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Phenomenology of the Background

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# Typological Schemes of the Relationship between Architecture and Its Context Phenomenology of the Background

Nicola Russi

## *Abstract*

Through the use of graphic diagrams the article investigates an updated relationship between architecture and context, stemming from a new understanding of the contemporary reality.

By a specific definition of project, considered as a way of designing rather than identified with its architectural object, this work retraces the evolving relationship between project and reality, context and object in order to clarify the logic structures of different approaches to design.

Postmodernism claims that context, instead of being reduced to a given background, can be interpreted both as a subjective and relative framework. This new consciousness allows architecture to adopt conceptions inspired by contiguous disciplinary fields, and thus to modify the inside principles of the project itself. No hierarchies exist anymore between the object and its background.

The overcoming of this dialectic implicates the ultimate fading of the vacuum in the fulness and the fullness in the vacuum, opening the needs for a new ontological research.

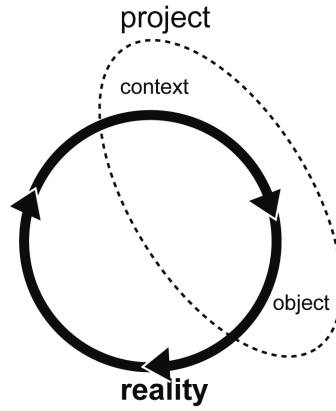
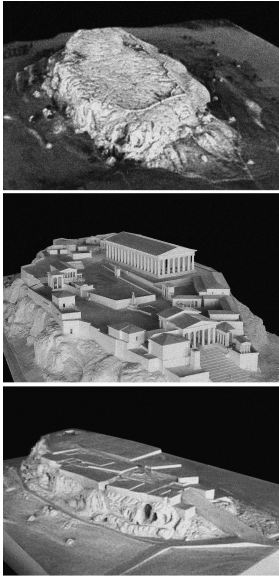
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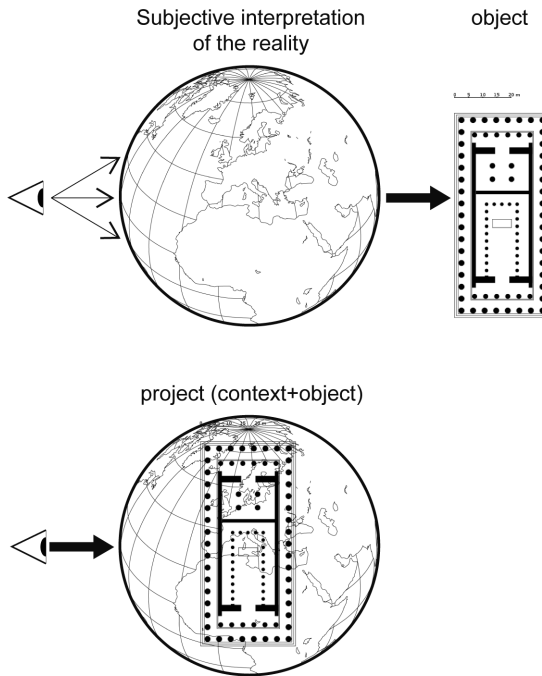
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### Hypotesis

We consider the project as a cultural way of designing and we distinguish it from the architectural object itself. We assume that the **context** originates from various approaches to the **interpretation** and transformation of **reality**.



*«architectural space lives a double semiotic life. On the one hand it shapes the universe, on the other hand it is shaped by universe: the world created by man reproduces his idea of global structure of the world»,  
YuriJ Lotman*

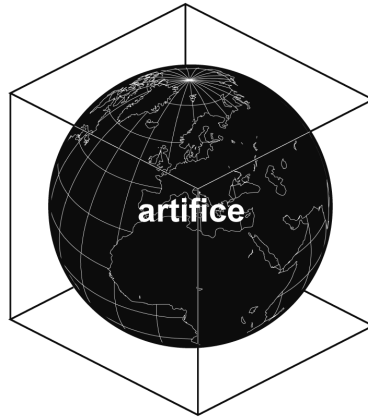


*Background: the antropocene*

Nowadays the anthropization processes of the earth, the leveling of the differences and the alteration of the relationship between men and nature, lead the project towards **new fields of research**.



2004

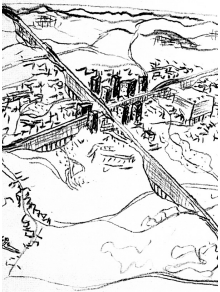


*«The last hill is the roundness of the earth at its furthest end»,  
Paul Virilio*

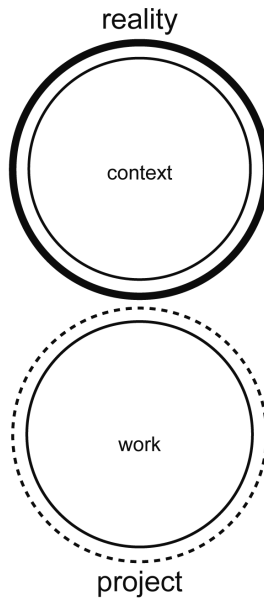
*Back to the modernism: objective context*

**Context** has been perceived like an endless given background that could be objectively described, measured and transformed. On that time geometry was superimposed on the organic in a perfect aesthetic balance.

