

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

1. A specific context is framed by the site and its immediate or extended surroundings – ranging from local to international scales of analysis – as well as by specific issues related to the theme being studied, the site itself, or the programme, all considered within a broader framework. **Given the complexity and breadth of context, what does “decoding a context” imply?**
2. Framing and approaching a design theme in an academic context can sometimes differ from tackling it in real-world situations, depending on the learning outcomes. In the final years of study, especially during the diploma project, students should demonstrate the ability to frame and understand a broader and more intricate context. **Could you elaborate on the contextual categories and parameters that a student should consider as part of a complex architectural approach?**
3. **Do you have any recommendations for students on how to approach a context in order to decode it?** Although properly defining a context involves multiple considerations, we are particularly interested in identifying strategies that guide the process of uncovering its complexities.

[5] INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES



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

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

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

[5.1] Lilly KUDIC

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Context is absolutely not to be determined by strict adherence to regulatory codes and city ordinances.

The problem with local legislation is that it is not absolute, but changes with political context; the life of a building is likely to be considerably longer than the life of local, regional or national development plans.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[5.2] Rita OCCHIUTO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[5.3] Adrian PHIFFER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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