

# RE-CONTEXT

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## Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Gordon Matta-Clark

In September 1975 the New York artist Gordon Matta-Clark, whilst in Europe, received a letter from this lawyer about the police investigation of a work realized a few months earlier on the abandoned Pier 52 in Manhattan. The implementation of *Day's End*, as the piece was entitled, involved cutting through the structural I beams of the pier and through steel trusses and corrugated iron sheet of an industrial hangar located on it. Once Matta-Clark and his co-workers were done with the work, he sent out invitations for an opening. Because the building was the property of the NYC Economic Development Agency and because Matta-Clark had no permission to intervene in it he was placed under police investigation.

Motivated by, as he put it, the extension of “real environment situations into something more accessible to the public and in providing alternatives to enclosure and confinement” (Diserens, 2003: 6)<sup>1</sup> Matta-Clark's *Day's End* can be described as an act of subversion in defiance of what Foucault characterised as disciplinary societies. The particular institution Matta-Clark's work challenges is that of the gallery as a setting for art. He thus engages new territories into an artistic statement by opening them up to the public sphere. In that connection, Matta-Clark voiced an awareness that he was intervening in an urban setting – Manhattan's water front – exposed to rapid transformation under a process of restructuring. A transient statement, *Day's End* articulated the condition of a changing urban context and brought that condition to the public eye.

When commenting on his FIESP Cultural Centre project, the Brazilian Architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha refers to Matta-Clark's work as he recounts how builders had to cut through with heavy machinery the structure of the existing reinforced concrete building in order to open a space of interaction between the building and the street – an interaction which was not there, as Paulo Mendes da Rocha put it, in any compatible form. Similarly to Matta-Clark, Paulo Mendes da Rocha's motivation is the creation of a condition of publicity. FIESP Cultural Centre's architecture follows from that initial contextual consideration.

As the above cases suggest, the insertion of a public dimension can be a decisive step in a process of re-territorialisation which engages both a building as well as its surroundings. In the face of urban conditions increasingly undergoing mutation in connection with globalizing and economic restructuring forces, gestures of reconfiguration, or “re-contexting,” emerge as important maybe necessary architectonic strategies. This paper explores the consequences of such processes of re-territorialisation in architecture. The term *re-context* reflects both a process of reconfiguration of built spaces but also a necessity of re-conceptualization of the term context in the face of unstable urban conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Diserens, C., ed., *Gordon Matta-Clark*, Phaidon, New York, 2003

## **Context, De-context, Re-context**

We can no longer forcefully take it for granted that there is a context, a given, stable historical setting, which unambiguously informs a programme or a building, as implicit in preservationist discourses in the 1970s and 1980s when context rode high in the architectural debate. The possibility of a context as a set of unstable situational constructs (physical and social) seems to me to be a more appealing formulation to deal with complex processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization against a background of intense economic and spatial restructuring. This is the hypothesis, I would like to develop in this paper, by looking conditions of publicity as devices to re-cast architecture in relation to the context and the context in relation to architecture in a process which I describe as *re-context* and which can blur their eroding identities.

The possibility that the formal idiom of a building is the surrounding culture and that diffuse and complex operations of deformation, shearing and mending that permeate globalized physical and digital spaces create the conceptual background for architecture is the closest I would suggest one can come to a definition of context. This both suggests that de-materializing practices are insidious to the articulation of contexts and that remoteness is just as pertinent a contextual condition as is vicinity. Just what kind of context is São Paulo or specific localities in its urban region, for example? There is no single answer to that question, but rather latent trajectories to establish evocative connections between an architectural intervention and its surroundings – in this sense a contextual awareness is described as a process and thus as an operation of re-contexting.

## **São Paulo and Avenida Paulista**

São Paulo is the largest megacity in the Southern Hemisphere. It is the fourth most populated metropolitan region on the planet (after Tokyo, Mumbai and Mexico City) with 19 million people and covers an area of 8,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It is the largest economic pole not only in Brazil, with a concentration of 35% of the country's BNP, but also of the whole of the Mercosur region.

The prestigious Avenida Paulista has since its inauguration in 1891 been rebuilt several times over as the city expanded from being an agglomeration of 130,000 inhabitants to become the current multimillion metropolitan region. And the original two-story villas have been replaced by increasingly higher skyscrapers housing national and international corporations and banks headquarters.

## **FIESP: Publicity and Territory**

When discussing with Paulo Mendes da Rocha the FIESP Cultural Centre, references to the physical context of Avenida Paulista as a heterogeneous composition of early twentieth century eclectic, modernist and post-modern architecture are absent, whilst a consideration of promoting a condition of publicity in this prime cultural setting is on the foreground.

