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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.

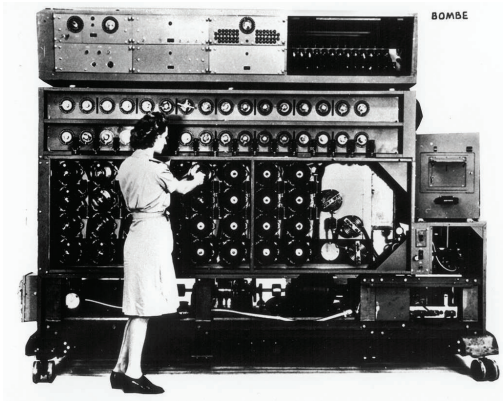

Figure 1. Bombe – the machine developed by Alan Turing and his team.
Source: NSA, Public Domain, https://itoldya420.getarchive.net/amp/media/bombe-fa96af

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.

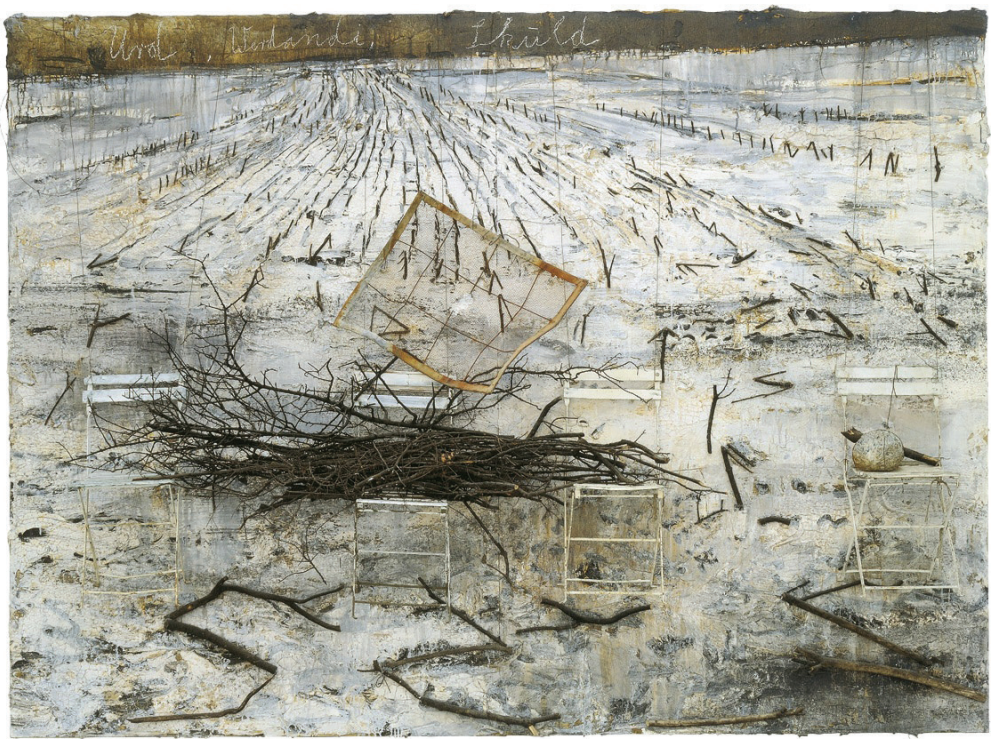

Figure 2. Anselm Kiefer: *Urd, Werdandi, Skuld*.
Source: museum-digital:baden-württember, © Sammlung Würth, https://global.museum-digital.org/singleimage?noiiif=1&&imagenr=88401

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

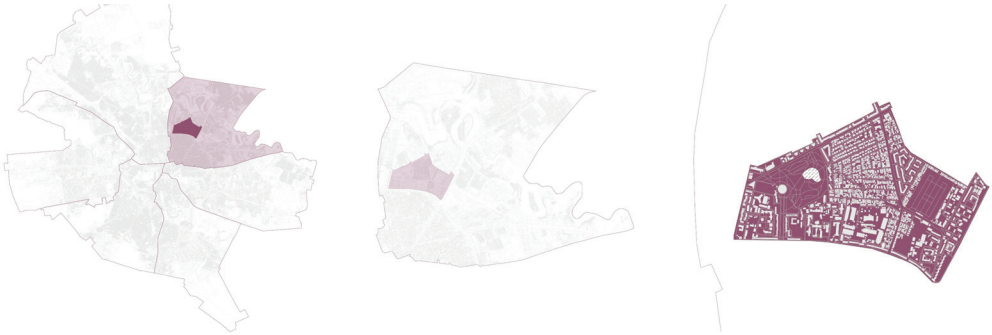

Figure 3. Location. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Elena Conțeanu.

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.

