

Universal Hyperlocalism

Aida Idrizbegović Zgonić*, Jasenka Čakarić

University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Architecture
Patriotske lige 30, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; aidaiz@af.unsa.ba

Abstract

Architecture in historic urban context, no longer burdened by nostalgic concepts or aggressive/ignorant contrasts, has become an innovative platform where contemporary architectural practice thrives upon. Contemporary hyper-localism uses local narratives and processes (or in some instances forms, patterns, materials), as well as universal architectural and human ethics to generate new values in a given context. It is also not a conditioned response to globalism, but rather a medium through which conflicts of local – global, specific-universal are resolved. Cultural sensitivity is an integral part of this discourse, since it is the embodiment of the local urban conditions and lifestyle.

Historical urban areas have always been a subject of slow and gradual transformation, only in the past few decades this process was interrupted. The historical areas were either left aside and the new city parts were built, leaving the city cores without vital functions or population. The other extreme was brutally imposed "modernization".

Urban and architectural design paradigm has shifted to constant transformation of places and buildings (as opposed to creating new), and that this recycling is a complex, multilayered process that starts with a specific space, and by augmenting, enhancing and innovating delivers a singular space that inherits the universal and hyper-local virtues.

1. Introduction

Under pressure of globalization and increasing density of built space, architects are faced with a challenge they might not be prepared for - architecture has become more about transformations of the existing structure and fabric, a permanent modification and mutation of existing space in order to accommodate new structures and functions. To some architects this seems incomprehensible; almost a betrayal of ideals of architecture that have long been in place – to create new, iconic structures [1]. The innovative iconic structures have always been integral part in progress of building and civilization; recently we are overwhelmed with "show off" iconic, yet similar structures everywhere.

Architecture in historic urban context has long been burdened by polarizing terms: historic context is associated with conservative, resistance to change and modernization is seen as a universal neutralizer of local identity. The issue arrived with the Modernist movement that had followed the ideal of universal architectural language that can save the world. This is referred mostly to bare functionalistic modernism (as mannerism) that promoted reduction of details, elements of identification without the sophistication and skills of masters of modernism. Today, even though the design and construction possibilities are better than ever, the result is getting less diverse. Most of these new buildings are solid architecture work, but have a tendency to uniformity, calculated simplicity and reduction. *According to Paul Ricoeur: "The phenomenon of universalization, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction..."* [2].

This is ever so visible when a new building is erected in a mixed or historic context, in most cases it tends to override basic human emotions and needs such as sense of belonging, individuality, local cultural condition, sense of past and diversity. The Modernist movement and contemporary architecture provide some of the

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most important values of architecture today: idealism, universal value and design integrity. Current negative trends have arisen more from the unethical use of financial means and space and lack of critical reasoning and awareness.

In order to mitigate the negative trends a new approach strives to create a system of dialogue, mediation between the inherited and new. Transformation of urban tissues is not a new process, it has been ongoing since the creations of first cities, but it has been gradual, well adjusted to local cultural and bioclimatic conditions. The acceleration of the process has been immense in the past 20 years. The paper will explore dualistic nature of logical and ideological space, and the notions of globalism, context and means of their resolution through the universal hyper localism approach. With no strings attached to a particular purist style or suffering from nostalgia, can architects/urban designers find a meaningful relationship between the new building and its context?

2. Logical vs. ideological space

Urban and architectural space (cities) has been shaped through two principles of urban and architectural development:

- Logical space principle
- Ideological space principle

Both logical and ideological spaces were then formulated by urban processes and forms [3]. In general the overriding principle has been the „logical space“ in the sense that cities evolved due to a desirable geographical position, accessibility, trade routes, natural resources and were built in concordance to the physical layout of space. In some instances the logical distribution of urban tissue was replaced by a strong and overriding idea what a space should look like.

One of the best examples of the two principles, actually created consequentially on the same space is the historical city of Baghdad, Iraq (Figure 1). The city is a classical example of two opposing aspects when it comes to genesis of urban form. The round shape was the early Baghdad (between 762-766 AD) created under the influence of early Islamic civilization by an abstract idea of creating a perfect city, with concentric fortification and the mosque in the centre (of universe). Through later periods the round city was abandoned and the current city of Baghdad formed under ottoman and European influences (18th and 19th century) is