For me, whenever I think about space it is public. The concept of space already presupposes publicity – there is no private space. Private space would be your mind... That is the great contradiction between the building and the city. FIESP is an interesting example, for it has something to do with Gordon Matta-Clark... Because we cut through with incredible machinery the existing structure to open that space of interaction between the building and the street, which was not there in any compatible form. (Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Personal Communication 05.07.05)

As suggested in the above passage Paulo Mendes da Rocha's preoccupation with the creation of a condition of publicity is implemented in the proposed FIESP Cultural Centre through a necessary interaction with the concrete structure of the existing building, through removal of parts of its existing "machinery," and by cobbling the new steel construction to existing pillars and beams – a gesture reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clark interventions.

This is an extremely local operation, whereby the new building has to create a space for itself by carving something out of the existing. But on the other hand, Paulo Mendes da Rocha's conception of publicity has broad, urban and geographical scales and even a highly focused intervention such as the FIESP Cultural Centre is imbued by this territorial awareness. The spatiality of the territory interfaces the spatiality of the building as it touches the site and articulates the territory so as to make its geography habitable beyond the single building.

Paulo Mendes da Rocha's interest in a geographical scale as an expression of a condition of publicity in architecture is further discussed in connection with two landmarks of modern architecture in Brazil, namely Santos Dumont Airport by the Roberto Brothers (1937-1947) and the Museum of Modern Art by Afonso Eduardo Reidy (1958):

[Santos Dumont Airport in Rio de Janeiro] is the epitome of a public place. The transparency of the terminal building beside the sea, the runway at the side of the city – like a beautiful portal. [Another example is] the Museum [of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro] by Afonso Reidy... These works have a geographical force that radiate such magic. (Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Personal Communication 05.07.05)

When talking about his proposal for Buenos Aires, Paulo Mendes da Rocha refers to the del Plata Bassin, which covers the bottom half of South America, when talking about Venice his fascination is not the palaces, but earthworks mechanics required to make the original swamp habitable.<sup>2</sup> Paulo Mendes da Rocha's architecture is permeated with geographical awareness.<sup>3</sup> His work could be said to explore new spatialities by probing the potential of new technologies to transform the territory. An architecture that sharpens its surroundings, opens up for new platforms and supports new types of interactions.

The aforementioned equation between building and a surrounding culture is articulated in the FIESP Cultural Centre through a Miesean approach both in its architecture and in terms of the convictions that inform it.<sup>4</sup> The steel structure,

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<sup>2</sup> So, the beauty of Venice are not the palaces, the palaces arrived later to crown the marvellous work which was already in place. The beauty of Venice is the engineering work, the mechanics of fluids, earthwork's mechanics, is a triumph of human enterprise. [Interview 05.07.05]

<sup>3</sup> This thematic content is very important in my project for the Bay of Vitória, above all regarding the qualities of these building... 1000m2 of floor space, and the floors and steel beams between both of the concrete supports that are anchored in the sea floor. These are the important things when one builds in this place. Where they stand, and not whether they are blue or red, or whether the windows are made of glass and such topics. What is important is that the floors offer space for the activities of the harbor, that they form new platforms by virtue of the distance to the quay walls, canals as such, to which the ships can then dock. Basically, one designs a new "geography." These are the important questions to me not the aesthetic questions. Rather the givens of the landscape together with the specific requirements of the harbor area form the building much more so. They are design changes that demand different solutions from technology than those to which we are accustomed. One always expects architecture to deliver extraordinary buildings which, however, really change nothing. This cannot be of interest to anyone. It is as if one would endlessly make the same thing in ever-changing forms. (Spiro, p.251)

<sup>4</sup> Paulo Mendes da Rocha's statement that "Nature as it is, nature in natura is not useful to us... Nature has to be transformed. We always have the absolute necessity to transform nature in order to make it inhabitable. It is by itself not habitable" (PMR Personal Communication 05.07.05) echoes in many ways Mies van der Rohe when he writes that "Building art is not the object of clever speculation, it is in reality only understandable as a *life process*, it is an expression of man's ability to assert himself and master his surroundings."(Mies van der Rohe, 1928, 1991, p.304). Both denote a search towards the fulfilment of the project of modernity through architecture with Faustian conviction.

nearly invisible from the road, has an anonymous character and is designed as an enabling device to promote interactions with the public space of the street.

