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**Reinterpreting the Contemporary
Architectural Practice in Turkey in
Light of the Context Debate**

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Reinterpreting the Contemporary Architectural Practice in Turkey in Light of the Context Debate

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Abstract

Architectural production has always been influenced by the economic developments of an era and the national and international political dynamics. In this regard, today, globalization and the current state of capitalism characterize the various aspects of contemporary architectural practice such as commoditization of architectural objects, urban environments and experiences and strong expression of nationalist identities in the buildings. In the scope of this essay, several projects from Turkey and as well as from international scene are going to be discussed in reference to the broader framework of globalization. These projects are selected as the exemplary cases of ‘sameness’, ‘iconism’, ‘theming’, ‘revivalism’, ‘typification’ and ‘urban regeneration’, which have emerged as the major approaches in contemporary architectural and urban design. However, there is a lack of reference to the tools and means of the field of architecture in the contemporary discussions on the problems of these projects. In this respect, one of the major problems of these projects is defined as the lack of critical approach to the physical, social, historical aspects of the urban context and the specificity in place and time. Thus, the aim of the essay is to frame a new fertile ground for a productive debate on the problems of these projects by bringing the context discussion in architecture to the center. On the other hand, the context debate in contemporary architectural theory is also abandoned due to the limited and simplistic understanding of the notion of context today. For this reason, a mapping of architectural contextualism in the post-war architectural theory and practice will be provided to uncover the evolution of context debate in architecture. Finally, it is asserted that the contemporary architectural and urban problems proliferated by the economical and political impacts of globalization calls for a more critical conceptualization of architectural contextualism. In addition to that, developing a renewed understanding of contextualism has the potential to activate a generative debate on the problems of urban environments.

Keywords: architecture, globalization, contextualism, Turkey

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Introduction

Architecture's close tie with the mutual relationships of the economic and political conditions is a well known fact. Economic developments of an era and the national and international political dynamics have a direct influence on architectural practices. This close relationship is highly visible in the last century as modernist architecture is developed in relation to fordism and mass production and used as an expression of the nation-state while postmodern architecture is related to post-fordism and consumerism and expresses the localities within growing internationalization. This impact of economic systems on architecture is also mentioned in the book *Brandscapes* by Klingmann (2007, p.5) as she states that: 'whereas the modern movement in architecture was driven by an early stage of market capitalism emphasizing production, postmodern architecture became the stylistic hallmark of late capitalism, which stressed consumption.' It is possible to assert that the shift in the economical organization from the production and consumption has an impact on the shift from modernist to postmodernist architecture. Then, in the same way, it is possible to put forth that globalism and the current state of capitalism characterizes the various aspects of contemporary architectural practice.

Within the scope of this essay, several projects will be brought to the discussion for understanding the impacts of globalization and late capitalism on contemporary architectural practices, particularly in Turkey. These projects are selected as the exemplary cases of 'sameness', 'iconism', 'theming', 'revivalism', 'typification' and 'urban regeneration'. Many of these approaches have been discussed before in several mediums in reference to the issues of identity, place-making, power structures, branding, etc. However, the aim of this essay is not to provide a reading of these contemporary architectural and urban issues solely within the framework of current economics and politics. Further than this, the aim is to discuss these projects with the tools and means of the field of architecture, which is lacking in the debate. In that respect, one of the major problems of the projects discussed in the essay is defined as the lack of critical approach to the various aspects of the urban territory (physical, social, historical, etc.) and specificity in place and time. Thus, in problematizing these projects, context debate in architecture will be brought to the center. However, as the context debate in the field of architecture is also abandoned, a mapping of architectural contextualism in the post-war architectural theory and practice will be provided in order to uncover the evolution of the term. Finally, the aim of the essay is to reveal the need for a more critical understanding of architectural contextualism.