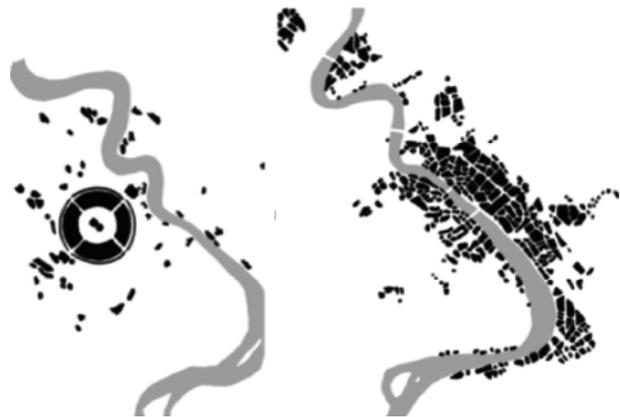


Figure 1. Baghdad on the river Tigris – Two principles of space development: ideological and logical

formed in a more logical manner, longitudinal shape along the river, using it as its best asset.

Why this example matters today? Throughout history ideological spaces were used to express grandeur of kings or religion, but it was still limited to an exclusive group of people. Today, the ideological (conceptual) space prevails through abstract urban/architectural concepts¹, generalization and globalization and more than ever through means of capitalist ideology with disregard to the spatial logic or specificities of a place.

3. The Contextualism vs. Globalisation

3.1. Context

In order to provide insight into the „clash“ between Contextualism and Globalism it is necessary to have an overview of the issues that define both terms in the realm of urbanism and architecture. Architectural and urban context is determined by an almost infinite number of variables, that combined provide the specific circumstances of the context. These variables can be roughly divided into three groups:

- Environmental (natural) features, such as: space morphology, bioclimatic conditions, natural resources;
- Man made (built) features: urban matrix, materials, typology, silhouettes scale, volumes, infrastructure;
- Meta-physical variables: intangible features, history, culture, lifestyle, genius loci, node points, ideology etc.

adhering to the logic of space and recent rise in architecture and spectacle of architecture has contributed in generation of a conflict between the existing and the new.

¹ Throughout history there have been cities and spaces formed by an idea, such as Palmanova Italy, but since the Modernist and CIAM movement the architecture is struggling with

In architecture, contextualism has often been equalized with nostalgic regionalism, but current tendencies are broadening this definition that it is the use of uniqueness and specificities of a certain space that provide a platform for creation of contemporary concept.

Previously the contextual theories have more or less dealt with terms like Contrast and Blending in: Principle of "Contrast" can, in many instances, be essentially the of ignorance towards the existing urban tissue and surroundings. In that sense method of "contrast" in historic urban layout is highly sensitive, and can produce conflicting, confusing outcome or it can be a bold statement bordering on provocation one with substance and refined intellectual coexistence with the existing fabric.

Principle of "Blending-in" when the new building superficially resembles, reflects its neighbours by repetition of some elements of style. Even though these buildings create visual continuity the "blend in or nostalgic concepts" seem to lack the strength and credibility of their arguments, and fall into traps of indistinction. At the same time this principle allows "creation" of history and can be questionable especially in places that do not have a historical continuity composed of several layers of built matter. Both principles (contrast and blend in) lack an essential ingredient – relational attitude towards the place or building.

This relationship is achievable through use of contextual strategy expressed in two basic principles: either one will establish a dialogue with a building or one will create tension between them, but in both cases it means engaging with all of the complexity of boundaries and extracting the essence and turning it into a meaningful visual and functional resolution. It is also possible to create a provocation through means of resistance and response to the situation as will be elaborated in the paper.

3.2. Globalism

- It is essential to emphasize that not all aspects of globalization are negative, overall the positive aspects prevail: the world has never been as informed educated, wealthy, connected or accessible. The negative impacts are present and it is our task to find appropriate ways to address them. In his book *Variations on a Theme Park*, Michael Sorkin [4] has defined three

trends considered to be the future pitfalls of architecture:

- A-geography (placelessness) where urban and architectural forms repeat in the same manner in different locations worldwide (shopping malls, airports, chain restaurants and retailers etc.).
- Permanent creation of architectural spectacle and simulation of situations.
- Increased control and surveillance and influence on people's lives (this was written in time before Facebook and similar apps). To this one might add the acceleration of time, information and the general overwhelming feeling of condensed space/world.

