

Architecture in the Fractured City

English synopsis

Objectives

The renewal of the historic city is a broad European theme in architecture. Yet, in each country attitudes differ. Specific fields of intervention vary. Practice in the Netherlands discriminates itself by a casual appreciation of historical values and an enormous task in the renewal of its post war housing stock: the tendency is to demolish the post war city, to rebuild it in contemporary fashion and to offer minimum cultural motivation for this modus operandi.

The central topic in the study was to question this specific local Dutch practice within the European discourse on contextualism. Its central objective is the definition of design methods that enhance contextual design in the renewal of the European city.

The following aspects were addressed:

- . The learning of those European examples in urban renewal that exhibit a careful consideration of the historic city,
 - . The finding of design-methodological constancies,
 - . The operational assessment of such methods in the local problem of the Dutch post war city.
- The result is a handbook for architects and professionals in the renewal of the European city.

Points of reference

To be able to arrive at a consistent description of design methodological characteristics of a contextual design of urban renewal projects in a handbook format, the field of architectural contextualism needed to be mapped and defined. 3 points of reference were researched.

1. History and recent tendencies in contextualism

The history of the phrase contextualism has been traced back by such writers as Adrian Forty. This history stops with the 'F*ck Context' claim of Rem Koolhaas in 1989. However, also after 1989 contextual architecture has been progressed by architects like Tony Fretton and Miroslav Sik. Their work turns away from the urban architecture of monuments and thematizes the trivial and the everyday in the city instead. The work of both architects is described within the

framework of Forty's history of contextualism and serves as an extension and nuance of his history.

2. Architectural practice within the renewal of the city

The renewal of the historic city and the debate of continuation versus contrast in relation to historic precedents are in themselves historic phenomena. This history is firstly researched from the angle of the reconstruction of war-damaged cities. Such cases are illustrative because the traumatic background has tended to magnify differences in opinion and has provoked radical architectural choices. This 'history of history' is supplemented by short studies to the status of urban design in current practice and the question of realistic versus utopists' thinking. The former is based on literature by Tilman and Koolhaas, the latter on literature by Crombach and Van Dun who discriminate between *questions* and *problems*: questions are objective and can always be solved, problems tend to be subjective and are not likely to be entirely solvable. The complicated matrix of negotiation, decision making and politics puts urban renewal in the category of problems.

3. Exemplary projects

On the basis of the former 2 references a critique was developed that links perfectly with the observation of Ákos Moravánski who has stated that the context debate in architecture is paradoxically preoccupied with the forging of identities and fictional narratives, and not with an empirical investigation of the actual reality in which architects are operating. This debate might profit of references that are the product of a more performative attitude. Four built urban renewal projects were selected that share such an attitude and, additionally, have a number of characteristics in common. However inaccurate: their authors are all family or inheritants-by-proxy of the work of Aldo Rossi. More methodological criteria are outlined in the next section. These four reference projects have served to illustrate a particular performative niche position within the context debate but have also served as objects of study to methodological constancies.

Methods

The study was not driven by academic research, but by thinking within the practice of architecture. Its report was drafted as a handbook for practitioners rather than as an exposé. Two scientific referees supported the study:

- . David Dunster, Roscoe Professor of Architecture at Liverpool University. He is an expert in urban design and rationalist architecture.
- . Wim Platvoet, philosopher. As an editor of Uitgeverij THOTH he is experienced in reporting on architectural research and publishing.

Four European urban projects have been selected as reference projects. The following criteria have been used:

- . Each project operates both on the architectural and the urban scale.
- . Each project is a renewal project replacing and/or renewing historic artefacts.

- . Each project is an ensemble of more than one urban block.
- . Each project is a mixture of new build, restoration and landscape design.
- . Each project contains housing.
- . The designers share their idiosyncratic background to a considerable degree.

The projects were all documented, visited and analysed. Interviews with their designers have been conducted with the objective to find shared design methodological properties. The plan analysis as developed at the Technical University in Delft by such figures as Max Risselada was used and adapted. An important step was to base the analysis upon aerial pictures (and not present the analysis with reduction drawings), leaving the characteristics of the existing city visible. The interviews were focused on methodological aspects of the design. They were conducted in a critical way with the explicit objective to break through the success as presented in earlier publications. Failures, controversies and learning issues were discussed.