## **Pinacoteca**

How can one refer to the work of another without it being simple imitation? The issue is to make the same experience anew; for the epoch is another one and the interrelationship is not longer the same. Sometimes centuries lie in between, sometimes only just a short period of time. Thus, each work of art moves within a general dimension and is simultaneously dramatic and touching. It is the voice of everything. "The Scream" from Munch is connected to this, as well; this is why it is so impressive. What is difficult, however, is to judge all of this. There is no mass by which to reach judgement; one can essentially just make note of it or, indeed, not, depending upon whether we have attained a certain degree of consciousness, a kind of benchmark of feeling. One is touched by an emotion and makes a note: once again one has touched upon the question of the historical course of our existence. It is moving to take up our existence on this planet as in an original rendering, as if we were in possession of an original rendering that we always were to pursue. That is the dimension of the Classical that touches us in a work, and not the simple way in which one references this notion to a particular epoch. (Spiro, p.249)

In his project for the Pinacoteca in São Paulo, which won Paulo Mendes da Rocha the Mies van der Rohe award for Latin America in 2000, the architect is also faced with an existing building as a point of departure. The nineteenth-century art college (Liceu de Artes e Ofícios), designed by Ramos de Azevedo is maintained as structure upon which to fasten new architectural elements built of steel profiles and laminated glass. The textural masonry structure of the late nineteenth-century art college is kept as a monolithic mass and is gutted through the removal of original fixtures such as window frames and doors. The brick work stands naked and its frailties are exposed, some parts of the original structure appear to have undergone some amount of damage through the life of the original building and they are kept as such. Upon the framework of the original construction, Paulo Mendes da Rocha introduces unmistakably contemporary elements in mat black painted steel and glass. The original spatial relationships of the building are reversed through the choice of a main axis of circulation transversal to the original one and through the covering of the original courtyards with a light steel and glass construction. These interventions charge the building with spatial ambiguities – what was a brick façade facing a courtyard becomes the wall of an internal space. The steel bridges crossing the courtyards give a new spatial dimension to the building opening up new angles and creating a drama of moving across three-storey high spaces.

The nineteenth-century college provides less of a historically charged context – and much of its surroundings has been radically changed since its construction over 100 years ago – than a material field for intervention. Its masonry construction is acknowledged and subsumed in the new building rather than celebrated. Its spatiality recognized, but also subverted for the creation of a new public space for the city of São Paulo, through covering the original courtyards and integration of those as new vertical spaces within the building, through the creation of a new circulation axis and through the implementation of new connections with the building's surroundings, notably Luz Railway and Metro Station.

## **Re-context**

Paulo Mendes da Rocha's posture to context seems to emerge as a combination of acute attention to materiality, with a point of departure on the building as given construction, structure and shell; and concomitantly, exacerbated dematerialization in the form of long ranging geographies of public space. Far from passively complying with a context,

the buildings in question become critical points for the articulation of a new spatiality, and inception of virological conditions whereby the building is an active element in a process of contextual re-configuration.

The two projects commented here underscore the role of urban settings as their own historical trajectory, for they are charged with instability and mutation, which is consolidated in changing material configurations across time. And each project is an opening to re-cast an urban programme, a condition of publicity, and to add more or less to the cultural life of a city. *Re-context* is a reflexive action through such openings, which change the role of buildings, urban fragments and localities, but also which re-configure the broader geography of a city region and beyond.

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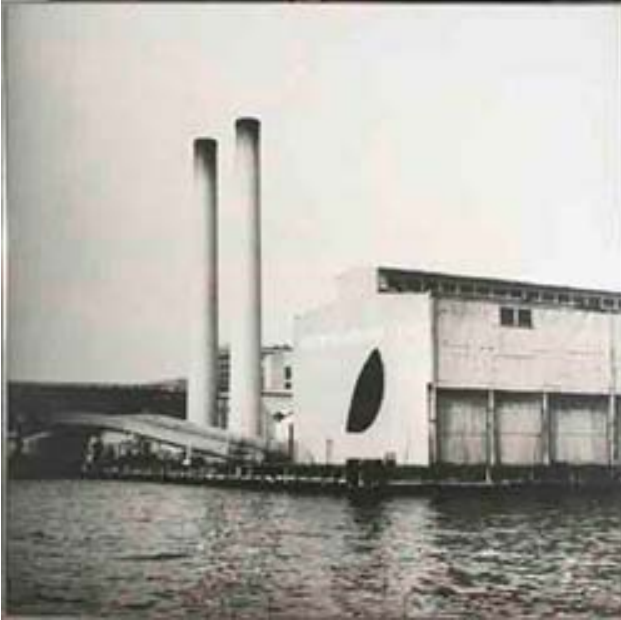
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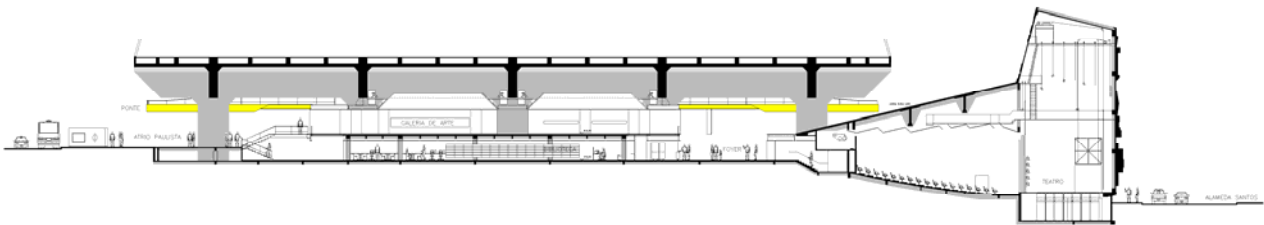
van der Rohe, M. (1928, 1991) "We stand at the turning point of time: building art as the expression of spiritual decisions". In Friz Neumeyer (trans. by Mark Jarzombek) *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*. London: The MIT Press