In urban and architectural design this is reflected through several factors with negative impacts:

- Hyper globalization in architecture is manifested through repetitions of same visual solutions– branding, that overwhelms the streetscapes as pedestrians or billboards on highways that lead to desensitization, creating sameness.
- Reality has become media aesthetic augmented reality in which people are perfected and standardized and architecture is shown through virtual 3D imaging without any reference to the context – every building can be built everywhere.
- Formation of a global architectural elite that without a doubt produced some of the world's most exciting architecture, even rebelled against the mainstream but have become the antonyms producing abstract forms, concepts – ideological space.
- Radical gentrification of cities where populations and local architecture is replaced by new shiny skyscrapers (China, UEA).
- And maybe the worst of all (due to the deception) is justification of abstract ideological space with green architecture and eco-friendly cover.

Besides all of the above mentioned, one has to recognize that architecture has progressed through grand and iconic structures (Eiffel Tower, The Museum in Bilbao, Library in Seattle) through which these iconic structures create a strong point of reference, an identification of space which is in essence the task of architecture – to create a specific place. A legitimate concern can be raised in ethical deliberation of contextualism as is done by Tom Spector, in his book *The Ethical Architect*, 2001



Figure 2. Globalisation, in some cases, is undermining perception of distinctiveness, as shown on the examples of cities of East and West (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Chicago, Seattle), offering almost same visual identity

[5]² in which he explores the imposition of context (although mainly in sense of regionalism) upon contemporary architectural practice.

We can conclude that preservation of urban identity and continuity should co exist with visions of the future development, that regionalism is not always the answer to globalism but quality, uniqueness, social utility and specific conditions must be included.

4. Universal hyper-localism

4.1. Universal values

Contextualism with the universal hyper-local approach, is based upon the theories and practices of critical

² „... By the measure of regionalism, Chicago—the birthplace of the skyscraper—would arguably be the only city deserving of sleek, exciting, tall buildings. This narrow attitude can be avoided, but then the concept of regionalism loses all capacity to support normative distinctions. If modern skyscrapers are considered regionally appropriate in cities with vibrant skylines such as New York and Hong Kong, why can't they become regionally appropriate in Shanghai? If we follow the

regionalism, but broadens this perspective, by redefining universal and local attributes used. Universality of architectural expression that has spread with the impact of globalism is a powerful architectural tool and among other things since it is also part of the world we live in today.

Universal values are not only to be associated with architectural, but are also the common values of humanity, social inclusion and a need to believe in idealist/utopian improvement of life and living conditions. It emphasizes the dualistic nature of architecture (in historic context), that must at the same time respond and resist its surroundings. In architecture where we hear many simplified phrases such as form follows function, function follows form, in contextual

temptation to admit that skyscrapers can become regionally appropriate in Shanghai under certain conditions, then theories of regionalism fall apart altogether. Either one takes a theoretical stand against allowing modernistic skyscrapers in certain locations no matter what, or admits that this theory is not ultimately about location, but about satisfying certain conditions: social utility, perhaps, or ecological concerns“(Spector, 2001).

architecture form follows the flow of space (combining physical space, nodal points and movements).

An excellent example of this approach is Inca Public Market place in Mallorca (Figure 3 and Figure 4) where the typical market square has become a series of useful and intimate spaces, accommodated to the Mediterranean lifestyle and climatic conditions (small square, awnings, closed market and parking space).

4.2. Hyper-local values

Use of local archetypes, forms, materials is a part of the architectural practice of designing in historic context. Using familiar forms in new ways, as well as knowledge (sensitivity) about local culture and lifestyle conditions is something design in context strives for. In order to always evolve one must always explore the singularity, the peculiarity, the processes behind the local urban and architectural form, as well as specific circumstances – thus the "hyper" in the title.

Phenomenological approach is also a part of this exploration process; it wants to discover the causal essence of all things. According to Norberg-Schulz [6], a phenomenon is interlinked with form, as physical manifestation, and their form is the meaning.

That does not mean that forms create phenomena, but it is represented by their intermediate relationship, order or context in which they appear (Figure 5).

In this regard we can say that every individual (architect, urban designer, designer) has a different perception of space that is their reaction to the material surroundings, circumstances. The perception is also conditioned by previous experience, knowledge, cultural values. As a conclusion one can state that even the material space has alternate realities, since all human beings treat the physical surroundings according to the individual qualities and traits [7].

Hyper localism allows architects to introduce an aspect of avant-garde localism, currently mostly designed by architect Francois Roche. It involves an unusual multisensory response to local conditions, creating what seems a contradiction – response to local condition and provocation at the same time. The Project "He shot me down" (Figure 6 and Figure 7) clearly responds to local conditions, visual not disturbing the green context the object is in, but also making a statement, recognizing the absurdity of demilitarized zone and thus forming the object as if a molten metal would react if a bullet was shot through. At the same time this acts as a visual and political provocation through hyper augmentation of reality.