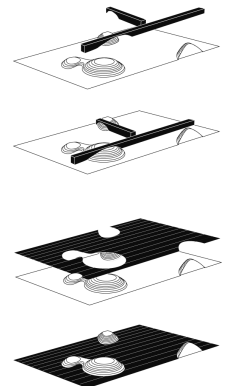
**Tabula rasa** was just the effect of an architecture that conceived itself always in opposition to its background.



1930

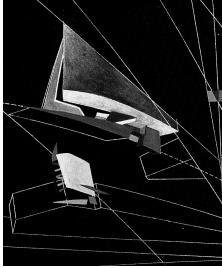


*«There is nothing more elegant than the pure line of viaducts in a geographically varied site»,  
Le Corbusier*

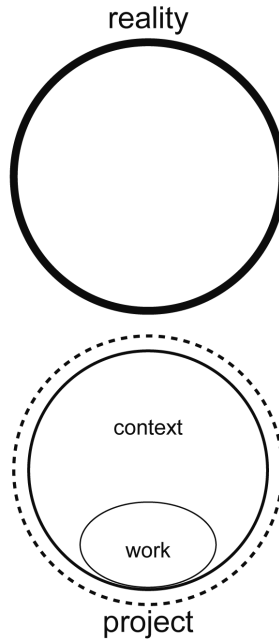


### Postmodernism: subjective context

The architecture became a sort of auto-estrangement, an individual product as the result of a personal world. The internal dialogue between the context in the mind of the architect and its artifact produced **biographic projects** instead of **rational ones**.



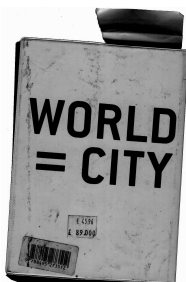
1970



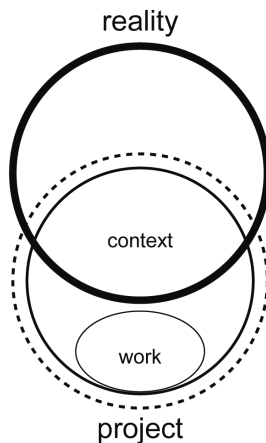
*«For many years, I hated nature. As a student, I refused to put a plant anywhere - a living plant, that is. Dead plants were OK»,  
Zaha Hadid*

### Postmodernism: relative context

From the Nineties up to the first decade of the new millennium reality seemed too complex to be synthesized into a common background and architecture wasn't able to change any of it. This idea was much more about **analyzing**, **investigating** and **describing** instead of conceiving the context as the result of a design culture.



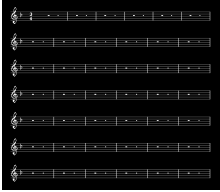
1990



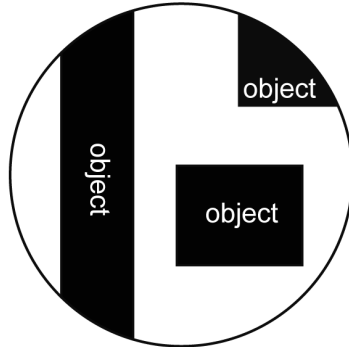
*«The novelty of this with respect to the observations carried out on the territory of the classical and modern cities resides precisely in the fact that today these organizational dispositifs no longer tend to be imposed by a desire external to the protagonists of the modification»,  
Stefano Boeri*

## Overcoming

New design conceptions, inspired by minimal and conceptual art overcame the dizzying collapse of modernism and the individualistic refusal of postmodernism. These new design conceptions cannot simply be considered as the result of a change from object architecture into landscape architecture but rather as a result of a shared desire to recognize and **include in the project a range of “other” spatial qualities** that were not traditionally attributed to architecture, even its absence.



