Harnessing the Tension from Context-duality in Historic Urban Environment

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Abstract

The quest for improvement and upgrading of the historic urban environment through coexisting historical context and new context had introduced tension over the previous years. The resultant flows have jeopardized the harmonious layers of historical settings. The concept of conservation that provides the needed bridge between the forces in many cases implemented exhibits a no consideration of the three polarities that controls historic areas. The aftermath shows up in two ways. At one end is convergence and divergence at the other but the emphasis of this paper focuses on investigating what happens in historic urban environments when annex developments exceed historic limits? Historic Limit (HL) is the hidden benchmark and maximum point of the historic urban environment at which the forces produced by the two contexts coexist elastically. In order to answer the generated question, a literature review of the keywords that constitutes the topic is explored. The ideas of Warren John on ‘interaction’ and that of Getty Conservation Institute on ‘relationship’ that happens in the built above environment will buttress the argument. A model that represents the correlation of the two contexts is developed to simplify the overall intentions of the essay. Another technique is the selection of two composite annex cases to validate the targeted objectives. The article is concluded by recommending that conservation schemes in historic urban landscapes should adopt consensus design strategy for tackling context tension. As a sure way of sustainably welcoming the voices of the community in the process before implementation of the development.

Keywords: conservation, contextual design, historic urban environment

1. Introduction

The Jet mindset (modern culture) for fastness in tastes/satisfaction passively restricts dwellers from experiencing the intuitive stimuli of their surroundings. Historic urban environment (HUE) possess the point of focus (centers) and the habitual cognitive attachment of people to a place as an essential sociocultural element. The challenging state of urban developments today tend to jeopardized the harmonious layers of HUE via conservation schemes of upgrading. The paper addresses the pertinence as adding a new context (annex) to an existing one. Invariably, informing a design rethinking base on contextual evidence. The premise provided from the scholars/International Charters constructively supports that HUE is the bedrock upon which all interventions/alterations process get executed. The pressure from spontaneous development produces uncertainty through divergence in the form of displacement of the vulnerable people and convergence at another end through improving the standard of living of the area.

Culturally speaking, it makes sense when a stranger learns from the indigenes of a place. It is evidential to say that respecting the old setting through additions becomes an ecological way of maintaining the interaction and relationship in historic landscapes. The sensitivity of development to its location (site) at different scale levels remains beneficial only if its targeted function or stylistic approaches are not abstractive to the said landscape (Thomas, 2002). The historic core of HUE should not disappear by conservation developments. The outcome of urban developments either architectural, and urban design should fit in the existing physical configuration (character) of the site. The context-duality properties of HUE can be upheld by skillfully inserting composite annexes and other developments. In relative proportions that take siding from ‘Hooke’s Law in Physics’: Provided the elastic limit of a material stands unexceeded, the applied stress equals to the strain. In this study, the annex is the stress, and the existing context constitutes the impact receiver while HUE is the foundation.
subjected to tension. The essay is structured to seek a similar equilibrium if we must foster chronological continuity of our historic urban quarters.

2. Methodology of the Study

The paper involves a detailed literature framework of the subject supported with some images/tables at each theme of the discussions. The use of “Warren John” and “Getty Conservation Institute” ideas, as it’s, relates new designs in historical context, simplified with Interaction Web (Figure 1). The intentions of the essay are further made simple with a correlation model developed by the author (Figure 2). Participation in the presentation first class on ARCH 593 (New Buildings in Historic Environment) brought the motivation to fine-tuned the Model to suit the explanation of the topic. The next method is the evaluation of two composite annex cases sourced from the Internet (Military History Museum Dresden, Germany and Maidstone Museum, England). Figure 2 provides a Correlation Model defining the relationship that happens in HUE between historic/new contexts and will form the basis for this essay. The historic limit (HL) that represents the measuring line stands on the vertical axis as the overall viewer of the historic urban landscape. A introduction of the Model is necessary. Inside the HUE two interactions [(1);(2)], surfaces as historic context (HC) – standing for existing building and new context (NC) – representing annex. The insertion stands side by side with the old to constitute urban layers. Perhaps not limited to the four blocks shown.

