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Architectural Contextualism and Emerging Hybrid Morphologies:
The Case of Olympic Sculpture Park for the Seattle Art Museum

Abstract:

Infrastructure networks have always been the primary feature of urbanism. As any aspects of urban environments, the understanding of infrastructure networks and their practices have witnessed changes due to the shifts first to modernist ideal and then to the globalized world view. In oppose to the former fragmented nature of infrastructure networks, modern urbanism proposed centralized, standardized and ordered planning of infrastructures. However, this coherent understanding is abandoned as globalization and its economic organization trigger liberalization and privatization of infrastructure which leads to 'splintering urbanism', a term coined by Graham and Marvin (2001). In addition to these developments, the process of deindustrialization converted the industrial sites of the modern planning into the problematic urban areas. Industries were moved away and networks which once served to integrate these areas were decayed, became obsolete and started to split urban areas. These changing urban conditions demand new spatial configurations.

Olympic Sculpture Park for the Seattle Art Museum is a good example for discussing the changing urban conditions and the emerging new practices of architecture. The project was designed by the architectural firm Weiss/Manfredi, completed in 2007 and won the Veronica Rudge Green Prize same year. Located in a former industrial site in Seattle, an emblematic condition of above-mentioned urban problems, project generates a new spatial configuration based on contextual design strategies. The context debate is not new in the field of architecture and in order to comprehensively understand the emerging new practices, post-war context debate, which was characterized by the works of Team X, Ernesto Rogers, Aldo Rossi, Colin Rowe and Robert Venturi, has to be revisited. Thus, the aim of the essay is to examine the contextual design strategies of the Olympic Sculpture Park Project in relation to the post-war architectural context-debate. Finally, it is asserted that new spatial configurations of architecture are characterized by the use of contextual strategies that leads to the hybridization of morphology.

Keywords: Splintering Urbanism, Contextualism, Hybrid Morphologies, Infrastructure, Landscape, Olympic Sculpture Park

1. Introduction

Infrastructure networks have always been the primary feature of urbanism as they shape and are also shaped by land-use patterns, production and consumption practices, ecological and geographical systems and power relations. The understanding of infrastructure networks and their practices witnessed changes due to the shifts first to modernist ideal and then to the globalized worldview. Graham and Marvin (2001 p. 40), in their book *Splintering Urbanism*, claims that 'during the period between about 1850 and 1960 there was a general movement, particularly in Western cities, from the piecemeal and fragmented provision of networked infrastructures to an emphasis on centralised and standardised systems.' Thus, modern urbanism's dominant feature is its networked character, which is achieved through 'harmonious planning' and 'dominated by notions of order, coherence and rationality' (Graham & Marvin, 2001 p. 42). However, globalization and its economic organization cause a change in urban conditions due to the new approaches to the infrastructure networks. Graham and Marvin named this new urban condition as 'splintering urbanism' as liberalization and privatization of infrastructure demolishes the modern infrastructural ideal (1). In addition to these developments, the process of deindustrialization converted the industrial sites of the modern planning into the problematic urban areas. Industries were moved away and networks, which once served to integrate these areas, were decayed, became obsolete and started to split urban areas.

The abovementioned reading of the infrastructure networks and changing urban conditions can also be followed in the city of Seattle. Settled by Europeans in 1850s, the city's prominent place in the history is developed with its relation to larger infrastructure networks (2). Holistic planning approach was adopted between 1850s and 1960s where centralized transportation systems were provided (3). After 1960s, clearance and renewal proposals began as former networks decayed and urban patterns changed. The city's characteristic industrial areas along the shore were moved away and their sites

remained as discrete urban fragments blocked by obsolete infrastructure networks. Today, being the city's one of the most important projects, the Olympic Sculpture Park for the Seattle Art Museum is also located on a similar site. The architects of the projects Weiss and Manfredi (2007 p. 29) described the site of the project as follows:

> Most large North American coastal cities are oriented around ports that once served as active economic centers. Gradually over the past decades, older ports have become obsolete and industry has moved away from the American waterfront, living behind antiquated urban infrastructure. Highways and rail lines that once facilitated the flow of commerce have become barriers, blocking public use of urban waterfronts. The site of the Olympic Sculpture Park was emblematic of this condition.

These changing urban conditions demand new spatial configurations. In the Olympic Sculpture Park project, the site's characteristic features were integrated into the design process. The building was not dealt as a freestanding object as it interweave, interact and entangle with its urban context in order to unite the split areas. Thus, the project responds to its physical, social and economic context by connecting the physically discrete parts, providing easy access for people and revitalizing the abandoned area. Sensitivity to context is obviously not a new phenomenon in architecture. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the contextualism debate in order to comprehensively understand the emerging new practices of architecture.

