

Hierarchies of context in heritage architecture

Combining historical research with a contextual approach in heritage conservation

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Methodology and the Architectural profession

Methodology is about the study of methods in a certain field. Unlike research methods, research methodology does not provide the solutions itself, but rather focuses on the procedure to carry out research systematically for a specific discipline.

For the architectural profession, research has always been an intrinsic as well as indispensable part, and the research-methodological awareness is crucial. To be more specific, in all architectural activities and architectural topics, including form, technique, space, communication, etc., research methodology plays a vital role as the guideline for architects to conduct research. "The architect's problem," as Stanford Anderson argued, "is not how to found his knowledge positively but how to make his knowledge grow."¹ While architectural research aims at dealing with different topics and diverse knowledge systems, these epistemes in turn enrich this discipline and influence the perception of architecture itself. Research methodology, besides framing the architectural research, further guides and pre-determines architectural design practice.

Just as there are different chairs and studios at TU Delft, a diverse range of research methodologies are utilized. For graduation students, it's imperative to clarify his/her paradigmatic stance, to find his/her research approach, as well as to stick to his/her methodological position. From my point of view, the series of research methods lectures cover several research-methodological topics and demonstrate profound knowledge as well as reflection, which helps me to understand different and state-of-the-art research approaches. Furthermore, compared with the other lecture series, the interactive way of methodological education is achieved through the discussion between audiences and lecturers, which is advantageous for students' methodological positioning. However, given the intricate relationship between the lecture series and audience's individual graduation project, it might have been even more practicable for students' methodological framing if these lectures relate better to different graduation chairs.

1.2 Introducing hierarchies of context in heritage conservation

The thesis focuses on a rethinking of context in the field of heritage architecture. Context is generally understood as the setting or environment for an idea or event, whether it be concerning political, cultural or physical aspects. For most architecture design projects, the context means the immediate urban surroundings where the site is located.² However, the departure of design for heritage architecture is an existing building, and a meticulous study of this building must be carried out to determine the qualities of the original building.³ In this sense, there is a scale hierarchy in the heritage design projects. More specifically, the urban/political/economic setting is the first layer of context for the building, and the existing building itself is the second layer of context for further architectural/technical/program renovations. Just as Johnson argued, "Always design a thing by considering it in its larger context: a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan."⁴

Almere is a planned city in the south-west of the reclaimed province Flevoland, and my graduation project is about renovation of the Beursgebouw, which is the first office building in Almere Stad. My research question would be how the hierarchical view of context facilitates a holistic research of the existing heritage building, and ultimately leads to a balanced design.

RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

2.1 Selected research methods

The hierarchical view of context in the field of heritage architecture requires corresponding research strategies. When the research looks at the surroundings of the existing building, the contextual approaches are used. When the research comes to the heritage building itself, historical research strategies are utilized to form a holistic narrative. More specifically, on the one hand, in the process of site contextual research, a comprehensive set of methods are devised, including observation, photographing, site investigation, data collecting, etc. On the other hand, in the framing of a complete narrative of the heritage building itself, tactics in historical research are applied, including the identification, organization and evaluation of determinative evidence, contextual evidence, inferential evidence, and recollective evidence, etc.⁵

The motivation behind the two-hierarchy contextual methodology is to achieve the balance between old and new, to identify cultural heritage value and further add new quality. The key point of heritage re-development is to preserve monument buildings through development, which means a unity of the past and the future, and this can only be achieved by the study of both aspects. Firstly, the knowledge gained from contextual approaches is crucial to a clear understanding of the current setting of a monument, to capture the potentials and drawbacks of the environment. Data, pattern, and specific qualities of social/economic/physical settings lead to certain problems that the monument is facing, and they can further serve as the starting point for the intervention. Secondly, the historical research of the existing building itself touches upon different themes, and both tangible and intangible aspects are looked at. Through the use of specific research tactics, a complete narrative of the monument can be formed, which include the esthetic, technical, and spatial qualities. Forming a complete narrative of the heritage building is crucial for the original heritage value to be preserved and further to gain relevance for the future.

