Among many others, suitable data categories might include the following:

_Historical: significant events which have taken place on the site over several centuries/millennia, and critically shaped its development, and which may suggest future usage/s.

_Cultural: defining and understanding those cultural events which have determined the way in which the site is perceived locally and regionally, and what roles the site may play in cultural life in the future.

_Socio-economic: what role the site has had in influencing the local/national/regional economies, how this has been expressed, and whether this research suggests new economic models in the future.

_Site vectors: how the geometry of the site can be expressed graphically in 2-, 3-, and 4D, in plan and in section, how these vectors have changed over time, and how the superimposition of these geometries develops possibilities for form finding.

_Psychological impact: defining the manner in which the site directly affects the psychology of those using it, those passing by it, and those who are aware of the site but neither tied to it visually nor functionally.

_Phenomenological impact: understanding and mapping graphically the complex but intangible characteristics of the site as unique presences in terms of their impact on the individual consciousness and how those characteristics speak to our consciousness.

_Time: understanding the role of time (daily/monthly/annual) on the site and mapping it graphically into patterns of desire and usage.

3. Do you have any recommendations for students on how to approach a context in order to decode it?

Context is absolutely not to be determined by strict adherence to regulatory codes and city ordinances. The problem with local legislation is that it is not absolute, but changes with political context; the life of a building is likely to be considerably longer than the life of local, regional or national development plans. Students should therefore approach context with the idea that the site is something which can speak to them and provide clues for thematic, formal and strategic design – if the correct questions are asked –, and the data developed should be strictly interrogated to give visual and intellectual prompts for further investigation.

4. For coherence to be achieved, which factors determine the relevance of an analysis in a particular context?

Not every piece of the data gathered in contextual analysis will have equal relevance; students should in fact be extremely discriminating in defining a hierarchy for their data. Some data will speak loudly; others, more quietly. It is perhaps best to stress the value of research which has a strong visual character derived from site readings as these data may encourage formal exploration and experimentation. Equally though, socio-economic, historical and cultural data which lead the student to define themes, values and social strategies for their project that depart from tired archetypal functions should be encouraged. The purpose of architecture is to improve lives through innovation, and contextual analysis should support this purpose.

5. Is there a specific parameter of context analysis that you regard as particularly important?

If a single type or criterion for contextual analysis and the research data deriving from this can be identified as critical – and thus mandatory – it would be the concept of fit (social/cultural/phenomenological/formal, etc.) If a project does not fit its context in terms which prove to us the student has deep conviction in its strategic values, socio-cultural relevance, formal and geometric appropriateness, conscious contribution to resource efficiency and innovative approach to structure, material technology and environmental control, then the project cannot be considered successful.

[5.2] Rita OCCHIUTO

Faculty of Architecture,
University of Liège /
Belgium

The process of getting to know the place is indispensable for learning how not to impose a programme on existing communities and spaces and, moreover, for understanding that design is neither a stylistic exercise nor a technical exploit, but a profound act that modifies the pre-existing, natural and human, ways of life.

1. Given the complexity and breadth of context, what does "decoding a context" imply?

Starting from the principle that architecture is "situated art", the transformation of the existing by means of the project demands taking into account all the composing elements/characteristics of a place. The concepts of site, place/milieu, context and environment, considered on all the scales of reflection and intervention, are cyclically re-examined in architecture: a discipline that thrives on changes, which enable the questioning of relationships between different scales, materials and agents/actors. In fact, such moments of renewal have always been fundamental for the relaunch of experiments and hybridisations leading to the formulation of new orientations for and by the project.

Nevertheless, the 20th century generated ruptures that harmed the intrinsic regenerative capacity of architecture, which only recovered its original character towards the end of the century: that of a living, open and systemic discipline operating in a living (natural and human) universe. In fact, following a period that had reduced context to the dimensions of zone (administrative approach), surface (quantitative approach) or community (sociological approach), it became possible to redirect the architectural debate towards greater attention to the interdisciplinary relationships that had always been its hallmark: connections to the visual and performing arts (theatre, dance, cinema), to the changing characters of spaces (socio-spatial aspects, temporalities, operativity), to literature and history (narratives and diachronic actions) and to the earth sciences (geography and various natural agents).

Thus, the notion of context currently captures the most dynamic and different connotations of place, environment, field open to interrelations between human and non-human agents and materials (Council of Europe, 2000).

Discussing "context" today is reflective of an urgent need in architecture, which has lost the capacity to comprehend what is happening in the territories of daily living, where communities are in search of reference points and of local knowledge, often forgotten.

The context resulting from the multiplication of data that quantify the characteristics of zones subject to pre-established programmes is a thing of the past. These certification procedures translate the world into measurable quantities, reducing the architectural intervention to an efficient technical exercise. What is required of today's architecture is, on the contrary, to consider a multitude of actions that can hardly be reduced to measurable quantities. In addition, the current necessity of returning to the investigation of sites as systems made up of living materials in constant interaction and change demands in-depth re-examination of quantitative decoding modes.

In my research, architecture has been the focus of efforts to reunite the specialist visions that had broken the trans-scalar links between vast territory and lived space, in their relationships to materials at the scale of architectural detailing.

Rediscovering the relationships between the (built and unbuilt) space inhabited by the body and the environments in which we live is essential, on the one hand

for rediscovering the reasons of what occurs (bringing together the different scales and design materials, the here and elsewhere) and, on the other hand, for recovering the awareness that the architectural design is not an isolated gesture but an action that springs from the knowledge of the already-there (pre-existing natural and human-related conditions) and directs the future, therefore a transformative action continued over time. The architectural design, documented and justified, begins with a careful reading of what is already there. It formulates hypotheses, offering several possibilities for action, and it lays the foundation for progressive transformations that can be continuously shared and redirected.

Finally, "decoding a context" means taking time to rediscover what is already there by means of documentation and field readings relevant to: the state of the ground/site prior to construction – *ground zero* of the landscape; the diachronic study of different strata shaped by movements of the earth, the laying out of fields, plots and plant growth; the search for the reasons of the changes that have occurred; the discursive interpretations (narratives) of the correlations between actions and changes to existing environments.

Decoding is an action to be repeated over time, no longer limited to a single irreproducible reflective loop. It needs to enable the testing of different project hypotheses, allowing for the assessment of the potential of various transformation trajectories.

From this perspective, trans-scalar readings are a very important tool for questioning programmes imposed on environments that no longer have the capacity to accommodate them. In fact, the site is a resource and not a support: it can serve to redirect the programme and modify its transformative action, making it into a tool to accompany changes rather than saturate the site. Decoding becomes an act of involvement (both ethical and physical) that is indispensable for placing the land at the centre of transformation issues: creating/designing architecture to respond to what sites want/tell (bottom-up approach) and no longer to what humans impose upon them (top-down approach).

2. Could you elaborate on the contextual categories and parameters that a student should consider as part of a complex architectural approach?

The approach to spatial design in the course of academic studies undoubtedly differs from project conditions in a professional context. Yet this distinction is fundamental in the context of learning and/or research. In fact, in the professional environment, design is bound by a pre-existing programme or by a public or private commission. By contrast, in the training context, it is essential for the student to go through the experimental stage since the ability to conceive a project emerges from what is already there: the conditions of the existing environment and the ways in which it is inhabited, used, exploited and perceived over time. Learning to design requires a real-life situation, yet approached from a critical position, in order that the students can learn independently how to formulate a programme starting from the circumstances and issues specific to the contexts in which they are asked to intervene. The site and its expanded context represent

laboratory-sites into which student designers must immerse themselves in order to forge a connection to the materials that constitute architecture's mode of intervention. Any programme that may have already been formulated should not be adopted directly as the design framework since this would reduce the project to the formal enactment of ideas whose validity has not been tested in a given socio-spatial context.

Even if a particular demand or a latent programme exists, the stage of questioning the "commission" is crucial to the formative period since, in researching the reasons for what is being asked, it becomes possible to take a deeper look at reality and to approach the concrete circumstances of the places to be transformed. This process of getting to know the place is indispensable for learning how not to impose a programme on existing communities and spaces and, moreover, for understanding that design is neither a stylistic exercise nor a technical exploit, but a profound act that modifies the pre-existing, natural and human, ways of life. The striving to re-establish the links to (built and unbuilt) space develops the capacities of recognising and looking after multiple actors and materials. The project is born from this listening process which changes the creator's role: from that of a distanced designer who conceives a work for a given space to that of a committed observer tracing the development of the lines of a writing already inscribed onto the living conditions of existing environments. This vision of the project is based on the principle that, if the context is a palimpsest, that is to say, a text that has been engraved and obliterated several times on a surface, then the act of designing takes the meaning of new writing to be traced onto the same set of signs and daily practices that characterise the already existing surface.

In light of the above, context is never empty or lacking in pre-existing values. On the contrary, it is able to "tell and communicate" across the dense layers of writing accumulated over time. Making a new project is thus not about erasing these traces so as to bury them under new layers. Instead, it is about writing again by starting from the lines of what already exists, allowing them to give rise to several types of narratives, hence to several programmes and interpretations of these. The act of design can therefore be compared to a game of combinations (Occhiuto, 2005; Occhiuto & Goossens, 2023) or to the writing of hypotheses, a ludic action that puts environments to the test of various different new conditions of the materials, experimenting with their transformation over time. Thus, the stages of training and research are indispensable for re-learning the project process, that is to say, the path of discovery and creation which allows the greatest closeness to local issues while also regenerating modes of reflection and writing that lead to implementations which are better adapted to very rapidly changing contexts.

The students, especially at the end of the process, will be better able to adopt a perspective and present an argument if they are placed in the situation of examining the site and the programme at the same time. The project exercise will thus be a true test of the coherence of the process undertaken from field study through to the argumentation for key project features to be implemented by using multiple temporal, scale and programme strategies.

The guiding parameters of the design concept are thus the writings: starting from those that characterise the soil and the subsoils, passing through the paths and

various traces that engrave/cut into the different settings, carved and/or thickened by the multiple modes of densifying space (through buildings, infrastructure, vegetation, etc.) without forgetting that human beings also continuously trace places with their footsteps.

3. Do you have any recommendations for students on how to approach a context in order to decode it?

Implementation of a double strategy to be deployed synchronously: acting on the basis of the study of various maps and documents testifying to the history of the environments in question, developing their knowledge and understanding before formulating a programme; and acting in situ, through walking, observation and the immersive and repeated experience over time of the studied environments from their interior.

As regards the diachronic reading of the palimpsest of the environments under study, the reading strategy cannot be limited to the acquisition of historical and documentary knowledge. Instead, knowledge must be interpreted as a temporal unfolding which shows us, as in a film, how environments are constructed and deconstructed, striated and smoothed, or filled and emptied over time. The changes and their movements will show how history can be a tool to bring out the dynamics that have played out over time, making it possible to restore to history its "operativity" – Muratori spoke of "operating history" (De Carli & Scatà, 1991; Maretto, 2012) – and to sites their narratives. In fact, stories or testimonies are not uniquely derived from sociological surveys among users. Sites and fields can also speak for themselves. Ingold (2013) describes this approach as a form of field study. The lines inscribed therein are the texts of several narratives in which we should take a renewed interest, not only to turn them into "heritage" (or freeze them in time), but above all to endow them with new life through creative and critical interpretation, by means of possible new writings, of projects that explain where they come from and what they tend towards.

The study of the French terms *trait* and *pro* by Berque (2000) allows us to interpret the word *pro-jet* as an action that begins with a single stroke (the *jet,* corresponding to the English *throw*/gesture, or the existing line) and relaunches it towards a prospective vision (*pro*), open to the future. This double dimension is also present in the European Landscape Convention, which encourages the implementation of "forward-looking" actions.

Finally, I would cite the nine project points formulated by Corajoud (2000) to explain to students how to apprehend a site:

1. Get yourself into a state of excitement
2. Explore in every possible direction
3. Test the limits, go beyond
4. Give up in order to return
5. Work with multiple scales

6. Anticipate
7. Champion open space
8. Open up your current project
9. Remain the guardian of your own project.

A practice I have tested with Masters architecture students is to begin with the aim of approaching a context from one of its fundamental landscape materials (water, soil/earth, vegetation, air). The course, titled *PAYS-ART*: Surveying, Drawing, Writing the Possibilities, enabled the students' immersion into territories undergoing changes and for which transformation programmes had already been planned. Without taking these plans into consideration, the students had to familiarise themselves with the environments by starting from exploratory walks, accompanied or not, in the course of which they observed, highlighted and noted the different forms and presences of the materials researched on the respective sites. Drawings, sketches, photos, videos and texts were the means used to capture, interpret and communicate the characteristics of a place. Starting from these captures, the students explored how to bring out the characteristics of different environments via the specific material under study. Thus, they moved from modes of observation to writing and reflection allowing for the deeper exploration of the multifaceted relationships uncovered through drawing and profound, repeated observation. The visual, audio and written documentation were then used for a debate leading to the sketching of the project direction (the possibilities). The formulated documents allowed, on the one hand, for the emergence of a project's guidelines and, on the other, for the possibility of addressing questions to users/residents, not on functional needs, but on their links and their sensuous and deep relations to the respective sites. From this type of site-specific actions emerge characteristics that touch, on the one hand, on the sensitive dimension of inhabiting a place while on the other hand bringing the dwellers closer to the places they belong to.

4. For coherence to be achieved, which factors determine the relevance of an analysis in a particular context?

Coherence is one of the key values in justifying and communicating the thinking that has steered design at every stage of its development. Yet it does not result from the accumulation of technical or formal parameters, nor from respect to norms, functions or to imposed economic criteria. On the contrary, context analysis is valid insofar as it enables the capturing of the particular features of a place. Consequently, the more the analysis brings out the singularities and the systems that maintain the balances between natural and human factors, the greater the capacity for project choices to build on arguments that are useful in preserving constructive and conceptual coherence at all the scales of the design process. For example, if the aim is to develop a sustainable work of architecture, the coherence of the design process cannot be confined to following good programme and technical practice; it must instead be tested at all territorial scales, on the basis of what emerges at the sites of intervention. On re-examining the real conditions of the sites, the arguments that frame the project allow for adding nuance and thus for redirecting it, even to the extreme

hypothesis of reversing or discarding a programme that is unsuitable or imposed upon a particular place. In fact, since the interactions of human and natural factors that characterise environments are at the centre of the project, context conditions are particularly important. A site may be considered saturated when it is no longer capable of accommodating a programme that does not correspond to its current natural and/or landscape conditions. This principle of the site's priority was formulated already in the 1990s by Michel Desvigne, a French landscape architect, who regards landscape as a "prerequisite", not to be missed in any transformation of places. Since every project of territorial transformation via architectural interventions takes place in environments that already possess a history and definite characteristics predating any new desired programming, the elements of coherence are to be found in the natural and human components that define the place at the moment when a new transformation is envisaged. Starting from this principle, the factors that enable a good understanding of the environments on which to intervene are the natural elements in their action and the transformations that humans have brought to the context. From the critical evaluation of the balances and imbalances of these interactions over time, new "argumentation" and "reasons" can emerge for adding nuance, redirecting and/or reinventing other development perspectives. Among the possible issues, the reduction of the ground occupied by buildings or the decision not to build and instead to reorganise or modify the geomorphological configurations of a site, acting on the soil/subsoil, water, air, and plant cover system, can also be considered as a mode of architectural transformation, founded on landscape balance as a prerequisite. Once the conditions of the natural elements have reached a stage capable of accommodating human action, it will become possible to study various hypotheses in order to integrate built elements without altering the newly created balances. It would be possible then to subscribe to the contemporary ways of thinking that no longer relate to existing contexts as environments to be occupied and exploited (even overexploited), but as sites to be co-generated or regenerated by joining the complementary actions of architecture and nature.

5. Is there a specific parameter of context analysis that you regard as particularly important?

Bearing in mind that current societal issues are tied to the types of interrelations that human beings are capable of maintaining with the unstable conditions of the environments that accommodate them, architecture, articulated at all scales of spatial transformation, is called upon to question the deterministic and predatory nature of its action on existing contexts. Instead of making the environments subservient to human needs, architecture can adopt more systemic or holistic attitudes, as already touched upon by Vitruvius and developed over time by populations that have known how to live with local resources. In being able to learn by starting from local resources and their exhaustibility, architecture can respond to new challenges. The parameter that can support this reversal of the relationship to the context concerns the interactions, to be constantly re-evaluated – between the built and natural elements that accommodate it, knowing that the latter are at the same time a resource and a boundary to be respected: a wealth of materials that must be taken care of and not exhausted,

but also a set of forces, like the movements of land, water and air that can suddenly turn against the excesses of human exploitation over time. Thus, the prerequisite for reconsidering the transformations that architecture can bring to living environments is to once again start to regard natural materials such as soil, water, air and vegetation not as objects to be exploited at will, but as "agents of spatial transformation", which act equally with humans on the modifications of a single planet to be shared and not dominated. Only a reversed gaze in relation to the environment that accommodates all of us can create the perspective of a situated architectural renewal.

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[5.3] Adrian PHIFFER

John H. Daniels Faculty of
Architecture, Landscape, and Design /
University of Toronto /
Canada

Context is such a broad topic and it's hard to narrow it down into something specific. Decoding is about understanding each of the pieces and the building as a sum of layers as well as the need to position the project programme brief in relation to various other contexts.

1. Given the complexity and breadth of context, what does “decoding a context” imply?

I think “decoding” implies that the context has a form of secrecy and that we want to get to the truth of that site. That is somehow hard for me to deal with. I think it’s acceptable to have various positions vis-à-vis the context, not always to embrace it, or not always to try to be in harmony with it, or in continuity with it. So, in answering the question, I would like to highlight another term, which is “reading” the context, because it implies a personal view and somehow departs from a purely empirical understanding of the site. I think that reading the context implies further interpretation or misinterpretation that can be folded into the making of the project. So I encourage the students to understand the context as much as they can rather through a form of reading it.

Context is such a broad topic and it’s hard to narrow it down into something specific. Decoding is about understanding each of the pieces and the building as a sum of layers as well as the need to position the project programme brief in relation to various other contexts. These might refer to, for example, the other (national, local, but also international) precedents that have led to the respective programme brief. In this case, a formal scale comparison helps with understanding what you are working with and in decoding the context of that programme.

2. Could you elaborate on the contextual categories and parameters that a student should consider as part of a complex architectural approach?

I do remember my own experience with the diploma project at UAUIM and more specifically the pre-diploma process. I went in front of the committee with a fairly elaborate analysis at different scales (including a form of analysis at the level of the city, of the urban zone where the site was positioned, and then an analysis at the level of the immediate site), which was supposed to prove that the site had been understood from multiple perspectives. My critique is that in the end the analysis was incredibly static and it didn’t have a lot of energy in terms of moving ahead the project itself. I question a linear method of first doing the analysis and then thinking about the proposal and developing it. I am now considering how everything can happen at the same time because the moment that you intervene in the site it means that you are going to alter it, that you are going to change it. So a form of analysis needs to be a gesture of responsibility (because you are trying to decode the site, you are trying to understand it), but it also needs to be very opportunistic: you should have in mind that whatever you are analysing and the way you look at the site must help you get a response.

Here, at the University of Toronto, I have recently started teaching a studio for the first year of the Master’s in Architecture which looks or tries to look at the site through the lenses of indigenous knowledge. For those that don’t know, Canada has to deal with a very tragic and bloody history of relationships with the

indigenous peoples, including the First Nations in North America. So this studio was also a form of reconciliation. When we started it, with a specific focus on the notion of site, I asked the students not to look at the site as only a plot of land that is determined by rigid property lines. I asked them to understand that as merely one dimension of the site, and to follow also, for example, the history and culture of that land; to raise questions about the civilisations that have inhabited it over many centuries. The advice was, in a way, to be incredibly respectful and pertinent in how they engage with the site, and curious beyond the norms of the profession.

In general, there are lots of parameters that can be considered. Some are those that we are most comfortable with, which refer to the physicality of the site (a general urbanistic zoning of that area, morphological features, etc.). Then we can move on to things that are still physical but need to be understood in terms of timelines, such as flow of people, flow of traffic, etc. From there, we can move on to the previously mentioned historical layer as well as to other similar layers. There is also a need to situate the project in a larger context, that of the climate breakdown, and understand that architecture can be a form of violence in the way that we extract materials from one part and bring them to another part of the planet in order to build more or less meaningful or meaningless structures. So the students need to understand this impact at the planetary level, including, in the end, the carbon footprint of every element that makes that building. Moving on, there are other types of analysis and studies of the site that can look at the predominant wind patterns, the pattern of the solar radiation and we can take them into consideration, for example in order to achieve a passive architecture.

3. Do you have any recommendations for students on how to approach a context in order to decode it?

I would like to highlight how important it is to visit the site. It is something that we take for granted, and many times the visit is done just once, at the beginning of the design process. So visiting the site as often as possible and trying to situate the project in that reality, that's one thing that I like to emphasize. Of course, there is this situation when you work on design competitions and you don't have the chance to visit the site. Then you try to make up for it by using other tools that will get you closer to the site, but none are as good as visiting the site.

The students need to inhabit a persona, that of an architect and not of a real estate agent. So, when they walk the site, they need to look at specificities and understand the site from that oblique angle that belongs to the architect, meaning that you don't always look from a frontal perspective or from the best perspective, but you must develop a 360° view, you try to get inside, to inhabit the site.

The other thing that I will strongly recommend to students is to build a site model. It can be built at various scales and the tendency is to use a 1:500 or 1:1000 scale. However, at the University of Toronto we experimented with a series of site models that were at 1:100 or even 1:25 and I think those really helped students to inhabit the site and to understand it.

4. For coherence to be achieved, which factors determine the relevance of an analysis in a particular context?

I would say that in order to be coherent and perhaps honest and in line with your own ideas, you might need to become a bit stubborn and not let go of that specific understanding you derive from working with the context. As a parenthesis, by stubbornness I do not refer to a highly authored idea, but to a good design idea sustained by a deeper understanding, an idea that bears a high degree of legibility.

In my pedagogy, I am indifferent to what path, stylistically, the students are taking with their project; my aim is to help them stay coherent. It means that every project in the university is an opportunity to test different perspectives and different takes on architecture. So it's important, from the very beginning, to establish your standpoint and how to work with it in order to achieve a well-sustained position. Let's say that, in the case of a specific site, you decide to keep all of the vegetation, for example all of the trees on the site; this might create an absence in architecture that actually needs to be taken all the way to the limit and in a manner that might end up creating spaces that are not absolutely comfortable for the users. Suddenly, you do recognise that there are other entities that need to make use of that architecture. Thus, you need to remain somehow stubborn, but also generate a form of compromise.

Students need to understand that architecture is complex, but not in an overwhelming way. It's complex because it's made out of many layers, or many parts. You might privilege one part, or one layer, but you still need to have a comprehensive view over what you are doing and be able to present it coherently. That doesn't mean that you must have arguments for everything that you do, as you might end up into a zone that reduces architecture to a computational and artificial form of generating projects, purely parametric. It is, however, sometimes recommended to post-rationalise your own process rather than thinking that you need to be fully rational from the beginning. Answering questions like: What is the precedent or the image that inspired you? or What is the story behind what you did? might be very helpful in this regard.

5. Is there a specific parameter of context analysis that you regard as particularly important?

Concrete site elements, programmatic parts, and the subsequent tensioned relationalities are important parameters, in my view.

I think it's quite visible in most of my projects that they are informed by a direct way of working with the context. There are examples where a certain view corridor that needs to be maintained on the site creates tensions that inform the design, or a series of trees that need to be protected become the elements that actually give shape to the building. In a way, I am absolutely at peace with letting the site author the project.

In general, I tend to understand the project in two parts, the first part being the ground floor and the second part being the rest of the building. The ground floor is the one that starts to inhabit all of the tensions of the site, and of the context; it's a somewhat messier entity. As you move up from the context, you get into a more generic form of architecture.

[5.4] Giovangiuseppe VANNELLI

Architectural and Urban Design
Department of Architecture /
University of Naples Federico II /
Italy

Given that the word “complex” etymologically refers to intertwining, the elements of investigation that corroborate the definition of a complex approach to architectural design are those that most open up further scenarios, that go beyond the limits of the project area, that involve further stakeholders, that project into a future that is all to be designed.