2. Revisiting Context-Debate in Post-War Architectural Theory

Architectural contextualism, as a theoretical body of discussion and particular design approach, was mainly developed within the years of 1950 and 1980. However, contextualism is mainly disregarded in contemporary architectural debate mainly after the 1980s. Koolhaas's 'fuck context' statement became a motto in the field (4). In addition, contextualism was started to be defined as a very limiting approach. For instance, Wigley and Johnson (1988 p.17), in the catalogue of the MOMA exhibition in 1988, state that: 'contextualism has been used as an excuse for mediocrity, for a dumb servility to the familiar'. This current understanding of architectural contextualism is mainly shaped by the discussions of 1980s that can be defined in reference to two main approaches. The first one is the 'fitting in approach', developed with the influence of American Preservationist Movement, and the second one is 'heterostyle' and 'postmodern eclecticism', disseminated mainly by the writings of Charles Jencks. However, contextualism covers multiple approaches mainly developed after the 1950s when the criticism of Modern Architecture was getting harsher. In these approaches, contextualism was not defined as an act of creating visual sympathetic fitness, designing analogous to neighboring buildings or reviving historical styles and forms. Rather, understanding contextualism as 'continuity and regeneration' as oppose to 'fitting in', 'formal association' instead of 'formal analogy' and 'historical continuum' rather than 'historical revivalism' is promoted. Below is a brief summary of these three main approaches developed in post-war architectural theory and practice.

Team X's understanding of context can be defined as not 'fitting in' but as 'continuity and regeneration', the approach elaborated by Peter Smithson in a lecture at Cornell University in 1972. The group developed as a reaction to CIAM's zoning of functions (categorized as dwelling, working, circulation and recreation) and emphasized social concerns, inspired by everyday life and shifted attention from universal solutions to specific local situations. Thus, Team X's meetings witnessed discussions responding to the diverse layers of context as debates on infrastructure and mobility refer to territorial context, building for the greatest number and human association refer to social context and habitat refer to environmental context. Group members developed diverse design approaches in relation to these discussions. Bakema and Van Eyck developed Dutch structuralism with their studies on neighborhood unit, orthogonal matrices and city-house analogy. Woods' studies on double level orthogonal pedestrian grid, web and stem led to the mat-building concept. Smithsons elaborated on 'elevated street' and cluster idea. De Carlo referred to continuity, history and local place that later associated with critical regionalism.

In the Cornell teachings of Rowe and early works of Venturi, 'formal association' is promoted instead of 'formal analogy' (5). In his master thesis, titled 'Context in Architectural Composition' and completed in Princeton's School of Architecture in 1950, Venturi made use of the principles of Gestalt psychology in order to provide a formal association between the building and its urban context. He argued that context is important in architecture as buildings can derive meaning from it by not pointing a single solitary object but by enhancing a greater whole, where the former is claimed to be the way modernist

architecture achieves to buildings. Colin Rowe also developed design strategies in reference to Gestalt principles. He responded to the site with a new interpretation of 'figure-ground plan' and the 'set piece' or 'composite building' and he offered to use the compositional strategies of collage, collision and resolution in order to provide formal association.

Italian architects Rogers and Rossi referred to the history of the city and heritage in their architectural studies. Their historical understanding did not aim at promoting revivalism. Rather, they aimed to provide a continuum between architectural works and their natural and historical surroundings and the tradition of the city. Rogers criticized the modern architecture for dealing with architectural works as abstract problems indifferent to context. Instead of context, he used the terms *le preesistenze ambiental* (surrounding pre-existences), or *ambiente*, which became the source of context discussions in Italy in 1950s and 1960s. According to Rogers, architectural work should respond to its particular space and time by embodying the history of its context. Rossi also referred to the history of the city, memory and locus. However, criticizing Rogers' definition of *ambiente* for denoting a present time frozen scene, Rossi developed the notion of *locus* defined as a relational construct between a work of architectures and its location.

In these entire approaches, architects try to respond to the different layers of context such as historical, social, formal, environmental, etc. Thus, contextualism covers the identification, interpretation and articulation of these particular layers and characteristics of the setting in architectural design process for negotiation and engagement with urban context and its enhancement. Although a governing debate on contextualism is abandoned in contemporary architectural theory, some new innovative practices are also emerging. Olympic Sculpture Park for the Seattle Art Museum is a good case for examining these new practices where contextual design strategies lead to hybridization of the morphology.