## Photographs



Day's End – Gordon Matta-Clark

[[http://www.reggionofotografia.it/foto\\_allimite\\_328.htm](http://www.reggionofotografia.it/foto_allimite_328.htm)]



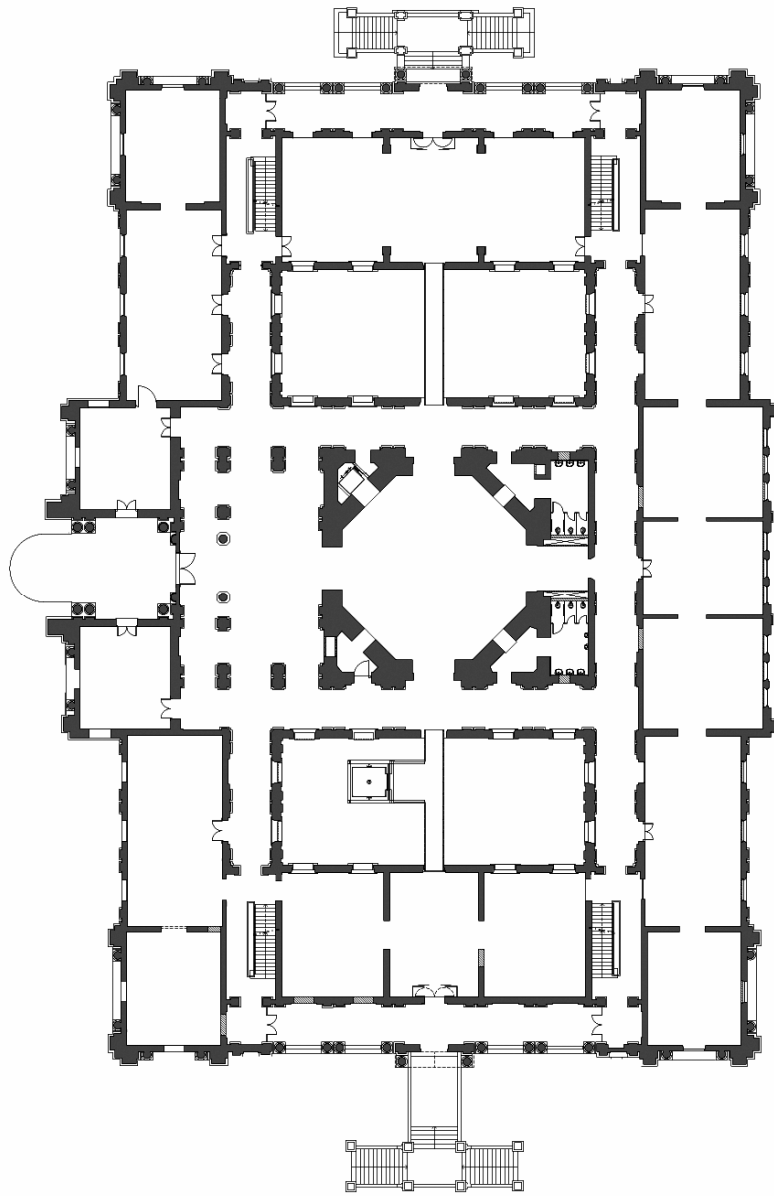
FIESP Cultural Centre – Paulo Mendes da Rocha – Longitudinal Section



FIESP Cultural Centre – Paulo Mendes da Rocha



Pinacoteca – Paulo Mendes da Rocha



Pinacoteca – Paulo Mendes da Rocha – Plan