1. Given the complexity and breadth of context, what does “decoding a context” imply?

In order to answer these interesting questions, I feel it is necessary to share some premises.

First premise: I agree with the proposed, far from self-evident, assumption “context is something that must be decoded”.

Second premise: we refer to a particular educational context, namely “the final years of study, especially during the diploma project”. I understand this phase as a bridge between education and research (conducted both individually, through professional activity, and within an institutional framework, at research centres and universities).

Third premise: the aim is to “identify strategies” or approaches and we might also add methods. In this sense, I believe that the argument changes in methodological terms depending on the order in which the following concepts are considered: context, place, theme.

In fact, the design activity in the studio generally starts from a project brief provided by the tutor. This brief (which underlies the project demand) can be provided in three ways:

_Starting from the proposition of a theme, a place (or a series of places) is identified whose architectural design will require a broader understanding of the context in which it is located.

_Starting from the proposition of a context, an emerging theme (or a series of themes) will be addressed through the design for a specific place (or a series of places) identified as strongly representative of the contextual and thematic framework.

_Starting from a place (or a series of places) proposed as the object of design experimentation, a reference context needs to be identified in relation to which an emerging theme (or a series of themes) will be chosen for exploration.

Respecting these three possible scenarios, the question What does “decoding a context” imply? finds partly different answers, not so much with regard to the elements to be investigated, which are listed in continuation, as to the possible order of investigating them: morphology, history, ground, perimeter, ownership, time. These represent, in my opinion, a common basis to which further and specific elements can be added depending on particular contexts, places and themes.

_Morphology: understanding morphological structure. The investigation of elements, geometries, measurements, proportions, typologies, hierarchies, relationships and conformation processes that give a rule – even in those contexts where the latter seems to be completely absent – is essential in order to proceed in design experimentation that interprets, to some extent, the context.

_History: understanding the history of a given territory and its architectural and urban features. In my opinion, the physical and intangible heritage of a project site must be put at the basis of design experimentation, even if one intends to question this heritage to the point of denying it or reversing its trajectories.

_The ground: understanding the topographical shape of a site and its characteristics in terms of risks. The shape of the ground and the risks of the project area are, in my view, indispensable elements of the project. These can play an important role in relation to the architectural composition and more generally the typology and archetypes to which one decides to refer.

_The perimeter: understanding and questioning the definition of a perimeter that is itself a part of the project to be designed. The investigation of a context – hence its description and subsequent interpretation – must in any case go far beyond the perimeter of the project site.

_Ownership: understanding the ownership and constraint regime of a given site. The functional programme and compatible uses are to be understood in relation to ownership and constraints in order to propose design experiments that interpret the needs – evident or implicit – of a stakeholder system.

_Time: understanding the temporalities of a study site. The temporalities of ongoing processes, transformative forecasts, and possible changes over time of the project itself are all central to the design proposal.

From what has been said so far, it is clear that I mean by context first and foremost the physical one – with its forms, its measures, etc. – but also those intangible dimensions that have tangible effects on the project.

2. Could you elaborate on the contextual categories and parameters that a student should consider as part of a complex architectural approach?

I always invite students to understand how important their role – as future designers – is politically. I would like to make it clear that the term "political" is never used here referring to a party, but rather in the higher sense of the term that pertains to the *pòlis*.

From this perspective, I consider it essential – also within a complex vision of educational activity intertwined with research and university's third mission – that students regard the project proposal they are asked to realise as an opportunity to uphold the expression of certain values.

For these reasons, I encourage students to study a context with the aim of giving back to it visions that interpret it also by proposing major modifications, but

always well-argued and contextualised. For example, the given morphological structure of a settlement tells us about power relations or the socio-economic condition of the inhabitants and also about the ways of living, so the project can both confirm the status quo and subvert it, or propose progressive changes.

Furthermore, the main difference between an academic design exercise and a real-world project is the absence of budget limits (although these, too, must be interpreted according to the context studied, but they are certainly not binding). So I invite students to approach design experimentation as part of a complex architectural process where I require a "design vision" – more plausible – that is complemented and supported by "design forecasts" – more uncertain – that help to provide possible directions of transformation for the context and that can even guide urban policies. In certain respects, it is a way of verifying the possible impacts of the project proposal at the scale of the context through the project itself.

In conclusion, given that the word "complex" etymologically refers to intertwining, the elements of investigation that corroborate the definition of a complex approach to architectural design are those that most open up further scenarios, that go beyond the limits of the project area, that involve further stakeholders, that project into a future that is all to be designed.

In fact, while the design vision provides one of the possible answers in terms of forms and spaces to a certain project demand, the system of design forecasts – generally elaborated at a scale related to a broader context – opens up to uncertainty: it tells of possible stakeholder networks, describes possible incremental scenarios, simulates alternative conditions, reconsiders the perimeters of intervention, proposes stages of implementation of the project proposal and, almost always, ends up outlining new project demands.

It is evident that the relationship between design vision and strategic forecasts can be twofold. In some cases, the more plausible and precise design vision may be a trigger for a system of broader forecasts in space and time. In other cases, the more uncertain scenario may represent the objective to be pursued, which sees in the more plausible design vision a first demonstrative case. In both circumstances, it is fundamental, however difficult, to reason about the fallibility of the project and thus to have design visions that do not lose their meaning if the broader forecasts do not turn out to be achievable, but are instead reinforced by the eventual realisation of the broader scenario.

3. Do you have any recommendations for students on how to approach a context in order to decode it?

This question, I believe, requires a twofold answer whose parts obviously intertwine: one relates to the method and the other to the tools.

I consider it useful to conceive the educational project according to a schematic structure that, albeit representing a simplification, allows for comparisons to be made and differences to be defined. The structure to which I am referring

is proposed by Roberta Amirante and Emanuele Carreri (2014) in a collective volume entitled *Atlante di progettazione architettonica (Atlas of Architectural Design)* and sees in a sequence of design phases a possible structure of the didactic activity (particularly that of the studio): project brief, transcription, inscription, description and narrative.

In my opinion, the design phases represent a useful strategy for understanding how to structure the decoding process of the project context. In the first phase, the tutor provides a project brief – as outlined in the first answer – which opens up many possible transcriptions. Generally, the transition from project brief to transcription is mediated by a progressive approach to the project site, which is understood first of all on the basis of the context. In addition to the tutor's guidelines, there are technical requirements (such as superordinate planning), contextual conditions (for example, the characteristics of the territory or the resources it offers), and cultural factors (such as the student's own background but also the system of design references that they have built up over time). All of these elements gradually gain space in the design process that starts from a careful knowledge of the context in terms of form, character and atmosphere. In this sense, as regards tools, the study of plans, zenith images and historical representations, urban sections and transects must be combined with field study. In fact, the on-site visit is most of all the moment when the future design professional can take possession of the place, can discover perspectives, can discuss with and observe those who live there.

With reference to the design phases, it could be said that, following the site visit, the project brief is redefined and reformulated by the student, and this leads to the transcription. The latter could be considered the hypothesis phase: students are called upon to make hypotheses that interpret the multiple requirements, also establishing a hierarchy of the contextual elements that they decide to take into consideration through the design process. A further useful tool in this phase is the collage, which can be understood as a non-fixed construction of imagery, a catalogue of elements or an illustrated glossary. This tool allows the status quo of the project site to be combined with other images and suggestions, references and abstract models.

Inscription is the subsequent phase. Between these two phases, the hypotheses are debated, represented and verified, being constantly rearticulated into design proposals that give formal expression to the initial system of requirements. In this phase, the tool of the physical model is extremely useful to verify volumes, ratios, distances and it is always intended as an operational working tool that can also serve to render time-based work. Inscription leads to the description phase once the preferred design hypothesis has been set and developed in depth.

Finally, narrative is the last of the five project phases. It closes one process in order to open up several others, especially in the educational field where the narrative of project proposals is addressed to local actors, i.e. the communities living in those places or other stakeholders.

4. For coherence to be achieved, which factors determine the relevance of an analysis in a particular context?

Referring also to what has been said so far, I believe that the consistency of a design proposal should be checked in the narrative phase in relation to the project brief and the design question.

The often uttered phrase "No Right Answers to Wrong Questions" is almost always true in architecture. The most interesting projects usually arise from well-formulated project demands or good interpretations of them. Therefore, the project demand is the first real project. And it is precisely in this sense that the university, through both research and didactic experimentation, can provide an important contribution.

Furthermore, if it is true that a project is a political action, then coherence is always relative as the point of view or factors exposed change. What I find important, therefore, is for students to start the design transcription phase after a clear statement of the requirements they decide to lay at the basis of the design process. This introjection of the design brief makes it possible to have a clear outline for the project and can be considered as the system of factors through which to verify and evaluate the coherence of the projects themselves.

5. Is there a specific parameter of context analysis that you regard as particularly important?

The two parameters of contextual analysis that I particularly like to investigate and then propose to my students are one physical and the other immaterial: ground and time.

Ground allows me to experiment in terms of the relationship between architecture and geography. Working with the ground allows me to work with operations such as excavation, incision, soil filling. Moreover, this interpretative key of contextual analysis often calls into question the relationship with infrastructures and entails a gradual construction of the access, which generally becomes a threshold space that is much wider than the plateau of a stereometric volume.

When thinking architecture from the ground up, the project is conceived by manipulating the form and moving through the context.

Such a process of construction of the form enables us to direct, to favour viewpoints, to disappear in order to enhance certain elements of the surrounding landscape, to contextualise forms and models in their transformation from the global to the local level.

Moreover, working with the ground almost always leads to an expansion of public space and this induces even more dialectical work with the context, with its masses, with its distances, with its material features. It is no coincidence that this analytical and design work starting from the ground is increasingly frequent in projects where it is necessary to build within the built environment.

It is evident that the design interpretation of the ground in this way is only possible when specific orographic conditions occur and in relation to a range of functional programmes. Yet these are the conditions in which – by chance or out of interest – I often work.

In addition, I often work in education and research on complex issues where time becomes a contextual element of the project. Analysing the context by understanding its temporalities is, for example, necessary in one of the research areas I work on most: post-disaster. Understanding the temporalities of destruction, reconstruction, historical and archaeological permanencies, and temporary post-earthquake artefacts, for example, is an analytical action that has direct implications for the project.

This is also true in the case of complex functional programmes in which it is necessary to understand the transformative dynamics of the context and therefore the temporalities of the different project strategies that must eventually trigger gradual transformations, building new imaginaries through projects that are implemented over time and that are rooted in a context that is never only physical.

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Each studio at UAUIM has the freedom to pursue objectives of architectural education through diverse approaches and methods. Within a framework assignment and following deadlines that require the development of specific content up to the final submission of the project, each studio sets its own goals and, in doing so, may emphasize and frame certain steps or aspects in different ways.

With regard to decoding context, the premise was that reading, analysis, synthesis and interpretation of a particular context, irrespective of the studio or its philosophy, should be transposed into the project, contributing to its foundation. The results, visible in the final work, may differ greatly depending on the overall project – its context, the issues addressed, the student's personal understanding, the pursued scenario or vision and so on. However, the way different teachers approach context decoding in their studios is a subject worth exploring, and discussions on this topic can prove highly fruitful. Thus, as part of the Scholar Architect 2024 project, two round tables were organised to identify the fundamental aspects and strategies of context decoding employed by UAUIM teachers, regarded not only as a means of site analysis but, more importantly, as a way of understanding context (as defined in the first chapter of this volume).

The lively discussions at both round tables – transcribed and adapted for publication – underline that, beyond differing didactic approaches and methods, the final architectural project is expected to demonstrate the existence of a coherent logical, narrative and visual thread, linking context decoding (as part of the research process) to the design outcome.

[6] UAUIM INSIGHTS. Round Tables

[6.1] ROUND TABLE no. 1

08.10.2024 / Bibliohub / UAUIM

1. Bearing in mind context scales (from local to international) and the multitude of contextual dimensions (from the historical to the social and cultural but also the climatic, symbolic or virtual, alongside many others), what determines the selection of scale and of the relevant dimensions for studio/diploma projects?

Lorin Niculae

In the studio, I usually tell students that the scale at which we consider context has nothing to do with a metric scale, but rather with a human, 1:1 scale.

This is the scale at which the object interacts with a user through the details you can touch. Going further, the 1:10 scale is the scale at which architecture interacts with 10 users. At the 1:100 scale, we see how the building, the object interacts with 100 users. And we could follow this thread up to the geographic scale, the scale of national territory. So the link to context scale has to do with the number of users the architectural object is meant to serve through its concept and the programme we adopt. This link seems important to me because it moves the discussion away from figures, which can be opaque and elide the human factor, to the very idea of the people whom architecture helps in a given context.

Magda Stănculescu

We've started an experimental project this year, in which we try to determine this scale and the relevant dimensions together with the students. We take the first steps in decoding and, starting from several dimensions provided by us, we direct the students to brainstorm, to identify the relevance of each dimension, to determine the area for analysis relevant for each of these and to justify the conclusions they've reached. In order to determine the area to be analysed, for example, we ask them if on enlarging the scale they'd still obtain significant data.

What interests us is for them to find parameters that are suited to their inclinations but that also lead to conclusions in the analysis. This is a challenge until the diploma project because they often draw highly expressive analyses, but they don't reach any conclusions; not having reached conclusions, they can't provide a diagnosis; in the absence of a diagnosis, they don't know how to solve the situation at the site. Beyond the in-depth understanding of analysis parameters, from the measurable to the non-measurable ones, the conclusions are also very important: we can't move forward without them. We suggest to them that every analysis board should contain a minimum of conclusions, in keywords that capture the essence. Even this process is at first fairly complicated for the students: drawing partial conclusions from the analyses and then formulating interconnected ones. When this entire objective process is finished, the affective analyses will emerge, which very much depend on what each of them perceives, how much they empathise with the users, with the place. And these lead to different conclusions.

It's essential that they understand the whole process, but in order to obtain a very good project, they should rather begin from the end, I mean, from the affective analysis, which highlights what seemed special to them, those elements that

not everyone sees in the same way. This is when the project succeeds in also illustrating an interesting trajectory.

Vlad Eftenie

I've noticed two attitudes. First of all, the more we want to analyse the city at a larger scale, the more the ego's temptation increases to imagine that the respective project will be extremely important for as many people as possible. On the other hand, architectural experience shows that objects are also transformed through usage. We can't design how the respective building will be perceived after 5 years, 10 years, after 20 years. See the Guggenheim effect where a museum – a programme we often teach in the studio – has become a subject of global importance, actually, in architecture. So I think we should reconsider this selection of perimeters of analysis through zooming in and zooming out. Perhaps we should think of the city in the form of scenes or moments or sequences leading to this zooming in or zooming out. This kind of perspective should be kept in mind even after project completion because only from there can a very well-founded discussion begin. Perhaps we could even imagine the life of the respective edifice if it were built.

Alexandru Călin

I think there's a difference between a studio and a diploma project, first of all in terms of what is at stake, of its extent. The correct scale of the diploma project is given by the chosen approach and we have two main types: 1. Some projects start from a site and seek to solve a problem at the urban level, a situation in a particular place; function and usage become of secondary importance. In this case, a certain scale of analysis is selected at which the problem is solved. 2. Some students intend from the very beginning to develop a specific architectural programme and so they try to find a suitable site for it. In this case, the scale of analysis will be adjusted to the programme and the identified conditions, so the point of departure is somehow reversed.

In studio work, the stakes are different because things are preset to some extent. Usually, studio projects have a clear theme, they have a function that is fairly well-established through the brief so the scale of the area to be studied is then determined in relation to the complexity of the project.

In any case, the discussion is linked to what the project aims to achieve from the very beginning: if it aims to solve a situation or to contribute a new function. The two scales may in fact be different and I think the scale of the analysed context is determined in relation to this.

Vladimir Vinea

There are two terms here that mean different things: one is "dimension", which refers rather to a theme or issue being explored, and the other is "scale".

With diploma projects, we often notice that students don't set these scales correctly in relation to dimensions and the jury cannot tell, in fact, which are the fundamental characteristics of the context because the transition from the city scale to, let's say, the immediate neighbourhood of the site isn't explicit. Apart from the transition from one scale to another, with rules that can be learnt, one

must also learn to sense the city, to feel when there are greater or smaller breaks in the fabric, variations of urban density that determine, each time differently, the need to do these successive cuts... It's not actually an algorithm. The conclusion would be that they need to explore the city more, on their own, and that they should put together this exploration (which also exercises their intuition in reading the city) and what they learn in urban planning courses (the principles of defining area delineations across successive scales).

Magda Stănculescu

Defining the limits has consequences, actually, and this isn't well understood, not really. Often, they do a circular delineation because it looks great, but this cut doesn't establish clear boundaries, it's not correlated to the study and to where it stops. Or they make the cut in the middle of the street although it might have been relevant to capture both fronts. It depends on what you are studying, but you should be consistent.

Vladimir Vinea

Yes, they need to realise that, for example, if they put a human subject at the centre, the limit of the analysis should never be in the middle of the street because you, as the person standing in the middle of the street, perceive both fronts and so the limit would necessarily be somewhere at the back.

Anda Sfinteș

In the case of literature reviews, we say that when you stop finding new information, you can stop studying. I wonder if we could find a similar rule for delimiting context?

Cosmin Caciuc

I don't think it would be possible to stipulate a rule that can be applied from the beginning, When framing the brief or at least within the student group, especially in year II, we have the difficulty of providing a study area, which we select in a seemingly random manner. We generally start from a focus point or the experience of having walked through the area. This, somehow, makes the relationship to the space be limited by the body. The sense of setting limits is trained intermittently: even if we set them by following a rule (such as the rear property lines or the middle of the street), at some point it might cease to matter. We might have to extend the limit of the study area because we've discovered something in the course of our experience; or to shrink it because the initial cut is no longer relevant. We had this situation last year, with the year III students, when we were working in Bucharest's old city centre and we provided a perimeter of analysis. Then, for us, the limit of the old city centre really didn't matter. The area of interest was eventually determined after walking through, following some questions and the actual experience. So everything we had provided at the beginning became invalid.

Many books have been written on the theme of defining a region and its relevance. Urban geographers say that, however small and narrow-focused a place may be, it is linked to a global context at a given moment. A pandemic may reach that place and then you become preoccupied by issues on a planetary scale ...or you refer to other scales for historical, environmental or cultural reasons, bearing in

mind the migration phenomenon or anything that happens outside and has an impact on the place. Then, these limits become debatable and are born, in fact, from the very process of design. This is very difficult for students to understand, they think it's something vague and they'd like us to deliver a methodology ...but I, who've worked a lot with methodologies, start doubting them after a year or two.

Lorin Niculae

What you're saying is true! In general, if your research is genuine and truthful, the investigation methods you start from undergo modification and you have to adapt to the situation. For example, you can define the area by its streets, by the rear property lines; this way, it may be more relevant to view that area as the sum of acts of appropriation and ownership claims. You can move on to anthropology and bring anthropology into the realm of architecture, which can be very fruitful and can change the perspective. It's important that everyone should define their own tools and these should be coherent within the totality of the thinking proposed. I think that we, as a studio, should not, as you say, close down students' thinking, we shouldn't give them methodology with capital M which, once mastered, they can apply for the rest of their lives and thus solve the problem of context. On the contrary, we should teach them how to discover their own sensitivity and their own tools attuned to it so they can put themselves in the work they'll do; only then will their humanity be transposed into architecture. Otherwise, everything becomes mechanistic, it becomes a craft that we teach, and architecture is not a crafts school.

Melania Dulămea

It's very important for students to understand that there is no recipe for analysis and that analysis is, in fact, part of their thinking process and that it shows an individual way of relating to a theme that they define.

The aim of analysis is to help you establish the hierarchy of priorities linked to the intervention. I think that analysis must be seen from two points of view: of examining how the proposal affects the city and then of defining the area that imposes some constraints on the site where one intervenes. There is permanent fluctuation between the two: there is a need to extract data, then to test them and see how they'll be changed through the intervention.

I'd add something else connected to the process because I think that studio projects relate differently from diploma projects to context analysis. Over the years, in the studio, I've tested many ways of working with the students at the analysis stage because I see it not only as a step in building the argumentation of the proposal, but also as an opportunity for student interaction, for getting them to know one another by pursuing research on a common theme. I tested working with the students by dividing them into teams, on the basis of study criteria, and then putting all the information together and creating a kind of collective, group analysis; we also worked with the set-up where each of them did individual analyses. The advantage of studio projects is that you can show them, in fact, how analysis is carried out, going much further than could be accomplished by a single person, and in this way, they test several ways of conceiving such an analysis, which they can begin to personalise in the course of time. In the

diploma projects, context analysis seems less in-depth, perhaps because in the studio projects they have a very well-established framework and rhythm and interaction is much more intense, whereas there are breaks in their work on the diploma projects.

2. Decoding the context is a process that implies various steps (from a first reading of the site to understanding the context), but also different complexity levels depending on the year of study. For a correct differentiation across the study cycle, we should ask, first: what expectations do we have from a student at the diploma level when they present the context and how they have decoded it?

Letiția Barbuică

In the diploma project, before getting to decoding, students must choose a site. This choice is a very difficult step for them to take, especially since the chosen site and the issues raised must be sufficiently stimulating and spur them towards the analysis of different dimensions. I agree with Vlad, one must zoom in and zoom out and the more questions you ask that create the need for analysis at a larger, intermediary, smaller, detailed scale, the richer and more complex the project becomes.

Alexandru Călin

The diploma project should probably lead to a much more complex research area than the mere resolution of an architectural programme. You get to solve it, of course! In the list of submissions, we see many projects that adopt from the start a purely functional solution – three-star seaside hotel, Crevedia winery – while other projects address an urban situation with a complex theme, where the ultimate object is not defined, but you see an understanding of the situation, an understanding of urban dynamics that leads you to the conclusion: Yes, given this entire situation, it's worth designing a sports hall! ...which eventually also requires a solution in terms of function. This is actually how you solve a situation and you demonstrate that you understand several dimensions: of decoding a physical context, a historical context, a social context, a larger built context, of decoding theoretical issues... and you have a well-argued answer. So the expectations, in the foundational study – pre-diploma – diploma sequence, consist in understanding a theme that you present in a much more nuanced and sophisticated manner than the mere functional insertion of an object, whatever its characteristics.

Cosmin Caciuc

I think it's essential for the process to be fuelled by a cultural issue. Even when speaking of an architectural programme like the hotel, you can start from that without putting it in a test tube. Because hotels are places that are lived-in – you've seen and experienced them and you can ask some questions about them. For example: *How can you be a tourist nowadays?* What does tourism actually mean? How many types of hotel are there and what kind of experience

do they offer? Do these hotels ruin places or don't they? Are there other types of accommodation? All these questions should be addressed in the presentation because otherwise the jury will ask them. The jury's first questions aim to establish if your approach is valid and what your process has been like, first of all culturally, because referring to culture means that you definitely understand the place in a particular manner. And so, no matter how we play it, we get to places and experiences and to the founding cultural dimensions. Everything else comes after.

Many theory books revolve around visual, cultural, social and anthropological dimensions that, albeit different, are often intertwined, and it's impossible to justify why something belongs in one category and not another. I think that place can always naturally generate its categories. With a minimum of culture, you can set some modest dimensions in relation to which to orient the entire project and this seems more natural than something imposed from the outside. Going back to tourism, we can create a linkage to places by delimiting an area that interests us intellectually. For example, we can think about a Greek island that rejects tourism or about a different area of Europe that no longer tolerates tourists – I'd make this the issue. So I wouldn't formulate the problem of the hotel, I wouldn't wonder what it will look like, but how I confront this extraordinary situation: Why does a community reject tourism? Why is a saturation point reached although tourism has brought prosperity... or What is the harmful aspect of a consumer society? What does harmful mean? What is consumer society? I've not heard a student present this kind of approach. They just solve the programme...