Cases from the Contemporary Architectural Practice in Turkey

Turkey, as a developing country, is highly influenced by the impacts of globalism and the current state of capitalism on the built environment. To

begin with, it is possible to assert that globalization creates a global homogenous architectural language. As an aspect of multinational capitalism, the buildings of the branches of international firms and the national firms that compete with them use the same language all around the world. This creates ‘sameness,’ which can obviously be seen in the downtown areas of cities. As can be seen from the images, the financial center of Istanbul has a similar look to the financial districts of other big cities such as Singapore, Toronto, Miami, Moscow, Frankfurt, Shanghai, etc. (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Downtown Areas of Various Cities. From Left to Right: Istanbul, Singapore, Toronto. Google Images*



Globalism also promotes commoditization of architectural objects that are detached from the notion of place. Iconic structures can be given as examples. To become visible in the international scene, to attract tourists as a place marketing strategy, or due to the growing impacts of the ‘Transnational Capitalist Class’ on the built environments, cities demand for iconic structures designed by internationally known famous architects.¹ (Figure 2) As also stated by Tschumi (2013) in the event organized for the 25th anniversary of the *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition in MOMA, architects today are obsessed with designing icons and there is a need for a confrontation against it. This is a very interesting remark as many of the icons today are designed by the architects who were participated in that exhibition. Besides the above mentioned factors, building of iconic structures is also related with the consolidation of the hegemonic powers of the state, which is also visible in the projects prepared for Istanbul by Hadid and Gehry.² (Figure 3) Thus, globalization triggers a change in the ‘relationship between architecture and nation building’ as ‘global architecture has become the national expression’ (Ren, 2008, p.188). In the scope of this, not only iconic buildings of the star-architects but also other power structures are appearing. For instance, the government in Turkey now promotes the construction of a huge Ottoman style mosque on top of one of the hills of Istanbul. (Figure 3) The aim is to create a new symbol for the city that represents the power and ideology of the ruling group.

¹Sklair (2006, p.21) suggests that Transnational Capitalist Class ‘help to explain how the dominant forms of contemporary iconic architecture arise and how they serve the interests of globalizing capitalists.’

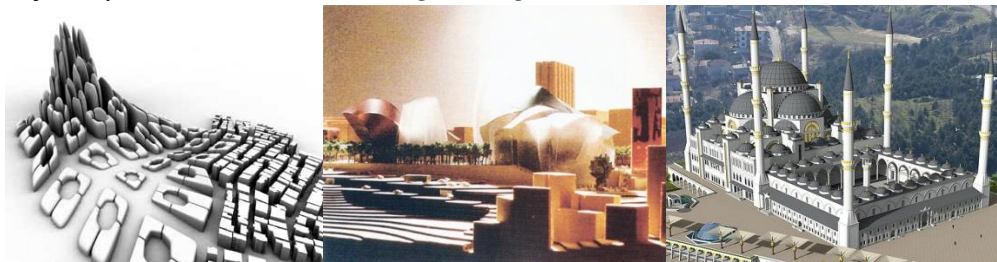
²Using iconic structures for the consolidation of the national power is also visible in China as stated by Ren (2008, p.178) that ‘hosting the Olympics and building high-profile architectural monuments are not merely urban regeneration efforts, but also attempts by the ruling Communist Party to overcome a legitimacy crisis and to consolidate the political regime.’

Globalization also triggered a new capitalist organization, which is defined as ‘experience economy’. Pine and Gilmore (1998) introduce experience economy as the 4th stage of capitalism after defining the 1st stage as agrarian economies, 2nd stage as industrial economies and the 3rd stage as service economies. So, the previous shift from production to consumption is today characterized as a ‘transition from selling services to selling experiences’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, p.98). In this respect, as also mentioned by Pine and Gilmore (1998), ‘theming’ the experience become a crucial design strategy.¹ Thus, lots of ‘thematic projects’ have appeared in different parts of the world as well as in Turkey due to the commoditization of the experience. Designing housing districts, hotels, casinos in Venetian style is just one example among many others (i.e. Bosphorus City housing project in İstanbul imitating the original Bosphorus, WOW Topkapi Palace and Kremlin Palace in Antalya imitating the original palaces in Istanbul and Moscow). (Figure 4) As can be seen from the examples, the contemporary use of ‘theming’ operates as an imitation of distinct local qualities, rather than a critical design strategy.