The research was complicated by the fact that something else was found than what was expected. It was not so much the day-to-day design operations that were consistent (these actually differed substantially) but the awareness of how on the one hand architectural aspects within the design were formulated (especially the evaluation of historic relics) and how such aspects were dialectally defined against extra-architectural pressures such as finances, social-economic and political realities, negotiations around the project etc. Crucial in the design methods of the architects involved in the reference projects was a clear definition of the design task within the complicated matrix of activities that are intrinsic to urban renewal. In each case the architectural task was set apart from social, financial and political consideration, thus making clear what relation design as its own discipline had to such considerations and to what extent architecture was capable of contributing to the ambitions of the intervention. This definitional awareness was high, but its wording remained paradoxically implicit in most cases.

In order to make such analysis explicit and make projects comparable, the task definition was represented in a matrix, which was called a “task-definition-in-columns” (Kolomsgewijze Opgave Definitie, KODE). This matrix discloses such considerations by giving a concise view of the definition of the architectural project.

Objectives	Negotiability	Relics	External conditions
Occasion	Firm items	Physical relics	Decision making
Job	Flexible items	Conceptual relics	Programmatic colouring
Level of aggregation	Neutral items	Vanished relics	Fail factors

KODE was devised as an analytical instrument. Our study was completed by design studies to 4 cases in the Dutch post war city in which KODE was tested as a design tool. These 4 cases were developed as “design research”. The 4 cases were based on realistic briefs. To arrive at a similar dialectical modus operandi as was present in the reference projects each case was developed in dialogue with representatives of the main stakeholder of each project. Each design research focused on contextual appreciations: in nearly all cases it was found that the evaluation of relics was particular. Typically, the post war city does not possess established architectural monuments that can be defined as physical relics. Instead its monumentality, at least in 3 out of 4 cases, is located in the open green urban structures. These are more appropriately defined in terms of *conceptual* relics.

The presentation (drawings, texts, urban analysis) of the designs are highly consistent, making comparison possible. In each case KODE was point of departure of the design work.

Findings

Several conclusions were drawn.

First, it is possible to discuss architectural contextualism in other terms than woolly architectural vocabulary. There is considerable methodological hardness in the way projects are set up and defined, at least in the architectural niche which was taken as a reference group. It is possible to represent the project definition in a simple diagram, KODE. From this, comparison and analysis can be easily developed.

Second, it is possible to restore connections between analysis and design. In a theoretical sense, such connections have been lost since architectural discourse has been focusing on architects’ originality, cult of the person and innovation. A more rational approach, however, has the promise of enhancing the performance of architecture in the complex world of urban renewal without losing urban cultural values (or perhaps even profiting from those).

Finally, the design research demonstrates that also the specific renewal task of the post war city can be based on contextual considerations. It should be noted that the items in the KODE matrix also possess specific values. For instance, the evaluation of relics has a specific character.

Assets to European and national discourse

This study defines the issue of the renewal of the city as a European problem. It evidently departs from a European built and written canon.

The articulation of the architectural task in KODE introduces methodological solidity in the architectural debate on contextualism. In theoretical terms this study supports the claim to

restore the link between analysis and design. Furthermore, the local problem of the Dutch post war city is put into a European perspective which might enhance further international exchange of thought. The intervention in the post war city is a growing architectural task. This study recognizes such interventions as an urgent cultural phenomenon in which the role of architecture as yet is highly unclear.

Restoration is viewed as an integral aspect of urban renewal. Restoration, renovation and refurbishment are normalized and conceptualized within a more general recognition that history matters. This study provides operational tools to cash in on such historical awareness and to design the city of tomorrow based on this awareness.

Reception

The study was awarded financial support by the Dutch *Architecture Foundation* (Stimuleringsfonds Architectuur).

The study was published as a book in November 2008 by *Uitgeverij THOTH*.

The leading Dutch architectural magazine *De Architect* has conducted an interview with the author of the study in their April 2008 issue prior to publication of the book. Two excerpts of the study were published prior to publication, one by *De Architect* (January 2007), another by the Dutch magazine *Oase* (#76, Autumn 2008).