2.2 Current status of selected research methodology

In Event cities, Bernard Tschumi argues that context, concept and content may be in unison or purposely discordant, and he demonstrates the different relationships of the trio, including indifference, reciprocity, or conflict.⁶ Later in 2015, in the book *Niche Tactics* Caroline O'Donnell investigates the relationship between site and architecture from an ecological perspective. She proposes the combination of ecological and contextual referents into architectural design.⁷ As to the design practice, nowadays several architects reflect on contextual thinking and operate within relevant theories, such as Álvaro Siza, Peter Zumthor, and Kengo Kuma. "The idea is in the site," Siza states "more than in everyone's mind, for those who can see."⁸

In terms of architectural historical research, new techniques are applied, and different schools of thought are at work nowadays. In his 2013 book "Spatial Technology and Archaeology" David Wheatley introduces how the GIS Technology and related spatial technologies have influenced archaeological study.⁹ In *Archaeology After Structuralism*, Ian Bapty carefully investigates the connection between the past, interpretation and the present. The author's rethinking of Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault leads to re-excavating of the meaning of architectural historical research, and he ultimately evaluates the reciprocity between post-structuralism and architectural historical research.¹⁰

RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

3.1 Historical-theoretical setting

Discussions about contextual approaches have a rich history. Back to old Roman architecture, contextual thinking was known as '*genius loci*', which means the spirit of place. In the 20th century,

theories and research about context are especially abundant. For Alison and Peter Smithson from Team 10, context is not the physical setting of architecture, but rather the social settings like the norms of everyday life and the social practices. Their idea can be seen from the term *socioplastics* in their early writings around 1950s, and it means ‘the relationship between the built form and social practice’.¹¹ During the same period in Italy, Ernesto Rogers put forward his criticism against modernism, and he proposed contextual architecture which embodied ‘responsibility towards tradition’.¹² Later in 1960, Kevin Lynch claimed the critical role of urban imageability in his book *The Image of the City*, and his contextual approach is one that highlighted individual perceptual experience. In the 1980s, Brent Brolin pointed out the significance of new buildings’ visual compatibility with its existing environment.¹³

The Deconstructivist Architecture Exhibition in MOMA in 1988 witnessed an intensive criticism on postmodernism and its contextualism from the avant-garde architects, including Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, and Bernard Tschumi. “Contextualism has been used as an excuse for mediocrity, for a dumb servility to the familiar”. Claimed Philip Johnson, the curator of the exhibition.¹⁴

New ideas about contextual approaches emerged in contemporary architectural practices. In *Architecture as Instauration*, George Dodds analyzed instauration, intervention and amelioration. By carefully looking at the continuity and discontinuity of context, he emphasized the cultural and temporal aspects of the site.¹⁵

In terms of the development and changes of historical research, there are three aspects that are especially inspiring. To start, a cultural turn happened in the 20th century against a single, definite history. Just as Georg Iggers pointed out in 2005, “a turn from macrohistories to paying greater attention to smaller segments: to the lives and, significantly, to the experiences of little people”,¹⁶ the attention of historical research is moved towards the local realities and everyday culture. Furthermore, the research approach emphasized subjective “documents” or the stories in people’s memories, which can serve as addition to documentary evidence. Another shifting point of historical research is the spatial turn. According to Delores Hayden, the study of public history must include the consideration of urban space. In *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, Hayden investigated the urban communities of Los Angeles carefully and reoriented urban historical study to spatial issues. By connecting people’s lives and livelihoods to the urban landscape, a new perspective for public history is illustrated, whereby a reflective perception of culture and subjective construction of space is combined.¹⁷ The linguistic turn is another issue in various interpretations of historical research. Theories of linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure inspired structuralist approaches in the architectural field. Also, in *Function and Sign: Semiotics of Architecture*, Italian semiotician Umberto Eco applies his general semiotic theory to architecture and built environment.

3.2 Reflection on the selected approach

Given the historical-theoretical setting of selected research methods, the positioning of this thesis can be clearer. For the contextual approach, my research goes beyond the idea that context is merely about the site, the form or styles of surrounding buildings or the typology of the neighborhood. Social practices, the patterns of everyday life, the cultural aspects and historical interpretation of the context are of equal importance. The re-interpreted contextual approach is the key point to ultimately achieve a new, more reactive relationship between the intervention case vis-à-vis the environment. As to historical research, I get inspiration from the cultural turn and the spatial turn. In the research of the heritage building, it makes sense not only to refer to documentary evidences or technical drawings, but also to find out its real meaning for ordinary citizens and to value people’s individual memories and stories. Furthermore, as my research case is the first office building in Almere Stad, it is an important part of public history of Almere city, and how the changes of the building influenced people’s perception and use should be examined.

The development and changing process of contextual approaches and historical researches indicate a diverse range of perspectives and research tactics. In combining these two approaches, I am not conducting each research in a completely separated way, but rather reciprocally and reactively adapting these methods to the real project. To simply apply one approach is far from enough for a complete and

self-contained research in the field of heritage architecture, and only through a tactical combination of both approaches can the essence of heritage building be grasped.