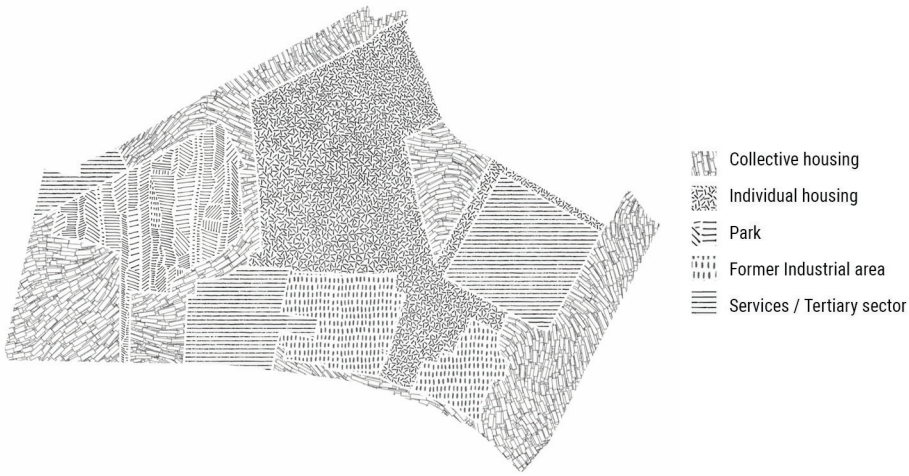

Figure 4. Urban fragments. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Gabriela Bica & Daria Penovici.

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.

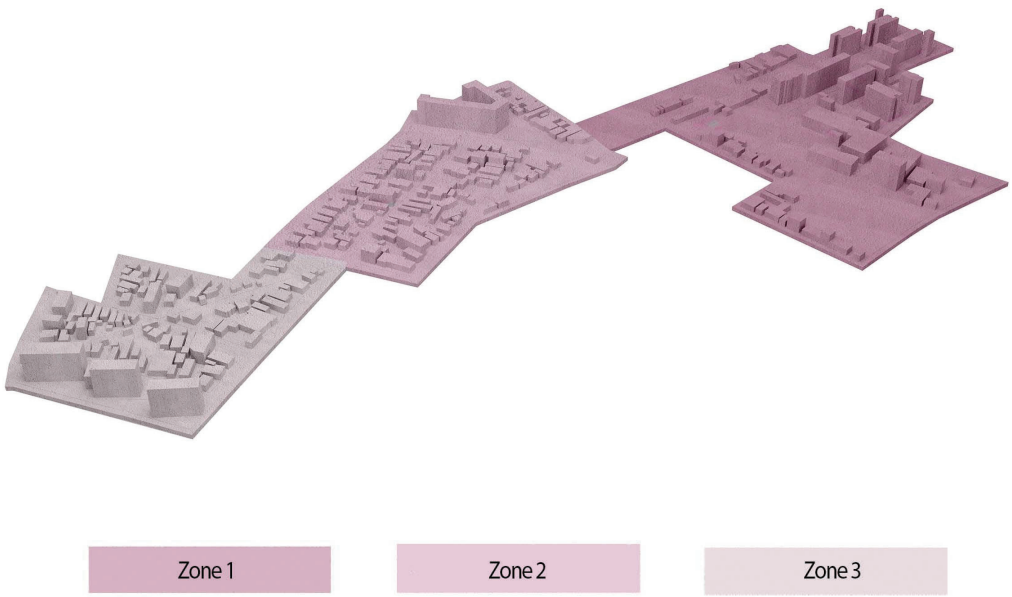

Figure 12. The Different characteristics of the route. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Claudiu Ignat & Daria Nistoroiu.

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.

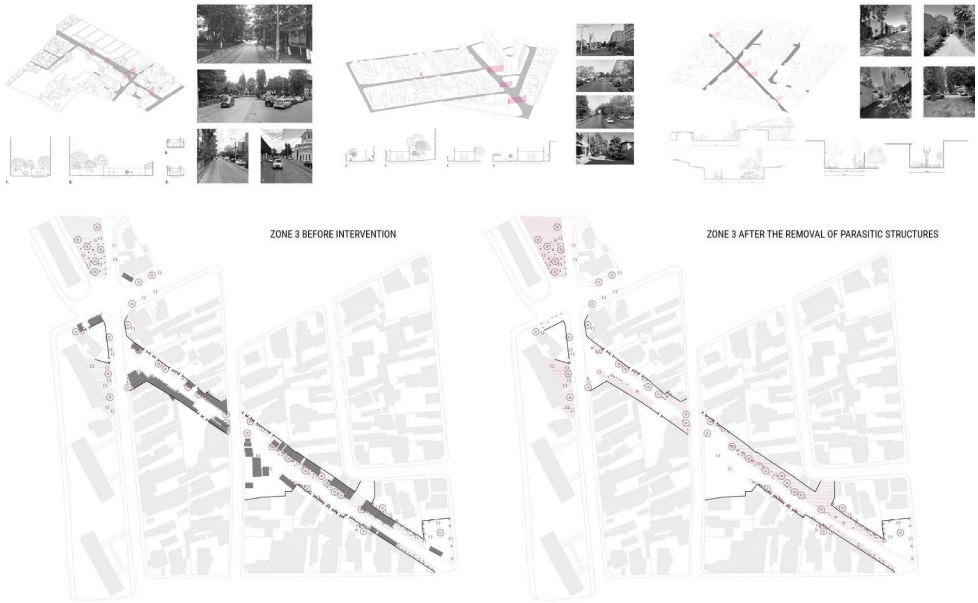

Figure 13. Intervention principles. Places of the City project.
Source: Presentation board by Isabela Chirică & Sophia Panaitescu, Ilinca Dima & Maria Grigore.

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.

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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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