![Interaction Web in HUE](image1)

![Correlation Model in HUE](image2)

3. Literature Review

3.1 Conservation

The concept of conservation has attracted many definitions from different scholars; this part will thoughtfully considered some which relates strongly to the aims of this paper. According to Lichfield (1988), conservation is an action to cope with actual or potential obsolescence. Since historical environments serve as social instruments and their cultural loss as shown after World Wars was harmful to residents. A vivid evidence of such cases treated in the book: ‘Revitalizing Historic Urban Quarters’. Conservation refers to the careful planning and management of scarce resources (Fethi, 1993:161). It is a thorough and diversified program of organizing and tracking urban change within a bearable degree for the protection of historic belongings in a consecutive manner of time. The tact and ‘skill’ of management and controlling ‘change’ in the historic environment are termed conservation (Warren, et al. 1998). Eventually, the objectives of conservation are focused on retaining the value of ensembles of the past, insertion of new components to match with present patterns and lifestyles. Taking advantage of the current technologies and keeping the building alive. Conservation is, therefore, long-term commitment to an area; not just a building or a monument as purported by early conservators in history like ‘John Ruskin’ and others. It has political, economic, educational and social involvements. It is essential to mention that the principles of conservation anchored on maintaining the significance of the area, to enhance the
integrity and authenticity of the given urban setting (Rodwell, 2007:1). Orbasli (2008:17) stipulated that ‘fashioned-led conservation’ will be superfluxes if it does not cater for the sustainability of the area conserved. Thus, in the HUE, the process of conservation constitutes all the component elements, carefully coordinated for man and ecological derivations. Holistically, the process is manipulated through planning, consultations, implementations and management.

The meaning follows that sustainable conservation project should provide a bridge between the networks of the past, present and contemporary configuration of the urban layout. Interventions in HUE can be via preservation, restoration, reconstruction, revitalization, reuse, urban renewal and etcetera. It follows that the discrepancy that exists in theory/implementation, deviate from ‘Rodwell’ assertion. The paper raises an argument that there is a water flow into HUE, which waves are dissolving if not alienating the historic core of historic built form. That is, the incompatible introduction of new building as drawn in section (2) of Figure 2 denoted as EHL (Exceeded Historic limit). The determinants that define the grain of HUE, which require attention in any conservation schemes include historical urban character, sense of place, street patterns, stylistic design approaches and detailing (Cohen, 1999). A typical example of a cultural heritage site showing conservation approaches communicating the above qualities is Guanajuato Town inscribed in 1988 by UNESCO. The entire urban elements: Baroque style, a variety of painting and monuments together with the mining potentials (economic activity) of 1800 maintained to date (See Figure 3). The conservation scheme illustrated agrees with Lawrence (2000) study that the maintenance of a historic urban environment is a motivator to the sustainability of the environment. An eye view of the example provided shows contrasting properties of the context but in an organic manner that does not hamper the historical spatial, visual and functional evidence. However, the 20th-century radical movement of modernity had created a gap (Ercan, 2011:305). It follows that conservational and infill design ‘controversies’ in policies and implementation are metaphorically piling up ‘threats’ in the historic urban environment. It also implies that there are lessons to learn from Guanajuato cultural landscape as we proceed to the discussion on contextual design.

Figure 3. The historic town of Guanajuato, Mexico, UNESCO World Heritage

3.2 Contextual Design

The famous modernist architect ‘Le Corbusier’ agitated vigorously for the evolution of styles which pertains to where we are without any reference to the past (Le Corbusier, 1927). His assertion debated at several discourses that relate contemporary architecture in historical context informs a brutal disconnection. Brolin (1980:13) refutes the disharmony of adding new buildings to existing context as a deliberate abandonment of the ethics that governs architectural practice by architects. Other criticisms wrote about heritage also indicate a paradigm shift in the position of cultural heritage from the individuality of artistic elements to meaningful space-based interventions as supported by (Lynch, 1960). Cramer & Breitling (2007), quoted “Choay” for recalling the paths in history were styles existed side by side in a harmonious way before the 1900-2000 rapid developments. Architectural critics question the unrestrained overshadowing architecture that intimidates the life cycles of historic buildings and users in HUE. Venturi (1966:16) opposes modernist ideology with the motion that the sole reduction of buildings to ‘pure geometric shapes’ by ignoring other dimensions rip the buildings from its
significance.

