



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

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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.

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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.

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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 (Sfinteş, 2023; Sfinteş 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 (Sfinteş & 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

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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?

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

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* (Sfinteş, 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.

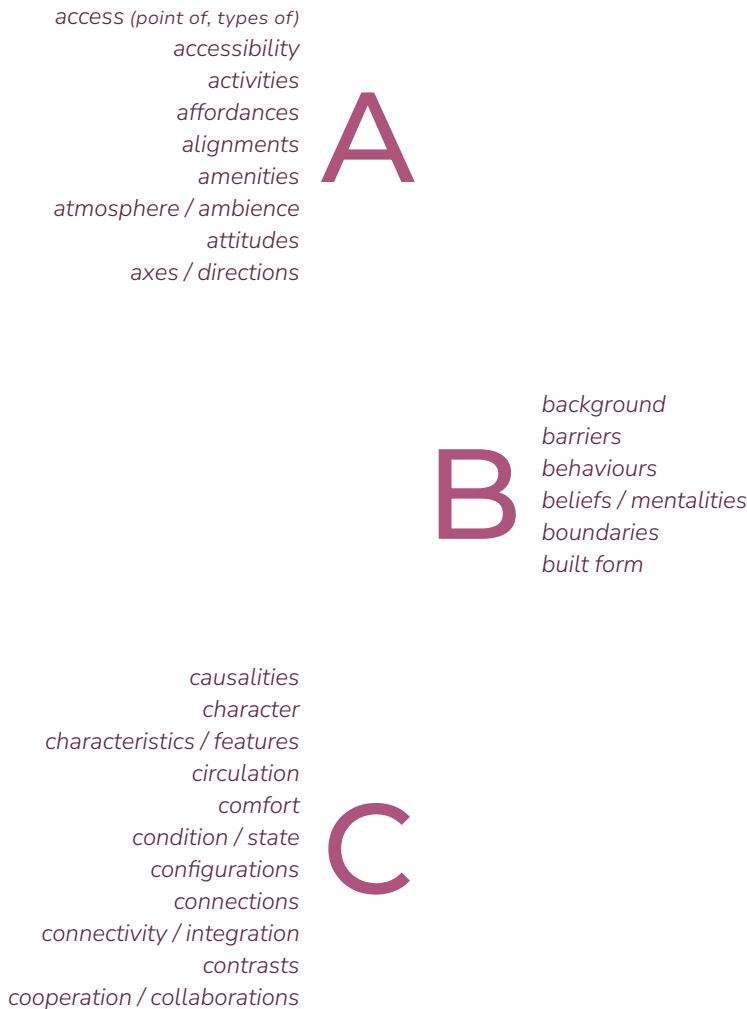
The parameters below are simply listed and can be seen as key terms in decoding context. Each of them can be linked to other terms, or related to different dimensions and scales, thus leading to tailored analyses and distinct modes of understanding context characteristics. For example:

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*

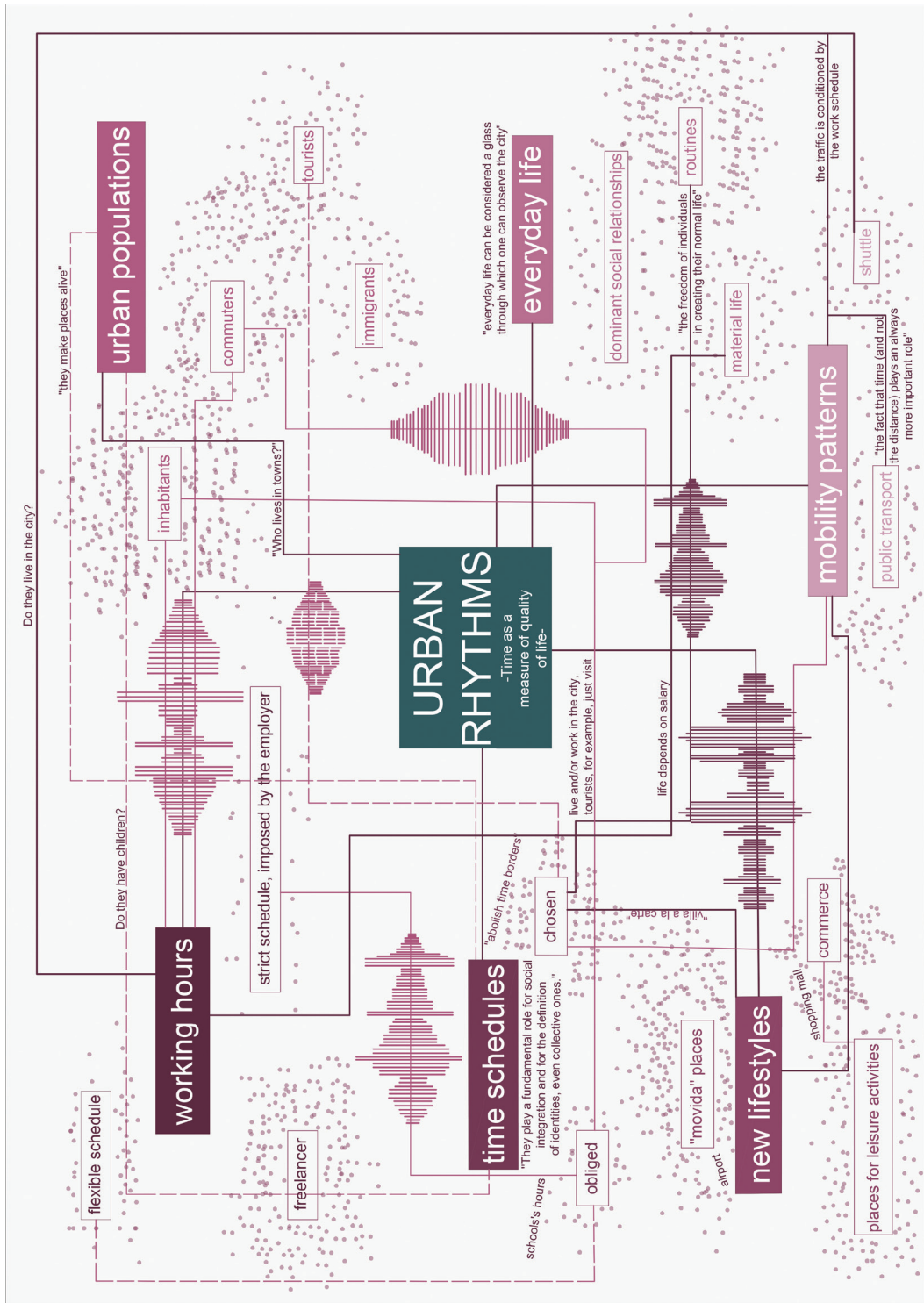


Figure 1. Urban rhythms, broken down as a parameter through theoretical research to develop understanding for subsequent application in context decoding.

Source: Drawn by Ștefania Bîgiu based on Mareggi (2013) during the Text [re]presentation⁴ 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

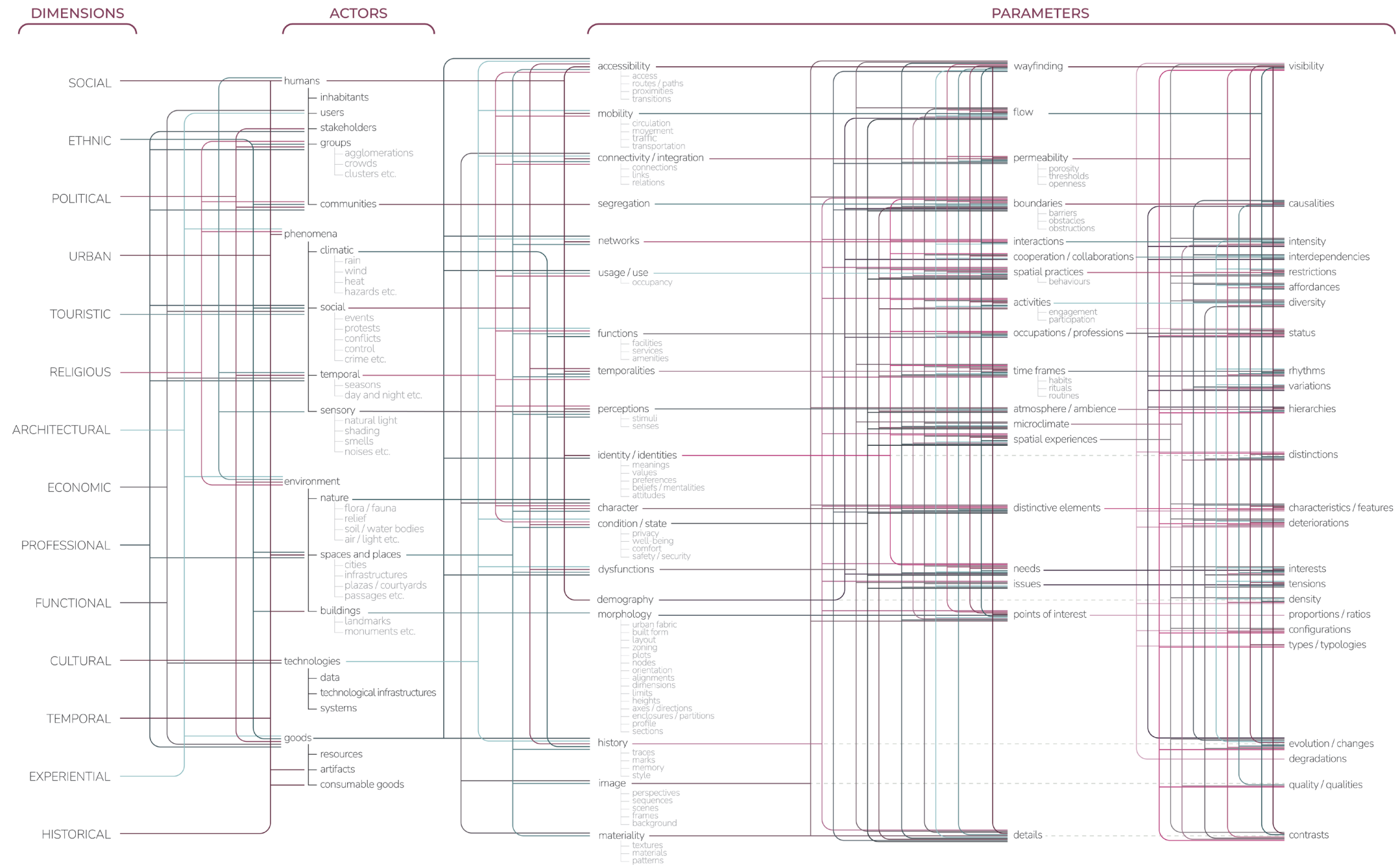
values
variations (built/unbuilt,
new/old, day/night etc.)
visibility

W

wayfinding
well-being

Z

zoning



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.

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.

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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