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### An Archaeology

Komez-Daglioglu, Esin

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## THE CONTEXT DEBATE: AN ARCHAEOLOGY

**Esin Komez Daglioglu**

*Department of Architecture, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands*

Email: [e.komez@tudelft.nl](mailto:e.komez@tudelft.nl)

Context is a crucial concept in architecture in spite of the frequent ambiguity around its use. Although the consideration of context is intrinsic to the process of architectural design, in contemporary theory, little attention is paid to it. By way of contrast, in the 1950s, various architects, theorists, and teachers cultivated several perspectives on context as a way of addressing some of the ill effects of modern architectural orthodoxy. Although a topic of layered and productive debate in the post-war years, context fell into disrepute in the critical architectural discourse of the 1980s. This paper provides an archaeology of the “context debate” in the hope that it may be possible to reveal its forgotten dimensions and flexibility.

**Keywords:** Autonomy; context; contextualism; new architectural pragmatism; postmodernism

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### INTRODUCTION

Architectural discourse has rarely been defined more wittily than through the concept of prosthesis. Mark Wigley introduced prosthesis as a metaphor to describe both the physical and conceptual extension of architecture into the university, the institutional home of the thesis, where arguments are—as the Greek root *tithenai* suggests—proposed, positioned, and defended.<sup>1</sup> According to Wigley, “the concept of prosthesis is always already architectural”, while “architectural discourse is itself a prosthesis”.<sup>2</sup> Architecture provides metaphors for talking about a thesis: arguments require “grounds”, they build upon stable “foundations”, and so on. Furthermore, architectural discourse is prosthetic, for it constantly artificially attaches itself to or expands on debates generated in fine arts or sciences. In addition to using prosthesis as a metaphor for explaining architectural discourse and its institutionalisation, Wigley defined buildings as prosthesis as well. He endorsed techno-aesthetics from modernist architecture as a technological prosthesis to contemporary architecture of digital prosthetics. In fact, a building is not only a technological prosthetic extension of the human body, as the modernist discourse claims, but it is also prosthetic to social, cultural, physical, and historical layers of its context. In this regard,

prosthetic architectural discourse has potentials in comfortably engaging with emerging paradigms in philosophy, technology, the humanities, and the social sciences to reflect on diverse layers of context. However, being prosthetic is also a weakness, since context in architecture can also easily be manipulated, dominated, or absorbed by political regimes.

Understanding of context is an inherent property of architectural practice, although it has hardly ever become central to architectural theory and discourse. Always encapsulating a definition beyond the physical features of a site, context is embedded in the notion of *genius loci*, translated today as “spirit of place”, in old Roman architecture.<sup>3</sup> In Renaissance architecture, *decorum*, inherited from Vitruvius’ *décor*, was developed as a key strategy to communicate with context through symbolism.<sup>4</sup> *École des Beaux-Arts* introduced *tirer parti*, meaning making the best from what is found in the existing physical and political context, which, however, later came to be dominated by *prendre parti*, prioritising the freestanding object.<sup>5</sup> Freestanding and mass-produced building later became a canon of modernist architecture for which previous implications of context were supplanted by a *tabula rasa* approach, the break with history and tradition, notions of designing from the inside out, etc. However, modernism’s progressive and emancipatory dimensions were questioned deeply after the two world wars of the twentieth century, which also cast a shadow over the legacy and supremacy of orthodox modern architecture. Triggered by the destructive post-war constructions, new definitions of context were reintroduced in the field of architecture in the early 1950s. Their principal aim was to cross-fertilise the progressive dimension of modernist architecture by cultivating the existing circumstances, rather than projecting a utopian ideal. However, context as an intrinsic value of architectural design again faded away after the 1980s when contextualism imposed a blinkered understanding and was subsequently challenged by the autonomy paradigm.

Architectural autonomy was widely disseminated through the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies founded by the American architect Peter Eisenman and its journal, *Oppositions*. While many architectural theoreticians and historians such as Manfredo Tafuri viewed autonomy as a resistance to the capitalist cycle of production–distribution–consumption, Eisenman’s framing of autonomy was rather seeking to codify architecture as a self-contained discipline having its own intrinsic formal principles. Defining context as extrinsic to the architectural design process, Eisenman’s disciplinary autonomy framed “critical architecture” as resistant to “external forces”. This argument was expanded by the writings of the architectural historian and theoretician K. Michael Hays, who himself stood for a more nuanced position. Hays argued for “a critical position between culture as a massive body of self-perpetuating ideas and form supposedly free of circumstance”.<sup>6</sup> The “circumstance” from which he declared form free can be read as the immediate social, physical, and material context. Hays’ critical architecture is therefore a distanced practice, which clearly separates itself from all that is “external” to it.

