

The Problem of Context

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“Context Stinks” – Rem Koolhaas

“No matter how elegant, coherent, necessary, adjusted the shape of a house in a landscape might end up being, no matter how ‘necessary’ it appears to be, no matter how pleasing to the eye, it does not provide the sort of necessity requested from matters of fact. It still has a source and origin in some architecture studio signaled by a marble or brass plaque fixed somewhere on the wall” – Bruno Latour

‘Context’ as a term has been used in architecture in every project that has come out of an architect’s studio. It is the magic term that seeks to make any architectural object more relevant and perhaps more ‘correct’. After the fiasco of modernism which saw architects being held guilty for creation of acontextual works and the ‘International Style’, the generations after ‘Modern Masters’ responded with Context as the saving grace for architecture. According to Cambridge Dictionary context means ‘the influences and events related to a particular event or situation’. Architects started using context as a way of situating their designs inside the ‘local’, simply put, architects started responding to the cities, geographies they were building in. The context became of essential importance to any architectural work, and theorists and architects such as Kenneth Frampton, Robert Venturi, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas took up context as an object of serious study.

With sustainability becoming another important issue, context was deployed as way of creating sustainable architecture. If architecture is contextual, it is sustainable, so went the mantra. In architectural discourse, context itself has been defined as place, culture, the people among other things but it is still taken as an all-encompassing entity inside which architecture is to be placed. Like a set of Russian dolls, Architecture is cosily nested inside Context. Architects have tried to take this doll-set as *a priori*, where Society has established a stable Context in which a ‘true’

Architecture can be generated. This also has had the effect where architecture itself has become interpretive, becoming a collection of symbols, signs, an inert, static object waiting to be explained by the forces of the Context (Jencks et al.). I argue that it has led to Context being black-boxed and deployed as a *Deus ex Machina* where it seemingly solves all the problems of architectural production and provides the ‘perfect’ conditions for an architecture to be generated.

Black-boxing is a term used in Science Studies to refer to any object whose ‘internals’ are hidden from view, partly due to its ability to run flawlessly thus avoiding scrutiny. This lack of scrutiny coupled with Context being taken as *a priori* has perhaps stopped us from asking what exactly is this Context? What is the context made of? What are its limits? Why should architecture be placed *in* a context? In order to attempt an answer to these questions, I am going to deploy actor-network theory (ANT) as a tool to help trace out some answers or clues.

It is important to clarify a few things about actor-network theory from the onset. ANT is first and foremost not an analytical framework, it does not attempt to explain or interpret any object. It does not provide any satisfying endings where the objects being discussed are explained through some underlying or hidden forces. Furthermore, it is a negative argument, meaning that it is concerned much more with what *not* to do to the objects in the process of studying and analyzing them. (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 141) Then why use such a thing which neither provides any explanations nor prescribes actions to take? ANT’s major strength lies in its ability to ‘flatten’ the landscape of our objects to a set of actors, without hierarchies or a parent-child relationship. ANT does not take any actor for granted, nor are their existences *a priori*; every actor is scrutinized, and every association is traced. It is the actor’s actions, their associations that define and describe the action. This flattening of the landscape allows us to travel through the

complex entity that has been packaged as the context. Through ANT we can slowly start to unpack the Context and look at what really stabilizes this entity.

The absurdity of the context:

The need for such an intervention arises primarily from the black boxing and the ambiguity of the term that surrounds the word Context. The idea of the Context as a generator of meanings that stems from a culture or society has been well documented in philosophical traditions (Maxwell 153). Building on this, the existence of an environment, conditions or situation (collectively referred to as the Context) that generates architecture has become a matter of fact. Context gives meanings to the architecture and makes possible its existence. By the virtue of being situated *inside* context, the pure, clean-cut dichotomies of inside/outside, subject/object have arisen architectural discourse. Robert Venturi along with others he quotes, argues that the ‘outside’ generates the ‘inside’ of architecture (Venturi 31). Interestingly, while the inside is a clearly defined, collected and stable place, the outside is just ‘outside’. Kenneth Frampton in his seminal essay ‘Towards a Critical Regionalism’ quotes Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre who describe ‘regionalism’ as pertaining to the ‘local’ as opposed to the abstracted ‘universal’ (Frampton 19). Frampton goes on to define context as ‘peculiarities’ of a place which inform architecture, offering no further explanations. Tadao Ando defines Context as ‘essential logic inherent in the place’ and includes ‘a site’s formal characteristics... cultural traditions, climate and natural environmental features, the city structure... the living patterns and age-old customs’ as the limits of Context (Nesbitt 461).

This definition of the Context where it generates architecture, is defined as ‘out there’ existing in vacuum, deployed as the ‘local’ opposed to the ‘universal’ or global, or limited by a set of arbitrary constraints is problematic on many levels.