However, the discourse on integrated conservation supports that a change in HUE initiated by the needs of the locals is leverage on the relationship than just the architecture of the new development. The paramount indicators that matter in the design of new buildings in historical context as examined by ‘Susan Macdonald’ in Getty Conservation Institute (GCL) are character and quality. These critical factors define the identity of the place. The expositions outlined, showcase an aligning symbiotic relationship between conservation and contextual design. The precise evaluation also qualifies new design and annex as complements of refurbishing HUE. The investigation carried out by Pearce (1989) in Britain focusing on the ‘practice of conservation’ brought the introduction of the process of ‘building in context’. While (Booth,1989; Loew,1998), defined contextual design as both the theory and methodology of productively integrating new buildings in historic areas. Additionally, with the incorporation of other design principles, legislation from authorities and institutional instruments. According to Tugnutt & Robinson (1989), ‘contexture refers to the framework of combining the ‘old and the new’ with the aim of gratifying the organic mix of a particular place. The urban developments of late 19th century to present times posit tendencies that alter the sustainable existence of the two contexts and energize them into tensional opposing forces. The non-understanding of the situation of the historic environment by the players as stated is capable of causing the disappearance of the endangered grain of HUE. The magnitude, if not averted undoubtedly wound the memories of locals. Frankly speaking, only posterity knows the number of people who are drastically gentrified and marginalized. Nevertheless, a short turned to the big idea remains vital to evaluate why insertion in old context demands attention.

Saliently, insertion in HUE is executed for city branding and keeping alive the historic center. The present challenge lies in the objectives of striking equilibrium between the HC and the NC as represented in “(Figure 2)”. The solidarity requires points towards NC maintaining integrity and authenticity of not exceeding HL level. This proposition does not agitate for a total return to the past nor a complete newness due to time changes at both sociocultural and environmental levels. Vadiati & Kashkooli (2011), suggested that just as upgrading of historical environments can come via new additions. Similarly, the formation of new developments can also learn from the compact multifunctional nature of HUE for coherence and continuity. There are some contextual designs approaches appropriate for all types of infill developments in HUE. It entails the visual integration of building scale and size of new buildings in existing historic urbanscapes. The design achievable through three methods: Contextual uniformity, contextual continuity, and contextual juxtaposition. However, other design methods that are also compatible for designing in HUE will be mentioned in this theme.

Although, in some cases implemented freestyle is celebrated as a misplacement in the scope of contextual design methods because it does not consider the third polarity (community) as mention at the beginning of the discussion. Other qualities to review the impact of new development in HUE include scale, form, sitting, materials, color, proportion, orientation, and detailing. The sum up of the determinants listed defines the spatial and visual character of the annex project in existing context (Davies, Rowley & Edwards, 1985; RFAC, 1994). Apparently, the criterion of ‘relationship’ is remarked as an active determinant when introducing infill designs in HUE (GCL). The outcome projects of contextual design places it as a facet of conservation. Nowadays, that agrees with the conception that conservation provides the balance for the preservation of the ‘character, quality and significance’ of historic areas while accommodating the change progressively to the future.

- **Contextual Uniformity**

  In this method, the existing styles are imitated and results in pastiche. The approach is not psychologically, and design-wise fitting because the procedure kills the life of the area when reading its transference of time (See Figure 4).

- **Contextual continuity**

  The existing historical pattern not copied but respects the historic setting while at the same time introducing contemporary ideas as evidence to differentiate the past and present times (See Figure 5).

- **Contextual Juxtaposition**

  The type of contrast envisage in this method is more pronounced than contextual continuity (See Figure 6). Despite the contrast, it is required that the new development should not invade the historic core through exceeding the maximum limits highlighted in “(Figure 2)".
3.2.1 Other Contextual Approaches

A recent publication of Semes (2007) showcases four methods (Literal replication, invention within a style, abstract reference, and intentional opposition). The explanation accorded by comparison owes to the methods already listed but with simplified terminologies. The other approaches employed apart from traditional and modern may include:

- **Morphological Approach**: This approach focuses on ‘urban morphology’ and the typology of the existing environment (Rossi, 1982).
- **Genius Loci method**: The spirit of the place should influence the infill design in HUE “(Norberg-Schulz, 1979).”
- **Collage City**: Emphasis is in the assemblage of both the old and the new environments (Rowe, et al. 1978).
- **Stylistic Approach**: Comprises-new localism and historicism (a reference to historical details) (Baytin, 2000).
- **Prescriptive approach**: The technique rooted in the legislation and control of design through the formation of standards “(Baytin, 2000)”.