Attacking criticality, the empowerment of theory and distanced practice upheld by the proponents of disciplinary autonomy, the new architectural pragmatism was developed in the early 2000s and has since become the dominant paradigm in the field. Defining or defending architecture not as a discourse but as a practice, the new architectural pragmatists have launched an “assault on something called ‘the critical’ or ‘critical architecture’, usually accompanied by a

collateral assault on something called ‘theory’.<sup>7</sup> Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting showed how this new paradigm proposed *projective* architectural practice against the dominance of critical theory in academia in an article that challenged the “critical project” of Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman, for whom it is claimed “disciplinarity is understood as autonomy” (enabling critique, representation, and signification), but not as instrumentality (projection, performativity, and pragmatics).<sup>8</sup> Somol and Whiting introduced Rem Koolhaas as opposed to Eisenman to support their campaign for a shift of disciplinarity from “autonomy and process” to “force and effect”.<sup>9</sup>

Although the new architectural pragmatists are claiming today an *engaged* architectural practice taking into account “how the context and the viewer ‘complete’ the work of art”, they do not and are perhaps not willing to generate a critical, theoretical, and discursive reflection on context.<sup>10</sup> As their protagonist Koolhaas’ “fuck context” statement shows, architects, when they become agents of global neoliberalism, can ignore contextual concerns since the purpose of their pragmatism is to allow them to operate in different territories under contradictory political regimes and social conditions.<sup>11</sup> Equating criticality and theory with Eisenman’s call for autonomy, new pragmatists abandon them. In fact, engaged architectural practice is possible without abandoning the notions of discourse, theory, and criticality. A reassessment of context, the theoretical elaboration of which comes some decades before both the doctrine of autonomy and the current pragmatism, reveals why this might be the case. The term context, literally meaning *weaving together*, was introduced to the field of architecture in the middle of the last century to draw attention to the relationship between the individual structure and a neglected urbanism. Diverse and subtle approaches to context emerged during the 1950s and 1960s through critiques of orthodox modernist architecture’s tabula rasa approach to the city, the fixation on designing buildings “from the inside out”, and the valorisation of breaks with history and tradition. This essay presents an archaeology of the context debate to show how engaged architectural practice can embody criticality and theory while performing architecture as a prosthetic discourse.

### POSTMODERN CONTEXTUALISM

In the 1980s, contextualism was mainly associated with conformity and visual compatibility with the surrounding built environments. In the USA, due to the growing influence of the American Preservationist Movement, professional discussion had begun to revolve around the integration of new buildings into their historical surroundings. Keith Ray noted an increasing familiarity with the terms *reservation*, *restoration*, *adaptive use*, and *contextual design* due to the growing interest in historical buildings in America. He stated that:

To remain of service to society, these [historical buildings] have to be modified for new uses—or new buildings have to be inserted among the existing ones to maintain the living fabric of our cities. But modification to existing buildings and new buildings cognizant of their surroundings present unfamiliar design relationships between the new and old. Contextual design, designing

in relation to the context, then, is the point of this book. It elucidates the design relationship between old and new buildings by illustrating the variety of options available.<sup>12</sup>

Criticising modernism's disregard for context, its break with the past, and the doctrine of the "spirit of the times", Brent Brolin also emphasised the importance of visual continuity and defined it as one of the most important tasks of architects, planners, and developers.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, he discussed the role of form, scale, ornament, materials, and details in fitting architectural works to their contexts. Linda Groat developed a checklist for architects, covering items that should be considered in fitting new buildings to old neighbourhoods.<sup>14</sup> She emphasised the importance of using elements derived from the façades of surrounding buildings.<sup>15</sup>

In Britain, a policy of sympathetically tailoring the visual fit of new architecture to established neighbourhoods has been endorsed by the Prince of Wales. Prince Charles has advocated neo-traditional principles in urban design as elaborated and disseminated through The Prince's Foundation for Building Community (formerly The Institute of Architecture from 1986 to 2001 and The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment from 2001 to 2012). One of the first instances of an intervention by Prince Charles in architecture was in 1984, when he gave a speech at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) on its 150th anniversary. In his speech, he attacked the modernist architect Peter Ahrends' proposed extension of the National Gallery in London as a "monstrous carbuncle". Prince Charles' architectural vision, arguing for a subtle reconnection to tradition and nature, was recently outlined in a piece written for *The Architectural Review* in 2014. At the end of the article, he proposed ten *geometric principles* of urban design: respect to land, architecture as language, attention to scale (human proportions), achieving harmony through diversity, well-designed enclosures, drawing on local building materials, reducing the use of signs and lights, pedestrian-centred designs, achieving density, and flexibility.<sup>16</sup> Prince Charles' ideas referred to an understanding of context as the consolidation of traditionally built harmonious urban environments.