Alexandru Călin

As projects grow in scale and intricacy from early to later years of study, the problem of decoding context, context scale and the complexity of dimensions for analysing and understanding context should also reach a higher degree of sophistication. In year VI, we assume they have sufficient professional maturity to choose by themselves the important dimensions of analysis for the site they want to work on.

Whether they want to solve a function – of course, it's desirable there should be more to the project than this – or whether they want to solve a problem of the site, limits can in fact differ depending on the contextual dimension being analysed. If we talk about functional elements: What functional references are there for the programme they eventually solve? What urban features could influence the site and the programme? At the same time, the proposal becomes an element that influences the context and, depending on the scale at which it has an impact, how far or how close should the analysis go? Sometimes, certain dimensions cannot have a limit or the dimensions have different limits. This isn't functional analysis, but an analysis of built fabric. How far do we take the limits depending on site, programme and place in order to create reference points and achieve integration in that place, that district, that neighbourhood, that city? It depends. Then, there are the immaterial dimensions that we couldn't work without because architecture is and must of course remain a cultural act. I'm referring to the social, cultural, historical dimensions.

In year VI, you expect them to come prepared to discuss things at a different level both from the point of view of content and of working methods.

Justin Baroncea

In the end, we wonder why we do all these things? Because when we chose this profession we thought that the field we selected would help us express ourselves. This is why I start to analyse, why I start to search for the place, the context. The context is a pretext, and so is the programme, and the client. It's a pretext! Architecture is my instrument of self-expression, through which I express what is in my mind and try to lay on the table what's circulating through my synapses. If it weren't the case, a brilliant engineer, together with a sociologist, together with an anthropologist and with a historian would be capable of putting together a better project than the architect. And I'm not at all convinced they could because they have no expressive process to sustain them. Solving the challenges of a site, however well you may analyse the context, is not sufficient. It's far too little. We must succeed in persuading students to find out what are the appropriate tools for their self-expression.

Lorin Niculae

I don't agree. I don't think the context can ever be a pretext. For me, context is something very important, which must be present in your project, a project that, of course, needs to be expressive as well. You express yourself and you are a creator, but the context is no mere pretext.

For example, a hospital you have to design represents a need. The beneficiary may be the City Hall together with the Ministry of Health, who have allotted money for a community that lacks a hospital. Of course, you need to integrate it into the urban fabric, relate it to a context. Yes, the context is a pretext because you, eventually, want to obtain expressivity out of that building as well, but apart from that, there are the people you must consider.

Justin Baroncea

I'm only saying that we always stop at the first part and we never get to the second part – self-expression. It's like we were afraid. In the second part, we are all very different and coming to an agreement seems almost impossible. Not one of us, if we were given the same project brief, with all the restrictions in the world, would do a similar project to someone else.

We tell students: "You must analyse the context!". They reply: "But why must we?" to which we answer: "Don't you want to obtain an architectural project? Do you want to stop merely at solving problems?" Do we want to obtain something beyond solving problems, solving plans? Where is architecture in all this?

[6.2] ROUND TABLE no. 2

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1. From a first reading of the site and context to data interpretation, decoding can be approached in different ways that relate both to studio strategies and to individual visions. Still, could we indicate, by way of recommendation, a few points of departure for this process?

Andra Panait

It seems crucial to me that students should learn how to look at a place and how to ask the right questions in connection to it. This seems to me to be the difficulty in approaching a context, but these things contribute in determining the extent to which the future intervention can lead to positive changes in that place, to a positive impact. So students should always ask themselves how they can create value while keeping certain features of the urban fabric and how they can enhance the context at the same time.

Anda Sfinteș

Could we clarify what this "looking at" entails?

Andra Panait

The act of looking is a very subjective experience and so it's quite difficult to clarify. Of course, we can guide them and give them a series of points to keep in mind, but it's spectacular when the students notice something different from what you, as a teacher, have observed. When you give them a set of rules, or a set of conditions, you may end up losing precisely this unexpected part, the surprise element.

Emil Ivănescu

We find this looking to be so natural that the first things we say about it are fairly generic. In fact, every element of public space is a sign, it signifies something, and it's sometimes helpful if things are explained in different terms and taken to a more abstract level. For example, we see the street, the pavement, we see the fence; if we can make the students see the fence as a kind of boundary, they'll already start to read the site differently.

Dan Dinoiu

We've been doing an experiment in the studio for some time where, before getting to analyse the site rationally, we ask the students to decipher it intuitively (to discover "a secret"), to take a subjective attitude towards it (each through the prism of their own personality, their experiences, the music they listen to, their social habits and so on). Then, when you start conducting the rational analysis of the site, your intuition will already prompt you towards a particular approach. But it's very difficult to achieve a subjective attitude that is powerful enough to lead to an architectural project. In the end, this attitude should also mean something to the others, not just to you, and the project should be an illustration of the secret discovered at the site. Through this experiment, we noticed that students

place themselves, from the beginning, somehow above the programme: they aren't constrained by it and the conclusions reached by rational means, which they find much more difficult to overcome afterwards. Yet in the end, if your initial intuition was that the site should be a space of tranquillity or of freedom and you didn't obtain this in your project, it means you've made a mistake somewhere, even if the programme was well solved from the formal point of view. Perhaps this could be a way of getting to ask yourself some questions.

Melania Dulămea

You need to teach them to look and at the same time not to constrain them to look only in a particular way. It's important, especially during the first years, not to show them a way of looking that they can learn and apply mechanically. Instead, you need to try to stimulate their individual ways of looking so they can develop their autonomy.

Ana Machedon

Indeed! I've often noticed that students take the same kind of look at the context (through analyses made on circular or square delineations or whatever fits on the sheet of paper) and they even tell us: How can we reach different conclusions if this is what reality looks like? But even setting the limit of the analysed context is a project in itself since some things deserve to be analysed at one scale and others at a completely different scale. For example, the same parameter analysed from one side to the other of an entire boulevard looks different from its analysis on a shorter section; the respective parameter must be analysed up to the limit or scale where it becomes inconclusive.

Mihaela Pelteacu

I think the term "analysis" generates confusion because it's used slightly differently in the studio versus other courses or applications. Urban analysis as a tool of reading context differs from analysis as a creative act that we pursue in the studio. In light of this, in the latest project we first asked the students for a vision of the site and, only after the aim was set, to search in the context for elements that validated or contradicted this vision.

Vlad Eftenie

We, too – Magda, Dragoș and I – try to get our students in the studio to put more emphasis on this subjective, affective, observational side, on the emotional connection to the site. It's an extremely important source for what will become the conceptual process, the way in which you defend and justify a project. The student architect must unquestionably establish a relationship and a dialogue with the site and the context in order to be able to encode/decode/re-encode. But to decode, you need to know the code ...which we can offer, as a pretext for looking, just like at the Music Academy students are taught harmony, the musical notes and staff. After that, it's up to everyone how they use it all and what they compose. At the end of that look there are astonishments, wonderings and fabulous things which can inspire you. At the studio, we gave them about 25 parameters from which they chose for analysis what suited them, what they

liked, what gave them joy. We steered them, gently, in the good direction, and I think it worked.

Magda Stănculescu

Indeed, for the first project we explained the multitude, the variety of the types of analyses they could do and they worked in teams, searching for the essence within the context to justify a function. But in the second project, they were given a function and then the analysis had to be completed depending on individual vision and what each of them was after. Yet suddenly they reverted to recipes and to what was "on trend"; they didn't understand that analysis is something that must be generated, it isn't set in stone, but needs to be expanded to serve a purpose, to support a scenario you believe in or a valid vision; it's a living material.

Dan Dinoiu

We've also done the following exercise: over the last two years, we've asked them, in long-term projects, to work at first with 10 different spatial typologies on the site. With this set-up, where you work with typologies, you have the opportunity to develop your critical spirit, but the main advantage is that you get to analyse what happens to the site in different scenarios. And after you discover what you're actually looking for at the site, you start to analyse the built fabric, knowing that you need to obtain something specific, that you must emphasize certain perspectives, now that you've realised what matters. So the analyses, however classic, become much more nuanced. The scenario Magda was talking about will almost dictate the in-depth analysis of the site.

Anda Sfinteș

Through my inclination towards anthropology I sometimes tend to put people and their needs perhaps slightly above the architecture, but at the same time I encourage students to look at the context from their own perspective and through the lens of their own interests, hobbies, etc. This is why I wonder how we could balance these two different approaches. When students look at things subjectively and decode or understand the respective site from this individual perspective, how should they relate further, also to those they are building for? Sometimes, intuition may be enough and the built object may be integrated very well, it may function in the context. But it isn't always the case and so I return to the scenarios mentioned by Magda and Dan. I think that through scenarios, students might put themselves in the shoes of those they'd build for or who'd use the proposed building in one way or another. This way, they'd more easily understand that whatever they do and however personal their perspective, the respective object still has an impact on everyone, from passersby to active users of the building. Once they've understood this, I think they'd more easily fulfil the desideratum that Andra spoke about at the beginning, that of always producing positive change in the context.

2. If by decoding we understand not merely the reading and analysis of context but also processing information and formulating conclusions with an impact on the solutions, what role does such decoding play within a project? How might we expect it to develop in the course of a project?

Dan Dinoiu

After some first analyses of the site, at some point you start to develop a concept and then you get to reduce some of the analyses, to search and process further, you realise that you are still missing certain data... It seems to me that the elements you end up with at this stage are the most important; they are part of the explanation for the solution. These pieces of analysis done to justify the solution are the most relevant ones.

Andra Panait

Yes, after a set of basic analyses that we probably all do at the beginning, different ones take shape during the second stage of the project.

Dan Dinoiu

...and they give us answers that are much more grounded in the project context.

Ana Machedon

When might this second stage occur in the timeframe of the project?

Andra Panait

Actually, a project is a cyclical process where you keep testing hypotheses. When you reach a certain point, something may force you to take a step back and choose a different path, which may entail a different type of analysis, a different type of reading. So it could be at any time.

Ana Machedon

It could be until the end. It's actually the "nth" phase.

Andra Panait

In the end, it's about controlling the narrative. The discourse mustn't have logical breaks and it needs to be supported by images. So at the "nth" phase, you may notice you are missing a piece that justifies a certain part of the argumentation. This is why things can't be divided into an analytical and conceptual stage. They must be connected.

We did an exercise in the first project weeks – we asked the students to already write an argumentative text and this helped them put some ideas in order, to clarify the solution much better by choosing the appropriate words in the text.

Anda Sfinteș

I use a similar strategy in supervising diploma projects and dissertations: that of asking students to formulate an overall idea from the beginning, however vaguely sketched. It seems to me very important that the students understand what they want to do and why, that they determine the points they should reach to achieve that result. This way, they get to discard lots of irrelevant things and to concentrate on what matters, without fumbling in the dark in too many directions. Although it generally takes quite a long time before they settle on the aim, things evolve much more quickly after that; with clear objectives, you know what analyses you should move towards, where to take your research, what types of case studies to pursue, what to focus on and so on. In any case, from here, things still evolve in "nth" phases, but perhaps better directed ones.

3. What types of results, visible in the project, do we expect at the end of a context decoding process? More precisely: how could this decoding be reflected in a project, at the moment of defending it?

Vlad Eftenie

I think we expect to see mastery of the project theme and of the individual solution proposed. This gain of certainty about the solution can also demonstrate a good knowledge of the site issues. And why not, we also expect a self-critique of the presence of the project on the site because it may not bring Heaven on Earth, as the student would have initially wanted, it may even create new problems. Some issues might be resolved, while others might just start to appear. We rarely get to this point, but I'd consider it a gain for the students. In the end, what does the student gain on a personal and professional level from the assimilation and usage of certain codes?

Letiția Barbuică

Following some live presentations we organised under the title *Making of... Best Diploma*, we discovered that the presentation is very important. It somehow accounts for this narrative thread which, when it's appropriate and conclusive, is like a good story on the reading of which you'd exclaim: aha! It's not something you struggle to understand, to see what you're left with.

Andra Panait

If the question is asked in terms of deliverables and refers to what they must produce as such, then perhaps there should be a set of diagrams that explain the project, a strategy of development should be visible, or a vision for developing the site on which the intervention is made, in addition to a coherent narrative thread.

Letiția Barbuică

I expect that narrative thread to be able to transform into a story.

Emil Ivănescu

...but more than storytelling, the project should also speak by itself, without the story behind it. So it should contain those conclusive pieces which visually explain the solution.

Letiția Barbuică

Yes, it's true. The layout of the panels should create a storyboard.

Dan Dinoiu

The presentation should become a process leading to a kind of conclusion. The boards should be structured so as to convey a message about the project key: What is the specific context in which you have situated your work? What scenario are you introducing us into? What is the ambience like? And so on. And in the course of this argumentation you show plans, sections, facades, you don't fragment the presentation to fit them.

Anda Sfinteș

I, too, feel that there's most often a connecting piece missing, something to make the transition from what they analysed in the first stage, what they extracted from the site or any type of background research they've undertaken, to the solution. For example, when we get to the plan, is the fact that access is located in a particular place due to any specific cause?

Andra Panait

They need to show more clearly the relevance of the pieces and the diagrams they've studied and drawn in relation to the project. Each piece of research/ analysis must be directly relevant for the decisions they've made in the design.

Dan Dinoiu

They need to do some syntheses.

Andra Panait

Which is the piece that best describes the project? This also needs to come from them. It can't be imposed through the brief.

Ana Machedon

My opinion is that a good decoding of the context should lead to a distinct project. In response to the question we started from, I expect, in a jury session, to see projects that differ from one another and that are particularised.

Dan Dinoiu

I'd say that one of the problems, somehow connected to context, is that each student must set the level of ambition to be reached by the respective project.

If you design a philharmonic hall in Bucharest you must understand the level of ambition of this kind of building, in a European capital. You can't set about designing a concert hall now and look at Sala Radio, which was built in 1960; you need to take a look at what is happening in Vienna, in Budapest, in Istanbul at least, if not in Paris. Of course we can't compare ourselves to that, but at least the level of ambition should be around that mark. And then you have a little understanding of the context where you situate your project, not just in that place, but also in a broader cultural context.

The diploma project in architecture is a special, long-awaited moment – the culmination of six years of studies, but it is also charged with a large spectrum of emotions due to its complexity. The process of developing the diploma project is quite demanding since it assumes working with much more independence and, in most cases for the first time, the responsibility of choosing one's own site, programme and theme. The depth expected, from decoding the context to the narrative, is also much greater. A diploma project must convincingly demonstrate the overlap of various substrata in a coherent discourse.

All the projects presented in the following subchapters proved their consistent qualities by being substantiated through research and responding to the fundamental objectives outlined in the five volumes of this series. Thus, they remain good examples even for the themes of the forthcoming volumes.

Yet given the focus of this volume, the authors were asked to frame their projects by emphasizing the role played by context and its deciphering in the course of their research process. These projects, quite different in nature, showcase how decoding a context translated into the design in different manners, shaping distinctive approaches and grounding well-formed arguments.

[7] DIPLOMA RESEARCH

[7.1] STUDYING THE CONTEXTUAL NUANCES OF A SITE THROUGH PARTICULARITIES OF COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Andreea Diana ROMAN

This paper examines the intricate relationship between a site's contextual nuances and the systems that define its identity, functionality and evolution. Focusing on the Dutch city of Zaandam, it analyses how the current conditions of an environment are shaped by its historical, cultural and socio-economic layers. The findings highlight particularities of urban and architectural systems that contribute to the continuous production of meaning within the urban environment. The study emphasizes the necessity of addressing contemporary needs, which introduces an experimental dimension to the concept of a functional city. Such a city requires a delicate balance between maintaining a coherent representation of the existing urban fabric and incorporating the individualisation of new developments, an idea I applied in the project for the redevelopment of the city centre in Zaandam.

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INQUIRY, CONTEXT AND URBAN COMPLEXITY

Architectural research and semiotics function as a pivotal framework for facilitating dialogue between a new architectural structure and the surrounding society. Such a framework reveals the profound implications of design on the daily experiences and lived realities of citizens and it has been used as a starting point in the research undertaken during the development of my diploma project. As the final project of the Architecture Master's, it captured the complexities of the architectural programme and the specificities of a built environment. The results of this research were a theoretical paper on elements of identity in the structuring of the new centre and the project Hybrid Strategies in the Densification of Zaandam City Centre, presented during the 2023 viva sessions.

When Rem Koolhaas (2020) stated "I think I can make architecture as a journalist, (...) it is a profession without discipline. Journalism is just an assembly of curiosities, applicable to any subject" (p. 18), he sought to articulate his distinctive approach to architectural practice. This perspective encourages a broader examination of the role of research, which can be understood as encompassing the systematic investigation, analysis and dissemination of knowledge pertaining to the built environment.

Architecture, within this framework, operates inside the context of the urban landscape, subtly influencing the dynamics of the city while remaining integrated into its broader fabric. By engaging with the complexities of urban life, we acknowledge that architecture needs to address pragmatic values as well as to shape the qualitative dimensions of place.

I began the design process for my diploma project – consisting in the redevelopment of the city centre of Zaandam – by understanding the vocation of the site and its functional necessities. This understanding is cultivated through an opportunity study, which evaluates the site's potential and constraints, and through volumetric sketches and site surveys that facilitate the visualisation of spatial relationships and contextual integration. The approach to the site may vary significantly, ranging from bold, transformative gestures to subtle, discrete interventions, depending on the existing conditions and the intended impact. Regardless of the approach, coherence with the site's identity, as defined by its urban planning guidelines and contextual particularities, remains a critical consideration.

The Special Function of a Site in the Context of Globalisation

Urban life has always required strong focal points within the limits of the city. These elements are essential for preserving the continuity and recognisability of the urban fabric, which remains rooted in the city's identity. However, this raises the critical question: How do we respond to these urban, social and historical imperatives? The answer lies in adopting a critical attitude toward the city's existing and potential narratives. The specificities of the context are the sum of

the elements that confer its identity, thus defining its particularities in relation to the city.

In their dialogue, Rafael Moneo and Kenneth Frampton (1997) emphasize the importance of critical reading in architecture, particularly in the context of globalisation. They argue that the principles of the architectural discipline must be rooted in the identification and documentation of spatial configurations and urban conditions. This approach aligns with the ontological exploration of architecture, the nature of its being and the epistemological frameworks that define how we acquire knowledge about it.

The essence of understanding urban life and its intricate systems lies in the questions we ask, often without a predefined understanding of what we seek. Dilemmas and inquiries about how to intervene on the site drive the analytical process, transforming abstract ideas into tangible insights. For instance: How do spatial configurations influence urban conditions? Or: What defines the character of a place beyond its function? Such questions guide us toward an understanding of the urban fabric, in which architecture operates as both a backdrop and a catalyst for continuity or change.

One of the key considerations must be the extent to which these local characteristics are influenced by global thinking and the evolving needs of society. While knowledge of globalisation cannot be directly integrated into a contextual environment, it can provide a valuable perspective on how to leverage the specific characteristics of the place you work with. In the case of Zaandam, aesthetic characteristics and visual style were the main instruments in creating an architecture that continues the history of the place while simultaneously addressing contemporary needs.

Sources and Resources

Given that the resources at hand could be infinite, a clear understanding of what you are looking for must determine the suitable research method for each case. Key aspects must be examined at the correct scale to provide meaningful insights. The regional context helps in understanding broader urban dynamics and connectivity while the city's local image reveals how a site fits within its urban fabric and cultural landscape. Additionally, newly defined spaces must be assessed to determine how contemporary interventions influence social interactions and urban experiences.

The analysis of Zaandam integrated four methodologies so as to ensure a multi-layered approach to site analysis. This comprehensive strategy enabled a well-rounded understanding of the spatial, social and cultural aspects that define the identity of the site.

Field observations, photographic documentation and mapping techniques provided direct insights into spatial organisation, infrastructure and environmental features, allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of the site's character and functionality. Beyond theoretical and experiential approaches, the historical records, zoning laws and urban planning reports were examined in order to understand the regulatory influences on the site's evolution.

Architectural theory served as a foundation for site analysis, offering a framework to understand spatial organisation, urban development, and design principles. By referencing established theories, you can position a site within broader architectural trends, recognising spatial patterns, historical influences and their impact on the built environment.

Using phenomenology as a method to concentrate on a space's sensory and experiential characteristics provided insight into how to navigate the built environment given that individuals identify locations with experiences, feelings and memories.

Ethnographic study further enriched the analysis by focusing on the behaviours, traditions and practices of the community. Immersing yourself in the local context through interviews and participation in urban life allows you to capture narratives and interactions that define the space, assessing how it shapes identity and belonging.

The Paradox of Choice

Zaandam's urban design and development are deeply influenced by stylistic and spatial characteristics, which significantly shape how the city's transformation is perceived and understood. These elements determine how the debate on Zaandam's development is interpreted, influencing the overall effectiveness of its urban narrative.

When performing a contextual analysis of Zaandam, it was essential to differentiate between hard (non-negotiable) and soft (subjective) data, as outlined by Edward T. White (1983). Hard data involves objective elements like physical site characteristics, structural parameters and other quantifiable factors while soft data includes more interpretative aspects like cultural significance, user behaviour and emotional resonance. According to White, soft data forms a bridge to user experience, enabling behaviour patterns to inform design strategies that enhance human interaction with the space.

Furthermore, determining the value of different components of urban research required structuring arguments using three rhetorical concepts (logos, ethos and pathos) that became essential tools in structuring and presenting the collected data (Abell, 2010). Logos, which appeals to logic and reason, provided the evidence-based framework for the justification of urban design choices for traffic patterns, environmental sustainability measures, and for the assessment of the effectiveness of urban interventions in the way people use public space. Ethos, the ethical authority of those making decisions, served to build trust in the development process, maintaining proper standards in respecting the city's cultural heritage. Pathos, which addresses the emotional connection of the audience, evoking feelings like pride, nostalgia or community spirit, was relied upon in blending modern urban needs with historical references, engaging emotions that deepen the relationship between the city and its inhabitants (Norberg-Schulz, 1965).

A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO ZAANDAM'S CIVIC AND ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

Zaandam has undergone significant transformations over the past decades, with its evolution from an industrial hub to a post-industrial urban centre reflecting broader trends in urban development, such as the shift from manufacturing-based economies to service-oriented ones. The Inverdan urban development plan for the centre of Zaandam (Municipality of Zaanstad, 2006) serves as a prime example of how hybrid strategies can reconcile the need for innovation with local identity.

The city's urban fabric is characterised by a phenomenological approach, where architecture is experienced through the design of both indoor and outdoor atmospheres. These address the interaction between the user and the immediate outdoor space as well as the indoor navigation through the building. This interplay between genius loci and thematic design underscores the importance of creating a coherent urban identity while accommodating diverse cultural and functional needs (Ibelings & Van Rossem, 2009).

The temporal scale plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of events, their durations and the evolving perceptions of physical characteristics (White, 1983). Critical periods or processes that illuminate the contextual nuances of the site determine not only how long an event takes to occur but also how long its effects last, creating a continuous interplay between past, present and future. As time progresses, perceptions of physical attributes change, reflecting shifts in context, scale and significance that highlight the interconnected forces which define a site's identity. These issues, pursued in the study of the municipality of Zaanstad and particularly of Zaandam – its largest city – were the focus of my research.

Layers of Hard Data

Hard data layers are the tangible, non-negotiable elements that dictate the physical and legal parameters of urban development, involving the careful integration of various layers. These are often legally bound elements that dictate the structure of urban development and form the foundation upon which flexible, adaptive designs can be built, ensuring a harmonious blend of functionality, history and modern urban needs.

Historical Development and Industrialisation

Zaandam, a city located in the northern part of the Netherlands, has emerged as an integral component of the Randstad region, specifically of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (Fig. 1). Geographically, it is situated along the river Zaan, which has historically served as a vital transportation route, facilitating trade and industrial development. Over time, Zaandam has evolved from a small settlement into a significant industrial hub, and more recently, into a post-industrial city facing contemporary urban challenges such as the lack of public spaces (Helsloot, 2005).