Figure 2. *Iconic buildings designed by star-architects. From left to right: Walt Disney Concert Hall by Gehry in Los Angeles, CCTV Tower by Koolhaas in Beijing, Galaxy Soho by Hadid in Beijing. Google Images*



Figure 3. *Iconic structures designed for Istanbul. From left to right: Kartal project by Hadid, Suna Kirac cultural center by Gehry, Camlica Mosque project by Totu and Mızrak. Google Images*



¹Klingmann (2007) also mentioned the importance of ‘theming’ and ‘branding’ in architectural design in the experience economy. She suggests that ‘whereas modern architecture was evaluated by its ability to increase production efficiency and early postmodern architecture by its aspiration to convey symbolic value, current architecture must be assessed by its economic potential to raise the perceived value of its beneficiary, be it a single client, a corporation, or a city’ (Klingmann, 2007, p.7).

Globalization cannot be defined as an opposition to localization. On the contrary, ‘the effect of globalization is often to increase local distinctiveness’ (Urry, 1995, p.153). As stated by Robins (1991, p.34-35):

Globalization is, in fact, also associated with new dynamics of relocalization. It is about the achievement of a new global-local nexus, about new and intricate relations between global space and local space. Globalization is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle: it is a matter of inserting a multiplicity of localities into the overall picture of a new global system.

Thus, globalization triggers the strong expression of nationalistic identities that calls for ‘relocalization’. Similar to Robins, Hazbun (2004, p.312) defines this process as ‘reterritorialisation’ as he states that ‘increases in the transnational mobility of people, capital and information can also result in the *increased* relevance of location and characteristics of place for global economic activity.’ This growing emphasis on the localities leads mainly to the development of a revivalist approach. There is a growing emphasis on the various aspects of the local historical styles and forms all around the world. (Figure 5) This tendency is also visible in Turkey where the use of Seljukid and Ottoman styles in buildings such as court houses, schools, police stations are increasing.

Figure 4. *Themed Environments. From left to right: Venezia Istanbul Housing Project, Casino Venetian China, Las Vegas Venetian Hotel. Google Images*



Figure 5. *Revivalism as an expression of nationalistic identities. From left to right: Neo-Tang style building in China, Neo-traditional houses in United States, Seljukid style court house in Turkey. Google Images*



Nationalist intervention into space does not show itself only through revivalism but also through strong intervention of the state on the development of urban environments. Fast urbanization and the dependence of economies on construction processes in developing countries, such as Turkey, lead to

‘typification’. Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ) built 580 thousand housing units, which are almost identical to one another, all around the Turkey. (Figure 6) A standardized ‘apartment type’ has become useful as a tool for providing fast and economic urban developments. This national organization is also becoming globalized as several countries are asking for interventions and collaborations (i.e. Venezuela, Nigeria, Guinea).

The growing dependence of economy on the construction processes and the capitalist policies also trigger the development of urban regeneration projects. The lands that become valuable in the cities are being transformed into more luxuries neighborhoods where the actual inhabitants are usually pushed to move to the outskirts of the city. Thus, urban regeneration projects become a tool for making profit from these old neighborhoods. The transformation of the Sulukule district of Istanbul exemplifies the major impacts of this regeneration processes on urban environments and social fabric.¹ (Figure 7)

Figure 6. *Repetition of typified housing projects. From left to right: Houses built by Housing Development Administration of Turkey in Tekirdag, Samsun, İzmir. Google Images*



Figure 7. *Urban regeneration projects as a tool for making profit. Sulukule district in Istanbul, before and after the transformation. Google Images*



Several contemporary projects from Turkey and as well as from international scene have been discussed until now within the broader