Beginning from the 1980s, this rather reductive and blinkered understanding of context was criticised by the neo-avant-gardes or "critical architects", who associated contextualism with uniformity and conformity. Eisenman's "autonomy" was enlisted by these avant-gardes in opposition to contextual theories. In addition to Eisenman's attack on contextual practices, the critique of contextualism aired by many architects, theoreticians, and philosophers was also motivated by a more general disapproval of postmodern architecture. For instance, Paul-Alan Johnson criticised context for imposing conformity and continuity by being historicist and authoritarian.<sup>17</sup> Political theorist Fredric Jameson criticised "postmodernism's more general contextualism" by identifying its call for difference as a by-product of the multinational capitalism that it claimed to oppose.<sup>18</sup> In 1988, avant-garde architects came together in the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA's) Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition to attack postmodernism and its contextualism. Curators Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley asserted that "contextualism

has been used as an excuse for mediocrity, for a dumb servility to the familiar".<sup>19</sup> By way of contrast, they argued, their avant-garde architecture was critically distant from any authority claimed by the context of an architectural object.

The Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition in MOMA hosted the works of Coop Himmelb(l)au, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Bernard Tschumi, who are labelled today as starchitects, figures known globally for their iconic buildings designed as detached spectacular objects celebrating architecture's deterritorialisation. At a recent panel discussion for the 25th anniversary of the exhibition, Wigley asked, "Could an exhibition similar to Deconstructivist Architecture happen today? Does today's architectural climate invite a genre-defining moment?"<sup>20</sup> Tschumi's answer, as reported by John Hill, was interesting, since he "asserted that there is nothing today to battle, like postmodern architecture 25 years ago"; Hill noted further that Tschumi then "offered that a show now would be called 'Iconism', addressing the obsessions of architects to make icons".<sup>21</sup> If the report was accurate, Tschumi was thereby calling for an exhibition criticising the position that he and his peers had implicitly endorsed a quarter of a century ago. While architectural contextualism was harshly attacked after the 1980s due to its conformism and association with postmodernism, Tschumi's comments make clear that context in architecture needs to be revisited.<sup>22</sup>

However, the critiques of the notion of context also triggered a search for new vocabularies in contemporary architectural theory and practice. George Dodds has argued that "instauration" is a more comprehensive term than contextualism, since it recognises the cultural and temporal realities of sites.<sup>23</sup> "Field", introduced mostly through the writings of Stan Allen, is another new concept proposed to replace the word "context".<sup>24</sup> Likewise, *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture* states that "the notion of 'field' in reference to place—and not that of 'context' or, at least, that of 'contextual'—suggests a new, more open and abstract, more flexible and receptive (reactive) condition of the contemporary project vis-à-vis the environment, far removed from classical evocation or modern (im)position".<sup>25</sup> Carol Burns and Andrea Kahn discuss the importance of site-related issues in architecture, but they propose the use of the word "site" rather than "context", as site is defined as a more open relational construct.<sup>26</sup> Sandy Isenstadt provides a brief mapping of the evolution of the term "context", where he characterises its limitations as: "In the United States today, taking up the issue of context implies a formal profile, directing attention to the past by directing it toward existing surroundings, especially in comparison with *site*, a more general term without a specific formal trajectory".<sup>27</sup>

Although several figures introduced concepts related to context after the 1990s, they have not developed a stimulating debate for a governing architectural paradigm or a critical insight on contemporary built environments. Moreover, the notion of context is still very present in much architectural thinking and expression today, through design studios, publications, and discussions. However, as stated, a critical and generative debate on context is absent in contemporary theoretical architectural discourse since its dismissal by the neo-avant-gardes. In other words, theoretical discussion of context has collapsed since the 1980s when it became operational for conformists and traditionalists. In fact, various architects, theoreticians, and

teachers generated a debate on context in the 1950s by aiming to heal the ill effects of orthodox modern architecture and planning. They took part in an implicit and multilayered discussion on context by taking it as an intrinsic value of the architectural design process. In order to reclaim a critical understanding of context today, the notion has to be freed from accumulated associations with a now-frozen catalogue of stylistic and formal characteristics. In this regard, the article will next introduce the layered context debate of the 1950s to uncover its hidden or forgotten multiple dimensions.