3. Examining Olympic Sculpture Park Project as an Example of Emerging Hybrid Morphologies

Olympic Sculpture Park for the Seattle Art Museum was designed by Weiss/Manfredi, completed in 2007 and won the 2007 Veronica Rudge Green Prize. The project is located in Seattle on a former waterfront industrial site. It was a problematic site, being divided into three parts by railways and an arterial highway and there is more than 12 meters height difference between water level and street level. Thus, this post-industrial landscape demanded new contextual strategies. It is necessary to elaborate these strategies in relation with the former contextual approaches in order to reveal the continuities and the ruptures of the emerging new practices.

In the project, the aim was not to fit-in but to regenerate the context, like the approach elaborated in Team X discussions. Referring to Team X's major design strategy of 'mat-building', Stan Allen (2001 pp. 118-126) defined landscapes not as plane surfaces but as 'thick 2D' as they form a dense mat at micro scale. Likewise, in the Olympic Sculpture Park Project, landscape is handled as a thick performative surface. In this approach, landscapes are designed not as mere scenic but as active agents of design (Wall, 1999 pp. 233-249). In the project, this surface is designed as a Z-shaped continues platform that links the city with its waterfront. Sommer (2007 pp. 70-72) traces the roots of this Z-shaped platform in the historical works of architecture and sculpture. He gives Richard Serra's works as an example, and cites also the images displayed in the 'Excursus' of the *Collage City* written by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter as a source of inspiration for the zigzag diagram. In the Olympic Sculpture Park project, this continuous surface is not homogeneous as its character changes in respond to its context. This is achieved through the section that Jayne Merkel (2007 p. 109) called the 'chameleon section,' on the grounds 'that [it] is sometimes a building, sometimes an earthwork, and sometimes a bridge.'

In the project, as in the works of Rowe and early works of Venturi, the aim is not to provide a formal analogy but a formal association. However, in the Olympic Sculpture Park project, this is not achieved through Gestalt principles and figure-ground analysis but through association with the topography of the site. Thus, landscape is neither a background to architecture (approach associated with the modern architecture) nor defined open spaces between the buildings (as referred in Rowe's figure-ground analysis). The project is handled as a topological stratum as building and landscape is merged and fused into each other and to their surroundings. Weiss (Martins, 2007 p. 15) defined their design approach as follows:

The scale of some of the programs we've been given supports a more topological approach than the finite boundaries of many architectural projects. This is increasingly common. Landscape is a much better operative model for working in those settings than the model of a detached iconic building, which modernism used to privilege: an object removed from the land, up on pilotis.

Weiss and Manfredi also respond to the historical context and the heritage of the site in the project. However, their approach differs from the understanding of history in the post-war Italian architectural culture. Weiss and Manfredi provides historical continuum by referring to the industrial heritage of the site and by integrating the existing infrastructure network passing through the site into the design. Thus, infrastructure network which once seen as an obstacle becomes a reconstructive organizational principle in the design process. For the use of infrastructure in the Olympic Sculpture Park Project, Joan Busquets (2007 p.19) states that:

Olympic Sculpture Park establishes a creative dialogue with infrastructure (railway, road approach, waterfront promenade), making it an active part of the project. Not all interventions to existing city infrastructure elements have to involve burying them or dispensing with them entirely: in some cases, this course of action will be essential, but in others these elements can become features of the whole. The skill and sensitivity exhibited by this project endorses this later approach.

The contextual strategies of the emerging new practices demand questioning of the theoretical boundaries between different fields and the physical boundaries of the project. In that respect, 'dissolving disciplinary boundaries' is key to the practice of Weiss and Manfredi (2007 p. 29) as they also state for the museum project that 'the dynamic integration of architecture, urban design, ecology, and engineering was necessary to create an uninterrupted flow between the city and waterfront, transportation routes and pedestrian pleasure.' So, their practice emerges from the broader view of the site and use of contextual design strategies that transcends the disciplinary boundaries. These contextual strategies, in which the knowledge of the other fields is embedded, lead to the hybridization of the morphology (6). As Merkel (2007 p. 111) defined it, Olympic Sculpture Park 'is part park, part museum, part connective tissue – building, landscape, cityscape and new kind of place'. The hybridization of the morphology enhances the integration of the project with its surrounding. Landscape is no longer considered as a base to architecture as they merge and become one. Infrastructure is engaged with the architectural design process and becomes an organizational tool.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, globalization and its economic organization lead to splintering urbanism. The liberalization and privatization of infrastructure networks causes fragmented urban environments. In addition to this, due to the deindustrialization, most of the industrial sites in the cities become devalued and their transportation means decayed. These obsolete infrastructure networks no longer provide integration but start to split the urban areas. New architectural solutions are required to handle with these antiquated and separated sites and architects have started to deal with developing new spatial configurations.

