



Re-discussing Architectural Contextualism Through the Competition Project: The Case of Dominique Perrault and Wang Jianguo

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Abstract

Intentionally or unintentionally, architecture affects the world with its physical and cultural values and represents its judgments with the outcome product. Modern architecture and its influences should be considered to define those judgments in the contemporary architectural environment. The city-in-park model, among the most substantial influences of contemporary architecture, introduces serious challenges. While certain ideas emerge regarding the fundamental issue addressed as exclusivism, criticisms, and suggestions are also available with respect to this subject. This study discusses the concept of contextualism, coined by Stuart Cohen to produce suggestions and criticisms for the problems caused by modern architecture. Also, within the framework of this concept, a critique is presented of the Transformation and Revival of Industrial Heritages Competition. In this critique, while comparing two projects, a general discussion is carried out on the purpose of the projects, the parameters they affect, and the problems they deal with, as well as their form and context. The study aims to reevaluate architectural contextualism with two different projects designed within the framework of the same problems and to present a definitive study based on the idea of renewing in its context, brought by contextualism.

Keywords: Contextualism, inclusivism, exclusivism, urban models, Cohen.

Mimari Bağlamsalcılığın Yarışma Projesi Üzerinden Yeniden Tartışılması: Dominique Perrault ve Wang Jianguo Örneği

Öz

Mimarlık, bilinçli ya da bilinçsiz olarak, yaşanılan dünyayı fiziksel ve kültürel değerleriyle etkilemekte ve ortaya çıkardığı ürünlerle kendi yargılarını temsil etmektedir. Güncel mimarlıktaki bu yargıları tanımlamak için modern mimarlığı ve etkileri ele alınmalıdır. Modern mimarinin en önemli etkilerinden olan park içinde kent modeli beraberinde ciddi problemlerden olan dışlayıcılık problemi için belli fikirler ortaya çıkarken, konu hakkında eleştiriler ve öneriler de bulunmaktadır. Yapılan bu çalışmada, modern mimarlığın ortaya çıkardığı söz konusu problemlere karşı Stuart Cohen'in bağlamsalcılık kavramı ele alınmakta ve bu kavram çerçevesinde The Transformation and Revival of Industrial Heritages yarışma projesi üzerinden bir eleştiri yazısı sunulmaktadır. Yapılan karşılaştırmada, projelerin amacı, etkilendikleri parametreler ve ele aldıkları problemlerle birlikte biçim ve bağlamları üzerinden genel bir tartışma yürütülmektedir. Mimari bağlamsalcılığı, aynı sorunlar çerçevesinde tasarlanan iki ayrı proje ile yeniden değerlendirmek ve bağlamsalcılığın getirdiği kendi bağlamında eleştirilme fikrinden yola çıkarak, örnek bir çalışma ortaya koymak hedeflenmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Bağlamsalcılık, kapsayıcılık, dışlayıcılık, kent modelleri, Cohen.

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1. Introduction

Architecture is among the most important elements embodying and reflecting the city's values and culture. For this reason, the buildings constructed bear certain values and judgments and represent these judgments. The exterior approaches of the building, its scale, and the form or colors used leave an impact on the city hosting the structure. On the other hand, the architect represents his/her judgments within the emerging values of the buildings designed. In contemporary architectural criticism, these judgments are evaluated and discussed. However, to define and make sense of the criticisms made, it is required to understand the nature of judgments modern architecture includes and its place in architectural criticism.

Cohen (1974), in his article *Physical Context / Cultural Context: Including it, all*, states that modern architecture fails to fulfill its utopias and the success of its ideas fails to be demonstrated in practice. The city-in-park model, in which modernist cities offer utopian approaches, introduces certain problems, which are ignored by modern architecture. In the criticism of modern architecture, the exclusion of modern architecture, which is defined as isolated structures, is at the root of these problems. In this article, which Cohen (1974) wrote after Colin Rowe's work, it is seen that he criticizes the problem and offers contextualism (Özten & Anay, 2020, p. 15-17; Bingöl, 2020). The study aims to present the concept of contextualism through selected competition projects and criticize contextualism through these projects.

This study, addressing architectural contextualism, re-evaluates urban design by considering the exclusionary state of modern architecture. Since contextualism is a critical suggestion, it can be handled and evaluated with different data and results in each design (Karayama & Hekimoğlu, 2022). Therefore, the two projects most suitable for the data to be provided are selected through a current competition, and discussions are carried out with these projects. An up-to-date competition is selected based on the idea that contextualism should renew itself with up-to-date data. While performing the evaluation, the cultural context, physical context, and inclusivity factors are taken into consideration as well as what is required in the project. Moreover, while the study is being completed, a case study is conducted on the projects selected recently, as it is aimed to re-discuss architectural contextualism, and a critique is presented with comparisons done following the evaluation.