### THE CONTEXT DEBATE

The notion of context was not yet prevalent in the architectural discourse of the 1940s. However, it was implicitly defined as the perceptual form of the built environment, and displayed the influence of either visual studies based on Gestalt principles or re-emerging traditional picturesque theories. Gestalt (meaning shape and form in German) psychology was developed at the Berlin School of Experimental Psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gestalt theorists criticised the scientific method of solving problems by analysis, breaking them into fragments, and reassembling them after discovering their inner laws: they, instead, claimed that wholes have their own intrinsic laws independent of the sole character of the fragments.<sup>28</sup> Gestalt psychology became influential in the USA after the mid-1930s when its protagonists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka left Nazi Germany and moved there. A *Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, consisting of translations of the main German articles dealing with Gestalt psychology, including the writings of Wertheimer, Köhler, and Koffka, among others, was published in 1938 in the USA to introduce this theory to English-speaking readers. The impact of Gestalt psychology on visual studies became prominent in the 1940s and 1950s through the works of US-based emigrés György Kepes and Josef Albers.

In his 1944 book, *Language of Vision*, Kepes encapsulates theories of Gestalt psychology and uses it to discuss the spatial conception of visual images through paintings, book covers, advertisements, diagrams, etc. His focus was on the new spatial and visual experiences of mobile spectators in dynamic metropolitan life. Kepes initiated a visual studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1947 and conducted a research project with Kevin Lynch entitled “The Perceptual Form of the City” between 1954 and 1959. The mobilised gaze of automobile users became a popular case study in perceptual experience of the built environment in the USA. This project eventually led to the publication of Lynch’s *The Image of the City* in 1960, where he introduced imageability as a guide for the building and rebuilding of urban contexts. Lynch selected three urban areas as case studies: Los Angeles, Boston, and New Jersey. His research method was to interview a small sample of citizens from each area about their image of their environment and then request them to draw a sketch map of their perception of it. Mental maps were derived from these verbal interviews and sketch drawings, which were analysed in reference to five distinct elements of a city: paths,

edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. The focus of the study was on the perceptual form of the city; as Lynch stated:

This analysis limits itself to the effects of physical, perceptible objects. There are other influences on imageability, such as the social meaning of an area, its function, its history, or even its name. These will be glossed over, since the objective here is to uncover the role of form itself.<sup>29</sup>

While perception of sprawling cities from a mobilised gaze was the main concern in the USA, the focus in Europe and the UK in the 1950s was on the coherent spatial experiences of pedestrian-scale city centres. The English townscape movement was one of the protagonists of this debate. The townscape movement was disseminated mainly by *Architectural Review* and introduced first in 1949 by the journal's editor, Hubert De Cronin Hastings, with an article he wrote under the pseudonym Ivor de Wolfe.<sup>30</sup> The journal proposed the eighteenth-century English Picturesque theory as an alternative to the ongoing post-war construction in England shaped by the government's Town Planning Acts (1943, 1944, and 1947).<sup>31</sup> As de Wolfe's article suggests, the aim of the townscape movement was to establish a vocabulary of the English visual philosophy of landscape through the study of precedents. To exemplify such study, the article was followed by a casebook prepared by the art editor of the journal, Gordon Cullen, which later expanded into the book, *The Concise Townscape*. In these publications, understanding of context as the perceptual form of built environments was presented by serial vision drawings capturing sequential experience of moving through urban spaces.

Criticising the English picturesque tradition and the townscape approach, British architects of the Team 10 group, Alison and Peter Smithson, advocated a different understanding of context in the 1950s. Context for them was the everyday social practices and things as found in existing environments. Being also members of the Independent Group, which generated the pop art movement in England, the Smithsons engaged with the aesthetics of mass culture as most visible in their "as found" approach presented at the "Parallel of Life and Art" exhibition in 1953 and the "Patio & Pavilion" installation at the "This is Tomorrow" exhibition in 1956. For these exhibitions, the Smithsons collaborated with a photographer member of the Independent Group, Nigel Henderson, whose street photography captured the patterns of everyday life that informed their "as found" aesthetic.<sup>32</sup> The Smithsons countered the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) grid by introducing their Urban Re-identification Grid in 1953, which showed the social and spatial patterns of one of London's most ordinary neighbourhoods, Bethnal Green, through Henderson's photographs. Hence, the Smithsons' understanding of context was not limited to the physical aspects of built environments, but attempted to accommodate social praxis. Not using the term "context" in their early writings, the Smithsons generated the notion *socioplastics*, meaning "the relationship between the built form and social practice".<sup>33</sup>