POSITIONING

In the lecture about 'Technosphere in Urban Design', Fransje Hooimeijer explained her way of integrating natural system in urban development (Fig 1). The research strategy is to find a critical way to link natural system parameters to the artificial system. In this era of information explosion, data is measured, calculated, and delivered in an unprecedented rate, but according to Fransje we need to be even more precautious against these data. Furthermore, the way we select data, guarantee data authenticity and interpret data is of vital importance. This lecture is thought-provoking because it challenged me to rethink about my understanding and interpretation of data. My contextual research of the heritage building involves a thorough investigation of the physical/economical/social settings, and the way I reorganize data, find the relationship between different factors and interpret data is more important than the data itself.

The lecture about 'Investigating Spatial and Social Practices' also inspired my own position. In her lecture about praxeology, Marieke Berkers used the example of the affordable housing project in Casablanca to explain how a critical architecture/urban observer involves historicity of perception, and how that critical recognition in turn influences the understanding of an urban landscape. The study of praxeology focuses on the study of human action, however, it's even more important to have a clearer definition of this term 'human' than the study itself. Bruno Taut for example, first started the specific study of woman praxeology, which led to the liberation of women's creative power in the workforce. It's highly important for researchers to always take historical conditions into account and to broaden their research spectrum to look at all groups of people, regardless of sexuality, political status or social rank. This perspective challenged me to rethink about the historical research of heritage building, because the story, identity as well as the implicit meaning of a monument are not reflected in the government archive, but rather in the citizen's personal memories and everyday experiences.

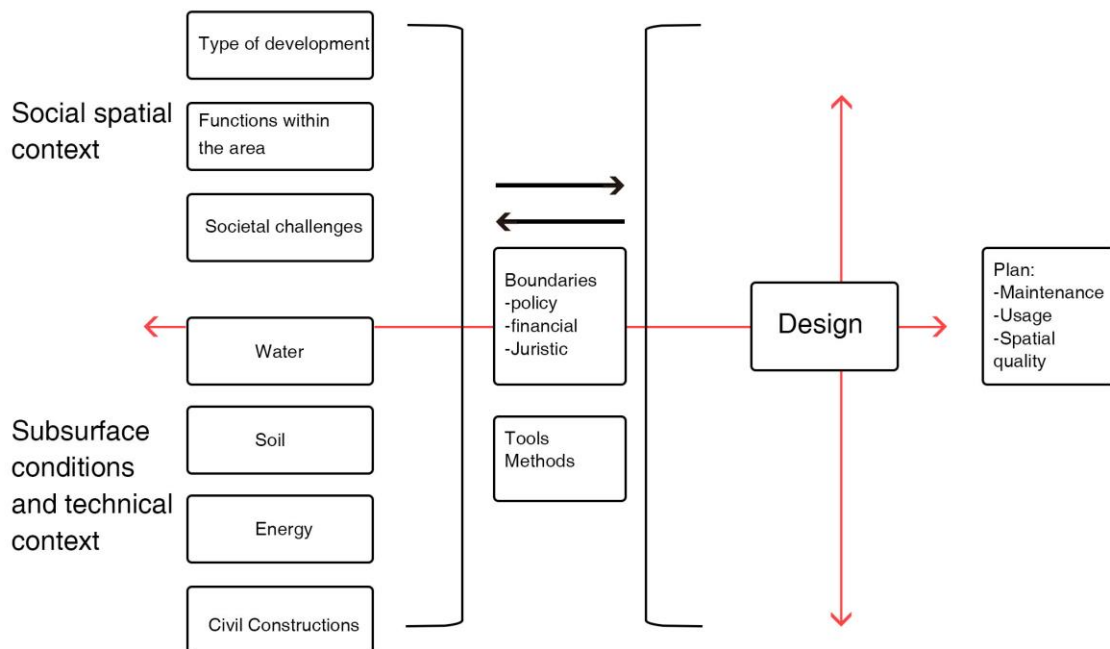


Fig 1 Diagram of the urban design process, redrawn by author (Hooimeijer, 2018)

As mentioned previously, Bernard Tschumi has made a good summary of different positions in terms of contemporary contextual arguments: 'indifference, conflict and reciprocity.' Indifference refers to the

position that 'the idea and its setting are superbly ignorant of one another.'⁶ In the field of heritage design, some intervention cases choose not to have a dialogue with the original context. Famous project 'the friendly alien' in the Austrian world heritage site Graz designed by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier is not alone in its 'indifference' strategy. (Fig 2) For the architects, the context is not necessarily one part of their story, and they conceived an isolated building which has no interaction with the site and literally could be put anywhere else in the world. Another contextual position is 'conflict', and it refers to the case in which 'the architectural concept is strategically made to clash with its context'.⁶ Reasons for taking this position in heritage intervention might be a clearer illustration of different time layers and an impetus for new possibilities of the monument. The design of the model hall in BK-city is an example of conflict with the original context. (Fig 3)