¹In Sulukule, among the 900 share holders, only 50 of them gain the right to become an owner in the new houses. The rest is forced to live in the outskirts of the city such as Taşoluk. So, among the 575 finished houses in the district, the rest 525 are sold to other citizens with higher prices. Somersan, S. (2012). ‘Sulukule... Sulukule... Vakit geçer güle güle!’ *Arkitera*, July 31.

framework of globalization. The discussion about these projects is usually governed by the economical and political dynamics and their impact on architecture. Even architects, jeopardized by political discussions, mostly do not discuss the problems of these projects with the tools and means of the field of architecture. In this respect, I define one of the major problems of these projects as the lack of critical approach to the physical, social and historical layers of the urban context. A variety of projects are no longer specific to their places and periods as can be seen in downtown areas of cities, which are identical, iconic buildings, which are designed as detached free-standing objects, themed environments, where particular places are imitated for the commoditization of the experience, revivalist buildings, where traditional and historical elements are used by detaching them from their specific periods, building of typical houses, which show little interest to particular physical and social aspects of their surroundings and urban regeneration projects, where the features of the existing social and physical fabric are not integrated into the design processes. Thus, in problematizing these projects, my aim is to bring the context debate in architecture to the center.

However, the discussion of architectural contextualism is also abandoned in contemporary architectural theory and practice mainly after the 1980s. Koolhaas's 'fuck context' statement became a motto in the field.¹ In addition, contextualism was started to be defined as a very limiting approach. For instance, Johnson and Wigley (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'. Contextualism also started to be blamed for being a by-product of and in the service of globalization dominated by 'multinational capitalism'. In 'The Constraints of Postmodernism', Jameson (1997, p.237) challenges Frampton's 'Critical Regionalism', which he defined to 'share postmodernism's more general contextualism as for the valorization of the part or fragment'. Jameson (1997, p.237) claims that critical regionalism calls for 'difference' as a by-product of multinational capitalism that it claims to oppose. However, architectural contextualism emerged as an approach that does not seek for producing difference but aims at understanding and interpreting it with a critical manner. Thus, in order to understand the evolution of contextualism in architecture and its current (mis)conceptualizations, the mapping of the context-debate has to be provided.

Mapping the Context-debate in Post-War Architecture

Architectural contextualism, as a theoretical body of discussion and particular design approach, was mainly developed within the years of 1950 and 1980. The current understanding of architectural contextualism is mainly

¹'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.'

shaped by the discussions of 1980s, which can be defined in reference to two main approaches. The first one is the 'fitting in approach', which is developed with the influence of American Preservationist Movement. The year 1980 witnessed the publication of two major books: *Contextual Architecture: Responding to Existing Style* written by Keith Ray and *Architecture in Context: Fitting New Buildings with Old* written by Brent Brolin. In these books, architectural contextualism is basically defined as 'fitting in' where the aim is to provide visual sympathetic fitness with historical surroundings.

Another important activity, which took place in 1980, is the First International Exhibition of Architecture of the Venice Biennale. Jencks (1980, p.36), in his essay 'Towards Radical Eclecticism' published in the exhibition book states that 'James Stirling's museum in Stuttgart is, like his other German projects, an essay in urban contextualism.' Jencks basically defines contextualism as a postmodern expression, which is a matter of language and style. What he proposes is radical eclecticism, which is 'doubly coded', as oppose to banal revivalism. Thus, 'heterostyle' became the strategy of responding to context and Stirling was declared to be one of the most important figures achieving contextual architecture in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His contextual architecture depends on the use of 'Neo-classical syntax' shaped by the cultural references.¹

Stirling as a student of Rowe, was highly influenced by his theories. The discussion on architectural contextualism in the 1970s was mainly governed by Rowe's theories and Cornell Studio teachings. Rowe published his *Collage City* with Fred Koetter first as an essay in *Architectural Review* in 1975 and later as a book in 1978. According to the authors, the collage city accommodates 'modern city', the city composed of isolated buildings set in a park like landscape, and 'traditional city', the city characterized as a dense built fabric with defined public spaces. Rowe and Koetter propose the use of collage, collision and resolution as compositional strategies that are implemented through the process of 'set-piece' and 'figure-ground' plan, where the latter is derived from Gestalt psychology.²