In 1950s Italy, pre-existing environment was also central to the understanding of context with a different connotation, as most visible in the writings of Ernesto N. Rogers. Rogers was the editor of the journal *Casabella* between 1953 and 1965. During that period, he added the word *Continuità* to the title of the journal. In his first editorial text titled “Continuity”, Rogers defined the problem of architectural discourse and the practice of the period as “modernist formalism” and “the chauvinism of the nostalgic...demagogic folklorism” that arose against it.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, he used the term continuity to overcome the crisis of Modern Movement in general, and Italian modern culture in particular, by combining the premises of modernism with Italy’s deep-rooted traditions.<sup>35</sup> His answer to the problem was to develop contextual architecture, which embodied “historical awareness” and “responsibility towards tradition”, where building reflects the character of its natural and historical environments without imitating past forms. Rather than the notion context, he used the terms *le preesistenze ambientali* (surrounding pre-existences), or *ambiente*, referring to the historical, natural, and picturesque character of built environments. Although Rogers was against historical revivalism, he adapted the formal repertoire of the surrounding built fabric, especially in his later works, as is most clearly seen in his Torre Velasca project.<sup>36</sup> In the end, Rogers’ *ambiente* became associated with formalist scene-making, which referred not (only) to the compositionality of its immediate physical surroundings, but (also) to the city’s picturesqueness as reflected through its historical and natural forms.

Discussion on context in Italy can be further followed in the early writings of Aldo Rossi, who was part of the editorial board of *Casabella Continuità* during the editorship of Ernesto N. Rogers. Articles published in this journal later constructed the base of Rossi’s 1966 book, *L’Architettura della Città*, where he introduced the notion of *locus*, defined as “a relationship between a certain specific location and the buildings that are in it”.<sup>37</sup> As this definition implies, context was not an a priori condition for Rossi, but a relational phenomenon derived from the interaction of place with the urban artefacts. Criticising understanding of context as a compositional entity or a scene-making strategy, which was his master Rogers’ position, Rossi defined context as a singularity of place constructed through architecture. In other words, Rossi was opposed to the understanding of context as a frozen present condition, since he asserted that the city is constructed over time. *The Architecture of the City* appeared in English in 1982. Readers of this English translation encountered Rossi’s criticism of context in his statement: “context seems strangely bound up with illusion, with illusionism. As such it has nothing to do with the architecture of the city, but rather with the making of a scene”.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Rossi himself did not use the term “context” or its Italian equivalent *contesto* in the original Italian. His criticism of illusionary scene-making was rather directed towards Rogers’ *ambiente*.

American architect Robert Venturi completed his Master’s thesis at Princeton University School of Architecture in 1950: it turned out to be one of the first sources in the field of architecture introducing the notion of context.<sup>39</sup> In the thesis, he criticised the understanding of architecture as a self-contained entity and emphasised rather the larger wholes these entities compose. Influenced by Gestalt psychology, Venturi’s main argument was twofold. First, he proposed that “context gives a building expression, its meaning”, which means “a building is

not a self-contained object but a part in a whole composition relative to other parts and the whole”.<sup>40</sup> Second, he claimed that “change in context causes change in expression”, which is explained further in the statement, “change of a part (addition or alteration) causes a change in the other parts and in the whole”.<sup>41</sup> By using abstract Gestalt diagrams, Venturi addressed the role of objects’ *position* and *form* in shaping urban compositions.<sup>42</sup> Venturi’s early definition of context as urban composition included spatial and perceptual experiences in a manner similar to the townscape movement.<sup>43</sup> His definition of *form* and *position* of the buildings as the key conceptual strategies to achieve “the difficult whole” was later extensively discussed in his seminal book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.<sup>44</sup>

The notion of context later became central to British-born American scholar Colin Rowe’s Cornell studio teachings in the early 1960s. Here, Rowe developed a design theory and strategy based on understanding of context as the urban texture of built environments, best depicted through figure–ground Gestalt diagrams. In that vein, Giambattista Nolli’s *Nuovo Pianta*, which showed civic and religious structures as successive urban spaces in white, while rendering housing and commercial structures as an urban *poché* in black, became the main paradigm for contextual design. Rowe proposed to design buildings as set-pieces, achieved through a collage of ideal types, which were composed and distorted according to their urban context.<sup>45</sup> In fact, a richer understanding of context can be found in Rowe’s Texas years. Rowe taught at the University of Texas Austin between 1953 and 1956, together with, among others, Bernhard Hoesli, John Hejduk, and Robert Slutzky, who later became known as the Texas Rangers. During this period, Rowe and Slutzky wrote two essays introducing Kepes’ Gestaltian definition of phenomenal transparency—“simultaneous perception of different spatial locations”—as distinct from the direct material condition of literal transparency.<sup>46</sup> Although they mostly explained their argument through façade analysis, they also introduced an analytical diagram of Le Corbusier’s Palace of the League of Nations showing “spatial stratification” as the prime strategy for shaping the physical, visual, and perceptual context.<sup>47</sup>