What is context:

Much like Latour's argument against Society, I argue that the thing/idea/entity we refer to as context is inherently made up of associations between multitude of actors. All of these actors are mediators, having the agency to transform and effect the action as it passes through them. They are not static, life-less intermediaries and if they were, we have no interest in them since they do not provide any meaningful information.¹ These actors by virtue of their associations form actor-networks, this what the context (without the Capital C) is. The context does not originate in them or terminate in them, but these actors hold the context together. We must be mindful here that our actors are not limited to merely the human or living, but the non-living as well. For instance, Ando's list of context is quite anthropocentric, it does not take into account the objects, the mediators that shape and transform our everyday lived experience. No architect will refuse the importance of materiality in mediating our interactions with our built environment. A soft patch of grass might invite you to relax a bit, the curbstones on its side clearly enable you to traverse the cityscape without impeding (hopefully) the traffic which runs on asphalt paved arteries. It is this insistence upon the non-living actors that makes ANT useful for our investigation. The action of a human is mediated and transformed by the other actors (living or non-living) in a larger collective, very much like how our gait changes depending on the material we are walking on. Thus, as soon as we have argued that context should be considered as a collective of actors bound by associations, we might be inclined to ask the next logic question. Does this collective not generate architecture and its condition, wherein architecture is placed?

¹ Both 'mediators' and 'intermediaries' are terms borrowed from actor-network theory. See (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*)

Where does context come from?

I argue that Context does not generate architecture neither it provides a reason for architecture to exist. Using ANT here, I am not going to assume that Context exists *a priori*. If Context does not exist *a priori*, it has to come from somewhere. When Heidegger tackles the question of dwelling in ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’, he uses the example of a bridge to illustrate that it is the bridge ‘sets in place the banks’ of the stream (Heidegger 7). Heidegger’s spaces act as points in *extensio*, coming into existence due to the ‘things’ (buildings) that creates ‘location’. He argues that it is the ‘thing’ itself that allows for the existence of locations which in turn allow spaces to form, thus contrary to our modern sensibility it is not the context which emerges first but the building which enables it. The building ‘gathers’ the context!

Some will object to this oversimplification, “Surely there are certain conditions that already exist to enable the building, no can argue that there was nothing before the building was born!”, they will say. But it is precisely this argument that I am making. The context, in the architectural sense of the terms, does not exist before the architect/builder materializes this construct for their use. Context, even in the most basic sense of the word, refers to all conditions, all situations. The word is by nature ambiguous and all-encompassing. It does not discriminate or limit, but humans do. Surely no architect can claim that they have responded to all conditions and all situations, and architecture’s ability to discriminate and marginalize has been documented (Cheng et al. 5). Every time the Context has deployed, it is based on a selection of only *certain* conditions varying by geography, project and the stakeholders. This is perhaps most blatantly obvious in the levelling of the site before the start of every construction project. This *tabula rasa* approach actively works to erase the immediate physical context into a set of ideal conditions where

architecture is possible. In this act, is architecture not generating a context for itself? Are architects, builders, clients not deciding which set of conditions to abide by and which to ignore?

Context also becomes as a way of homogenization. As Latour explains, that social explanations due to their omnipresence tend to lack an ‘object’ (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 82). This has the effect of producing oversimplified explanations which ignores complexity of and the role of objects (as actors) themselves. The Context acts similarly, it provides primarily a social explanation for architecture by focusing on a certain ‘grouping’ of the social. Thus, the varied nature of the actor-networks that are deployed collapses into a neat little package of the Context. This runs the real risk of ignoring the difference. Minorities, marginalized, the ‘invisible’ actors that make up our world are in many ways steam-rolled in to one Context to which the architecture is perfectly subservient. It is not uncommon to hear about how architectural works become a flashpoint between various groups of people as they do not believe that a work is truly representative of them (Yaneva, *Mapping Controversies in Architecture*). ANT counters this by putting all actors on the same level and secondly, by meticulously tracing the associations between each other actors. No matter how small or irrelevant that association might seem, the connection has to be traced. Thus, the use of Context as it is, can continue to perpetuate the inequalities that are found inside our built environment under the guise of being Contextual.

When Context is referred to as an idea, it possesses an infiniteness but when it is deployed in the building it becomes restrictive. Furthermore, the limits of the context are arbitrarily decided.