Figure 3 and 4: Public Marketplace, Inca Mallorca (Charmaine Lay and Charles Muro, 2011)

An outstanding example of capturing the flow of space, by creating a complementary contrast, enhancing and creating urban conditions suitable for the location/region



Figure 5: Meaning of the phenomena is the context in which they occur

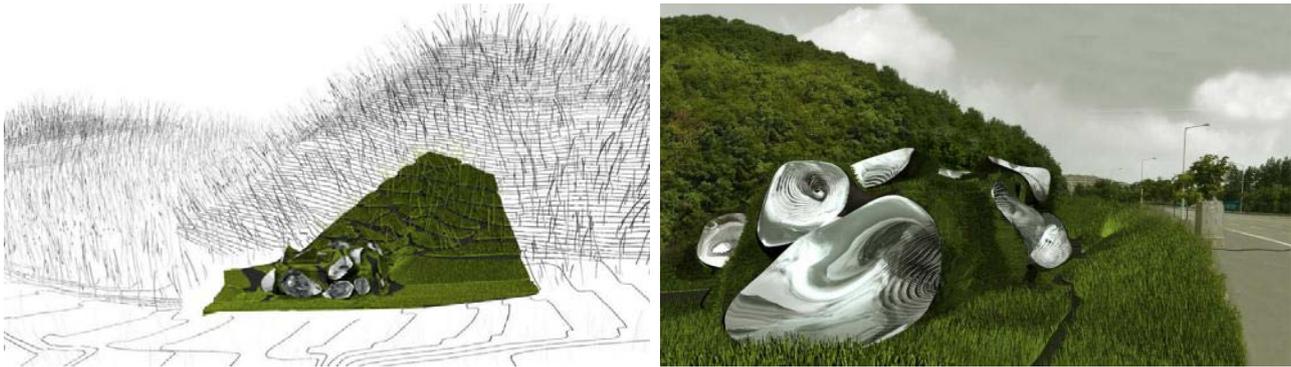


Figure 6 and Figure 7: *He shot me down*, project on the border of North and South Korea (Francois Roche, 2006) – Contradiction – response to local conditions and provocation at the same time

Architecture in context in the sense of Universal hyper localism can function through means of dialogue with its surrounding, through complementary contrast or through provocation, always oscillating on the fine line between response and resistance (rebellion).

5. Conclusion

Architecture today finds itself repeating known forms and solutions, or making spectacle of illusions of innovation and progress. Many have tried to define architecture, but in regard to the discussions made through this paper, architecture can be defined as a generator of identity of space. In this regard, architects must find ways to evolve the existing space, uncover hidden layers of meaning and not be afraid to oscillate between certainty and ambiguity of their design solutions. According to Kevin Lynch [9] *“our urban environment should not only be organized, but also poetic and symbolic...elements of mystery, labyrinth and surprise”*. However, the phenomena of context and urban transformation must be perceived within a frame of historical, cultural and spatial circumstances.

Urban design and architecture have lost a part of its integrity through constant acceleration of time, events, connectivity. Cities have become a kind of temporary collages of structures and identities. This does not have to be a negative circumstance, *panta rhei*, but must be grasped and understood by architects and planners.

Space, singularity, meaning and character of a place can be preserved through transformation or development with following conditions: a) improve the general urban conditions for inhabitants and visitors, b) have a rational attitude to bioclimatic, morphological conditions, c) produce a high quality architectural composition in respect to the existing matrix, proportion, volume, urban continuity, d) accent the singular and positive aspects of space, enhance or create identification, e) design functional and rational space and f) generate innovation

(need not be on a grand scale) by using the universal and local processes.

As we have seen, with the phenomenological approach, it is not only about the typologies or forms themselves, but more about how and way (the process) the structures are interconnected – as the immanent essence of matter. This implies that the presence of phenomenon that distinguishes underlying conceptualizations of urban spaces, are not just a collection of physical facts, but are interlinked with distinct symbolic, spiritual and perceptive level. The process of inclusion of phenomena is not only in theoretical or ideological plain but also in practical aesthetical, perceptive semiotic level of design and its implementation [8].

Logical and ideological spaces are inherently parts of urban and architectural history each with its own role and contributions. As in all other cases a balance needs to be established, since logical space (spatial logic) has currently been taken aback with conceptual space. The universal hyper – localism is an approach that gives an ethical and theoretical reference frame for architectural practice.

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