This multilayered context-debate of the 1950s and early 1960s was later submerged beneath the subsequent postmodern approaches of its protagonists. To mention a few, Colin Rowe became a subtle defender of liberalism with the influence of philosopher Karl Popper’s advocacy of open societies against historicist and utopian social engineering. In his 1978 book, *Collage City*, written with Fred Koetter, Rowe introduced possible elements of an urbanistic collage—*objets trouvés*—where the neoclassical syntax was prioritised. Abandoning the programmatic and hence the social dimension of architecture, his contextual approach resulted in formal eclecticism and heterostyle in the 1970s, as his so-called draughtsman James Stirling’s projects display. Robert Venturi established his own practice in Philadelphia in the mid-1960s, in which he was joined by Denise Scott Brown in 1967. Witnessing in these years a peak in modern liberalism in USA shaped by President Johnson’s program for the “Great Society” and the concurrent escalation of the Vietnam War, Venturi justified his emerging pop approach by announcing ironically that pop architecture expresses the values of its society, which is directing its money and technology elsewhere such as the war industry.<sup>48</sup> His projects represented classical vocabularies with pop

art techniques in order to communicate with the taste cultures of contemporary mass society. Social upheavals and student protests in 1968 led to the questioning of the discipline of architecture, especially in Italy. In this political climate, Aldo Rossi was searching for the basis for a “rational architecture”, which was then interpreted as the catalogue of historical and traditional architectural forms. In his works after the 1970s, he de-territorialised and re-territorialised forms derived from a vast spectrum of collective and his own personal memory. Absorbed by postmodern historicism and eclecticism in the 1970s, context was later co-opted by conformists and traditionalists in the early 1980s as discussed in the previous section.

### CONCLUSION

Today, context is either ignored or abused in contemporary architectural practice. Firstly, iconic structures designed as freestanding commoditised objects of global capitalism are pretending to disregard the physical, social, and cultural aspects of their urban contexts and feigning independence from the planning laws and financial constraints that shaped them. Secondly, context is abused by conservative politics promoting historical revivalist projects and by traditionalists aiming to achieve visually harmonious environments. In addition, theoretical and discursive reflections on context today are puny since there is a lack of interest among teachers, theoreticians, and architects. Therefore, it is necessary to reclaim the notion of context today as a critical generative tool in design. This can be achieved first by severing it from the blinkered understanding and formal-stylistic association it has gained over time. In other words, definition of contextualism as a reductive strategy complying with conservative politics by recirculating traditional and historical forms or conforming to visual aspects of surrounding built environments has to be altered. By contextualising context, the historiography presented above shows that architectural practice could be both critical and engaged, as the multilayered debate of the 1950s confirms. Hence, this argument presents context as a corrective to both the polemicists of architecture’s autonomy and the evasive position adopted by the new pragmatists. In addition, the early context debate performed architecture as a prosthetic discourse connected to art, visual studies, philosophy, and so on. Emphasising the debate engendering architectural discourse as prosthesis, rather than endorsing strict definitions or design principles for contextual design practices, could enforce critical capacity of context. In the end, I call for generating a context debate wherever archaeology can establish a background, a horizon of meaning where it can (non-trivially) play out.

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**About the Author:** *Esin Komez Daglioglu* graduated cum laude from the Middle East Technical University (METU), Department of Architecture, where she also worked as a research and teaching assistant. Since February 2012, she has been a PhD researcher at Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) Department of Architecture and teaches design and theory courses at the chair of Architecture & Public Building.