2. Material and Method

Focusing on architectural contextualism and aiming to discuss a recent competition project, features a qualitative case study. First, the foundations and purpose of architectural contextualism are explained, and then architectural contextualism is discussed on projects made in the same field, for the same purpose, and within the scope of the same competition. The discussion in question is based on the primary sources that define and discuss architectural contextualism and official information about the competition project. In this study, while starting with the argument that architectural contextualism is not periodic and can present a discussion on today's architectural works since its first emergence it is also defended that several answers are available for the emerging problems.

3. Findings and Discussion

This study reconsiders the concept of architectural contextualism through a current competition. First, the concept of architectural contextualism is explained and the concept of ecology is examined in this context. In the competition discussed, the concepts specified over the two selected projects are evaluated. These evaluations are carried out as similar aspects and comparisons. It is aimed to examine the extent to which architectural contextualism, which is an important factor in today's architecture, is among the expectations and outputs in contemporary architectural competitions.

3.1. Architectural Contextualism

Contextualism, derived from Colin Rowe's urban theories, emerges as a product of his master's program (Cohen, 1974; Özten & Anay, 2017a). The approach defines itself by the necessity of a comprehensive perspective rather than putting forward a uniform problem area. Considering the diversity it embodies, it is revealed that contextualism takes a critical approach toward the issue it addresses.

According to Fox (2014), contextualism is the inability of any situation or event to break away from its historical context. On the other hand, the contextualist approach is possible by criticizing the criticized subject by considering its entire conditions. It is more appropriate to review the whole context and to perform evaluations within this framework.

Although the book *Collage City*, written by Rowe & Koetter (1978), does not address the issue of contextualism as a word or even does not mention the practice of contextualism, the book presents the problems that contextualism deals with and includes analytical strategies. Following Cohen (1974) evaluates contextualism within the framework of inclusiveness by considering the cultural dimension beyond the concept referring to the immediate environment and physical parameters of the building. However, he defines modern architecture as exclusionary with its isolated structure. While Cohen (1974) approaches contextualism in terms of modern architectural criticism, he further states that modern architecture is far from a contextualist approach by ignoring the facts of life. Against this problem, he advocates proposing the physical and cultural context (Cohen, 1974). For this reason, while expressing modern architecture as exclusionary, it offers inclusiveness as a suggestion.

Cohen (1974) finds too superficial the criticism of modern architecture made in the book *Learning From Las Vegas* (Venturi, Brown & Izenour; 2017), another example of the inclusivity proposal. Stating that the criticism of modern architecture as ducks or decorated huts remains a criticism based on symbolism, Cohen claims that in this study that the approach of inclusiveness has been moved away.

In this study, while architectural contextualism is discussed, Cohen's contextualism ideas are taken as a basis, and the evaluation of the projects is carried out not only on the design of the building but also within the framework of the context as a whole. In addition, the subject is examined with the issues of inclusivity, physical context, and cultural context because they deal with overlapping problem areas in their three approaches.

3.2. Re-Discussing Architectural Contextualism Through Ecology and the City

Although contextualism appears as a monotonous and restricted concept that represents a restricted problem area in itself, it presents comprehensive and multiple problems. Modernist cities neither care about the internal context when creating their design nor do they care about the external context to be a part of a larger context in which they can exist. Contextualism described in *Collage City* (1978) focuses on these issues and acts to reverse this situation. In addition, urban design is not defined as merely functionalist and mechanical process in this book (Özten & Anay, 2017b). It starts with the concept of inclusiveness, which includes the physical and cultural context and stays away from the idea of ignoring the external effects implied by modern architecture. It can be stated that a design on its Architectural contextualism aims to address both the internal and external context and does not break away from these contexts in matters in terms of material, scale, form, and function. While it criticizes the problems of modern architecture with its approach, it also offers suggestions for this situation.

Following the emergence of the concepts of context and architectural contextualism, there are different interpretations of this subject. Alexander (1973) states that every design problem arises with an effort to capture the harmony between form and context and argues that form is not the subject of design alone, but it should include context. Lynch (2019), on the other hand, defines the factors related to the physical or cultural city with images that are perceived cognitively and formed in the mind. For this reason, context is defined as the unity between images. Even if they are handled with different names or concepts, a holistic and versatile approach is recommended in forming the city model. Although this proposal, described by Rowe as contextualism, seems like a single proposal that contains many elements and factors.