In the early 1970s, apart from Rowe's 'collage approach', another approach was developed basing on the understanding of context as 'something

¹Actually it was Frampton who first introduced Stirling as the main figure of contextualist thought in his 1976 essay 'Stirling in Context'. However, he later felt the discomfort with the growing 'post-modern' language which is culturally dominated by the hegemonic power and resigned from the organization board of the 1980 Venice biennale. He later developed the notion of Critical Regionalism which is first coined by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre.

²Rowe's ideas were first appeared in two previous articles before the publication of the *Collage city*. Tom Schumacher, as a student of Colin Rowe, was one of the first to write on contextualism and its design strategies. In his essay 'Contextualism: Urban ideals and deformations' published in 1971, he refers to Rowe's theories of 'collage' and 'figure ground' and Robert Venturi's theory of 'both-and'. Stuart Cohen, also a student of Rowe, is the first to coin the term contextualism in his master thesis who later published an article titled 'Physical context/Cultural context: Including it all' in 1974. In the essay, Cohen discusses contextualism in reference to Modern Architecture's 'exclusivism' and Venturi's 'inclusivism'. By applying the figure-ground studies, he proposes 'physical contextualism', the 'contextualism of objects' in addition to the 'cultural contextualism', the 'contextualism of images'.

to be learned from'. Several books appeared where characteristics of some particular cities were analyzed as case studies. Some of the most influential publications can be mentioned as Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas*, Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and Boyarsky's 'Chicago a la Carte: the City as an Energy System', which was first published in the *Architectural Design* and later in *The Idea of the City*.

In the 1960s, the context discussion in Italy was mainly shaped in reference to the history and the tradition of the city. Rossi, in his book *The Architecture of the City* published in 1966, uses the term locus rather than context. He defines locus as 'a relationship between a certain specific location and the buildings that are in it' (Rossi, 1982, p.103). So, it is not an apriori concept but constructed through time with a dialectic relationship between a location and a building. In the book, he criticized *ambiente*, which is translated to English as 'context', as an illusionary scene-making.¹ In fact, *ambiente* or *le preesistenze ambientali* (surrounding pre-existences) are the terms used by Ernesto Rogers with whom he collaborated in the editorial board of the journal *Casabella Continuita*.

Ernesto Rogers is one of the leading figures of the context discussion in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s.² His most influential ideas are elaborated in and disseminated through the journal *Casabella* during his editorship of the journal between 1953 and 1965. 'Continuity' is one of the most important themes for understanding Ernesto Rogers's theoretical position as he added the term *Continuita* to the title of the journal *Casabella* just after becoming the editor in 1953. Rogers uses the term continuity to overcome the crisis of the modern movement in general and Italian modern culture in particular by combining the premises of modernism with Italy's deep-rooted tradition (Molinari, 2008). In addition, the word is also used for denoting the continuity with the physical as well as the historical aspects of the cities. In his writings, he did not use the word context until the mid 1960s. Rather, he used the term *le preesistenze ambientali* (surrounding pre-existences), or *ambiente*. His contextualism implies 'historical awareness' and 'responsibility towards tradition' where building reflects the character of its natural and historical environment without imitating the past forms.

In the 1950s, the New Brutalism of Team 10 became very active in the context-debate as they turn toward mass culture and the architecture of street against utilitarian total planning. Alison and Peter Smithson are among the leaders of the British school of New Brutalism and members of the Independent Group. Their approach to context was defined as 'as found', which is first visible in their 'Parallel of Life and Art' exhibition in 1953 and Patio & Pavilion installation appeared in 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition in 1956. Influenced by the photographer Nigel Henderson, Smithsons (1990,

¹This is first elaborated by Adrian Forty (2000) in his book *Words and buildings*.