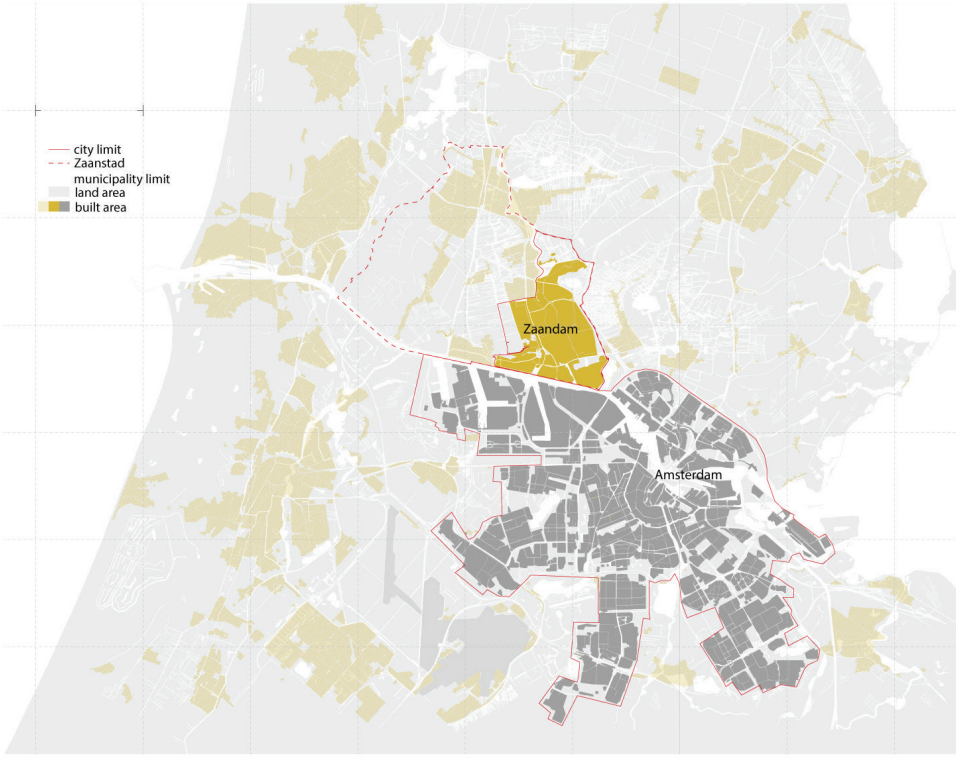

Figure 1. Zaanstad municipality within the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area.
Source: redrawn and adapted by the author from https://www.openstreetmap.org/

The origins of Zaandam can be traced back to its early settlement, which was marked by shipbuilding and the production of decorative motifs inspired by those found in larger Dutch cities. Its strategic location along the river Zaan made it a crucial link between Amsterdam and the North Sea, fostering its growth as a trade and industrial centre.

Industrialisation began in the 16th century, driven primarily by windmill-powered industries specialising in oil and wood production. By the 18th century, the city of Zaandam had developed into one of Europe's earliest industrial centres, boasting more than 650 operational windmills. This era of industrial prosperity was, however, interrupted by frequent flooding of the dikes, leading to a period of stagnation. During this time, plans were laid for the construction of a railway across the North Sea Canal, which would later play a pivotal role in the city's economic transformation.

The 19th century brought significant changes to Zaandam, as the advent of steam engines and the opening of the North Sea Canal shifted economic focus from water-based industries to land-based infrastructure. The construction of railways and roads further transformed Zaandam's urban fabric, leading to the densification of the city centre and the emergence of new residential neighbourhoods (Fig. 2). The revitalisation and expansion of the automated industrial sector began at the end of the 19th century, setting the stage for further urban development.

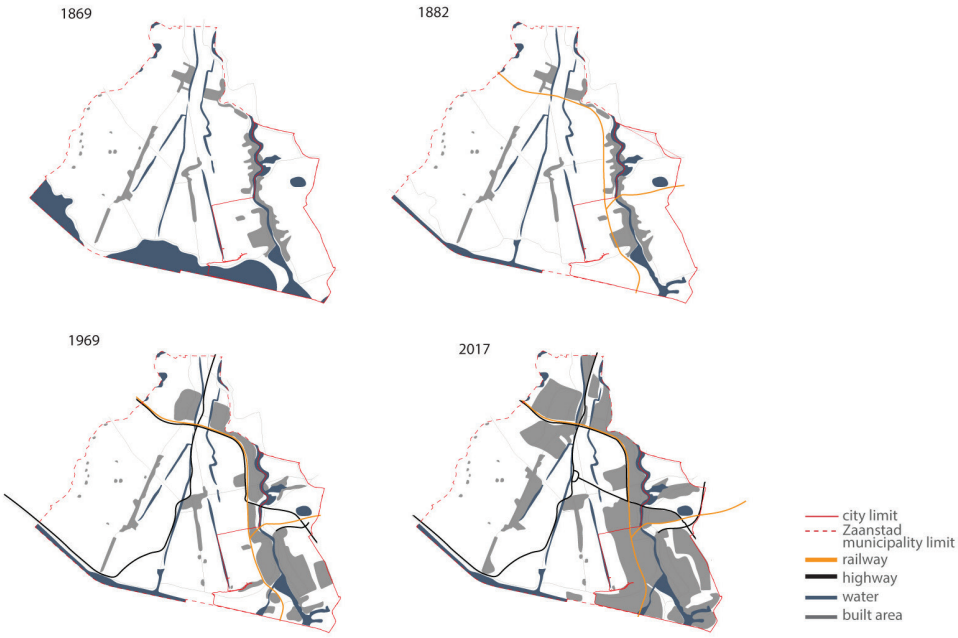

Figure 2. Zaanstad densification.
Source: redrawn and adapted by the author from https://www.oldmapsonline.org/

Post-Industrial Transformation

The 20th century marked a turning point for Zaandam, as the decline of traditional industries left it with a legacy of abandoned factories and underutilised spaces. The post-industrial period necessitated a rethinking of urban development strategies, particularly in terms of land use and architectural practice. The city of Zaandam could no longer expand outward due to natural protected areas to the west and a major highway to the east (Fig. 3). As a result, urban development shifted towards the efficient use of existing urban land within these natural boundaries.

Figure 3. Borders in the territory.
Source: redrawn and adapted by the author from https://www.openstreetmap.org/

The post-industrial era also brought about challenges related to living quality and population densification. The increased urbanisation of peri-urban areas, driven by improved mobility and economic benefits, led to migration to the Zaan region and a corresponding rise in population density. This period is characterised by a focus on densification strategies that accommodate the city's inhabitants while preserving the surrounding natural environment.

Zaandam's integration into the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area has further shaped its development. The city is now seen as an extension of Amsterdam, particularly in terms of industrial and tourism activities. The evolution of Zaandam can be divided into three distinct phases: the initial industrial phase dominated by windmills and shipbuilding, the automation of industry in the late 19th century and the current post-industrial phase, which focuses on addressing issues such as living quality and sustainable urban development.

Demographic Shifts and the Economic Transition

The significant socio-economic and demographic transformations in recent decades are characterised by population growth, economic shifts and urban redevelopment strategies aimed at fostering a socially sustainable development.

The Amsterdam Metropolitan Area and in particular the Zaan region have experienced population growth due to natural population increase and

migration. The city of Zaandam has become an attractive destination for both domestic and foreign migrants, leading to increased urban density and a rising demand for housing and community services. Amsterdam's structural plan (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2011) proposes that, by 2040, two thirds of new housing should be constructed within its metropolitan area, outside the capital itself. This policy underscores the importance of Zaandam as a key component of the broader metropolitan region, which can accommodate population growth while maintaining a balance between urban development and environmental sustainability.

The current situation of Zaandam is the result of a transition from an industrial economy to a service-oriented urban hub, where the creative industries have the main impact in driving innovation and economic progress. This situation has also urged a rethinking of urban space, with a focus on creating pedestrian-friendly environments and multifunctional urban areas.

One of the most important changes in recent years is exemplified by the Zaanse Schans district of historic windmills and houses. Together with the remaining factories along the river, it has become a major tourist attraction, drawing visitors as part of the broader Cycling Amsterdam area and contributing to the local economy.

The city's redevelopment strategies support this process by breaking the causal connection between form and function, as seen in modernist architecture, embracing flexible urban spaces that support interaction between the subject and the surface space of the buildings. As Gibson (1979) argues, the definition of surfaces determines how space is conceived. This approach is evident in the redevelopment of the railway station area, which serves as a cohesion point connecting the old city to new housing neighbourhoods and cultural clusters.

Restructuring the Central Area

Zaandam's industrial legacy is deeply rooted in its history, with the region having once served as a hub for heavy industries powered by windmills and water. However, the advance of new technologies and shifting economic priorities led to a decline in these industries over the past centuries. The remnants of factories and industrial sites, once symbols of prosperity, became stains on the urban fabric, necessitating a comprehensive redevelopment strategy.

The Inverdan Plan emerged as a solution to these challenges, aiming to transform the central area of Zaandam into a vibrant urban centre. The plan sought to wash away the industrial stains and create a new identity for the city, one that reflected its historical heritage while accommodating modern urban needs by creating a new urban centre that would serve as a gateway to the city, connecting its historical core with emerging neighbourhoods.

Sjoerd Soeters (2020), the architect behind the Inverdan Plan, emphasized the importance of using Zaandam's unique heritage as a foundation for its redevelopment. He argued that the city of Zaandam could only compete with other urban centres by embracing its own identity and architectural language. As a result, the new buildings and public spaces within the Inverdan area

were designed to reflect the Zaan region heritage, combining traditional and contemporary elements to create a hybrid urban environment.

A central feature of the Inverdan Plan was the development of urban nodes along the railway, which served as catalysts for public activity and economic growth. These nodes, strategically located around key transportation hubs, became focal points for social interaction, commerce and cultural activities. The plan's emphasis on hybridity reflects a broader trend in urban planning, where the integration of diverse influences is seen as essential for sustainable development.

The City at Eye Level

At the heart of Zaandam's urban experience is the concept of the city at eye level, which prioritises pedestrian-friendly environments and transparent urban spaces. This concept is reflected in the city's morphology, where the urban grid system of the city is employed as the foundational schema for the design of the city hall, transforming the large-scale building into an integrated element of the urban fabric.

The experience of public space is shaped by the phenomenon of horizontal landscape. An elevated eye level alters the perception of space, creating distinct experiences depending on one's position – whether situated atop a structure, within a valley-like space, or in an intermediate zone. The inclusion of a dominant tower element and the elevation of buildings on pillars to maintain public space at ground level exemplify this approach. The new "plinth" level is set at 7.20 metres, creating a dynamic relationship between vertical accessibility and public space. This approach integrates circulation nodes both inside and outside buildings, dissolving the traditional boundaries between public and private spaces. These varying perspectives offer different interpretations of the same spatial situation. As one moves through the environment, one experiences the transition from one space to another, with visibility limited to approximately 15 metres ahead. Within this range, architectural details become visible and each sequence of movement is framed by a preliminary space, creating a layered and dynamic spatial experience.

The anthropological exploration of place identity, attachment and dependence is achieved through architectural interventions that reinterpret traditional forms, such as the facades of workers' housing, while introducing variations in scale and asymmetrical compositions.

Edward Relph (1976), in his work *Place and Placelessness*, argues that places define our identity and that, without a sense of place, we would be completely rootless. This perspective examines how individual and social identities are shaped by our connection to specific places. It also seeks to address the architectural challenge of creating a substantial project without presenting it as an imposing, standalone structure. An illustration of this approach is the design of Zaanstad City Hall, located in Zaandam, conceived as a cohesive part of the urban fabric, blending seamlessly into the existing urban framework. The building is composed of distinct workhouses, each serving specific functions, interconnected by a central spine that mimics the role of a main street within the city's life structure, thus reinforcing the city hall's integration into the urban network.

Materiality and Aesthetics

Zaandam's architectural identity is deeply rooted in its historical and cultural heritage, prominently characterised by its traditional wooden houses, typically painted in green and black, with steeply pitched roofs that reflect the region's historical building practices. These structures, alongside significant industrial landmarks such as the De Adelaar factory, contribute to the city's unique sense of place. While the industrial heritage once posed challenges such as pollution and aesthetic discomfort, it has also left an indelible cultural legacy that continues to shape Zaandam's identity. The city's industrial past, despite its drawbacks, has contributed to its distinctive character, with elements such as the chocolate aroma from the Verkade factory and the juxtaposition of green wooden houses against the industrial skyline creating a nostalgic yet dynamic urban landscape. This interplay between tradition and industry has transformed Zaandam into an emblematic playground of architectural and cultural expression (Reinders, 2016).

In recent years, Zaandam's architectural evolution has embraced a pluralistic approach, reflecting shifting societal values and functional demands. This trend is evident in the design of contemporary buildings, where spaces are no longer monofunctional but instead integrate complex, multifunctional uses. The previously mentioned city hall exemplifies this shift, blending modern design principles with references to the city's historical context (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Zaanstad City Hall next to the railway.
Source: the author.

Koolhaas (1995) argues that the sources of a city's identity lie primarily in its past and historical context and advocates for a method of "systematic idealization, a systematic overestimation of what exists" (p. 208).

However, the integration of traditional and modernist elements in contemporary architecture has led to a repetitive and spatially ambiguous style, often perceived as a new traditionalism (Ibelings & Van Rossem, 2009) or a critical form of modernism (Witman, 2010). While this approach seeks to balance local tradition with innovation, it sometimes results in a superficial authenticity, where replicas of vernacular architecture are used decoratively on the exteriors of modern buildings. This practice, while visually evocative, often fails to fully respect the specific architectural language of the city, leading to a distortion of its traditional image. The Inverdan project, for instance, emphasizes the importance of maintaining a connection to the city's history and tradition but has been critiqued for not sufficiently enhancing the architectural quality of its outcomes.

The interplay of historical heritage, industrial legacy and contemporary innovation must be carefully balanced with a deeper understanding of the city's unique architectural language. As Koolhaas (1995) suggests, the systematic idealisation of existing elements can serve as a valuable method for urban identity formation, but it must be accompanied by a commitment to authenticity and quality in architectural practice. Ultimately, the creation of meaningful places that foster a sense of belonging and identity remains essential for both individual and collective interests.

Layers of Soft Data

The variable and adaptable factors, shaped through the design process, significantly influence the experiential reading of a place. While they are not always central to urban development, these elements play a key role in shaping the atmosphere and perception of the space. They can be adjusted or left unchanged depending on broader urban planning goals, creating a balance between immediate needs and long-term aspirations while reflecting the evolving social, economic and environmental contexts that define a community's experience of its surroundings.

Urban Development Philosophy

The Inverdan Plan blends trends such as mixed-use planning with the local architectural traditions of Zaandam. This hybrid model highlights a core principle of urban development: contextual sensitivity. Urban planners must ensure that new developments respect the historical identity of the city while also facilitating its economic modernisation. Drawing upon John Habraken's (1987) open building concept, the framework of the Inverdan Plan prioritises adaptability and flexibility, allowing urban spaces to evolve in response to changing social and economic dynamics. These instruments create environments that support both individual needs and collective aspirations, fostering spaces that encourage social interaction.

Placemaking: Crafting Meaningful Spaces

The transition from a production-oriented economy to one driven by creativity, knowledge and innovation has led to an increased emphasis on the role of pedestrians in shaping urban spaces. Historically, the city was structured around a clear division between residential and work-related zones. However, the shift away from car-centric urban models in contemporary urban planning acknowledges the importance of spaces where individuals can interact and engage outside of their primary work or home environments – commonly referred to as third places. Influenced by Jane Jacobs' (1961) vision in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Zaandam's urban spaces, such as public squares, provide an essential platform for social interactions and community engagement.

Drawing inspiration from the stylistic and volumetric characteristics of Western squares in cities such as Paris, Lyon and Barcelona, the urban environment provides models for creating open spaces that take into consideration both aesthetically and human-centred principles, with a focus on accessibility. The objective is to transform public spaces into dynamic urban living rooms that encourage community engagement and foster social connections. Research has shown that such transformations are essential in creating cities that are not only functional but also liveable and vibrant. Urban squares, in this context, serve as a stage of the city, offering structured environments where social interactions occur naturally (Fig. 5). These spaces facilitate physical interaction, connectivity and the formation of social bonds – fundamental elements that underscore the human scale of urban life.

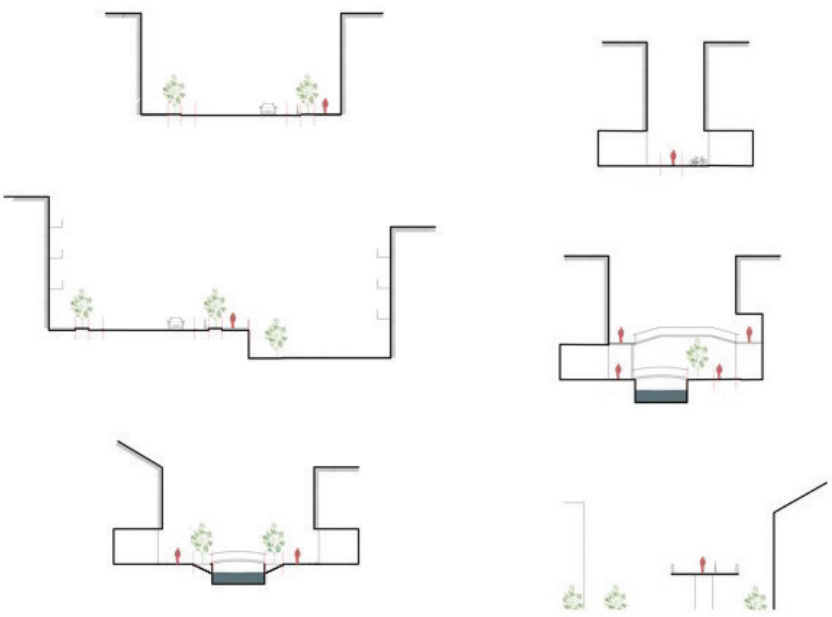

Figure 5. Pedestrian connections to the plinth in the city centre.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

The railway as a mode of transportation has been the most important factor in the area's connectivity in the evolution of the urban landscape. Even more nowadays, the car is being supplemented – and in some cases replaced – also by well-integrated bicycle routes. The station acts as the gateway for both residents and visitors, making it the focal point of efficient mobility (Fig. 6).

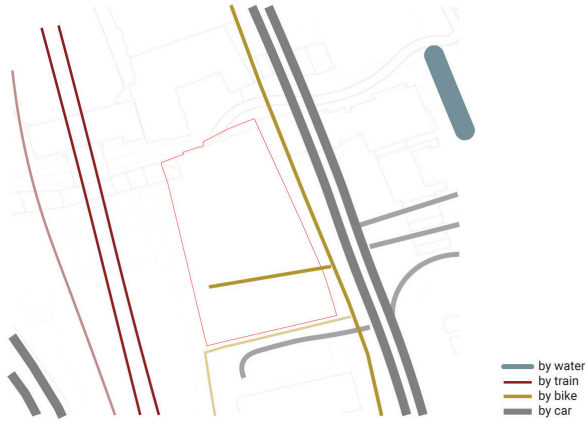

Figure 6. Transportation routes in the proximity of the site.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

The design of pedestrian pathways further enhances the accessibility of the site. Pedestrians are provided with two levels of crossing, each offering distinct experiences of the urban environment. The first level follows the ground plane, aligning with the construction of neighbouring sites to ensure seamless integration into the existing urban fabric. Above, at 7.20 metres, a second pedestrian level provides an elevated crossing, designed to connect the train station with the commercial routes that run perpendicular to the site. This elevated crossing helps create dynamic interaction between the transportation infrastructure and the main commercial activities in the area (Fig. 7).

Figure 7. Walkability in the proximity of the site.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Immediate Interventions and Long-Term Impact

Most iconic architectural projects often reach a scale that can be perceived as inhumane due to their overwhelming size. The plans for Zaandam, however, aim to use architecture as a form of language, extracting and emphasizing its fundamental principles. Within the architectural tradition, these elements carry intrinsic meaning and serve as a medium for communication. Architecture, in this sense, functions as a vernacular language – a reflection of the cultural and regional identity of a specific area. The goal is therefore to identify and incorporate this regional architectural language so as to create spaces that are recognisable and meaningful. While the challenges and methodologies may be modern, they remain deeply rooted in the concept of architecture as a communicative tool. The aspiration is to design spaces that evoke a sense of safety, comfort and belonging – places where individuals can gather, connect and enjoy simple pleasures, such as sharing a cup of coffee.

The concept of the 20-minute city emphasizes the importance of localising essential services like food distribution within neighbourhoods, thus reducing dependency on automobiles and promoting sustainable urban living. Such localisation was a mandatory requirement after World War II in Dutch cities. In this approach, the design process begins with the spaces between buildings since they define the character and functionality of the built environment. The quality of these interstitial spaces informs the design of the surrounding structures, ensuring the creation of pleasant and cohesive urban environments. However, it is important to recognise that architecture alone cannot resolve the complexities of urban planning. Instead, it must address the fundamental question of spatial dimensions and human-scale interactions, particularly those within the human range of vision. This perspective underscores the importance of designing spaces that are not only functional but also emotionally and socially resonant.

Figure 8. Routes through the city.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Furthermore, Zaandam's focus on cultural and creative industries aligns with Richard Florida's (2002) theory of the creative class. It underscores the significance of creative cities in attracting talented and innovative individuals, thus fostering innovation and economic progress. The city's efforts to create a vibrant cultural cluster, connected through an axis perpendicular to the river, demonstrate its commitment to supporting cultural interaction and social cohesion (Fig. 8).

Architectural styles that reflect local heritage and culture transform cities into stages for cultural expression and social interaction, emphasizing the role of architecture not just as a physical structure but as a cultural medium that connects people with their environment. The interplay between place, city, architecture and placemaking is essential in shaping urban life and creating spaces that resonate with the aspirations of their inhabitants.

BRIDGING ANALYSIS AND PRINCIPLES

A critical insight that emerges from this exploration is the distinction between a building and a city. While buildings are individual components of the urban fabric, a city is a complex, living organism shaped by social, cultural and economic dynamics. This understanding challenges architects and urban planners to think beyond the scale of individual structures and consider the broader systemic relationships that define urban life. Zaandam's transformation serves as an example of hybrid buildings and integrated functions, where the sum of parts transcends individual elements, fostering a collaborative relationship between urban space and its inhabitants.

The transformation of the urban centre reflects a complex interplay between historical preservation, civic engagement and contemporary architectural expression. As an administrative hub, Zaandam exemplifies the democratisation of public spaces, blending local and experimental tectonics to create a hybrid architectural identity. This duality is obvious in its architectural language, which balances the preservation of historical imagery with the integration of modern civic functions.

As you navigate the complexities of its urban design, you can see the ability to balance analytical rigour with creative expression, ensuring that the designs resonate with the people and places they serve. This practice underscores the idea that while rigorous analysis and scholarly precision are essential, there is also a need for creativity, passion and personal expression in shaping the built environment.

Going further, one of the fundamental questions for the conclusion to a contextual study is: Where do you come from in terms of analysis and where are you going in terms of intervention principles?

The journey from analytical rigour to principled design is a transformative process that underscores the essence of architectural and urban planning practice. This shift from form to substance is central to creating meaningful and contextually resonant spaces, which emphasizes the importance of translating specific knowledge into general skills, thus ensuring that architectural solutions are both locally relevant and globally informed (Fig. 9).

Figure 9. The solution proposed for the new city centre. Rendering depicting the main perspective.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

In my diploma project, the development of specific spatial sequences plays a key role in enhancing the perception of space. Pathways converging toward the central square serve as visual attractors, guiding movement and creating a dynamic spatial experience that captivates and engages individuals as they navigate the urban environment (Fig. 10).