Allen (1997), while defining urban models, deals with the forms that reveal the urban fabric and the holistic effect they create. Stating that the overlapping of two regular fields forms the narrative in Figure 1, Allen (1997) further says that this effect is not random but contains complex mathematical rules. In contemporary architectural examples, besides the buildings rising in the void in modern cities, it is possible to come across types in which the mass-space relationship is intertwined and the types mentioned by Allen in his examples (Bingöl, 2020).

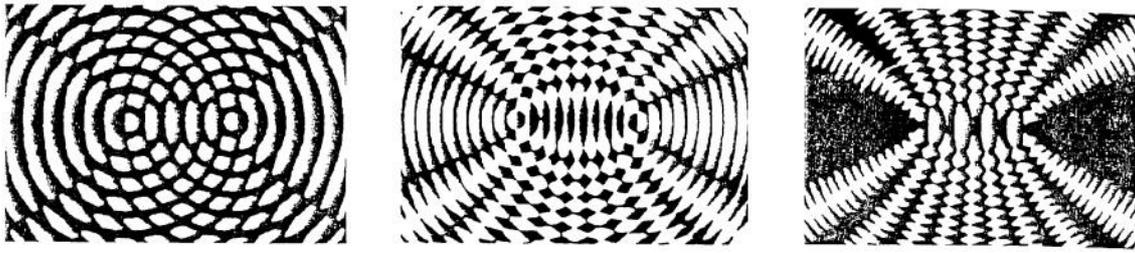


Figure 1. Moiré figures by Allen (1973)

Combining the different parameters covering the relationship between architecture and the environment, the concept of ecology, which deals with living life, can also be included in the contextualism approach. However, the concept of ecology is handled from different perspectives within architecture. Papanek (1972), in his article titled *Environmental Design: Pollution, Crowding, Ecology*, mentions the destruction of nature and the acceleration of this destruction by the processes in design while addressing the issue of ecology. In addition to the damage caused by the application and production of materials in architectural design, he also criticizes the emergence of design products not compatible with the human scale and rejects the use of urban planning that focuses on the use of automobiles. Although he does not entirely reject technology and approaches called development, he argues that they should be more compatible with nature. In this approach of him, it is revealed that the main focus is nature and the life of living things. Although Banham (1971) discussed ecology in his book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* that he wrote within the same years, it is observed that the main issue emphasized in this study is the technology and the state of development in the city. According to Banham (2017), the entire civilizations built immense structures to improve themselves and continued this development with the help of technology.

Therefore, in his book regarding Los Angeles, he goes beyond the accepted architectural principles and describes it as a city with ideal features. Unlike Papanek, he defines huge buildings as striking and city-specific and positively evaluates the prevalence of automobile use. Defining this type of city model as a megastructure, Banham (2020) argues that gigantic structures are indispensable for such a model. In Cohen's contextualism, these types of structures that can be defined as exclusionary, contain vital discourses such as rebellion and opposition for Rooyen (2018).

3.3. Transformation and Revitalization of Industrial Heritage

The current urbanization process in China raises questions about how the process should be managed and in which direction the decisions will be shaped. Industrial heritages are an essential part of urban transformation, and they contain social, scientific, and cultural values. A similar initiative is taking place in China, following previous revitalization in the Ruhr Area in Germany, the SOHO Region in New York, and the Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine in Japan. UED, one of China's influential research and application institutions in urban-rural innovation and development, aims to see idea projects by organizing the International Professional Invited Competition to help urban transformation innovatively. "The Transformation and Revival of Industrial Heritage-Hansteel District Urban Design Master Competition" is co-hosted by the Hebei Provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, Department of Natural Resources of Hebei Province, Handan Municipal People's Government, Handan Natural Resources and Planning Bureau and Urban Environment Design (UED) Magazine. The organizing committee of the competition has invited Dominique Perrault Architects, Coop Himmelb(l)au, UNStudio, Academician CHENG Training Team, Academician WANG Jianguo Team, Academician Zhuang Weimin Team to participate in the master competition and envisioning the future planning of Handan (The Architect's Newspaper, 2020). The competition was launched in Handan, Hebei Province, China, in January 2020. This was the third part of the annual competition, which has been organized since 2018, and it was held and ended in 2021. The city of Handan was chosen since it contains the remains of the Zhaowang Heritage Site as well as various cultural and historical heritages of ancient times, such as the Guangfu Ancient City, and it has a significant position in the emergence of Chinese civilization. The city's rapid growth led the Iron and Steel factory, which was previously far away, to remain in the living spaces as the development progressed, causing significant damage to the air quality.