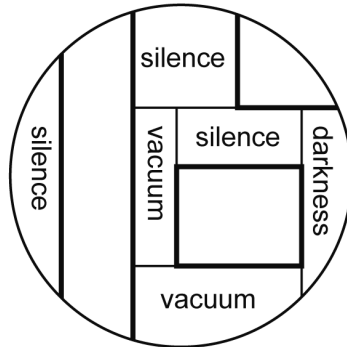
1966



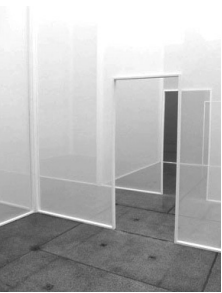
*«I realized that a real separation between sound and silence doesn't exist, but only between the intention to listen and to not do»,  
John Cage*



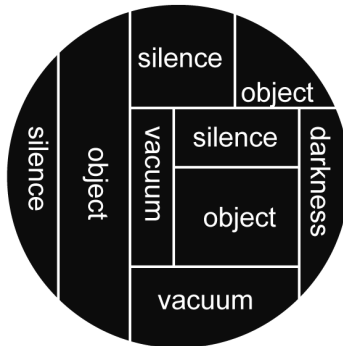
1975



*«I'm interested in the sense of presence of space; that is space where you feel a presence, almost an entity – that physical feeling and power that space can give»,  
James Turrell*



1989

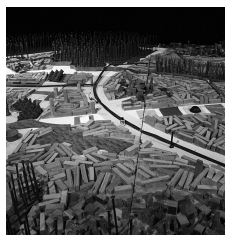


*«How is it that a space could ever come to be considered empty when it is filled with real and tactile events»,  
Robert Irwin*

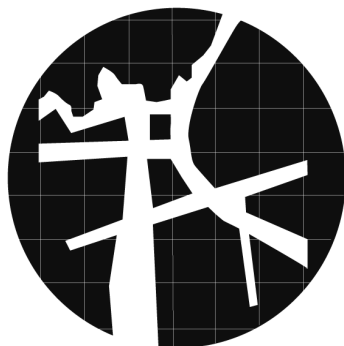
### *The artificiality of absence*

What has been conceived in OMA Melun Senart project was substantially different from all the others structural urban realized since then.

OMA placed artifacts and context on the same plane to the point of constantly **reversing the figure with its background**.



1987



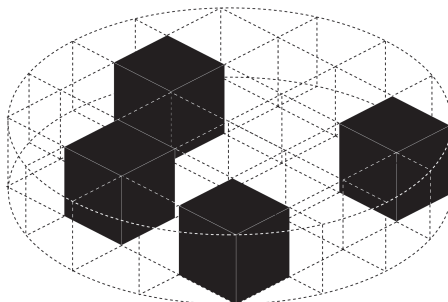
*«The absence of architecture is not only a preliminary condition» but could also be the project's outcome...»,  
Rem Koolhaas*

### *A part of whole*

The new conceptual relationship between architecture and context, **modified the inside principles** of the project itself. Architecture neither wants to control the whole by designing everything, nor focuses exclusively on the parts on which it intervenes with its own materials and rules.



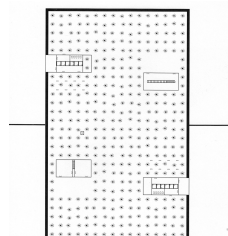
2004



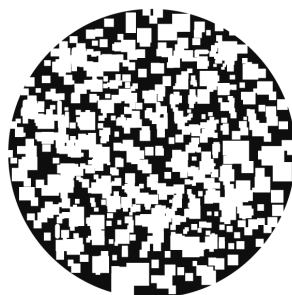
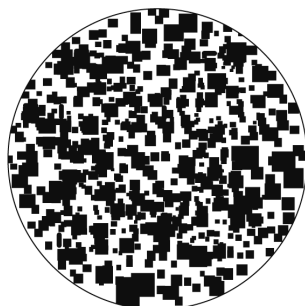
*«we should consider the abstract role of the distance, thinking of it as a compositive matter of the urban form»,  
Manuel de Solà-Morales*

## *The negative spaces*

In the Livien de Boek and Xaveer de Geyter urban projects the vacuum is perceived as a spatial condition which belongs to artificiality and **goes beyond the traditional oppositions** between full and empty, making this distinction irrelevant. This approach mutates the internal constitution of the project.



2006



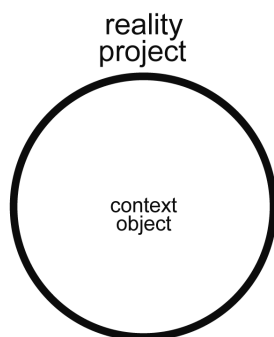
*«In other words... in the works of XDGA open space is not characterized anymore as a vacuum but is considered the same of the built space, no longer needed as a background of objects put into foreground», Gert Bekaert*

## *Background architecture*

The erasing of hierarchies between object and its background overturned the meaning of the project and its capacity to intervene on the contemporary space, even in the **built architecture**. Vacuum is perceived as a spatial condition which belonged to artificiality equal to the fullness.



2010



*«My work is about the exploring the atmospheric qualities of transparency trying to push boundaries of architecture over its limits», Junya Ishigami*