The contextual approaches enumerated so far initiate the background for consideration whenever the need arose for embarking on additions (technically known as Annexes) in HUE. There are different types of annexes, but the paper selected to evaluate two composite additions that agree with the title of the essay. The concept of contextualism plays a crucial role in informing designers of historic environment to broaden their technical perception beyond the tenets of professionalism to include environmental cohesive common sense. Just put as, having the humor of environmental sensitivities around a particular place of development. Contextual design is an umbrella term for new context combination with the old setting and composite annex is only a subset of the alterations and interventions that involves new institution to already existing historic facility.

3.3 Historic Urban Environment

The decisions of International Charters (European Charter, 1975; UNESCO, 1976), entailing historic urban environments to products of heritage and designated areas become non-substantial, whenever we consider the dynamism of historic urban landscapes. Scholars around 1800-1900 have conceptualized the historic urban environment as the custodian of the rich layers of cultural history (Cleveland, 1888). It is the meeting place of the landscape (Norberg, 1979). The distinctive urban setting (Tiedell, Oc & Heath, 1996:10-11) and the historical continuum and a living museum (Yahner & Nadenicek, 1997:149). In the 20th century, the concept enlarged to encompassing the legacy of past to present (Karimi & Motamed, 2003). The representation of the city’s grain (Whitehand, 2005) and an integral totality for the interaction of change (Swensen, 2012:381). A countdown of the definitions listed provides the resources for visualizing historic urban environment as a composition of two comprehensive terms: Diversity and integration. The variety shows the discrete existence of urban fabric but coexisting as a whole organic pointing at the integration. The two words characterize the uniqueness of every historic urban setting. A non-understanding and consideration of these results is the
contradictions the paper intent to address. Warren, Worthington & Taylor (1998: 9-11), projected that ‘three polarities’ (Community, owner, and designer) of interaction happens in historic urban environments (Figure 1). Accordingly, design in such environments should be informed by a consciousness of historical situations, care/consideration of the historical evidence and designer’s knowledge of sensitivity in historical settings.

The Interaction Web (Figure 1) indicates that in HUE decisions on design and implementation is affected by the polarities shown. In accordance, HUE possesses definite boundaries, character, and function. UNESCO (2005) on operational guidelines identified three groups of historic landscapes: Man-made landscapes, organically evolved landscapes and associative cultural landscapes. After the evaluation of thirty projects/assets that relate the economic value of historic urban environment by (Provins, Ozdemiroglu, Mourato & Jones-Morse, 2008:151). They summarized HUE into three groups of built heritage: Those belonging to ‘Cathedrals, castles and individual buildings, groups of buildings and historical/archeological sites’. Plymouth City Council refers HUE as all ‘human activity and material remains of our towns and cities’. Meanwhile, a new understanding has evolved in HUE, the duality of it structure: Historic context and new context (Figure 2). HUE is the universal embodiment of the two interactions [(1) and (2) functioning as subsets of the networking] that takes place as displayed. The image in Figure 7 represents a historic urban landscape, enveloping the city trajectory to the present. The old town image is in the foreground of the photo, and the new city is in the background. However, the influences base on neoliberalism of the global economy as one entity is drastically suppressing the old context (Historical). It gives birth to urban objects which aftermath is hard to maintain in the test of time (Richards & Wilson, 2006). Similarly, Vaz & Jacques (2006:241-253) referred to this as the international trends showcasing tendencies in the form of aestheticization and new image-building passively aided by architects. In this perspective, any change in HUE which comes through conservation and new design exerts a positive or adverse effect on the heterogeneous arrangement of the historical setting.