Therefore, both protecting the industrial infrastructure and heritage and prioritizing the quality of human life are among the objectives of the competition. In addition, the head of the jury, Song Chunhua, states that the competition is examined in four dimensions. These criteria, referred to as historical and industrial heritage, ecological reasons, meaningful public spaces, and plans for the near future, aim to develop basic plans defined as a "strategy of smart renewal".

Dominique Perrault won the first prize in the competition held in China, and the second prize was shared between Wang Jianguo and Zhuang Weimin. In this study, evaluation and comparison are made between Dominique Perrault and Wang Jianguo. While the case study is being discussed, the competition projects are evaluated within the architectural contextualism framework mentioned at the beginning of the study. In addition, discussions on this topic are also included, as the aims of the competition include stimulating the industry and addressing problems in ecology. First, the projects discussed are explained within themselves with their purposes and discourses, and the discussion continues with the project visuals they share. Afterward, the evaluation is completed with the comparisons made.

Winning first place in Transformation and Revival of Industrial Heritage 2021, the Dominique Perrault Architecture team aims to build the Green Handan Manifesto for Handan City in Hangang District. There are four themes in Perrault's project. While the themes of water features, green production, and preserving the heritage are defined as themes directly related to the place, the last theme that defines usage and economy is called the hotel metropole. According to the jury's comments, the latest theme is a concept that considers urban life and aims to shape the project accordingly. In addition, the four identified themes affect every level of the design strategy. In addition, the jury considers it as a project that has a global vision and presents new strategies with international standards (Figure 2).

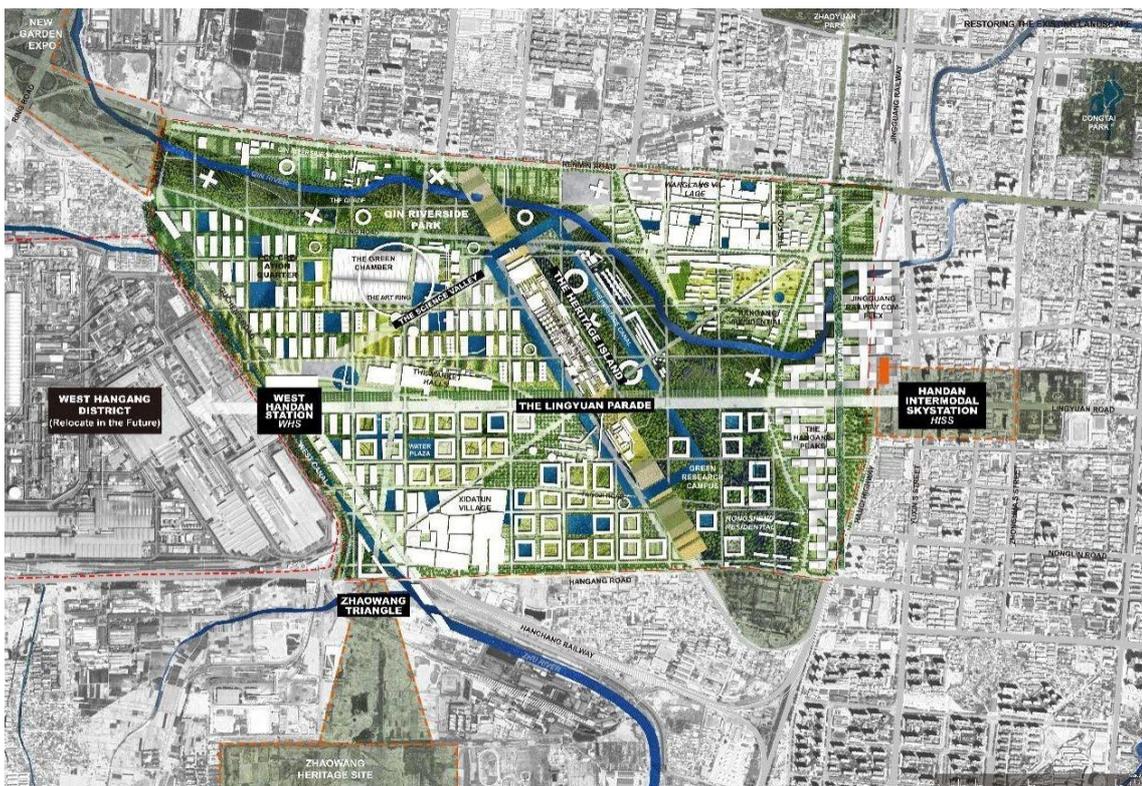


Figure 2. "The City of Tomorrow" by Dominique Perrault (Competitions, 2021)