What is Context of a building? Two blocks down the road, the city? The climate? The culture? Of which groups? All groups? Or those who commission it? Why is Context limited to just the city, why not the region? Why limit itself to the region, why not the Country? Well, some countries do share strong cultural and environment ties (i.e., South Asia, the Middle East), so

why not the subcontinent? If sometime in the future, we were to discover an alien civilization will we be content with the earthly context as the limit of the Context, the very context that is so vehemently shunned in architectural circles. Indeed, the musings of an alien civilization sound absurd but it is the next logical chain in the train of thoughts. The set of Russian dolls that the Context is made out to be is infinitely regressive and progressive. No architectural object can ever respond to this infinite spectrum. Perhaps the Context ('local') was concrete in the age before globalization, but in times when our geospatial presences are spread out, it has lost its meanings. It is why ANT's insistence on 'following the actor' and associations is so helpful here because we can trace how actions are transformed as long as the actors are associated regardless of their geography. This why Heidegger's insight into the construction of space is so powerful because it separates the geography from the *location*.

Thus, I believe it is misguided and deceiving to use the term Context, firstly because it is all inclusive while the architectural object is exclusive and secondly because it does not precede architecture but is perhaps better understood as mutually reinforcing the context.

Context is not absolute:

I would like to clarify here that when I claim that architecture is reinforcing the context, it does not mean architecture or the built environment that already exists generates the context but instead the building itself that is being constructed at the very moment is generating the context. This leads to the other problem with Context, where it is taken as an absolute, static, entity. The ecology that surrounds the architecture is complex and dynamic. Architecture is a slow endeavor, even simple projects take at least a year, and it is not uncommon to find architectural projects running for couple of years. Moreover, the end result i.e. the building itself is meant to withstand the test of time. In many ways, the job of the architect is to predict the future, architecture is

meant to accommodate the future. But by taking Context as a set of preexisting condition, locking it up in the Context and building on it, architecture loses the ability to really become relevant and as a result it is always playing catch up. Architects are so caught up with the object itself that they seldom realize that architecture is created as soon as the architect envisions the design, the first line, the first sketch (Yaneva, *Mapping Controversies in Architecture*; Robbins 31). The actor-network does not stop when architecture begins, and it does not stop when architecture is completed. The collective actively exerts forces and mediates the construction of the object as well. It is not just the plan, the design but factors such as the economics, the materials, the wishes and needs of the clients, the zoning laws among many others that are shaping the architectural object as much as the architect's hand. Thus, why use this absolute dichotomy between the object/subject which morphs into architecture/context?

As mentioned earlier, if the very first act of construction involves the creation of a different context, then why not consider the entire process of architectural production as a way of context making. This context is different from the Context, where the former is traceable, descriptive and not *a priori* while the latter is mysterious and black boxed. Does not during the construction process, architecture actively create another context? It changes how people circulate around the site, how people around the site live. The big yellow crane changes the sights of the area, the constant hammering and constant movement of the trucks adds new auditory elements. It brings materials from far off sites, workers from far off areas and machines constructed across the globe onto a single site. All engaged in this activity, they are not just modifying the immediate site, but sites all over the globe. The breakdown of a piece of machine might trigger the departure of a team of engineers in a foreign country. The need for more materials might force the procurement teams to mine a new region. It is the tracing of these descriptions, no matter how farfetched, how

arduous that truly make visible the limits of our context. Perhaps, if the constructors were more aware of this they might build differently. Knowing that the addition of a simple wooden column *will* cause the death of tree in the Amazon forest might force them to build differently.

The new limits of context:

Some might have noticed that while I rejected the infinite spectrum of the Context, I have illustrated another possibly infinite pathway where the ‘context’ keeps on moving from one actor to another. The breakdown of the machine on a construct which triggers the arrival of a team of engineers from a different country could also trigger another event which in turn activates another actor and so on and so forth. By rejecting one rabbit-hole we have found ourselves in another, but this is not so. It is important to remind ourselves that we are looking for associations and not for origin stories. We are concerned with the mediators and the actors and the transportation of actions in these actor-networks. We are looking at the actors that are stabilizing this collective of associations, be it the topography, the machine, the worker, the footpath. We have already flattened the landscape and there is no parent nor a master. Thus, we are not going to follow the action in hopes of finding some ‘objective’ truth which will reveal the hidden meanings. Instead, we follow the action in hopes of observing the transformations and mediations that the actors perform. We stop when our associations run their course, or when our work is complete. As Bruno Latour remarked, ‘You stop when you have written your 50,000 words..’ (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 148). This is not as much a radical idea as it seems to be. We already gave Context the liberty to arbitrarily pick its own composition of Context, then why not do it again. But this time, we can actually trace these associations, every action of inside this actor-network. If there is a jump between these actors, we can spot it, we can modify it. We have dropped an absolute frame of reference and instead turned towards a relativist approach

(Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 186)². Thus, as opposed to an arbitrary and infinite Context, we now have a limited and traceable context. At the end of the day, if a limited human with its limited agency and limited resource is going to produce a limited architecture then its only logical that we limit the context as well. ANT provides for this limit, it knowingly keeps itself open to the ‘unkown’.³ It does not claim absolute knowledge, all actor-networks can develop, new associations made, and new connections traced. What better way to document and respond to the complex ecology in which architects actively acknowledge that we might not know everything. Perhaps, it was the hubris of the architect that they felt they could tame all of Context and at the same time use it to justify their work.