Figure 7. Old City of Baku (Ichari Shahar). Photograph by Khortan

4. Case Study

The evaluation of the cases retrieved consciously on the basis of spatial and visual principles; that is two museums having the same functions but from separate regions/approaches. The paper assumes a scenario where case 1 agrees with section (2) of Figure 2 (methodology) while case 2 obeys the situation in section (1) of the same Figure. The evaluation will not consider a complete architectural assessment of the cases. A limitation is drawn around six design criteria to analyze limits (massing, siting, height, material, rhythm, and proportion) and ten to evaluate compatibility. The selected criteria are tested and proven suitable for appraising additions in HUE. The analysis aided by images (drawings from the designers of the cases and photos taken after the implementation of the projects) retrieved from the internet. The envisaged results will be plotted using ‘Continuum’ as the range to rate the level of compatibility to deduce the conclusion. Yellow lines/letters are inserted into the images by the author to provide clarity.

4.1 Military History Museum Dresden Germany (case 1)

The addition to the neoclassical war museum in Dresden, Germany after 22 years of closure by the government and haven functioned as the arsenal for the German Armed Forces for a decade and thirty-five years. Before the transformation extension that provoked public perspective on the violence of war (Arnold, et al. 2012). It started operation in 1897 with a series of names ranging from Saxon armory museum, Nazi museum, Soviet museum and East German Museum to the Military history museum before it was shut down in 1989. By 2001, an
architectural competition was arranged by the government with the aim to reconfigure the museum through lines of rethinking about the war that devastated Dresden after World War II. Architect Daniel Libeskind won the contest. Daniel while making the presentation of the proposal firmly expressed that his intention is to configure a model whose character will pierce through the historical structure without bearing to the existing arsenal (Libeskind, 2011).

The designer’s devotion for the new addition demonstrates a shift in the political and historical German’s past autocratic system to a realm of openness. The ideology introduced visually by the transparent glass triangular tectonic pointing massively into the atmosphere (Figure 8). The aim of the government for the project achieved, but presently public opinions are on the high side. The present pondering question becomes; Why the high spending of such token of funds just to install a stubborn protrusion in their historic property? (Zimmer 2011).

4.1.1 Evaluation of limits

- **Height**: Exceeded limit. The angular steel wedge is twice higher than the existing building (Image C).
- **Massing**: Exceeded limit. The volume of the insertion in terms of shape, size and scale dominants and stands alien to the existing structure and surrounding (Image B).
- **Siting**: Exceeded limit. The orientation of the addition in a slanting position to all other configuration of the site that is oriented perpendicularly to the approaching wing of the existing building/context. The annex is totally away from the setbacks of the front/rear elevations. (Image A and D).
- **Materials**: Exceeded limit. The massive use of transparent glazing and steel triangulation gives the new insertion a very high attention in color and otherwise. Although, it is not bad to use contemporary materials, the intensity devoted had diminished the previous material character of the context (Image C).
- **Rhythm**: Exceeded limit. Vertically and horizontally, the new addition does not take any siding from the existing historic facades (Image C).
- **Proportion**: Exceeded limit. The infill technically superimposed but lacks the property of proportionality with the current building (Image A, B, C and D).
The case is intellectually fantastic, but the pitfalls of it lie on a massive deviation from the principles of designing in such context. The extension is raising tension because the degree of juxtaposition applied is greater than the historic limits of the area and stamping the old framework with new annex veritable as the designer’s signature.

4.2 Maidstone Museum, England (case 2)

The annex to Maidstone Museum skillfully instituted on the East-side of the existing structure. Situated inside the boundaries of a conservation area. The old Tudor Manor house dates from 1561. The Town Council of Maidstone Borough acquired it in 1855 and made it a museum in 1858. The different magnitude of preservation and renovation works initiated count in given the building it stylistic architectural appearance. The need to improve the institution resulted in 2006 with a competition hosted for the design. Hugh Architects won the competition, and the commissioning happen in 2012. The addition project aims to: Preserves the museum’s artifacts in an appreciable time, attracts more visitors year round and increase community involvement. The design Team understood the context and the three objectives listed manifested. Materials application in gold cladding of copper alloy Shingles used to create a contemporary distinction with the old brick elevations. The museum upgrading brought value to South-East Town Historical Center and improved the operations of the museum from 30% to 100%. The use of curtain walling on the facades and the partition facing the courtyard produced a transparent skin. That alone increased public views of the museum/Bentif Art Gallery that banished from the public for forty years (Hugh Broughton Architects, 2012). See Figure 9.