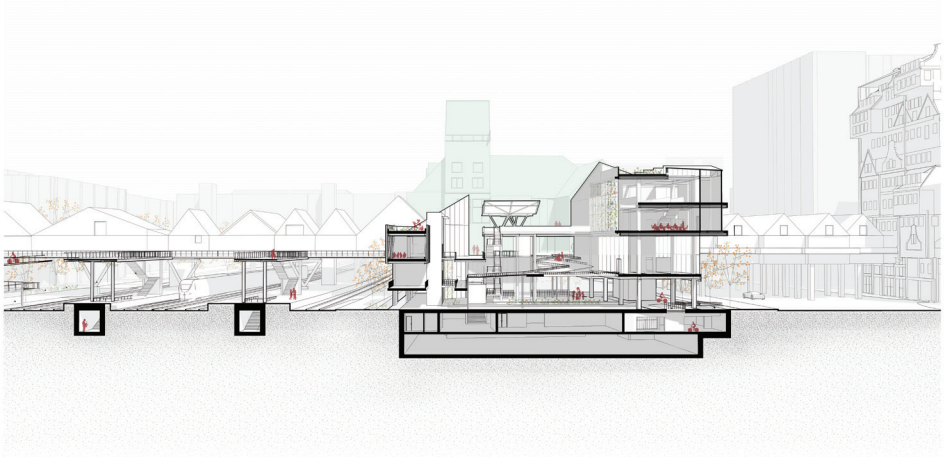

Figure 10. Section view of the proposal.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

The adaptability of architectural interventions is central to responding to change without altering the fundamental spatial pattern or disrupting navigability. The design is structured to accommodate specific functions within a flexible programme rather than rely on multifunctional spaces, thus ensuring that the built environment can evolve in response to shifting needs.

The interior of buildings is conceived as a continuation of the exterior urban environment, reinforcing the connection between public spaces and private interiors. This continuity strengthens the significance of urban space and enhances the relationship between the built environment and its surroundings.

Activity within the urban space is organised vertically, directing movement and interaction across different levels of the building. This vertical circulation responds to the intensifying urban density, optimising space and fostering dynamic exchanges within the structure while preserving its connection to the city.

Zaandam's transformation exemplifies the power of integrating history, innovation and community needs into a cohesive urban narrative, reminding us that the spaces we create today shape the cities of tomorrow, where the past and future coexist in sometimes contentious tension, pushing us to critically reconsider how we reinterpret historical characteristics in contemporary design (Fig. 11).

Figure 11. Zaandam plan. Reference points along the river Zaan and within the urban fabric.
Source: redrawn and adapted by the author from https://www.openstreetmap.org/

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[7.2] THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF URBAN INTERSTITIAL SPACES

Patricia STAN

This paper argues that interstitial spaces can be considered a positive element with development potential for the urban structure, which can be activated through creative use based on the recovery of urban memory and traces of the past. The proposed approach highlights the multiple values of urban interstitial spaces, considering them analytically for innovative architectural interventions so as to maximise and capitalise on their ability to reinterpret the context and the urban past.

Starting from observations on the old urban fabric in the central area of Bucharest, which possesses numerous examples of spaces resulting from the various historical transformations of urban form, the study presents a method for identifying interstices and discusses their creative valorisation through the integration of educational and cultural functions.

My project – the Art and Design Education Centre – shows how the potential of interstitial spaces is taken up in the design process through the step-by-step decoding of the elements of the urban context.

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INTRODUCTION

As the city becomes more complex in its composition, architectural and urban interventions address urban spaces that have an atypical character, are the result of various transformation processes and often have an interstitial nature, thereby provoking a creative response which reflects their own ambivalence.

This paper aims to establish a concise method for identifying urban interstices, using a set of analytical levels and criteria to differentiate them from other existing types within an old fabric given the wide variety of spaces resulting from amalgamations, fragmentations, ruptures and intercalations of the plot, streets, buildings and open spaces. The analysis sheds light on the urban interstice as a distinct and architecturally interesting element and details its role and potential for the purpose of creative valorisation.

The study is based on the research carried out in preparation for the diploma project entitled Art and Design Education Centre on 7-13 Luterană Street, Bucharest, which was defended in July 2024 at the Faculty of Architecture of the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the potential of interstitial spaces resulting from multiple historical transformations, with a view to revitalising the city based on the recovery of urban memory and of the interstitial character of old urban fabric. Through suggestive examples, this study shows that the contribution of creative industries is desirable if urban revitalisation operations are to succeed in such areas, especially in the case of atypical, ambiguous urban fabric that are difficult to address with classic planning and design tools.

The study process led to the achievement of objectives such as:

_the conceptual identification of the interstice;

_the typological differentiation of urban interstitial spaces in relation to different configurations of urban form;

_highlighting the link between the interstitiality of an urban fabric and creativity as a resource involved in architecture.

The research took as a starting point the concept of interstitial space, referring to works that address a variety of related notions: "vague terrain" (de Solà-Morales, 1996), "urban void" (Secchi, 1993, Ioniță, 2020), "other space" (Foucault, 2001, de Certeau, 1980/2002), "non-lieux" (Augé,1995), "in-between spaces" (Brighenti, 2013). The nature of these spaces is paradoxical in their posture, always situated between different instances of city evolution; most often, they are categorised as urban remnants, residual spaces, wounds or traumatic points, requiring a certain type of intervention in the sense of healing. At the same time, imprints from previous eras which are poorly integrated into a harmonious urban structure are also seen as elements of tension or contradiction that indicate a potential for architectural and urbanistic intervention that relies on the specificity of the context (Gregotti, 1996). However, rather than adopt any of these established labels – which often emphasize absence, stasis or residue – the term "interstitial"

was chosen to highlight the processual and creative potential of spaces that emerge between consolidated urban elements.

Interstice comes from the Latin term *interstitium*, composed from *inter* (between) and *sisto* (to stand), designating an intermediate position and specific particularisations of the state of being "between" (Stan, 2012). Moreover, the urban interstice refers to a category of spaces with specific features of areas developed without a predetermined plan, "a consequence of uncertain belonging (...) a type of unconsecrated space, lacking its own limits and status, and thus indefinable by itself" (my trans., Stan, 2012, p. 54).

In addition, the interstice is part of the phenomenon of the discontinuity of urban form, of its structural porosity as discussed by Bernardo Secchi (1993), and also part of the diffuse city (Kostof, 2005) determined by multiple processes of socio-economic transformation that are present discreetly but have evident spatial effects (Secchi, 1993; Ioniță, 2020). From a phenomenological perspective, the urban interstice is an element that can slide from the generic to the specific: an initially banal space, resulting or residual from the evolution of the city or from acts of planning/design, may be transformed creatively through a sensitive intervention and become a specific place, part of the identity of the area, loaded with the subjective attributes of individual perceptions (Norberg-Schulz, 1979).

The study primarily employed:

_field research, through physical and virtual exploration of various types of urban fabric in Bucharest;

_morphological identification, utilising the elements of perceptual identification of an urban space, according to Kevin Lynch's (1960/2012) method exposed in *Imaginea orașului* (*The Image of the City*);

_bibliographic research, specifying the most relevant theories and theoretical concepts necessary to understand the current condition of the urban interstice;

_historical cartographic analysis, using old plans of Bucharest.

To structure the research process, three research questions were defined: 1. How can urban interstitial spaces be identified and differentiated in a historically formed urban fabric? 2. What is the connection between urban interstitial spaces and creativity and how can they mutually enhance each other for the benefit of urban revitalisation? 3. How can the educational component of art and design be integrated into the processes of urban revitalisation of interstitial spaces? These research questions led to the formulation of hypotheses, verified both theoretically and through the examples presented. The conclusions formed the argumentative basis for the proposed architectural project, used as a tool for testing the validity of the findings on a site at no. 7-13, Luterană Street in Bucharest, Romania.

LEVELS OF IDENTIFICATION OF URBAN INTERSTITIAL SPACES

Due to their ambiguous nature and partial overlap with related concepts that also lack precise definition, the identification of urban interstices requires an applied, sequential approach in order to understand and subsequently capitalise on the specificity they represent and can bring to urban revitalisation processes. This identification can be carried out on several levels, starting from the perceptual one.

I discovered interstitiality first through perception. I was drawn to these neglected and almost unseen spaces (Fig. 1), situated in between other more powerful, more firmly present ones. I became aware of their appeal to a type of architectural thinking that can capitalise on them without destroying them, intervening subtly and preserving their discreet and diffuse presence in the urban fabric.

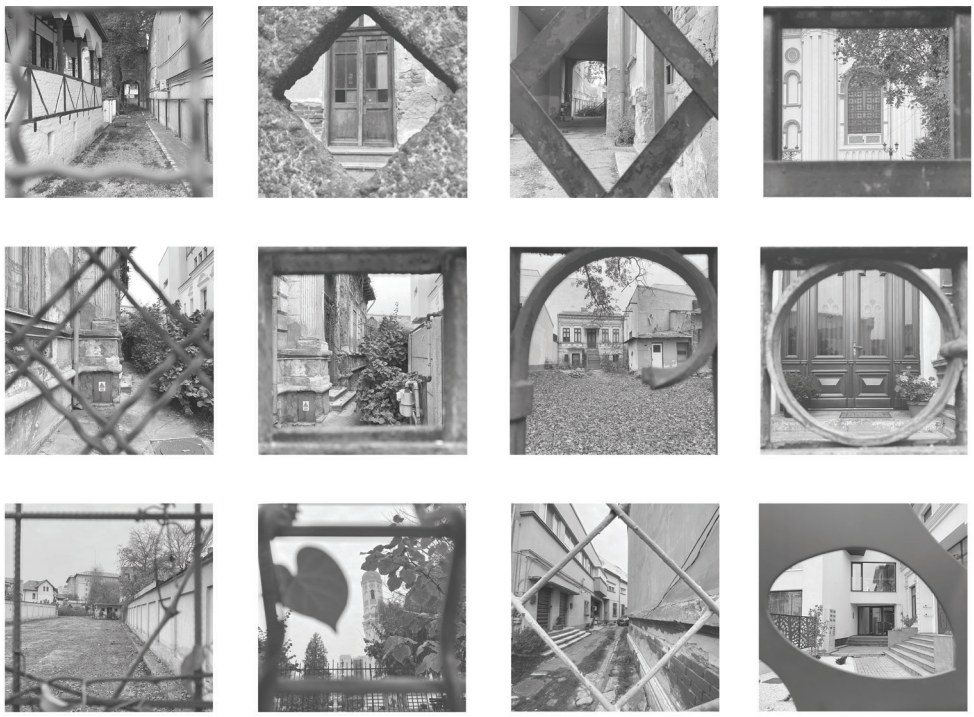


Figure 1. Looking (to the) in-between: inter-seen spaces, a preliminary condition in identifying the interstitiality of urban space.

Source: the author.

The Luterană area is part of the city's Creative Quarter, as it was named a few years ago following events organised by The Institute (https://institute.ro), a space designated for culturally driven urban regeneration. The Institute supports

the contribution of creative industries to the city's development and the opening up of design and arts to the general public. The area between General Bertholt, Luterană, Spiru Haret and Știrbei Vodă streets encompasses a morphological and architectural amalgam that can be considered representative of Bucharest (Fig. 2). This specificity does not reside only in the combination of strangely juxtaposed architectural styles but especially in what results from this diffuse character of interstitiality. At the same time, the abandonment noticeable in this area has become a routine which transforms voids and inter-spaces into paradoxical places: attractive precisely because they are neglected within a fabric that nevertheless remains alive.

Figure 2. Interstitial spaces integrated in the fabric of the urban structure. A sample of the local specificity of Bucharest, in the area between General Bertholt, Știrbei Vodă, Luterană and Spiru Haret streets.

Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

The Historical Level. The Role of Memory

The various historical stages of evolution of the urban fabric in the central areas of cities have involved multiple interventions, some planned, others spontaneous. Both the parcelling and the street network have evolved through interventions that have shaped their limits and surfaces, in some cases involving completely contradictory or abusive urban operations in relation to the past.

From a historical standpoint, the interstice can be present as an element resulting from the complex dynamics between parcelling, the street network and the built environment, in the process of constituting public space. Revealed in successive stages, the interstitial space also represents a testament to how property and land use have changed over time, reflecting the adaptation of the city to the economic and social needs of different periods as well as the development policies of the city and society as adopted by local or central authorities. Moreover, interstitial space is often a witness to the traumas and destructions that have marked the city's history (earthquakes, fires, demolitions, etc.).

The evolution of Bucharest involves a succession of stages corresponding to major changes in the city's structure, simultaneously attracting changes in the urban fabric. If we look at this evolution from the mid-18th century to the present (Fig. 3), we observe that the city has undergone a transformation process from:

_a relatively compact and coherent structure typical of the traditional city, where interstitial spaces are punctual and dispersed within a branched fabric (the traditional city); to

_ a structure in which there are extensive transformations of urban modernisation, with major restructuring of the street network and the appearance of urban regulations, with interstitial spaces resulting from such operations (remnants); to

_a period at the beginning of the communist era, with the imprint of collective housing estates and where interstitial spaces are predominantly delimiting the new zones; to

_a disastrous stage of radical discontinuous transformation through demolition (mutilation) of a large part of the centre and the insertion of foreign fragments, resulting in interstitial spaces of fracture between the new and the old; and to

_the post-1990 stage, when interstitial spaces result from the fragmentation of the city's limits and its expansion into peripheral areas, but also from the abandonment of properties or demolitions dictated by real estate pressures.

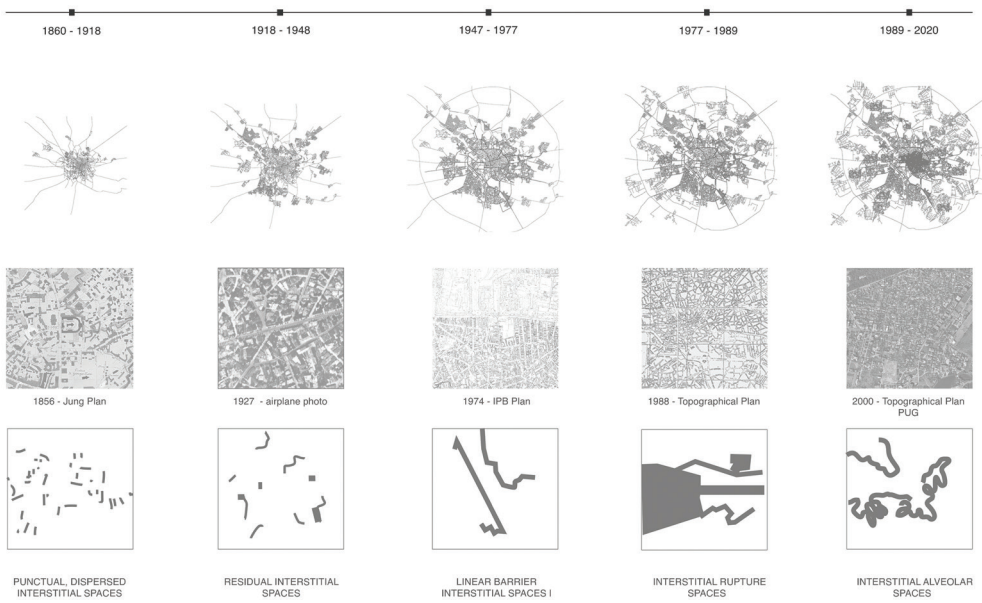


Figure 3. A table of the historical evolution of interstitial spaces in Bucharest along with the evolution of the city between 1850 and the present.

Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Over the course of these transformations, the interstice can also be understood as a fragment of de-structured urban fabric (which has lost the connection of coherence with the urban structure). At the same time, different urban fragments coexist and demand to be rewoven into a language of the present, generating meaning together. The coexistence of these fragments from different eras, tributary to the contexts that produced them, gives the city a complex texture, of a palimpsest waiting to be deciphered and creatively reinterpreted, in a dialogue between the past, present and future. Interstices become key spaces in affirming this language of the city's contemporaneity, congruent with itself but open to innovation, serving as bridges between periods, styles and generations.

The Morphogenetic Level: The Value of Diversity

The various types of interstices that we distinguish within the urban fabric owe their characteristics, in particular, to the way in which the city has evolved and to the main source of local transformations. According to this criterion, of the way they were formed, we identify:

_interstices that have appeared through a rupture between two different tissues/zones, following large-scale interventions, creating a hiatus between stable entities and highlighting their contrast;

_interstices resulting from demolition/non-construction (urban voids), spaces undeveloped for various reasons or left after the demolition of buildings for a project that remains unrealised;

_interstices that have appeared as a result of the tracing/piercing of circulation arteries – as an accidental result of inconsistencies in the design/redesign of areas –, or as a result of decommissioning of circulations or major infrastructure elements (railways, stations, etc.) in the process of transforming/modernising/adapting the street network. Decommissioning of former industrial areas can also lead to the appearance of new interstitial spaces.

The Structural Level: The Balancing Role

Seen as a witness to the city's heterogeneity, the interstice is vital in the urban structure plan. As a distinct morphological feature, the interstice appears only where there is a certain density of buildings and therefore the most frequent interstices are noted (at least in the case of Bucharest) in the central area. The density in the vicinity ensures the delimitation of the interstice and conditions its presence; hence its intermediate position, serving to bind fragments of the urban fabric whose stability it ensures through the balance of parts within the ensemble.

From this point of view, the interstice can be identified either as:

_a void (absence of structure) in abandoned, ruined or demolished sites/waiting lands/urban voids/urban gaps;

_as a rupture (of the structure) in fractured, residual, unusable, vulnerable sites (Stan, 2012), which appear where there is a very strong boundary separating two tissues;

_or as a buffer (between two or more clearly defined structures), ensuring a connection or transition between them.

The Social Level: The Importance of Resident Participation

The interstice has a clearly ambivalent nature: it is seen as a negative element, of degradation and loss of local identity and value, but also as a provocative, fertile element, opportune for alternative, flexible social activities and in contrast with institutionalised ones (Schumacher, 1996). Interstitial spaces are often valued starting from the expressed needs of local residents or artists interested in enhancing urban creativity (visual artists, performers, small traders, non-governmental organisations, etc.). Tactical urbanism and current methods of urban acupuncture (Wong, 2023) give special consideration to this category of spaces, insisting on the need to capitalise on the city's internal spatial resources by using urban density as intelligently as possible, taking into account any existing land resources and enlisting the active contribution of residents so that the unsustainable trend of urban expansion and construction of new infrastructures is discouraged.

PRINCIPLES AND CREATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE URBAN INTERSTICE

In the sense of creatively valuing interstitiality, a series of principles can be mentioned that refer to the positioning of interstitial spaces in several major configurations. I have deduced a series of spatial typologies of urban interstices starting from the five elements highlighted by Kevin Lynch (1960/2012) in *Imaginea orașului* (*The Image of the City*): nodes, paths, edges, districts and landmarks.

Nodal Interstices

Generally, interstitial spaces are not located in advantageous positions within the urban structure, as focal points/centres of public interest. On the contrary, due to their hidden, ambiguously positioned nature within the fabric, they do not directly benefit from the quality of being immediately recognisable and attracting interest. However, through certain interventions, they can become points of interest through the activities they host and through exceptional architectural or artistic expressions, thereby contributing to increased interest in the respective areas or to the rediscovery of an identity.

Relational Interstices

As a link between nodes/centres/zones of interest, the linearly developed interstice is inserted into a wider network of paths that may contain, in addition to classic sidewalks and landscaped promenades, shortcut routes that people prefer, thus thwarting the official planning with e.g. commercial pedestrian areas. The need to integrate them into the flow of slow public circulations comes from a higher understanding of urban mobility, which presupposes diversifying the public-private relationship and integrating circulation routes in the most harmonious way. The challenging aspect sometimes derives precisely from the formal/geometric difficulty of these spaces and from their nature as a neglected element within the context (especially in the case of former industrial sites, railways, etc.).

Boundary Interstices

When coinciding with a spatial boundary that requires acting differently on one side or the other, the interstitial space presents a potential for intervention through the very treatment of that boundary in relation to the adjacent tissue, re-imposing a certain structure. Boundaries (which can be strong or weak/permeable, continuous or discontinuous, built or unbuilt, vegetal or mineral, etc.) can generate an interstitial space through the differences they create in the vicinity. At the same time, boundaries, when very strong, impose conditions and firm closures, protections, gates or barriers that reduce the fluidity of urban space, diminishing its value within the city, both in terms of perception and of mobility. Architectural interventions and the redesign of interstitial spaces, aimed at increasing the permeability of public space and reducing the segregating impact of boundaries, contribute to the democratisation of the city, bringing it closer to its users.

Articulation Interstices

By facilitating certain connections between different zones or creating a junction of interests, the interstitial space as an articulation can be defined as a distinct, punctual or areal, element that has the merit of redistributing the lines of force within an urban perimeter or that can support a gradual transition between various parts/zones of the urban structure. Through solutions of re-weaving and/or adaptive integration, connecting to the character of the neighbouring areas, the interstice can play a crucial role in addressing the lack of coherence and homogeneity of the urban fabric, local density discrepancies or scale ruptures.

Landmark Interstices

When a banal interstitial space is transformed through creative interventions that capitalise on some of its attributes (spatial, positional, memory-related, etc.), it

becomes recognisable. In some situations, minimal interventions take advantage of the very diffuse or less visible/camouflaged aspect of interstitial spaces (Lévesque, 1999) and can transform them into their opposite: from marginal, they become landmarks, sometimes through urban art or urban acupuncture, which can decisively change people's perception of their presence in the space and on their mental maps.

APPLICATION: THE ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION CENTRE

The analysis presented above highlights the capacity of interstitial spaces to act as catalysts in redefining and revitalising the contemporary urban landscape. The conscious valorisation of these spaces allows both the preservation of the connection with the past and the opportunity to reconfigure the urban narrative in ways that reflect the contemporary context, generating new meanings and enriching the dialogue between different historical epochs. Collective memory, which preserves these superimposed and imbricated layers, functions as a link between the community and the territory, maintaining an active form of attachment and identification that goes beyond simple use: through architectural and artistic reinvestment, interstices can become crucibles of memory, reference points in an ever-changing urban landscape of maximum fluidity.

It is important for contemporary architecture to recognise the value of interstices as an integral part of the city's collective palimpsest, a testament to its memory. This implies an approach that reconsiders how urban spaces are designed and valued, with respect for historical layers and fragments and the preservation of harmonious coexistence between the old and the new. The theoretical aspects and principles outlined above have been tested and applied in the case of a site in the protected historical area of Bucharest, an abandoned plot of land currently containing a ruined element, a witness to the past – the former Luterană Commercial Galleries.

This project highlights the fact that urban interstitial spaces are an important presence in the city and that they can be the object of creative architectural reinvestment. Their identification and the recognition of their potential contribute to the diversity and complexity of the urban experience. The analysis has revealed a series of distinctive features that define the character of the urban interstice and demonstrate the need for its creative and culturally contextualised reinterpretation, both for the purpose of preserving urban memory as a witness to transformations and as a means of redefining local identity.

Project Aim

The purpose of the project is the recovery and enhancement of an important urban land resource located in the central area of Bucharest, near Calea Victoriei, based on recognising its spatial and cultural identity qualities.

The intervention focuses on the complexity of the urban fabric and calls for the remembrance of elements related to the city's past (Luterană Garages), aiming

to reweave the new into the discontinuous urban texture, thus generating a new spatiality and added public attractiveness. The garages on Luterană Street belonged to the famous Leonida family of industrialists, the representatives of General Motors in Romania during the interwar period and the owners of several garages, factories, and of the Leonida block on Magheru Boulevard, all nationalised after 1953.

Through the proposed functional mix and adaptation to the spatial context in which it is inserted, the project aims to improve the infrastructure of modern spaces dedicated to education in the field of design and visual arts, linking them in a coherent system at the level of the entire area. By combining educational, cultural and recreational activities open to the public, the proposed centre could represent an urban attractor for artists, students, pupils and entrepreneurs from the creative industries already present in the area, facilitating better connections between them.

Site Conditions and Constraints

The studied site is located in the centre of Bucharest, at the boundary of two protected built areas (Știrbei and Victoriei), with an opening towards Luterană Street, within the influence zone of Calea Victoriei, a main artery of historical significance in the city's development. The plot is thus situated in an area with a strong central character, highly urbanised, heavily trafficked and very accessible, both for pedestrians and vehicles, with a mixed profile predominantly oriented towards culture, education and food commerce.