Local vs. Global:

Pier V. Aureli in his book ‘The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture’ uses the form of archipelago as the form of the built environment where the buildings are the islands and the context is the sea (Aureli 2). Aureli’s archipelagos are a form of resistance against, what he refers to as the ‘totalizing nature of the urban’. He further argues that the urban is essentially an infinite totality which engulfs the ‘house’ as opposed to the archipelago which is ‘insular’ but political and almost emancipatory, thus allowing architecture to exist on its own. Aureli’s arguments alert us to the danger of the ‘local’. The urban, which in many projects *is* the Context, acts as a totalizing entity. There is, in many ways a fetishization of the ‘local’ in architectural practice. It is in service of the ‘local’ and as an opposition to the ‘global’ that the Context is resurrected every time. But the ‘local’ is itself made up of actors whose associations are made up of actors which are not ‘local’. For ANT, the local is itself composed of actors whose ‘agency

² This does not refer to relativism or the ‘incommensurability of viewpoints’, it is best understood as nearest to the idea of General Relativity. See (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Latour, *Pandora’s Hope* 310)

³ Latour refers to this as ‘plasma’.

has been silently brought on the scene’ (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 195). Is not this the case in our built environment, where our materials, objects, people are all brought on to a site from various locations? The classic case of this would perhaps be buildings designed by foreign architectural practices. Your actions through that building are mediated and informed through design decisions taken by actors in the past and in locations that are far away. The buildings ability to mediate, which is of course an actor itself in the actor-network, is real as much as its associations with the ‘global’ actors. But in the flattened landscape, there is no global either. No entity through which the social ether permeates and flows to the ‘local’ or vice versa. There are only associations in the actor-network and the collective known to us as context, which is based on associations that you pick for a particular project.

By recognizing this feature of the context as understood through ANT, it also provides architects with the agency but in a different manner, after all it is the architect who will ‘pick’ the associations to trace for a project. Here the architect is no longer ‘above’ but is one of the many actors. The agency of the architect is logical, but it is also limited and traceable, like every other actor in the actor-network. When Koolhaas defines his idea of ‘Bigness’, he explicitly refers to the importance of a ‘team’, a ‘surrender of autonomy’ to ‘technologies, engineers, contractors, manufacturer’ (Koolhaas et al. 513–14). For all the criticism levelled at Koolhaas for being acontextual and program-oriented, maybe when Bigness is understood through the lens of ANT it could be taken not as a rejection of place but a rejection of dichotomy between the local/global and the autonomy of the architect. When the ‘local’ does not exist, the global, as a distinct entity ceases to exist as well or vice versa.⁴ Once, this dichotomy of the context as a collective of actors becomes more clear, more obvious, the actors are no longer packed into either ‘local’ or ‘global’

⁴ For more on the problem of the ‘global’, see (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 191–218)

but observed, traced and documented. This associative traceability of the actors is what ANT is arguing for and not for the interpretive flexibility.

Conclusion:

By replacing the ‘pre-existing’ conditions for architecture with the ‘traced associations’ for a particular architecture, a much more meaningful interaction can be hoped to be achieved. As architecture is longer existing because of a Context, it is now free to exist on its own. Thus, ANT does not diminish the role of architecture either, but it enables it to exist as a separate object as well. It does not look for an ‘explanation’ of design but instead takes up architecture as ‘its own object’. As Yaneva remarks, ‘Together with legal technical, artistic and religious ties, design helps make the social durable’ (Yaneva, “Making the Social Hold: Towards an Actor-Network Theory of Design” 281).

What I have argued in this paper can be summed up in a few lines. The term Context is problematic as it has no limits or when it does, they are arbitrary; Context homogenizes which can actively marginalize certain ‘actors’; it does not generate architecture nor exists *a priori* but is constructed and mediated, among others, by architectural production itself; it is not absolute; it is not ‘local’ or ‘global’. Instead, context as what I have attempted to argue throughout ANT is a collective of actor-networks that are built on associations, they are mediators who transform, work on the action that is passed through them; they are both living and non-living; they all share a flattened landscape, and it is ‘relative’. I believe this is why it would be better if the word context is replaced by ‘associations’. It is the associations of the actors that render the social, the contextual visible and durable. These associations are what is traceable and observable. They are unique and provide information, in many ways they can be seen, touched, heard as well. They might even be ‘quantifiable’ in some perverse manner that renders the scientific project of

architectural discipline complete. If nothing else, it provides a term that can be engaged with, something which the mystical and ambiguous term ‘Context’ is not capable of. If architecture responds to the associations that are traced on the site, the process, the production, it might be more sensitive, more relative and perhaps more meaningful.

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