![Figure 9. Images of Maidstone Museum. Photo by Hufton & Crow](image)

4.2.1 Evaluation of Limits

- **Height**: Within Limit. The addition is not higher than the existing building. Instead of upward loading, the new went downward underground (Image B, C, and D).
- **Massing**: Within limit. The volume of the insertion in scale and form and size is not overshadowing the existing context (Image B and D).
- **Siting**: Within limit. The annex is obeying the existing setbacks and orientation (Image A and B).
- **Materials:** Exceeded limit. The choice of materials (gold cladding of copper alloy and curtain walling) and color, speaks distinctively from the existing building. However, the quantity inputted awakened the region from being frozen by the conservation scheme and draw attention to the museum (Image B and E).

- **Rhythm:** Contemplated. The line of the first-floor maintained on the right-side of (Image C), and the shape of the form (rectangles) in (Image A) adhered but all other facades elements remain exceeded.

- **Proportion:** Contemplated. The insertion submitted to the layout of the floor plan proportionally and delineated with pink color (Image A) but the façade on (Image C) shows exceeding the limit.

The case shows distinctiveness and integration to a bearable degree to foster continuity of the existing building. Furthermore, to get an elaborate basis for interpretation the two cases will be analyzed to check the level of compatibility (harmony or contrast) with existing context. The guiding design criteria will entail ten determinants (Table 1). From the results of the analysis, a Continuum is drawn to evoke the interpretation of the results (Figure 10).

### Table 1. Evaluation for compatibility

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**H - Harmony with existing context.**

**C - Contrast with existing context.**

Figure 10. Continuum

### 5. Discussions

From Figure 2 (Section 1), we can quickly spot the agreement between the two contexts under considerations. The two ‘blocks’ are coexisting within the historic limits (HL) but the type of relationship posed in section 2 is contradictory to the bearing capacity of HUE. The addition is extravagant, and the historic context by the massing of NC to EHL is out of the compatibility limits of the HUE. Vividly, the tension that the paper defines with the duality of adding new context to old setting is trading the grains of HUE and leaving contention in two folds. When the annex exceeds the elastic limits of HUE, the result (EHL) is divergence as evaluated in case 1. The plotting of the cases on the Continuum (Figure 10), based on the criteria used for the evaluation lands case 1 at free design approach. The impact of the extension is the displacement of locals in the form of
psychological/physical and loss of interest/place identity. In another hand, the insertion can be friendly to enforce convergence and harmony and the moral of the public is boosted as demonstrated in section (1) of Figure 2. Case 2 is a sample of such annex and falls in the mid-way of continuity and juxtaposition (Figure 10). The historical context is not diminished and frozen and the current period implanted contemporarily. It is a fair play composite annex that obeys the said benchmark (HL) of (HUE). Supporting the argument of the essay that tension from context-duality can harness when the various polarities of HUE receive due consideration during the intervention process (not over stressing the new).

6. Conclusions

The task of designing in the historic urban environment is not simple since each historic area possesses a unique character that is not synonymous with every other environment. That is why the essay supports that an understanding of such indicators/relationships by designers/funders who handle insertion of such annexes remain quintessential. It is obvious that most alteration projects evolve through International design competitions as evidence by the two cases evaluated. The sponsors who are on authorities, without proper assessment of credentials/previous portfolio of competitors completed in a similar context. Blankly, as International architects trade their cultural assets through few judges approved for the appraisal and selection of winners. The essay views the practice as a negation to the coherence of HUE because most of the designers lack the specialization of working in delicate settings of the sort though they are architects. The outcome as shown not limited to this compilation is the trading of precious historical layers/values for architects’ novelty, is this sustainable? We should note that the field of architecture exhibits specialization.

Finally, the tension produced when adding new context (new building) in the circumstance annex, to existing context can harness by the adoption of an integrated approach to the design and implementation. The technique will require an understanding of all the salient points that had been handling in the paper. The success of the scheme rest on public involvement and will be necessary to be incorporated cohesively to marry the cultural and environmental sensitivities from the inception of the project.

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