Fig 2 A friendly alien
Retrieved from <https://www.pinterest.com>



Fig 3 BK-city model hall
Retrieved from <http://www.braaksma-roos.nl>

My contextual position is 'reciprocity'. By this term, Tschumi means that 'the architectural concept and its context interact closely with one another.'⁶ There are architects all over the world trying to fit modern design with traditional heritage throughout the past century, and many successful heritage interventions showed up. The intervention project of Museo di Castelvecchio by Carlo Scarpa is an outstanding case of reciprocal renovation. (Fig 4) After a thorough research of historical development and changes of this building, Scarpa strategically mediated the complex temporal, political as well as societal layers in the monument, and he ultimately managed to achieve a harmony between old and new. Architects are able to create a reciprocity between the past and the future when they pay attention to the site, identity and original qualities of heritage buildings, either by maintaining traditional elements, by regeneration within morphological structure, or by putting up a new story of the intangible characteristics.

From my perspective, the heritage context is hierarchical, and to achieve reciprocity between intervention design and context requires a holistic understanding of the two layers of context. On the one hand, studying the physical/social/economic environment of heritage building is indispensable for renovation architects to know what possible programs, architectural forms, or technical innovations fits well with current contextual conditions. On the other hand, only when architects scrutinize the heritage building itself and view it as the context of later intervention can the essential values be fully grasped and thus kept. Furthermore, the way to carry out historical research of heritage building is quite strategic to me. Ordinary people's ideas as well as everyday experience are equally valuable as the official documents. In a word, I will practice the hierarchical contextual research throughout my graduation project, try to find the balance between the two contextual layers, and ultimately utilize my findings to form a reciprocal design. (Fig 5)



Fig 4 Museo di Castelvecchio. Retrieved from <http://modernpreservation.blogspot.com>

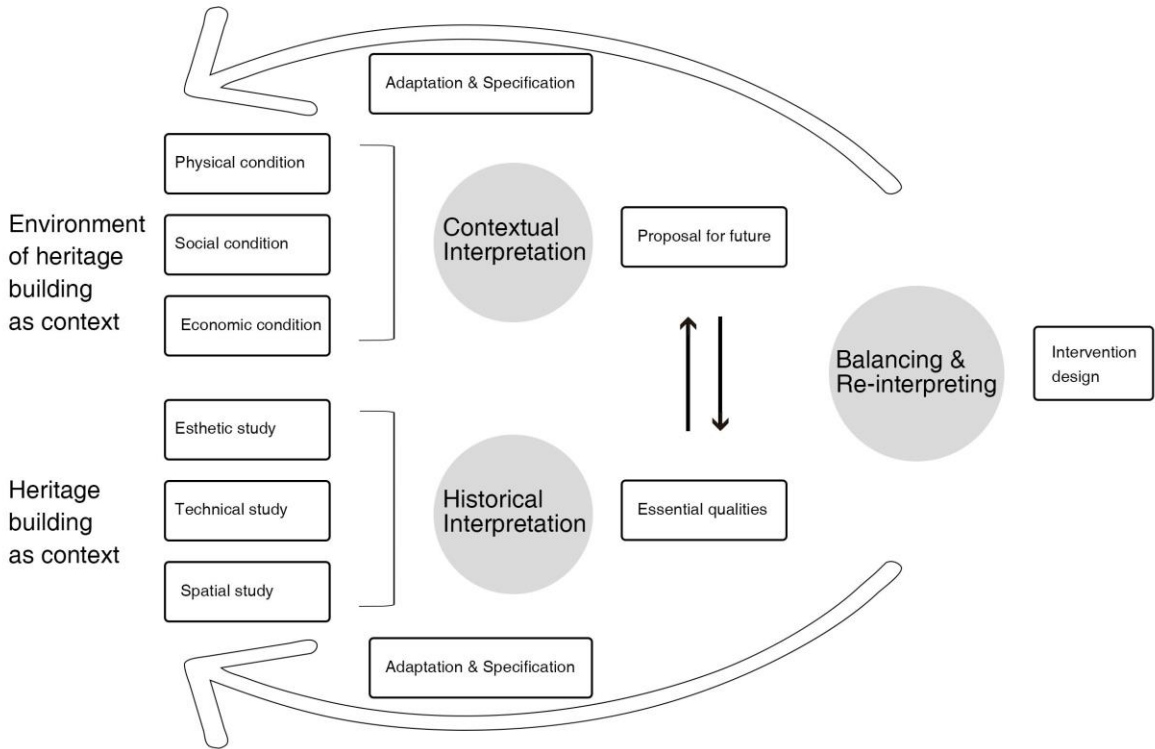


Fig 5 Diagram of hierarchical contextual approach in heritage intervention (Author, 2018)

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