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**Conference: The Complexity of the Ordinary
Context as Key to Architectural Strategies**

**Workshop, session 6:
Re-contextualization**

**Abstract:
Designation and Appropriation of the Ordinary**

Context:

One of the opening statements in the programme for this conference declares that many new buildings erected today fail to take into account their situational context.

This is indeed one of the pervading impressions on observing current architectural activities in the capital's central harbour area. Meanwhile, the conference programme adds to this observation the strategic perspective that a future contextual architecture must engage in dialogue with the surrounding culture of everyday life.

Hereby the programme sets us two difficult challenges.

One is to designate existing architectonic relations in order to create a signifying, strategic methodology. The other – equally difficult – is to pinpoint how we are to understand the concept of a “culture of everyday life”.

However, the actual combination of architectural contextualization with the so-called “culture of everyday life” in my experience, creates a third problem of a paradoxical nature.

I have chosen to express this as a juxtaposition of architectural essence and everyday existence. In this brief essay I shall attempt to discuss this paradox through experiences from a nationwide surveying-project entitled Survey of Architectural Values in the Environment (SAVE). It was executed from 1990 to 1998 under my supervision according to a methodology now used in several countries under the name InterSAVE¹.

Creating Context

The main objective of this work is the simple and practical assessment of architectural values in townscapes and buildings on a local level.

As with every other mapping procedure, this survey consists of two parts: the collection of data and the arranging of these data to render them meaningful in a given context.

In this way the methodology is comprised of tangible references and the intangible context in which the observed data form a base for the following objectives:

- Firstly, to create an identification of local buildings in correlation to everyday life in the community, thereby strengthening local identities.

¹ Ministry of Environment and Energy, Denmark; InterSAVE, International Survey of Architectural Values in the Environment, Copenhagen 1997.

- Secondly, to establish a coherent platform for planning that will develop these identities in a manner consistent with developments in society as a whole.

One way of doing this is through close co-operation with local communities. In every municipality a local consultancy group is set up to oversee the mapping process. This group is composed of citizens, representatives of local organisations and museums, one representative from the municipality and one from the state body and finally the architect in charge. The group is locally appointed. Its identification with local building culture is a vital part in the assessment-process. This process identifies a relationship between the physical characteristics of a townscape or a monument and the significances attributed to them by local residents. Our aim is to clarify these conditions, the better to understand them in a local context.

The actual mapping is carried out along the lines of a conceptual juxtaposition: One characteristic trait turns out to be a strategically innate openness to contemporary interpretations of local architectural phenomena, all of which are – in principle - historic.

Thus the architectural observations do not initially distinguish between historically interesting phenomena and those that are basically a-historical. A TV-tower that just happens to be positioned on a spot where it constitutes a distinct architectural viewpoint for a medieval street may be deemed worthy of preservation. On the other hand a historically vital relic may be completely irrelevant to the lives of local residents and may therefore not receive a high score in the survey. In this way the assessment-procedure and the resulting inventory create a heuristic interpretation. The survey constitutes an authentic, updated history; uniting past and present since the process creates a distinct, architectonic context, which is continually changing.

There are qualitative differences between the two architectural assessments in the mapping procedure: the first one, evaluating *developed structures* (corresponding to the townscape-level) and the second examining *individual buildings*. These may be distinguished in the following manner; a building or complex may be considered highly valuable as a *viewpoint* in an urban space during the first assessment of the developed structures in the town. Yet the second assessment of the individual structure may show the building or complex in question to be of poor architectural quality in its own right. The opposite situation may also occur. In other words there is an intentional strategic variance inherent in this method, characterizing the procedure as open and deliberative.

The survey-map is a *claim* that certain phenomena have been documented. The plan or project is an *instruction* as to how they should be operated. Thus an attempt is made to separate the two procedures: mapping and planning. This may be expressed as follows:

The inventory itself is a statement regarding the situation in a given locality. One could term it a baseline or a status quo. Planning-regulations, programmes and projects however, are mandates targeting the intended transformation of local context.

The former is a model *of* identities, the latter a model *for* a future identity. In spite of this attempt to separate the two, the inevitable blending of these activities is not uncommon. This may be the case when a survey is legitimising a planning-decision or project that is either already being carried out or, alternatively, is controlled by the same authoritative body.

Re-contextualisation

However, I do have reservations concerning the possible fusion of this mapping process with the culture of everyday life. They stem from those very same contextualizations and architectural

strategies that purport to be its purpose. This is because these contextualizations may appear as a form of re-contextualisation, which in my opinion entails a paradox requiring further consideration.

Firstly I have reservations about the very act of designating everyday cultural phenomena as being observable, that is, as being descriptive elements. This process must – of necessity - render the ordinary extraordinary. In my experience the designation of the SAVE-mapping – and this is an inherent problem for most surveys – introduces an element of *distancing reflection* to local residents. This distancing reflection takes the place of the immediate, introvert experience of normative everyday culture. One could perhaps denote this shift as the displacement of the existential experience of everyday life by the essential observation of ones own culture. Such re-contextualisation does not necessarily constitute a setback to the creation of an architectonic strategy. However, we must discuss in greater detail, why one context is preferable to another, when the purpose is to sharpen the senses of its users.

Secondly, experience has shown that this re-contextualization has an ensuing effect, which at least the SAVE-mappings failed to predict. One effect of this distancing reflection appropriated by local communities through the designation of the extraordinary appears, to be the creation of an *evaluating selection* of the cultural elements of everyday life. Presumably, such evaluations have always taken place, but previously by pre-conscious, tacit agreement. But now - through this designation and its appropriation by the local community - they are exposed to the surroundings. This often takes place through the instrumentalization of the cultural elements of the ordinary: be it in the form of benchmarking, branding or whatever other name may be given to the extrovert definition of economic potential in the culture of everyday life. The question then, could be how to manage this ensuing effect in developing architectural strategies like for instance Frampton's "Critical Regionalism".²

In order to conclude these considerations, it certainly appears to be necessary to discuss the methodology of contextualization.

Illustration:

20 architectural contextualisations on the island of Amager, southeast of Copenhagen.
Bydelsatlas Amager, The Danish Ministry of the Environment, Copenhagen, 1992

² Kenneth Frampton; Prospects for a Critical Regionalism, The Yale Architectural Journal, 1983



1. Islands Brygge
2. Karréer i Amagerbro Kvarter
3. Karréer i Bellevue Kvarter
4. Sundby Kirke Kvarter
5. Karréer ved Holmbladsgade
6. Karréer ved Elbagade/Parma-gade
7. Rødegårdparken og Abildgården
8. Hollændervænget
9. Dalføret
10. Bebyggelse ved Smyrnavej
11. Bebyggelse ved Sundparken
12. Byggeföreningshuse ved Sverrigs-gade
13. Byggeföreningshuse ved Kastrup-vej
14. Byggeföreningshuse ved Badens-gade
15. Eberts Villaby
16. Gimle
17. Ballonparken
18. Statens Seruminstitut
19. Sundholm
20. Skt. Annæ Kirke og Skt. Elisa-beths Hospital