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#### NOTES

1. Mark Wigley, "Prosthetic Theory: The Disciplining of Architecture", *Assemblage*, no. 15 (1991), 6–29.
2. Wigley, "Prosthetic Theory", 9.
3. For an interpretation of the term in contemporary architectural theory, see Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1980.
4. Peter Kohane and Michael Hill, "The Eclipse of a Commonplace Idea: Decorum in Architectural Theory", *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 5, no. 1 (2001), 63–76.
5. Robin Dripps, "Groundwork", in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (eds), *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories, and Strategies*, New York: Routledge, 2005, 59–91.
6. K. Michael Hays, "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form", *Perspecta*, 21, (1984), 22.
7. Reinhold Martin, "Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism", in William S. Saunders (ed.), *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 150.
8. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism", in William S. Saunders (ed.), *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 22–33. This piece had first appeared in 2002 in the "Mining Autonomy" issue of *Perspecta*, 33. It is significant to note here that Joan Ockman and Terry Riley's pragmatism conference held at MOMA in 2000 was a prior attempt to explore the new pragmatism in architecture; the proceedings were later published as Joan Ockman (ed.), *The Pragmatist Imagination: Thinking About "Things in the Making"*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000.
9. In fact, as Baird stated, "so many of the protagonists of the currently proffered alternatives to 'criticality' are former protégés of Eisenman, or at least figures at the edge of his circle. Stan Allen, Robert Somol, and Sarah Whiting all fall into one or the other of these categories. To the extent, then, that Eisenman himself has maintained such obdurate loyalty to 'criticality' over a long span of time, he has produced a corresponding tension among his followers in respect to their understandable career efforts to cut loose from him". George Baird, "'Criticality' and Its Discontents", in William S. Saunders (ed.), *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 140.
10. Somol and Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism", 29.

11. Koolhaas, when discussing large buildings, stated: “[B]igness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is fuck context”. Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, and Hans Werlemann, *SMLXL*, New York: Monacelli Press, 1995, 502.
12. Keith Ray, *Contextual Architecture: Responding to Existing Style*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1980, viii.
13. Brent Brolin, “Architecture in Context: Fitting New Buildings with Old”, *The Harvard Architecture Review*, 2, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981.
14. Linda Groat, “Measuring the Fit of New to Old”, *Architecture: The AIA Journal*, 72, no. 11 (1983), 58–61.
15. Linda Groat, “Public Opinions of Contextual Fit”, *Architecture: The AIA Journal*, 73, no. 11 (1984), 72–75.
16. The full text of the article by Prince Charles can be accessed from the webpage of *The Architectural Review*, <http://www.architectural-review.com/essays/facing-up-to-the-future-prince-charles-on-21st-century-architecture/8674119.article> (accessed 5 October 2015).
17. Paul-Alan Johnson, *The Theory of Architecture*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994, 284–287.
18. Fredric Jameson, “The Constraints of Postmodernism”, in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London/New York: Routledge, 1997, 237.
19. Mark Wigley and Philip Johnson, *Deconstructivist Architecture: The Museum of Modern Art*, New York/Boston: Little, Brown, 1988, 17.
20. John Hill, “Deconstructivist Architecture, 25 Years Later”, *World-architects E-magazine*, 28 January 2013, <http://www.world-architects.com/pages/insight/deconstructivist-architecture-25> (accessed 5 October 2015).
21. Hill, “Deconstructivist Architecture, 25 Years Later”.
22. There are few studies held on context from the 1990s onwards. One was introduced in the 74th volume of *Lotus* published in 1992. The discussion started with an introductory essay, “Contextualism?”, where contextualism in architecture is associated with hermeneutics in philosophy, which set the framework for the nine articles that followed. Jane Wolford’s PhD dissertation titled “Architectural Contextualism in the Twentieth Century, with Particular Reference to the Architects E. Fay Jones and John Carl Warnecke”, completed at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA, in 2004, is one of the most recent pieces of research on contextualism. However, her depiction of the elements of contextualism as “specific siting, general locale, shape, size, color of material, texture of material, type of material, position, style, rhythm of elements, scale/proportion, identity” again falls within the established (rather than critical) understanding of the term.
23. See George Dodds, “Architecture as Instauration”, *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 5, no. 2 (2001), 126–150.
24. See, for example, Stan Allen, “From Object to Field”, AD Profile 127, *Architectural Design*, 67, no. 5/6 (1997), 24–31.
25. Manuel Gausa (ed.), *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture*, Barcelona: Actar, 2003.

26. Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn, "Why Site Matters", in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (eds), *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories, and Strategies*, New York: Routledge, 2005, xv.
27. Sandy Isenstadt, "Contested Contexts", in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn (eds), *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories, and Strategies*, New York: Routledge, 2005, 178.
28. See Max Wertheimer, "Gestalt Theory", in Willis D. Ellis (ed.), *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, New York: Gestalt Journal Press, 1997, 1–11.
29. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960, 46.
30. Ivor de Wolfe, "Townscape: A Plea for an English Visual Philosophy founded on the True Rock of Sir Uvedale Price", *The Architectural Review*, 106, no. 636 (1949), 355–362.
31. For more detailed information on the origins of townscape, see Erdem Erten, "Shaping 'The Second Half Century': *The Architectural Review* 1947–1971", PhD dissertation, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004.
32. Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "The 'As Found' and the 'Found'", in David Robbins (ed.), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, 201.
33. Tom Avermaete, "A Web of Research On Socio-Plastics: Team 10 and the Critical Framing of Everyday Urban Environments", in Reto Geiser (ed.), *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching Design Research*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008, 114.
34. Ernesto N. Rogers, "Continuità", *Casabella Continuità*, no. 199 (1953–1954), I.
35. For a more detailed interpretation of Rogers' use of the term "continuity", see Luca Molinari, "Continuita: A Response to Identity Crises, Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Italian Architectural Culture after 1945", PhD dissertation, TU Delft, Delft, 2008.
36. One of the early criticisms of Torre Velasca came from the English architecture critic Reyner Banham, who blamed Rogers for sacrificing the tradition of modernity. Just a few months after Banham's criticism, Rogers presented the Velasca project in the final CIAM meeting held in Otterlo in 1959. The project opened up a debate in the meeting in which Peter Smithson accused the project of "formalism and historical revivalism". See Reyner Banham, "Neoliberalty: The Italian Retreat from Modern Architecture", *Architectural Review*, 125, no. 747 (1959), 232–235, and Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel (eds), *Team 10: In Search of a Utopia of the Present*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005, 62.
37. Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982, 103.
38. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 123.
39. Robert Venturi's Master's thesis titled "Context in Architectural Composition" was later published in his book, *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture. A View from the Drafting Room*. In his introduction to the thesis in the book, Venturi mentioned his discovery of Gestalt by stating, "I vividly remember my Eureka-like response in 1949 when I came across the idea of perceptual context in Gestalt psychology as I perused a journal of psychology in the library in Eno Hall at Princeton and recognized its relevance for architecture...". In this book, Venturi gave the reference of the related article as Nelson. However, this reference is inconclusive. In the draft pages of his thesis found in his archives at the University of Pennsylvania, the

- source was mentioned as: Harry Helson, "The Fundamental Propositions of Gestalt Psychology", *Psychological Review*, no. 40 (1933).
40. Robert Venturi, "Context in Architectural Composition", in Robert Venturi (ed.), *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture. A View from the Drafting Room*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 363.
  41. Venturi, "Context in Architectural Composition", 363.
  42. In fact, these dimensions of position and form as significant elements of context were derived from Kepes' conference statement for the Princeton University Bicentennial Conference, "Planning Man's Physical Environment", held in 1947, in which he said, "shaping and placing objects in our surroundings, we must understand their optical willingness and fitness to cooperate with their environment". A copy of György Kepes' conference statement was found next to Venturi's Master's thesis materials in the *Architectural Archives of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown*, University of Pennsylvania.
  43. Therefore, it is not surprising that Venturi's first article, which was derived from his Master's thesis, was published in *Architectural Review* in May 1953 under the section "Townscape". Titled "The Campidoglio: A Case Study", Venturi argued in the article that Michelangelo's design enhanced the spatial experience of the Campidoglio's urban composition, while the erection of the Victor Emmanuel Monument and the constructions made in the surrounding area during the Mussolini era impaired the perception of the Campidoglio despite leaving it physically untouched. Robert Venturi, "The Campidoglio: A Case Study", *The Architectural Review*, 113, no. 677 (1953), 333–334. This article later gave its name to Venturi and Scott Brown's book, *A View from the Campidoglio: Selected Essays 1953–1984*, in which "The Campidoglio: A Case Study" was published as the first article.
  44. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was mainly derived from Robert Venturi's studies of Italian, specifically Baroque, architecture during his stay at the American Academy of Rome from 1954 to 1956. During his stay, Venturi studied with Ernesto N. Rogers and was influenced by his architectural approach. See Martino Stierli, "In the Academy's Garden: Robert Venturi, the Grand Tour and the Revision of Modern Architecture", *AA Files*, no. 56 (2007), 42–55.
  45. Collage, at least as an artist's technique, was first used at the beginning of the twentieth century. Picasso was one of the leading figures to use this technique, beginning with his *Still Life with Chair Caning* painting in 1912. For an inspirational reading on Picasso's use of collage, see Rosalind E. Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso", in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986, 23–40.
  46. Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal I", in Colin Rowe (ed.), *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976, 161.
  47. Rowe and Slutzky, "Transparency I", 168.
  48. Robert Venturi, "A Justification for a Pop Architecture", *Arts and Architecture*, 82, no. 4 (1965), 22.