The architects of Olympic Sculpture Park for the Seattle Art Museum are among the ones searching for new spatial configurations to overcome the impacts of globalization and deindustrialization on urban environments. These new spatial configurations are based on developing contextual design strategies. The root of these contextual approaches can be found in post-war architectural theory. The members of Team X, architects and theoreticians Rowe and Venturi and the Italian architects Rogers, and Rossi contributed to the context discussions in diverse manners. In their approaches, they promote 'continuity and regeneration' as oppose to 'fitting in', 'formal association' instead of 'formal analogy' and 'historical continuum' rather than 'historical revivalism'.

The contextual approach of the Olympic Sculpture Park project show both continuity and a divergence from former discussions of contextualism. The design strategies of the project contain the knowledge of other fields. As a result of this, landscape is dealt as a 'performative thick surface', built fabric is considered as a 'topological stratum' and the obsolete infrastructure is handled as a 'reconstructive organizational principle' in the design process. These contextual strategies lead to the hybridization of the morphology. To conclude, emerging practices of architecture are shaped by hybrid morphologies where buildings and urban fabric integrate, fluid spatial continuum develops and figure-ground distinction dissolves.

Notes

1 According to the authors, this change is triggered by 'the urban infrastructure 'crisis'; changing political economies of urban infrastructure development; the collapse of the modern notion of comprehensive urban planning; the physical growth and extension of metropolitan regions; and the challenge of social movements and critiques' (Graham & Marvin, 2001 p. 92).

2 It was of uttermost importance to become a terminal point in the Northern Pacific rail line system as the leaders of the city urged for that. See: REPS, J. W. 1979. *Cities of the American West; a History of Frontier Urban Planning*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

3 For some realized and unrealized total planning projects see: OCHSNER, J. K. 1994. *Shaping Seattle Architecture; a Historical Guide to the Architects*, Seattle, Washington, University of Washington Press.

4 'Fuck context' statement is developed in reference to the issue of bigness. Koolhaas (1995, p.502) states that 'bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue. It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is fuck context.' KOOLHAAS, R. 1995. Bigness or the Problem of Large. *In:* OMA, KOOLHAAS, R & MAU, B. (eds.) *S,M,L,XL*. New York: Monacelli Press.

5 The term contextualism was born out from the discussions held in Cornell studios under the guidance of Colin Rowe. Stuart Cohen and Tom Schumacher, as students of Rowe, are the ones who published on Contextualism in the early 1970s. See: SCHUMACHER, T. L. 1971. Contextualism: Urban Ideals and Deformations. *Casabella*, 359-360, 78-86 and COHEN, S. 1974. Physical Context/Cultural Context: Including it All. *Oppositions*, 2, 1-39.

6 The term 'hybrid morphologies' was coined formerly in several texts. For the seminal one, see: ANGELIL, M. & KLINGMANN, A. 1999. Hybrid Morphologies: Infrastructure, Architecture, Landscape. *Daidalos*, 73, 16-25.s

Images

Image 1: Site of the Olympic Sculpture Park project before and after the construction. Source: Weiss and Manfredi website. Available from: <http://www.weissmanfredi.com/project/seattle-art-museum-olympic-sculpture-park>. [30 September 2012].

Image 2: Topographical approach of the Olympic Sculpture Park project. Source: Weiss and Manfredi website. Available from: <http://www.weissmanfredi.com/project/seattle-art-museum-olympic-sculpture-park>. [30 September 2012].

Image 3: Infrastructural approach of the Olympic Sculpture Park project. Source: Weiss and Manfredi website. Available from: <http://www.weissmanfredi.com/project/seattle-art-museum-olympic-sculpture-park>. [30 September 2012].

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Contextualism describes a collection of views in philosophy which emphasize the context in which an action, utterance, or expression occurs, and argues that, in some important respect, the action, utterance, or expression can only be understood relative to that context. [1] Contextualist views hold that philosophically controversial concepts, such as "meaning P", "knowing that P", "having a reason to A", and possibly even. Â It is important to note that this theory does not allow that someone can have knowledge at one moment and not the other, for this would hardly be a satisfying epistemological answer. What contextualism entails is that in one context an utterance of a knowledge