²It is possible to assert that his influence was not limited with Italy. Martino Stierli (2007), in his essay 'In the Academy's Garden: Robert Venturi, the grand tour and the revision of modern architecture' writes about the influence of Rogers on Venturi as Venturi met him and involved in his studio during his studies in the Academy.

p.201) define the way they consider the context 'as found' with the following words: 'setting ourselves the task of rethinking architecture in the early 1950s, we meant by the "as found" not only adjacent buildings but all those marks that constitute remembrancers in a place and that are to be read through finding out how the existing built fabric of the place had come to be as it was.' So, Smithson's context approach is not limited to the physical features of the site but considers the social aspects of the everyday life.

1950 is an important date for declaring the beginning of the context debate in post-war architectural theory as this is the year Venturi completed his master thesis titled 'Context in Architectural Composition' in Princeton's School of Architecture. Venturi's interest in context comes from his 'Eureka-like response in 1949 when [he] came across the idea of perceptual context in Gestalt psychology... and recognized its relevance for architecture.'¹ Thus, by criticizing the free-standing character of the works of modern architecture that do not embody external factors, Venturi developed contextual design strategies on the basis of the principles of Gestalt psychology. The prominent aspects of his approach is the careful positioning of the building on its site and articulating the form accordingly.

The context discussion in the 1950s began as a reaction to modernist architecture's disregard of context due to its 'claim for universality', 'break with history and tradition' and attempt for 'designing buildings from inside out.' Although the early discussion was developed by the criticisms of various aspects of the orthodox modern architecture in general, the post-war context debate in architecture was diverse and heterogeneous. However, the discussion was evolved to 'fitting-in approach' and 'postmodern eclecticism' in the 1980s, which later leads to the ignorance of context and contextualism in the contemporary debate.

Conclusion

To conclude, contemporary architectural and urban issues, which are shaped by globalization and multinational capitalism, demand contextual approaches. However, context discussion is mainly abandoned in contemporary architectural theory as contextualism is usually blamed for creating 'dumb servility' to the existing (where the context has the authoritarian role to fixate meanings) or producing 'differences' (where context is usually defined through its local distinctiveness oppose to the global other). As it was briefly summarized in the text, post-war architectural debate could provide a substantial background for contemporary discussions on context. It shows the

¹Besides his personal 'discovery of Gestalt psychology', Venturi (1996, p.333-336) mentions two more reasons as the source of his interest in the subject: lack of 'indications of the setting' or indications of 'merely the physical dimensions of the site' in Beaux Arts education (as he observed as a student in the Beaux Arts Institute of Design of New York) and the influence of the trip to France and Italy which provides him 'the opportunity to include and relate the individual building and the setting, to perceive in a perceptual whole.'

diversity of approaches to physical, social and historical aspects of context enhanced by rich theoretical arguments that can throw light upon contemporary problems. On the other hand, contemporary architectural and urban issues demand new theoretical perspectives and design strategies that lead to a new critical understanding of architectural contextualism. In order to define contextualism as a critical act and to dissociate it from the attributions that overshadow the inner complexities of the term, the notion has to be freed from the frozen associations with stylistic and formal catalogue, which it has gained throughout the time. In this respect, context has to be defined as a relational construct, rather than an authoritarian background. Context in architectural design process should not be understood as an 'inviolable given' thing but should be 'interpreted, manipulated, altered or (re-)invented' (Stuhlmacher, 2008, p.20). Thus, contextualism should not serve for the affirmation of what is already there, but should regenerate it in a critical manner. Only through this shift in the understanding of context and contextualism, it is possible to develop a generative debate on contemporary architectural and urban problems proliferated by the economical and political impacts of globalization. To sum up, the emerging issues in the urban environments are calling for a renewed understanding of contextualism that resists both to the 'homogeneous space of globalism' and the 'valorization of the national identities' with a populist expression, both to the 'free-standing object' and the 'historical revivalism', both to 'alienation' and creation of 'fake identities'.

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