Wang Jianguo, who won the second prize in the competition, is also an academician. Using the themes, he refers to transition, memory, and rebirth, he aimed that this proposal would increase the function of the region and provide a new model among urban models. The project aimed to promote the developing industry, revitalize the industrial heritage to renew the region and protect the urban memory, build a healthy society, activate the driving areas, and establish an integrated transportation network for fast and slow travel based on the blue-green system to purify the ecological zone. For those purposes project used six development strategies, including designing a living space (Figure 3).



Figure 3. “Transition memory renaissance” by Wang Jianguo (Competitions, 2021)

When the projects of Perrault and Jianguo were examined, it has been observed that they focused on the water element, ecological balance, green space capacity, and industrial development. In addition, both projects were designed with the effects of modern architecture and the desire for innovation. While Perrault's project emerges on clean grids with precise axes that follow each other, in Jianguo's project, the forms are shaped by partitioned plots (Figure 4 and Figure 5). Although the structures consist of inwardly designed squares, dominated by inner courtyards, which are regularly seen at first glance at Perrault's project, it can be seen that the structures that look exactly like each other in the comparative lead to indefiniteness. The forms here refer only to each other physically, and it is seen that the differentiated structures do not overlap with each other in terms of Context (Figure 4). Jianguo's project, which has more self-organized areas compared to Perrault's project, tries to provide context between all building models. However, the circle and semi-circle models that appear next to the rectangular form do not coincide with the primary idea of modern architecture, eliminating ornamentation (Figure 5).



Figure 4. “The City of Tomorrow” by Dominique Perrault (Competitions, 2021)



Figure 5. "Transition · Memory · Renaissance" by Wang Jianguo (Competitions, 2021)

When the projects are examined, environmental relations cannot be observed. Therefore, it is an unattainable goal to fully evaluate the extent to which the projects, represented only within the restricted area, meet the physical and cultural context. However, this non-representation can be interpreted as the context should have been considered. When evaluated internally, it is seen that they do not use the gigantic structures of the megastructure. Still, even if they use green areas, they do not prioritize ecology because production and living spaces are common, and its subject is industry. It is noteworthy that it does not contain a judgment about the cultural and physical context or the inclusiveness they deal with but includes the ideas that modern architecture opposes. Since they contain the desired scopes, these projects are considered successful. At this point, the main issue criticized is the idea that the expectations and evaluation forms of the competition should renew themselves in parallel with the principles of architectural contextualism.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Serious problems are observed in the city-in-park models that emerged after modern architecture. Together with Colin Rowe, it was aimed to solve this problem with contextualism. Contextualism should not be perceived as just a single proposal but should be considered both as a criticism of modern architecture and as a collection of proposals with complex components. One of these suggestions is the concept of inclusivity, which refers to both the physical and cultural context, and it also proposes a critique of the exclusionary state of modern architecture. While Cohen describes the inclusiveness proposal, ecology can also be included in the areas it covers, although he did not directly note the concept of ecology. When we examine the concept of ecology in architecture, it is seen that both the destruction of living nature and the use of technology required for development are included in this concept. For this reason, nature-sensitive city model proposals and megastructure city models are indeed encountered. The study re-examined contextualism through a competition project and reconsidered its expanded framework.

The competition named "The Transformation and Revival of Industrial Heritages", which was concluded in 2021 in China focuses on both ecology and industrialization. Therefore, urban models sensitive to living life and megastructure models are discussed, and the projects selected in the competition are evaluated. The project of Perrault, ranked first in the competition, and of Jianguo, ranked second, were chosen since they started from similar focuses and created different design

proposals as well as different forms within the same space. It is observed that both projects do not comprehensively address the physical and cultural context and act with the principles of modern architecture. However, it is seen that modern architecture has moved away from the idea of eliminating decoration and creating the design of the building itself. Although these projects have the ideal of constructing structures in which nature-conservation-oriented green areas are dominant, and technology is not abandoned, their departure from the context is among the main issues of the project that are open to criticism and are ignored in the competition. In this study, it is thought that architectural contextualism is ignored in competition projects. The case study, which emerged with this idea, supports this idea. It would be helpful to look at different examples and expand the scope of the study so that the thought can be based on more solid foundations.

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