The site, including the existing construction, has an irregular shape, placed between several party walls, with an opening to Luterană Street including the front of the existing construction (Fig. 4). The site results from the merging of several plots and is adjacent to the following landmark buildings: Cathedral Plaza Tower (north), "Sf. Sava" National College (west) and the interwar residential building on Luterană Street no. 5 (south). Additionally, the land is accessible only from Luterană Street, developed in the north-south direction, with a 16-metre opening between the plot alignments.

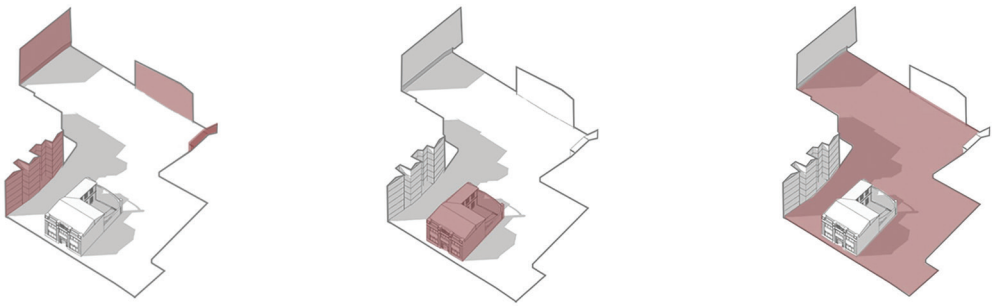
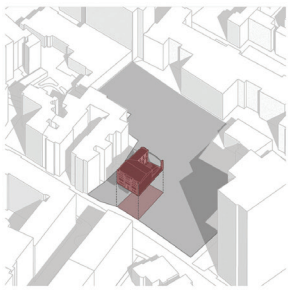


Figure 4. The key elements of the site's condition.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

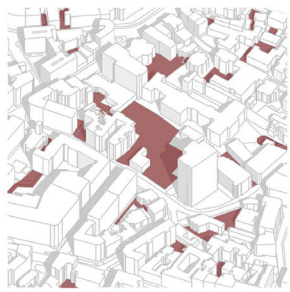
Premises and Arguments

Starting from the observation of the typology of the urban fabric and the neighbouring buildings, the project highlights the predominantly historic morphology of the analysed area, characterised by interstitial spaces that are irregular in shape and articulated through intermediate elements such as courtyards, alleys and porticoes.

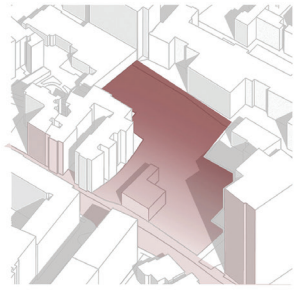
The urban context significantly influences the characteristics of the place, which in turn has a hidden story that deserves to be retold. Together, the context and the memory of the past enhance this site by framing a better understanding of the specific interstitial character of Bucharest's old fabric, which still preserves urban voids and irregularities resulting from multiple consolidations, demolitions and fragmentations of parcels (Fig. 5).



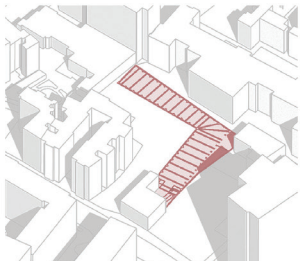
REINTEGRATION OF THE FRAGMENT



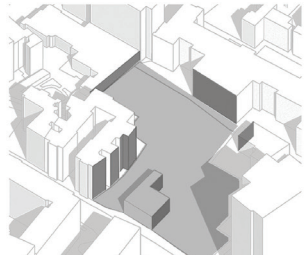
INTERSTITIALITY

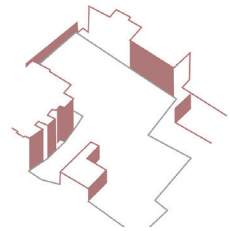


PUBLIC – PRIVATE GRADIENT



THE GALLERY – A REMEMBERED SPATIAL TYPOLOGY





LOOKING AT POINTS OF TENSION – THE BLIND WALL, BUILDING REMNANTS, THE URBAN VOID

Figure 5. Spatial premises of the intervention, taking into account the interstitial character of the plot and the role of the past (former Luterană Galleries) in reactivating urban memory.

Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project

The presence of the controversial Cathedral Plaza office tower in the immediate vicinity, currently abandoned and unused, poses a risk of degradation and loss of the area's identity, thus demanding a more significant intervention for preservation and recovery.

Moreover, the proposed project considers the historically defined functional profile of the area, which is predominantly educational and cultural due to the proximity of institutions specialised in visual arts, architecture and design (National University of Arts, "Nicolae Tonitza" Fine Arts High School, "Ion Mincu"

University of Architecture and Urban Planning) and of several schools ("Sf. Sava" National College, "Vasile Alecsandri" School, etc.), alongside religious edifices that also play an educational role and preserve identity ("Sf. Iosif" Cathedral, the Lutheran Church).

Basic Principles of the Intervention

The Art and Design Education Centre proposes a complex composition of built and unbuilt spaces. It seeks connection and integration with the urban context (Fig. 6) by:

_revitalising the interstitial character through the alternation of built and unbuilt spaces (courtyards);

_creatively using constraints, residual geometries and site irregularities;

_establishing a gradual transition from the public realm of Luterană Street to the more private spaces within the site;

_reinterpreting the "gallery" and "podium" typologies, drawing on the site's history and on collective memory;

_creating an interior pathway, using porticoes, passages and pocket courtyards to connect spaces;

_activating exterior public spaces by incorporating courtyards and walkable/green terraces to enhance public engagement.

Figure 6. Ground floor plan.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Intervention Scenario

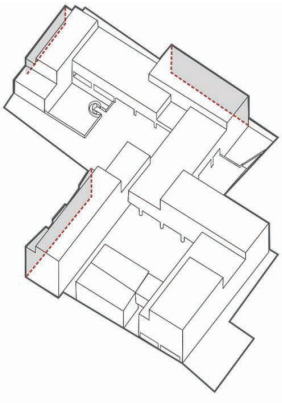
The Art and Design Education Centre proposes a complex of mixed functions dominated by spaces dedicated to university and pre-university education, specifically in design fields: graphic design, fashion design, jewellery design, decorative design and small furniture, interior design and textile arts. Additionally, it includes cultural spaces (exhibition/showroom, conferences, festivals), public spaces for the sale of design products, food establishments (cafe, restaurant), and leisure (urban square, pocket garden).

The programme aims to fill the gaps in the current traditional university spaces in the vicinity by creating flexible, multifunctional spaces that are designed for new generations and equipped for innovative research and experimentation, as well as dynamic exhibition spaces that seamlessly integrate interior and exterior areas, extending and enriching the gallery concept, reclaimed from the site's history. The field of design can play a crucial role in the education cycle for a sustainable and creative urban environment that is dynamic and innovative and benefits society as a whole.

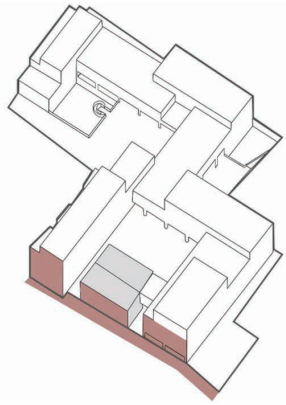
The direct beneficiaries of these spaces are young people (aged between 17 and 27), at a crucial stage in their lives and in the shaping of a generation, when the development of individual taste and knowledge as well as experimentation, openness to society and the city are fundamental. Besides the direct beneficiaries of educational programmes, teaching staff, researchers, artists, entrepreneurs and the general public as consumers of experimental art and design products are also involved.

The proposal for the new complex attempts to combine all the types of intermediate spaces identified as specific to this historical area of the city (Fig. 7). As a nodal interstice, the space created starts from the old, vestigial element by integrating it and developing a compact cluster. The relational aspect of the interstice finds its correspondence in the presence of porticoes and interior and exterior podium-type spaces, and the circulations they generate between the different bodies of the composition.

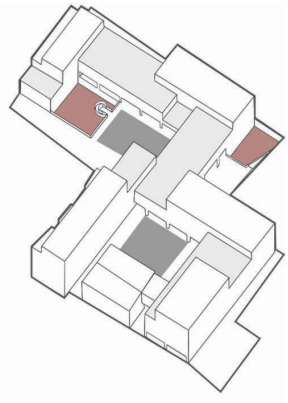
Because the site is strongly constrained by the plot boundaries (blind walls on the perimeter), the chosen architectural solution was to integrate these boundaries through an alternation of solids (built volumes) and voids (courts with different ambiences), gradually transitioning from public space with unlimited access to public space with limited access and to interior space reserved for a specific category of users (teaching staff, researchers). Thus, the volume defines an articulation in relation to its boundaries and in relation to the dominant and aggressive element situated in the immediate vicinity (the office tower). It does not attempt to compete with the existing vertical landmarks but to logically conclude on a sequence of the western front of Luterană Street, creating an appropriate density for this central zone and carving out in the depth of the plot a possibility of integration.



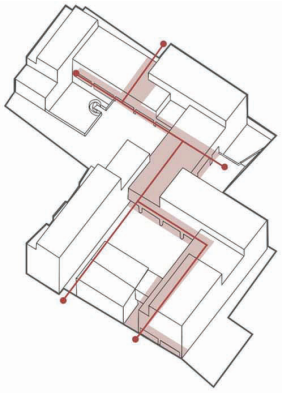
CONNECTION TO THE PRESENT
BUILT SPACE



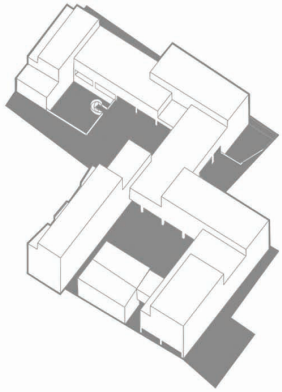
RECALLING – FRAGMENT/FRONT



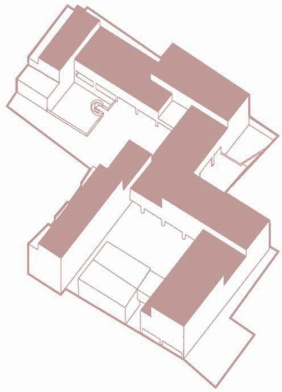
ACTIVATION – COURTYARDS,
TERRACES, INTERIOR – EXTERIOR



INTERMEDIATE SPACES – PORTICO,
PASSAGEWAYS



INTERLACING – ALTERNATION OF
SOLID AND VOID



GALLERY/PODIUM – RECALLED
SPATIAL TYPOLOGIES

Figure 7. Illustration of the main principles of intervention related to the spatial premises discovered through analysis. The role of the past (former Luterană Galleries) in reactivating urban memory.

Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Architectural Composition and Functions

The proposed spatial solution leads to several results: maintaining a controlled public-private gradient (opening public functions towards the street), taking over the boundaries (party walls) and transposing them into the volumetric cut, articulating the Art and Design Education Centre as a new cluster immersed in the urban fabric and not competing with the major landmarks of the area. To these results are added the gesture of preserving the memory of the place by reintegrating the built fragment (the remnants of the former Luterană Galleries), re-interpreting the spatial typology of the galleries and the urban void through the organisation of the four interior courtyards.

On the ground floor plan, the articulation of the courtyards is noticeable through an interior street (the portico) that leads to several points of interest. Each courtyard takes on its own character – the one facing the street is welcoming, open, inviting you to walk through it, then the interior street leads to a market-like courtyard with skylights and seating areas. The exterior paths direct to the sunken courtyards, which take on a more intimate character (Fig. 8). The sunken courtyards are also articulated by an interior route, a circulation that leads to the large events hall, the model-making and prototyping workshop areas, as well as the rooms intended for photo development and film projection rooms.

Figure 8. Image from one of the courtyards.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

CONCLUSIONS

The intricate urban fabric is often punctuated by interstitial spaces, those in-between, all too often overlooked areas that hold significant potential for urban revitalisation. This research has delved into the conceptual framework and theoretical perspectives on interstices, as well as into their specific characteristics and potential, thus revealing their significance in shaping urban identity.

Through a comprehensive analysis of various typological examples, focusing on the urban fabric of Bucharest, I have demonstrated that interstitial spaces are not mere remnants of urban development but rather dynamic elements that can be reinterpreted and repurposed. By examining their historical context, morphological characteristics and social implications, I have identified a range of typologies and potential uses for these spaces.

By preserving and reinterpreting these spaces, I foster a deeper connection between citizens and their urban heritage. As a matter of fact, architects can play a crucial role in highlighting the potential of these types of spaces. Through innovative design interventions that consider various manifestations of their presence within the city, they can be transformed into vibrant hubs of cultural exchange, promoting social cohesion and enhancing the overall quality of urban life.

The proposed construction illustrates the fundamental principles of the intervention, following the characteristics of the urban interstices specific to the area and responding both to its nodal and relational character, through the proposed permeability. The bordering character is addressed through the integration of the lateral limits into the logic of the new building, creating an articulation at the level of urban fabric. With its spatial and functional aspects, dedicated to creativity and the arts, the proposed centre manages to spatially conclude the street frontage sequence of Luterană Street and at the same time positively particularise a space dominated by the aggressive vertical accent of the office tower.

It is envisaged that The Art and Design Education Centre, together with The National University of Arts, “Nicolae Tonitza” Fine Arts High School, the “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urban Planning and other active institutions and organisations from the area, will participate in the integrated development of design education and improve the connection to the local creative community. At the same time, the proposed design affirms both a connection to the memory of the place and the valorisation of features related to the past as well as an open attitude towards the present and future through inserting spaces dedicated especially to young people and their education in artistic fields.

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[7.3] FROM UNCOMFORTABLE PAST TO CULTURAL FUTURE

Alexandra MÜLLER

The conversion of industrial heritage sites has played a vital role in urban regeneration in the last decade, albeit faced with challenges like balancing historical preservation and contemporary functions. Such a challenge was also the theme of my diploma project and this paper investigates the relationship between theoretical research and architectural design by exploring how the theoretical framework of the dissertation influenced the development of the project. Using qualitative research methodology and case studies, the study sought to identify different strategies of intervention in the conversion of industrial sites with uncomfortable historical narratives, which preserve their cultural and architectural significance. The research emphasizes the importance of contextual analysis in developing sensitive and sustainable design solutions by illustrating how adaptive reuse can transform industrial sites into vibrant, inclusive and dynamic urban landscapes.

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INTRODUCTION

The adaptive reuse of industrial heritage sites is essential for balancing preservation initiatives, sustainability and large-scale urban development. This text explores the connection between theoretical research and architectural practice by analysing how the theoretical framework of the graduation dissertation Uncomfortable Heritage: Adaptive Reuse Strategies for Industrial Building Reconversions (defended in April 2024 at The Faculty of Architecture of the "Ion Mincu" University of Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest, Romania) influenced the development of the diploma project titled Arts and Science Park (presented in July 2024). Both projects were developed under the guidance of Justin Baroncea. The diploma project envisioned the conversion of the former Municipal Slaughterhouse of Bucharest, located at Splaiul Unirii 162, into a lively cultural centre, thus addressing the lack of cultural institutions in the south of the city. The dissertation focused on what is defined as uncomfortable heritage, such as sites that have challenging historical narratives, and explored their unique dilemmas and opportunities. The employed methodology comprised a combination of qualitative research methods and case studies in order to help identify different strategies of intervention in the conversion of industrial sites with uncomfortable histories. The analysis focused primarily on the case of Matadero Madrid in Spain, a former 19th century slaughterhouse site that was converted in the late 1990s and early 2000s into a contemporary arts centre. This case study was chosen after a thorough examination of the themes it has in common with the Municipal Slaughterhouse in Bucharest.

In this text, the term *uncomfortable heritage* refers to industrial sites associated with industries that evoke discomfort due to their original or historical activities and societal implications. The unease associated with the old slaughterhouses and meat markets obviously comes from their connection to animal cruelty, to meat production and related practices that now raise ethical concerns, particularly in the context of contemporary debates on animal welfare and alternative dietary choices (Wang & Pendlebury, 2024). The conversion of such sites often involves selective remembrance, where difficult aspects of a site's past are omitted in favour of its architectural and cultural potential. Many abattoirs are nowadays transformed into cultural hubs without acknowledging their original purpose, thus missing opportunities to engage in a discussion about their historical and ethical dimensions (Wang & Pendlebury, 2024).

Uncomfortable heritage in this context should therefore extend beyond architectural and economic value to include the ethical aspects and cultural narratives embodied by these types of buildings. Their conversion should address both the historical realities and contemporary needs, favouring a more nuanced understanding of such an intervention. The dissertation therefore aimed to critically evaluate existing adaptive reuse strategies and subsequently to propose or integrate similar architectural interventions into the diploma project.

FROM RESEARCH TO DESIGN: THE ARTS AND SCIENCE PARK

The dissertation explored the history of adaptive reuse and conversion, tracing its evolution as a practice and its implications for contemporary architectural interventions, with a primary focus on the regeneration of former abattoir sites. Another key aspect was the historical study of the Municipal Slaughterhouse in Bucharest, uncovering its origins, transformations and its current status within the current urban context. The selected in-depth case study focused on Matadero Madrid in Spain, a renowned example of industrial heritage conversion, and included a detailed examination of three different projects within this site in order to identify the specific strategies and attitudes regarding uncomfortable heritage employed by different architects within the same urban regeneration project (Arquitectura Viva, n.d.). The dissertation provided valuable data regarding the dual challenge of maintaining the historical integrity of this type of industrial structures and adapting them to contemporary needs, yet without resorting to selective remembrance or erasing the site's history. Another important aspect, besides understanding the actual architectural interventions, was understanding the way in which this type of urban regeneration can function by also analysing the history of Matadero Madrid, the cultural context, the motivation behind the project, the stakeholders involved and the economic factors. These points informed a better understanding of the complexity of cultural parks on all levels, outlining a plausible scenario for the diploma project programme.

The Arts and Science Park diploma project aimed to build on the research perspective developed in the dissertation and to integrate key concepts of the last few years including conversion, public space design, integration of green-blue infrastructure, slow mobility, inclusivity and human-centred design. It emphasized the importance of nature within the urban environment, reimagining public space as a place for recreation, play and learning while also promoting permeability and connectivity within the city. The project proposed the transformation of the former Municipal Slaughterhouse of Bucharest, alongside a section of the right bank of the river Dâmbovița, into a vibrant arts and science park by maintaining the existing spatial composition of the site and adding two main buildings that would become the Museum of Industry and Space and the Museum of Natural Sciences respectively. At the urban level, the project reimagined the river as a cultural path that links the southern part of Bucharest with the city centre and the majority of cultural institutions while also establishing itself as a major cultural hub. The concept, at its core, is fundamentally guided by the idea of designing in harmony with nature while also prioritising the user experience, advocating for a harmonious integration of industrial heritage, art, nature and contemporary urban life.

PHASE 1 – COLLECTING DATA

In the first phase of the project, a digital garden approach was used to collect and organise data relevant to the research theme. The process involved compiling information, identifying common themes and creating links or relationships

among concepts that would eventually guide the selection of the architectural programme and of the project site. The collected data were visually structured using a platform called Miro.com to facilitate a simple and easy workflow (Fig. 1).

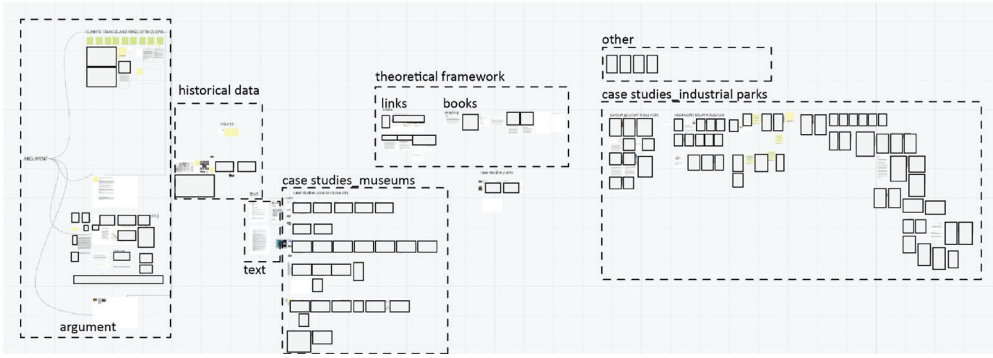

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the workflow on the Miro.com platform.
Source: the author.

PHASE 2 – CRITERIA SELECTION

After this stage, another matrix was created to filter and rank information, ensuring that the most important aspects would later be developed and incorporated into the analysis phase of the project. The selection criteria addressed aspects such as: urban scale interventions, the focus on public space, similar spatial typologies to the selected site, project impact, community involvement and economic factors.

It was important for the project to address the issue of uneven distribution of cultural facilities in Bucharest, particularly the scarcity of these types of institutions in the south of the city (Fig. 2). Thus, it was critical that the initially collected data in regard to contemporary references were closely related to the chosen site and addressed similar issues in order to assess whether what was to be proposed in the foundational study would have been a plausible scenario. In other words, it was important that the studied references shared a similar history to the Bucharest abattoir, had a similar positioning within the city, a similar programme to the envisioned concept of the diploma project, and that they demonstrated successful reintegration within the urban fabric, therefore functioning both at the zonal level and at the level of the urban system. This approach guided how the diploma project would address its relationship with the city, not only in terms of physical urban connectivity but also in relation to functional links of the selected programme. This process ensured that the proposed concept would operate effectively within the urban ecosystem, serving both as a connection and as a point of interest in its own right.

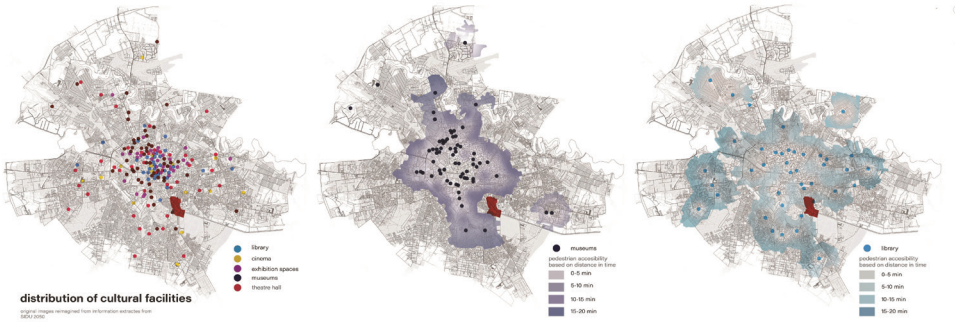

Figure 2. Diagrams representing the distribution of cultural facilities in Bucharest and the accessibility assessment of the selected site.

Source: excerpt from the diploma project, based on data extracted from Strategia Integrată de Dezvoltare Urbană (SIDU) 2021–2030 (Primăria Municipiului București, n.d.).

Public space was another criterion both in selecting references and in what was to become a crucial research point in the multi-criteria analysis of the pre-diploma project. The intended programme, namely the cultural park, usually has an inherent, close relationship with the surrounding public space, which most often acts as an extension of the built environment, sometimes even more inviting and actively used than the architectural objects. An in-depth study of public space was conducted, with a particular focus on uncomfortable heritage, in order to explore how the site's history could be preserved and integrated while transforming the exterior space into an environment that would foster cultural activities and informational exchange in a friendly and inclusive way. Understanding the historical narrative and decoding the context and logic of the site were crucial in shaping a sensitive and contextually responsive system that would subsequently inform and generate the solution at all scales of the project, from the urban scale to the details.

Similar spatial typologies were naturally studied in close connection with their hosted functions within these cultural parks in order to better understand the spatial requirements of the functions proposed in the diploma project. Additionally, the study of projects with similar spatial typologies played a key role in the analysis of the contemporary references, offering valuable insights into how these industrial halls relate to each other but also how they relate to public space. Furthermore, this approach also helped identify various interior intervention strategies, which contributed to the refinement of the conceptual system established in the multi-criteria analysis.

The assessment of the project's regeneration impact on both the immediate community and the city as a whole, accompanied by the analysis of stakeholder involvement, regulatory frameworks as well as economic factors, was essential in order to evaluate the feasibility of such a project within the local context. This also allowed sketching potential economic models and partnerships that could support the implementation of the envisioned scenario, especially in light of the local stakeholders' scepticism towards industrial heritage and heritage as a whole. This approach helped anchor the project in reality.

PHASE 3 – BUILDING THE ARGUMENT

Once these criteria were established, a mind-mapping process was used to structure and justify decision-making in the next phase of the project, the foundational study. This approach helped develop a thorough analysis of the selected site. By visually organising interconnected ideas (Fig. 3), this method helped provide a deeper understanding of the site's historical, urban and socio-cultural potential, ensuring that the proposed scenario of intervention would align with the previously identified criteria and research objectives.

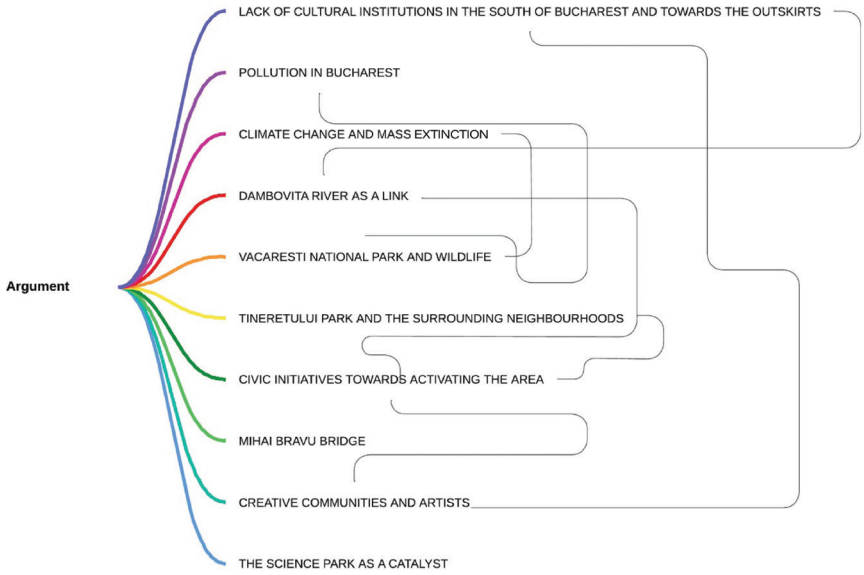

Figure 3. Mind map depicting the decision-making process in building the argument. Source: the author.

PHASE 4 – SITE ANALYSIS

The multi-criteria analysis of the former Municipal Slaughterhouse elaborated in the pre-diploma phase followed the same principles so as to ensure a coherent project narrative. For this project, it was important to develop a unique analytical framework that took into consideration the juxtaposition of three key urban layers. These included:

_the natural layer, represented by the river Dâmbovița and the parks (Fig. 4);

_the mineral layer, meaning the industrial heritage of the former slaughterhouse and the streets, envisioned as infrastructure for cultural and social activities;

_the human layer, consisting of the residents of Bucharest, the neighbours and the creatives' communities that have already started adaptive reuse projects in this former industrial area (Fig. 5). Actors within this social layer include various local initiatives and several grassroots movements advocating for environmental protection in districts 3 and 4.

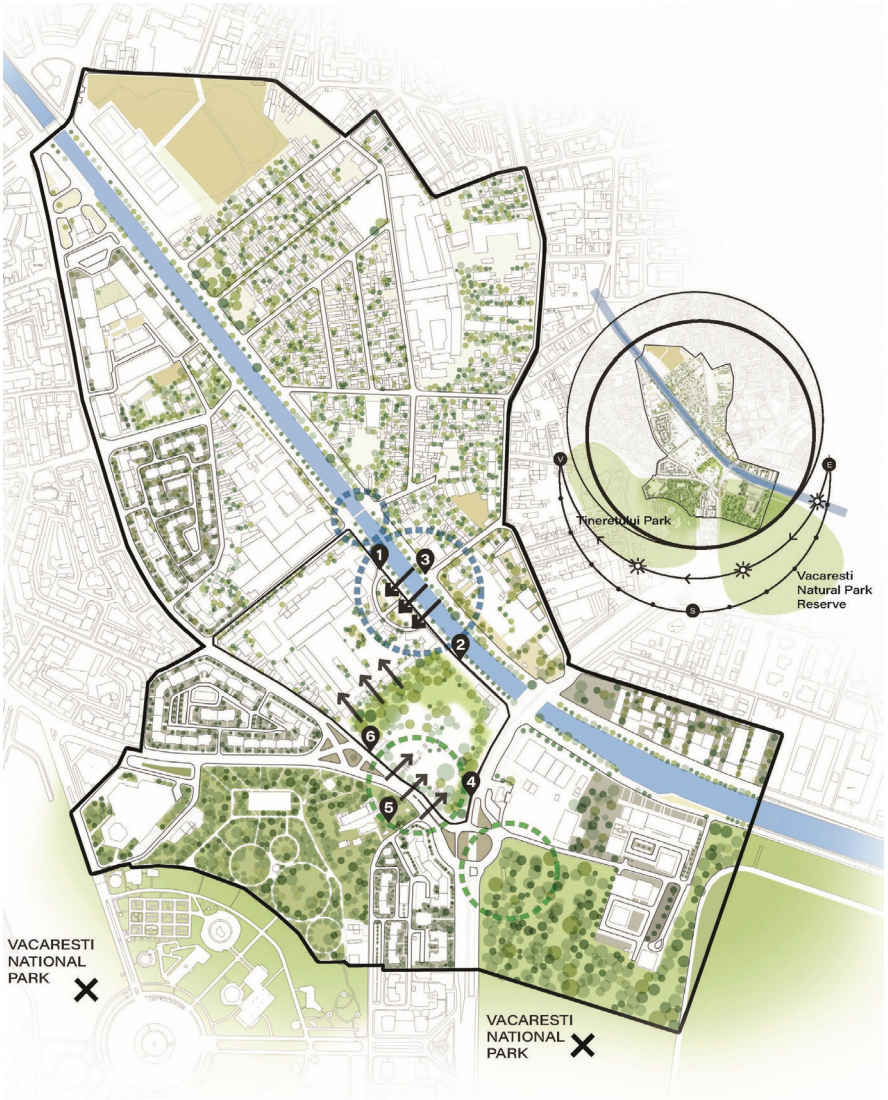

Figure 4. Diagram presenting the natural layer.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Successful examples of adaptive reuse within the area are demonstrated by the case of the conversion of the Industria Bumbacului [Cotton Industry] building in Nod Makerspace and the conversion of some parts of the FLAROS factory building into WASP: Working Art Space and Production, highlighting the potential of reactivating industrial sites by using cultural or creative functions.

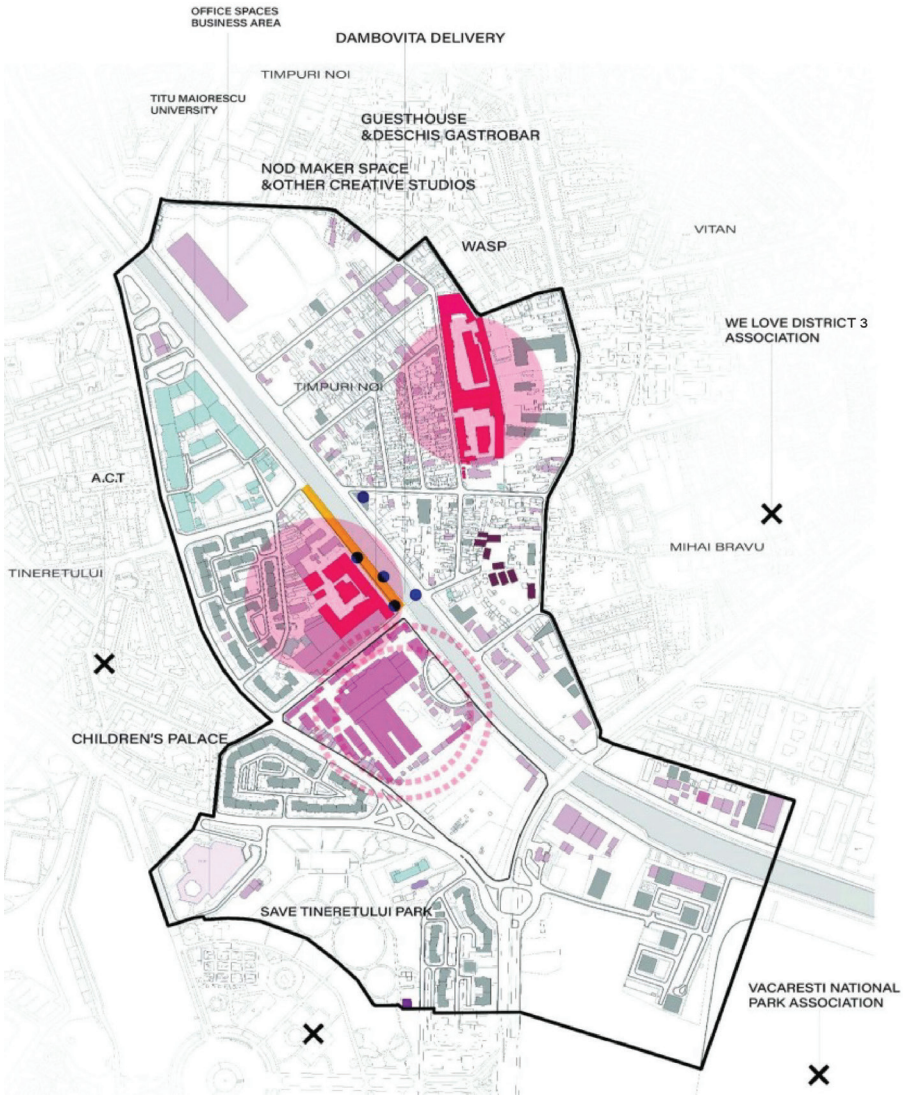

Figure 5. Diagram presenting the human layer.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Furthermore, initiatives such as the Dâmbovița Delivery Festival and other examples of tactical urbanism interventions underline the existing need and public desire to reclaim the promenade along the river, further reinforcing the concept's relevance within the broader urban context.

PHASE 5 – THE DISSERTATION

Once the focus points of the project were established, the methodology of the criteria matrix was further used to structure the dissertation. Its format followed the usual Master's thesis guidelines while focusing on qualitative methods and case studies analysis.

The research concentrated on several key questions. It aimed to explore factors connected to the effectiveness of different strategies, the dilemmas regarding cultural sensitivity, sustainability and economic viability while also exploring matters influencing stakeholder decision-making and public engagement. Additionally, it aimed to explore how different adaptive reuse projects vary in their approaches regarding architecture but also regarding their impacts on the surrounding communities and larger urban context. The dissertation hypothesized that these types of urban regeneration projects pose intricate challenges due to the competing interests of different stakeholders regarding preservation, urbanisation and community needs. It was expected that a combination of regulatory policies, financial aspects and public expectations would play a significant role in shaping these kinds of projects.

The case studies aimed to explore pioneering transformations of uncomfortable heritage throughout Europe, with a special focus on projects converted into

PHASE 6 – CASE STUDIES

public parks and/or cultural hubs. The assessment of contemporary references considered several aspects, including architecture and historical value, the project's impact on the surrounding urban fabric and the city as a whole, its role in enhancing public accessibility and community engagement and the spatial organisation and functionality of both the new and the old spaces. Furthermore, each project's historical and cultural significance was analysed, with a focus on the balance achieved between design strategies, such as intervention, insertion and installation (Brooker & Stone, 2019, Chapter 2). The focus on the use of circular city principles, such as the use of old industrial materials in maintaining aesthetic and formal coherence in the adaptive reuse projects, was also a selection criterion.

Based on these aspects, three main case studies were chosen for the pre-diploma analysis. Parc de la Villette (1982-83, Paris, France) by Bernard Tschumi was first selected for its revolutionary approach to the master plan and for its past as a slaughterhouse and a cattle market. Tschumi redefined park design by rejecting traditional landscapes in favour of a more dynamic habitat where nature and artificial/architectural elements can coexist. Under deconstructivist principles, the project is structured around three key elements that create a non-hierarchical system:

_points (the follies);

_lines (the axes and circulations);

_surfaces (the open public spaces and green spaces).

This type of approach was reflected in the research through the drawings made in the pre-diploma analysis, which investigated the intervention logic of the diploma project.

The winning proposal of The Center for Art, Technology and Experiment – MultipleXity Competition in Timişoara, organised by the Ordinul Arhitecților din

România (Romanian Order of Architects, OAR) in 2020, was selected for its local relevance and innovative solution, providing insights into the requirements of these types of projects in Romania's post-industrial context.

The main focus of the dissertation shifted to Matadero Madrid, which closely aligned with the themes and challenges of the diploma project. Matadero Madrid and the former Municipal Slaughterhouse of Bucharest have a similar historical background, and both are strategically placed towards the historical city outskirts near major urban rivers. Both sites were developed in response to urban expansion and industrialisation that brought with it new regulatory policies regarding sanitation and they served as major centres for meat processing and distribution in their respective cities. Their strategic positioning was crucial for sanitation and waste management, adhering to a practice in planning slaughterhouses that was common in 19th century Europe (Servicio Histórico COAM, 2005).

Matadero Madrid, completed in 1923 under architect Luis Bellido González, was designed in conformity with the German abattoir model (Servicio Histórico COAM, 2005). The Municipal Slaughterhouse in Bucharest was initially designed in 1865 by engineer Alexis Godillot (Slăniceanu, 1914), after the Paris model and later modernised in the early 20th century, incorporating German industrial trends and advancements observed and brought back by a team of experts from cities like Zürich, Frankfurt and Breslau (Fig. 6).

Matadero Madrid was strategically placed near railway lines, guaranteeing efficient livestock transport – similar to the planned railway extension connecting Bucharest's slaughterhouse to major transport hubs like Obor-Filaret Stations (Slăniceanu, 1914).

Both sites evolved over time due to increasing demands and regulations, incorporating new facilities such as cattle stalls, cattle markets, storage halls and other functions. By the late 20th century, both sites ceased operations, becoming obsolete due to advances in food processing, changing regulatory guidelines and urban expansion. Matadero Madrid officially closed in the 1980s, while the Bucharest abattoir stopped operations in the 1990s following the collapse of state-controlled industries after the Romanian Revolution (Chelcea, 2008).

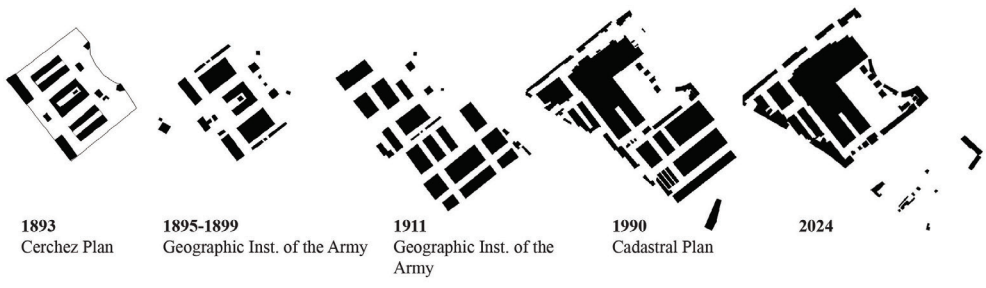

Figure 6. Evolution of the Municipal Slaughterhouse in Bucharest.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

However, Matadero Madrid's fate changed when the site was included in Madrid's urban protection plan in 1997, which ensured its preservation, while the Bucharest abattoir remains mired in legal disputes that affect its ability to undergo large-scale redevelopment. In Bucharest, the old buildings were repurposed and leased to private companies and they underwent significant modifications including demolitions, interior partitioning, changes at the level of the facade and adaptations for diverse commercial uses such as auto repair shops, workshops, storage facilities, restaurants and other businesses (Chelcea, 2008).

The conversion of Matadero Madrid site into an extraordinary cultural institution provided a strong example for the diploma concept proposal. The integration of Matadero Madrid into the Madrid Río urban renewal master plan project, extending the city's cultural axis and green corridors to the Manzanes River, parallels the vision for the Bucharest site, which seeks to reimagine the river Dâmbovița as the main cultural and ecological corridor of the city.

What is interesting about the site of Matadero Madrid is that the project for its regeneration did not follow an integral master plan. Despite maintaining a consistent vision for the project, the site evolved in multiple stages, with each former hall being treated as an individual effort through public competitions organised by the municipality. This fragmented approach has led to diverse architectural interpretations of the site's uncomfortable legacy, providing an interesting perspective on how these independently developed projects ultimately form a cohesive whole, despite being developed by different teams. Within the Matadero Madrid site, three projects were chosen for further analysis: *Intermediae* by Arturo Franco, *Nave 16* by Vila and Virseda Architects, and *Casa del Lector* by Ensamble Studio.

PHASE 7 – MATADERO MADRID: IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

The next phase of the research used Matadero Madrid as an in-depth case study; the three iinterventions mentioned before were considered instrumental and were individually evaluated on the basis of predetermined criteria. Subsequently, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify common themes and differences, assessing their sensitivity, effectiveness, sustainability and long-term success.

In this phase, the analysis was guided by the principles identified by Brooker & Stone (2019) in their work *Re-readings 2: Interior Architecture and the Design Principles of Remodelling Existing Buildings*. The authors categorise adaptive reuse interventions into three main types:

_intervention – major modifications that significantly alter the existing spatial structure;

_insertion – the introduction of new architectural elements into the existing structure;

_installation – reversible or temporary modifications, ensuring adaptability and flexibility.

It was important to understand the different types of interventions on this kind of architectural heritage because the diploma project aimed to approach the site as sensitively as possible without erasing its history and sanitising the narrative. This categorisation helped in identifying best practice projects and understanding the context in which these specific approaches are appropriate as well as the advantages and disadvantages of choosing one of them. Thus, the differentiation of the types of relationships with the existing built fabric generated the solution not only for the interior of existing architectural objects but also for the way in which the proposed new objects related to the site, to public space and to the existing buildings in the established working system.

A new set of criteria was developed to ensure a thorough and structured evaluation of the selected projects would be possible at the level of intervention on the existing architectural objects. These criteria would be: type of strategy, types of movement in space, type of structure, materiality, the treatment of the openings and lighting. This criteria matrix was developed first to allow for a detailed individual analysis of the case study and ultimately to serve as a common framework for discussions that would constitute the basis of the comparative analysis.

Intermediae, designed by Arturo Franco in 2007, emphasizes non-intervention and reversibility, facilitating an ongoing dialogue between the old and the contemporary layers. This attitude was influenced also by budgetary constraints and the project's expected temporary nature, with dismantling planned within two years. Warehouse 17 was the first transformed space within the complex and served as a pilot project. The linear typology of the hall dictated the type of intervention; using a hybrid approach of insertion and installation, the project seamlessly integrated with the existing structure while ensuring reversibility for the majority of the new elements. Arturo Franco (n.d.) stated about the project: "The point was to contribute with a new attitude in face of the public realm of historical patrimony, a radical posture, an experience about limits, the limits of non–intervention, reducing such intervention to a bare minimum". The project proved to be a success and became a permanent part of Matadero, emerging as a major cultural venue that offers programmes focused on ecology, children and civic participation through local community projects and international collaborations. *Intermediae* was one of the projects that most influenced the diploma project's attitude towards existing buildings. This attention to the relationship between the old and the new so that they mutually enhance each other became a main principle of my project. It reinforced the decision of incorporating new industrial elements into the site, contrasting the existing structures while simultaneously preserving the memory and character of the place. Furthermore, the idea of non-intervention and no limits was implemented in some of the park areas to encourage community participation. The idea of no limits was also reflected in the character of the park, as proposed in the diploma, by removing its physical boundaries and ensuring permeability and connectivity both between the buildings on the site and with neighbouring points of interest.

The next project selected was *Nave 16* designed by Vila and Virseda Architects (ArchDaily 2011; COAM, 2017). The winning project of the 2007 open call initiated by the Madrid City Council aimed to transform the hall into a flexible multifunctional space for a multitude of cultural activities like exhibitions, events

and performances. To enable adaptability, a mobile system allows the hall to function either as a single closed space, an open space or as multiple smaller units. The design strategy clearly focused on insertion, integrating two flexible volumes within the central space of the existing halls. The dimensions of the revolving panels were carefully designed to respect the proportions of the opening of the existing masonry structure. The roof trusses rest on the original masonry walls, ensuring reversibility through its structural logic. Additionally, the idea of reusing former structural elements to shape up new spaces was integrated, highlighting the sustainable approach of the project. *Nave 16* also served as inspiration for the diploma project through its design approach that relates to the dimensions and composition logic of the existing buildings on the site.

The last case study was *Casa del Lector* by Ensamble Studio (2015). Ensamble Studio won the 2006 competition to restore four of the former slaughterhouse pavilions and transform them into an educational programme. The project used a major alteration strategy, introducing two interconnected levels. The upper level, formed by 40-tonne precast beams inserted through the existing openings, bridges previously separated warehouses. The lower level follows this new, imposed structural rhythm, basically inverting the existing logic of the space. Unlike the previously discussed reversible concepts, this intervention is permanent, altering the spatial and functional dynamics of the halls. It is also potentially contentious as a contemporary approach to uncomfortable heritage since it sanitises the space by erasing its history, distancing itself from the former identity of the site as a slaughterhouse, presumably under the influence of its child- and youth-friendly programme but also of a more complex architectural programme, with additional requirements in terms of thermal control. *Casa del Lector* has served more as a negative example despite its successful functional approach and its architectural quality because it neglected the aspects enhanced by the other two projects, such as reversibility, adaptability and non-intervention. Instead, it proposed a permanent architectural intervention that significantly altered and contradicted the functional logic and spatial typology of the old slaughterhouse.

Despite their differences, the three projects share common themes including a commitment to industrial aesthetics, reflected in the use of materials like steel, glass and concrete, and an emphasis on flexibility. Their long-term success is clear from ongoing community engagement, the financial viability achieved through public-private partnerships and their permanent role within Matadero Madrid. The forward-thinking approach and design sensitivity displayed will ensure that they continue to serve as remarkable examples of adaptive reuse.

The analysis confirmed what had been hypothesised in the project's initial phase. However, the investigation was limited to a single case study with three interventions, which points to the need for further research into diverse contexts with different regulatory frameworks. Expanding the study would provide a broader perspective on best practices and strategies for preserving uncomfortable heritage.

OVERVIEW OF THE DIPLOMA PROJECT

The structured research approach, which included comparative case studies, multi-criteria analysis as well as the recurring themes identified in the dissertation, directly informed the diploma project.

One major theme was the emphasis on contextual sensitivity. The study highlighted the significance of thorough contextual analysis in developing the design strategy (Fig. 7). Matadero Madrid served as a key reference, demonstrating that industrial sites can be converted into vibrant cultural hubs while preserving their historical essence. This directly influenced the decision to retain the Municipal Slaughterhouse's spatial and logistical composition and industrial aesthetics while incorporating new cultural, educational and public functions. The studied design typologies – installation, insertion, intervention – provided a structured framework for integrating new elements into the site without compromising its industrial character, with the majority of the interventions being installations and insertions.

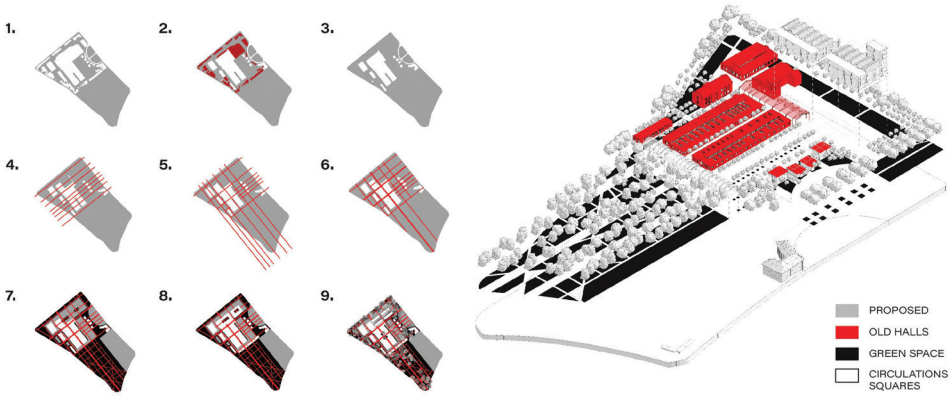

Figure 7. Conceptual diagram depicting each step taken in developing the solution. Steps: 1. Removal of the wall 2. Identification of parasitic structures and 3. Their removal 4. Connections to main arteries 5. Perpendicular connections 6. Building connections hierarchy 7. Introduction of the green layer 8. Introduction of the new proposed buildings 9. Introduction of the tall vegetation buffers.

Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

The proposed new buildings, the Museum of Industry and Space and the Museum of Natural Sciences, can be considered interventions, but at the level of the master plan they can be considered insertions since they respect the composition rules of the existing plan. The facades of these buildings are clad in frameless laminated glass to minimise the appearance of the buildings on the site and to give them a spectral aspect.

Another main goal of the research was to explore the reintegration of industrial heritage into the urban landscape. The proposal positions itself as part of a larger

green-blue corridor and cultural pathway along the river Dâmbovița, connecting the city centre with significant green urban nodes such as Tineretului Park and Văcărești Park. This idea builds on the findings of the case study that underline cultural enrichment, ecological connectivity and slow mobility strategies in urban regeneration interventions.

The findings also highlight the importance of landscape integration into everyday life. The proposal aims to maximise the potential of the site's spontaneous vegetation, harnessing its ecological value while transforming the site into an accessible urban environment (Fig. 8). Inspired by the best practices observed in the analysis, the concept integrates into public space features such as community greenhouses, permeable pathways, shaded pergolas with vine-type vegetation and thematic gardens and squares in order to create a sustainable microclimate that supports both biodiversity and human comfort.

Figure 8. Site plan that underlines the idea of landscape integration.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

The proposal addresses the challenges of preserving uncomfortable heritage by maintaining the slaughterhouse's spatial memory through carefully designed circulation routes, structural rhythms and the mindful repurposing of the existing halls (Fig. 9). The former industrial halls are reimagined through new cultural and educational lenses, ensuring that the site's complex history remains visible and accessible to the public.

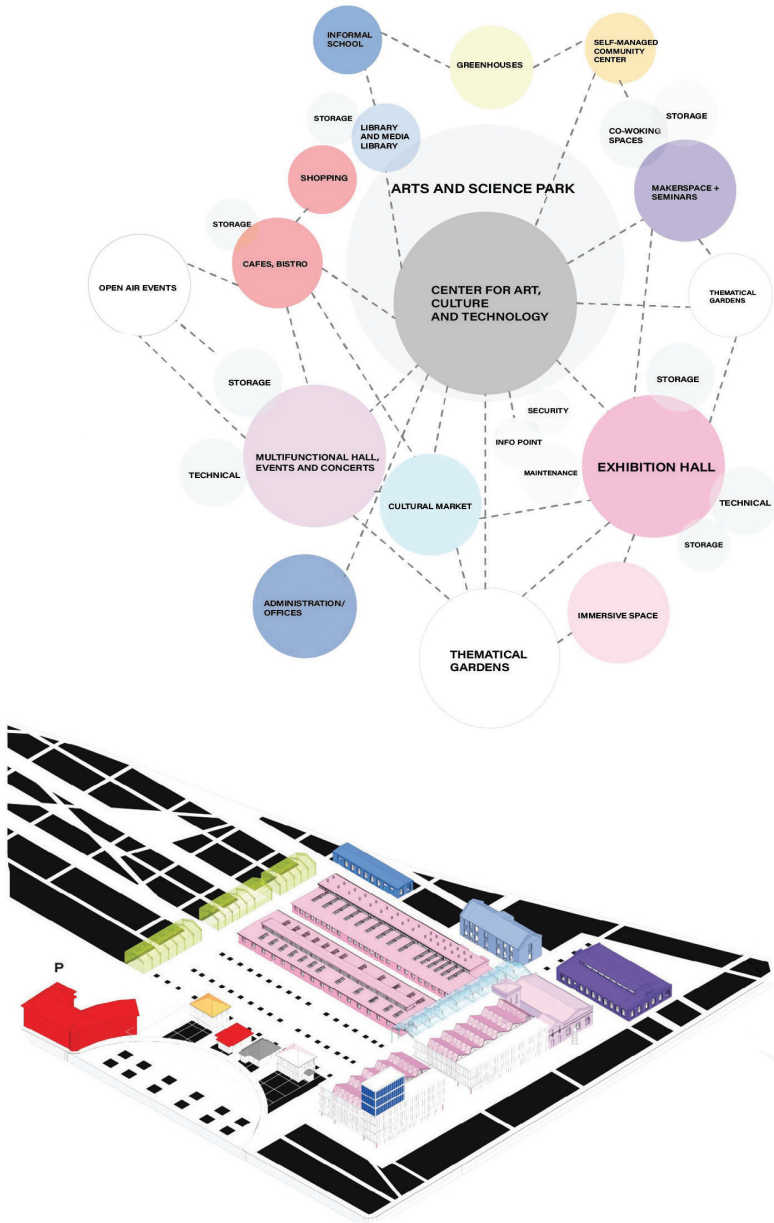

Figure 9. Functional diagram.
Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

Finally, the research underlines that community involvement is needed for the success of such initiatives. This principle has been integrated into the proposal through carefully selected programmatic changes, including the establishment of an informal learning centre, co-working spaces, a mediatheque, a makerspace, a community centre and community greenhouses towards the park. Events like Dâmbovița Delivery Festival and existing civic initiatives from the area provided precedents for shaping the site's programme, ensuring it could evolve into a participatory space rather than a static architectural one.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the Arts and Science Park project reimagines a space where the natural environment, industrial heritage, art, science and community intersect, creating a dynamic and inclusive urban landscape for both human and non-human actors (Fig. 10). The project emerges at the crossroads of: the natural layer – the parks and the river; the mineral layer – the industrial heritage and the streets; the social layer – the residents and creative communities. By focusing on nature, permeability, connectivity and social inclusion, the project aimed to strengthen the area's identity while providing public space for learning, recreation and cultural and informational exchange.

The diploma project represents a continuation of the theoretical research, illustrating how a conceptual framework can inform site-specific solutions. It ultimately argues that industrial heritage should not be treated as a static monument but as a dynamic entity with an evolving cultural and historical background.

The study encourages a reflective and forward-thinking approach to urban regeneration. The project's core principle – with nature, for nature and for the user (Batlleiroig, 2023) – encapsulates this attitude, therefore underlining the need for sustainable and inclusive design strategies. The journey from research to concept proposal sought to demonstrate that industrial conversions, when approached with sensitivity and vision, have the potential to become powerful catalysts for urban regeneration, fostering a more connected, resilient and culturally enriched inclusive city.

Figure 10. Main longitudinal section and a rendering depicting the new main axis of composition with the Cultural Market as the end point.

Source: the author; excerpt from the diploma project.

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Each chapter of this volume is accompanied by its own references that can also be regarded as invitations to explore, in greater detail, the topics brought into discussion. Nevertheless, this annotated bibliography has the role of showcasing and reviewing a diversity of books as resources to be used in the endeavour of approaching specific context-related topics that are of particular interest to each reader. The variety of theoretical, conceptual or applied perspectives presented in each of the titles listed below reflects the complexity of the parameters addressed both individually and in combination. Applied in specific contexts, the parameters translate into layers of understanding, through reading, analysis, synthesis and interpretation of the data uncovered, and they have the potential to lead to well-guided design outcomes.
This bibliography reiterates some of the books referenced in previous chapters, which are considered fundamental and/or instrumental in architecture and urban planning analysis, and it also adds others that expand on certain dimensions and parameters or explore them through different lenses, emphasizing contextual relevance as a key requirement.

Some of the entries are adapted and translated from an earlier online version of an annotated bibliography on the topic of decoding context, published in Romanian under the title Bibliografie Decodificarea contextului – scholarh 2024, available at https://www.uauim.ro/cercetare/scholarh/2024/tutoriale.

[8] ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anda-Ioana SFINTEȘ

1. **Amistadi, L., Balducci, V., Bradecki, T., Prandi, E., & Schröder, U. (Eds.). (2022). *Mapping Urban Spaces: Designing the European City.* Routledge.**

Based on ample research concerned with the psychological, sociological and aesthetic qualities attributed to the open spaces of European medium-sized cities, this volume approaches architecture as fluid, emphasizing experience and perception. The authors look at (physical and perceived) spatial connections and develop a rich discourse starting from a dialectic view of architecturally delimited spaces as interior (warm) and exterior (cold). Various ways of seeing the city and various parameters are introduced and related to mapping open space as not only a way of coding information but also as a subjective practice, dependent on the observer. The volume ends with a discussion on the problems of the contemporary city, thus highlighting the implementation potential of this approach.

2. **Carmona, M. (2021). *Public Places Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design* (3rd ed.). Routledge.**

In this fundamental book, Carmona lists and extends a series of dimensions, distinguishing paths of decoding through specific criteria and through questioning and analysis of specific parameters. He provides an alternative lens through which to understand the dimensions of public urban spaces (some of which are also mentioned in the introductory chapter of this volume) and he also details them, thus revealing the importance of self-positioning, of logic and coherence, building on the core ideas of his book. While my approach in the introductory chapter of this volume aims to encourage a broader, more personal navigation through a less firmly established diagram, Carmona, by researching specific public spaces, exemplifies a more structured way of working with such an instrument.

3. **Carmona, M., & Wunderlich, F. (2013). *Capital Spaces: The Multiple Complex Public Spaces of a Global City.* Routledge.**

This volume discusses the design, development, use and management of the urban square as public space, taking London as a case study because of the social, economic and political complexities that define it. Thus, it becomes an example of thorough examination of particular contexts against a list of contemporary critiques. Typologies and types of spaces are related to both issues and desired conditions, contributing to a better understanding of a network of relationships between actors and parameters that must be taken into account in order to achieve public space transformations that truly meet the needs of the public.

4. **Day, C., & Gwilliam, J. (2020). *Living Architecture, Living Cities: Soul-Nourishing Sustainability.* Routledge.**

Sustainability has been, for many years now, approached as multi-dimensional. Almost anything can be regarded through a sustainable lens, as this volume proves by relating it to the city and urban life. This book, as well as others

mentioned here, points out the intricacy of city layers, connecting distinct parameters through analyses that lead to complex understandings of a context. The authors introduce a vast array of parameters spanning from issues related to the environment (as a main aspect of sustainability) to experiences, places, community, mobility, use, security, economic processes, etc. before concluding with an ample discussion on future-oriented aspects.

5. Dovey, K., Pafka, E., & Ristic, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Mapping Urbanities: Morphologies, Flows, Possibilities.* Routledge.

This collection of case studies applies mapping as a method of investigation in the attempt to understand aspects of urbanity through various corresponding parameters: from walkability (linked to permeability, safety, density, etc.) to rhythms (linked to densities, functions and urban morphology) or to graffiti that speaks of the character of an urban space (taking into account parameters like condition/state, visibility, spatial practices or even desires). Each chapter highlights the idea that the researcher must determine, in each case, a specific set of (possibly not that evident, but highly interconnected) parameters, discovering a path through a diagram like the one that accompanies the first chapter of this volume.

6. Farrall, P., & Jackson, I. (2024). *100 Site Analysis Essentials: An Architect's Guide.* RIBA Publishing.

This well-structured guide explains many of the basic parameters to be analysed in decoding context. It exemplifies specific contexts, offering keys of interpretation and reflecting on how the design could be built upon or how it could integrate conclusions drawn from researching the parameters set for the given situation. The book serves as a comprehensive introduction to the process of reading and analysing a context, being a valuable instrument especially in the first years of study. It encourages not only the thorough understanding of a context but also the transformation of analysis into an integral part of the entire design process.

7. Hall, T., Hubbard, P., & Short, J. R. (Eds.). (2008). *The SAGE Companion to the City.* SAGE.

This companion is essential in understanding a broad range of themes that define the contemporary city, all speaking of various forms of inequality. It brings together perspectives that link sociology, history, geography, economy and politics with religion, culture or science, questioning issues of power, faith, memory, law, production and consumption, community and ethnicity, migration, civic behaviour, criminality and many more. This volume is a valuable resource that, beyond increasing awareness of such poignant themes, also encourages the active engagement of designers with various stakeholders. Thus, a specific mode of decoding a context can be viewed in relation to the changes the designer (architect, urban planner, etc.) hopes to achieve, or the urban dimensions it could have an impact upon.

8. Giseke, U., Löw, M., Million, A., Misselwitz, P. & Stollmann, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Urban Design Methods. Integrated Urban Research Tools*. JOVIS.

Urban Design Methods is a collection of current practices in designing urban space that are based on a thorough decoding of the context. Each method and tool is explained and exemplified with the aim of fostering a new interdisciplinary understanding of urban space culture and use. Some of the tools expand on the research and meaning of certain parameters or actors. Other tools apply to design, but they still highlight sets of parameters that must be considered together, thus being more useful in trying to decode a context while having in mind a specific objective. Contemporary understandings of the issues discussed open up various perspectives regarding research related to desired outcomes.

9. Henckel, D., Thomaier, S., Könecke, B., Zedda, R., & Stabilini, S. (Eds.). (2013). *Space–Time Design of the Public City* (Urban and Landscape Perspective, Vol. 15). Springer.

In this volume, time is considered a key parameter that frames specific multi-layered understandings of urban life as it unfolds in public spaces of the city, thus leading to a space-time approach. Urban rhythms are followed through various processes that take into consideration daily life (as well as the night-time city), time schedules, walkability, services and events, etc. The research of various urban issues in connection to urban rhythms highlights even the most common daily practices as deeply connected to the processes that define a city. Concurrently, time-space as framed by cataclysms or other types of emergencies as well as by other temporary, short- and long-term, phenomena become of great importance in understanding the challenges of the contemporary city and their impact upon city life.

10. Jaffe, R., & de Koning, A. (2023). *Introducing Urban Anthropology* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

This volume offers valuable insight into the city and its understanding from an anthropological perspective, following the changing nature of social life, urban space, flows (of people, money, things, ideas, etc.) and connections. Its chapters address specific dimensions and parameters that can be approached anthropologically, entailing, in fact, the exploration of interconnected phenomena and processes. From the much discussed urban places to urban economies or consumption and leisure activities and, last but not least, citizenship and politics, the authors bring together dimensions less frequently examined to an in-depth level in academic contexts. The specificity of their exemplifications highlights the need for understanding the broader context of any situation, with social, cultural, economic and political realities being of first importance.

11. Karp, D. A., Stone, G. P., Yoels, W. C., & Dempsey, N. P. (2015). *Being Urban: A Sociology of City Life* (3rd ed.). Praeger.

Although the volume looks closely at American society and presents situations that do not apply as such outside of it, the discussion is valuable as a great

example of how research must not stop at the surface. The authors reflect on a series of subjects that manifest themselves in an urban context (like community, lifestyle, power, sports or arts in the city), proving that nothing is just as it seems and that the city is a gearing mechanism. Various historical, social, economic, political and other processes related to the topic must be considered in order to avoid forming an incomplete image and to reach a true understanding. While reading through the chapters, the relevance of specific dimensions and parameters to be researched depending on the topic becomes obvious, thus signalling to any researcher the importance of a deeper inquiry.

12. LaGro Jr., J. A. (2013). *Site Analysis: Informing Context-Sensitive and Sustainable Site Planning and Design* (3rd ed.). Wiley.

This fundamental guide to site analysis is more focused on professional approaches and practice. Various dimensions (physical, biological, regulatory, cultural and historical contexts) are explored through relevant parameters, their assessment being carried out both at a theoretical level and through case studies. Of great importance, in going from analysis to subsequent steps in decoding, are the chapters dedicated to synthesis and implementation, which encourage the development of context-sensitive designs. Last but not least, decoding instruments like mapping, the use of specific technologies and systems, and aspects of graphic communication are presented.

13. Lucas, R. (2020). *Anthropology for Architects: Social Relations and the Built Environment.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Lucas builds his study on the acknowledgement that anthropology has much to offer to architects since architectural anthropology promotes a more human-centred and open-minded approach, challenging personal biases and preconceptions. He introduces the concept of "lifeworld", which emphasizes that no aspect of social life can be understood outside a network of related dimensions, viewed across various scales. The aim of this volume is to inform context-decoding processes by offering a detailed investigation of particular situations like: the home, museums, marketplaces, routes, performance spaces and food establishments. The contemporary condition of each is examined through its history, precedents and discussions based on case studies.

14. Lynch, K. (1960). *The Image of the City.* MIT Press.

The Image of the City is the most influential book written by Kevin Lynch. He links city form and city living through a series of defining elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. These five elements are commonly used as the initial parameters in decoding a context, but of great importance is that the author explores them through perception, establishing mental maps as essential tools for understanding how people experience city life. Mental maps reveal meanings beyond physical form or spatial configuration, thus enabling more nuanced and thoughtful analysis – a fact sustained by the impressive number of works influenced by this book in the over 60 years since its publication.

15. MacCallum, D., Babb, C., & Curtis, C. (2019). *Doing Research in Urban and Regional Planning: Lessons in Practical Methods.* Routledge.

This volume is a comprehensive guide that explains elemental methodologies and methods used in conducting site research. Starting with how to develop relevant research questions, it then discusses different approaches and multidisciplinary research methods (from literature review and text analysis to site auditing and interrogative methods). Unlike most titles in this bibliography, the book is less concerned with the selection and/or understanding of parameters and more focused on methods, tools and data interpretation. Thus, it is a great source for identifying the best modes of decoding context in relation to the specific aim of the research conducted.

16. Madanipour, A. (1996). *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into a Socio-spatial Process.* John Wiley & Sons.

The author looks at the processes that frame urban space, which makes this volume fundamental in understanding various parameters as part of the social reality that manifests itself in the city. The book is oriented towards intervening in urban space and promoting preferable changes. This entails a deep understanding of the complexities that define a city and its human and non-human actors entangled in political, economic and cultural processes. Of greater importance for us, in decoding a context, is the first part of the study where various dimensions of the city are explored, highlighting configurations of particular analysis. However, the second part, with its focus on the realities shaped by new developments and their impact upon urban space, makes one question links between parameters that can become relevant in a specific research context.

17. Madanipour, A. (2003). *Public and Private Spaces of the City.* Routledge.

This book delves deeper into the public or private status of city spaces, highlighting how a certain aim defined by specific parameters can activate a hierarchy of related key terms. Different actors and their places of action are taken into consideration, looking at the need for such a division between public and private – at how and why they are framed as such. Madanipour highlights perspectives and parameters that become relevant depending on the researched dimension (e.g. economic, political, social or cultural). The discussion shifts from micro to macro scales of understanding, ranging from personal space to public and private spaces of the city.

18. Picon, A. & Ratti, C. (2023). *Atlas of the Senseable City.* Yale University Press.

This volume presents a selection of works developed in the Senseable City Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) – a research laboratory oriented towards the future of cities transformed by technological developments

and big data. Motion, connection, circulation, and experience are viewed as key parameters in decoding a city transformed through digital urban mapping, but also as instruments in the hands of various stakeholders. Thus, as technologies are now considered non-human actors, they frame a new reality and become instrumental in driving both positive and negative outcomes. Each parameter is discussed and illustrated in mappings created throughout history as well as from Senseable City Lab projects.

19. Plowright, P. D. (2020). *Making Architecture Through Being Human: A Handbook of Design Ideas.* Routledge.

Unlike other books recommended here, this volume is closer to the form of a specialised dictionary: it is a collection of concepts, notions, ideas and actions, explained and illustrated (addressing their architectural dimension) but also explored through their role in supporting human activity. This human-centred approach is what sets the book apart, as it shows how each term, materialised in various ways, is interpreted, used or experienced by humans. The same approach enables the appropriation of the terms as parameters of analysis, offering a framework for the decoding of specific contexts during any of its steps – from reading a context to evaluating the potential impact of the parameter upon that same context.

20. Shaw, R. (2018). *The Nocturnal City.* Routledge.

The Nocturnal City delves into a well-framed and confined theme – that of the realities that define a city during night-time. We do not often think of looking at the city through such lenses, at least not in such depth, or of following up on such a diversity of parameters. Thus, this book is also an exemplification of how a specific theme can be advanced, leading to new perspectives upon issues that are sometimes taken for granted. The author discusses changing perceptions of city limits, artificial lighting as a non-human actor, nightlife, night-time aesthetics and even domestic space at night, framing night as a time-space to be decoded by using a broad range of parameters.

21. Viderman, T., Knierbein, S., Kränzle, E., Frank, S., Roskamm, N., & Wall, E. (Eds.). (2022). *Unsettled Urban Space: Routines, Temporalities and Contestations.* Routledge.

In this volume, various authors (academics, researchers and practitioners from all over the world) expand discussions in urban studies by starting from a particular set of parameters – routines, temporalities and contestations. The theme can be regarded as an invitation to look beyond the apparent stability and safety of urban spaces and uncover marks and traces of tensions embedded in even the most common activities. These parameters can disclose specific conditions and nuances of urban experiences which resonate across various scales of social, cultural and political dimensions. An understanding of such often-overlooked processes can successfully inform change-driven, context-specific designs.

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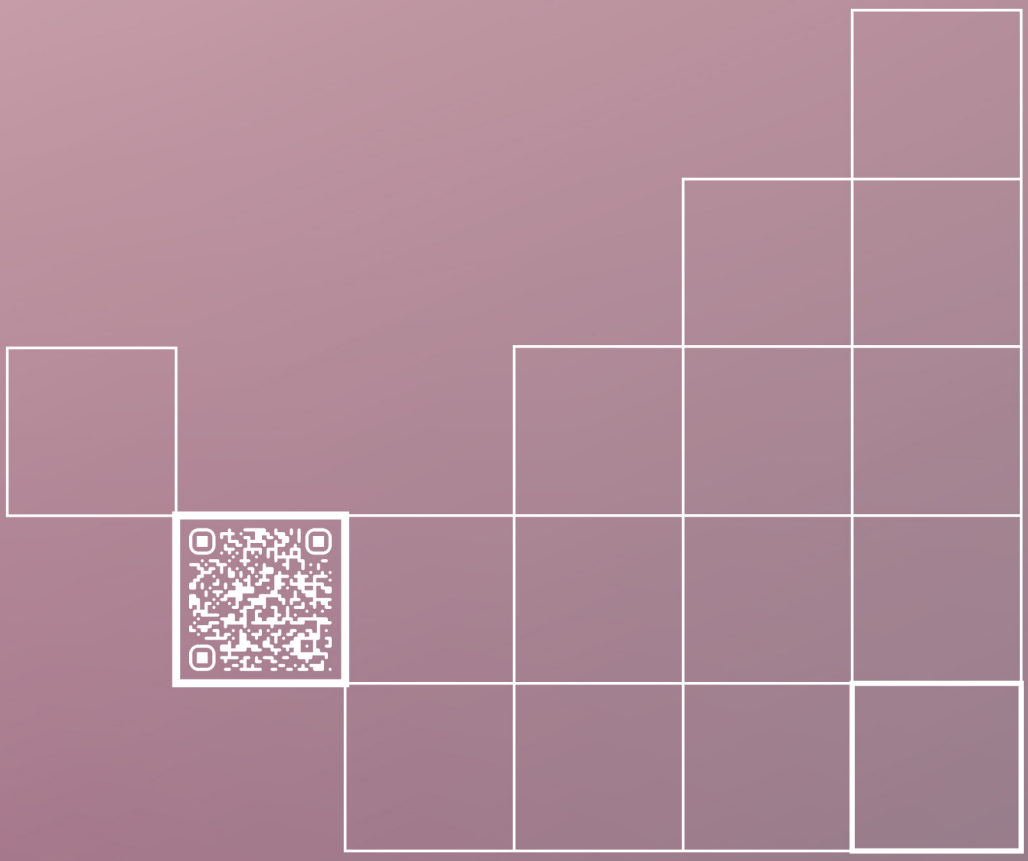

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