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A multifaceted interplay

Envisioning built environment transformations in the contemporary urban context

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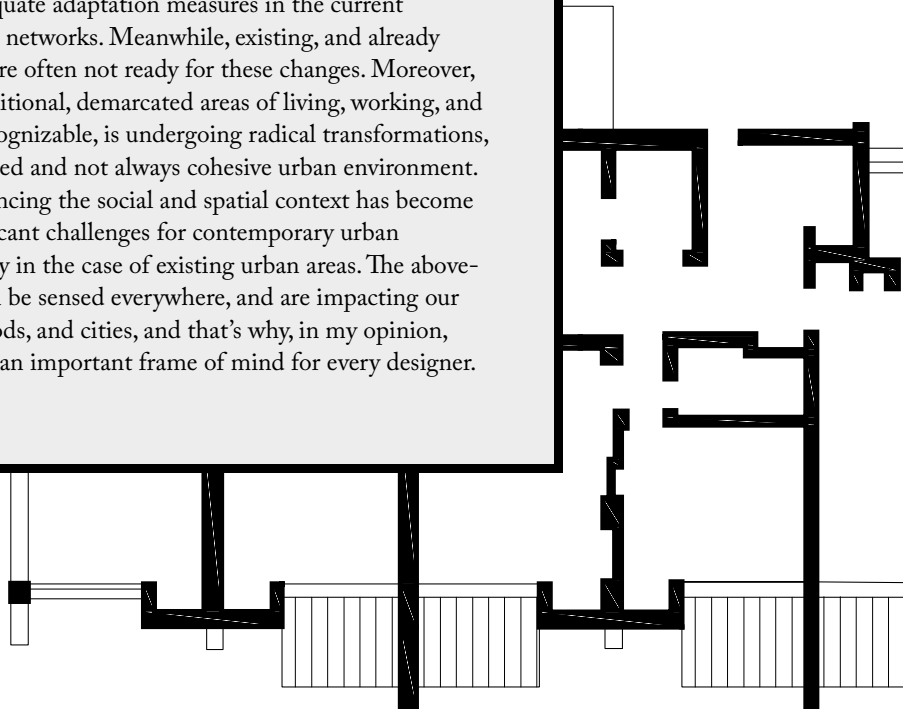
A MULTIFACETED INTERPLAY

ENVISIONING BUILT ENVIRONMENT TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN CONTEXT

ROBERTO CAVALLO

Introduction

Our times are characterized by an ever-increasing complexity, even unpredictable changes are becoming almost a regular occurrence. Pressuring issues such as growing globalization, environmental and societal concerns, or dealing with uncertainties and sudden crises, require constantly adequate adaptation measures in the current cityscape and its urban networks. Meanwhile, existing, and already densified urban areas are often not ready for these changes. Moreover, the city, where the traditional, demarcated areas of living, working, and facilities were once recognizable, is undergoing radical transformations, resulting in a fragmented and not always cohesive urban environment. For these reasons, balancing the social and spatial context has become one of the most significant challenges for contemporary urban interventions, especially in the case of existing urban areas. The above-mentioned matters can be sensed everywhere, and are impacting our buildings, neighborhoods, and cities, and that's why, in my opinion, they should constitute an important frame of mind for every designer.



It is therefore not a coincidence that, given this framework, several scholars are reflecting on the various roles of design and designers, trying to identify suitable approaches to face these complex challenges. Within the purpose of this publication, it is worth mentioning, in a nutshell, a couple of interesting thematic inflows that in my view have a certain degree of complementarity. Such as focusing on design experiments meant to counteract rigid urban environments with the intent of enabling social interactions (Sendra and Sennet 2020). Or, while offering a glimpse into several design disciplines, provide insights on ways to pursue inclusive designs, emphasizing the process rather than the outcome (Braun et al. 2021). To conduct research interconnected with design for transition along with the matter of process, one cannot avoid considering the variety of features and specificities that characterize design. Therefore, the basic question for each designer is to develop and make explicit his position towards the peculiar aspects involved with the design that he/she wishes to pursue (Blythe and Stamm 2017). This requires also looking at the various aspects of the context in which the design is going to act or have an impact as essential steps in the design process. Altogether, we should strive for designs that, despite the succession of often heterogeneous transformations, can still offer steadfast solution pathways to the given tasks and, at the same time, respond to the underlying urban agenda. In order to fulfill this twofold role, the proposed design intervention must then act as a catalyst for further developments and serve as a unifying element in its urban site.

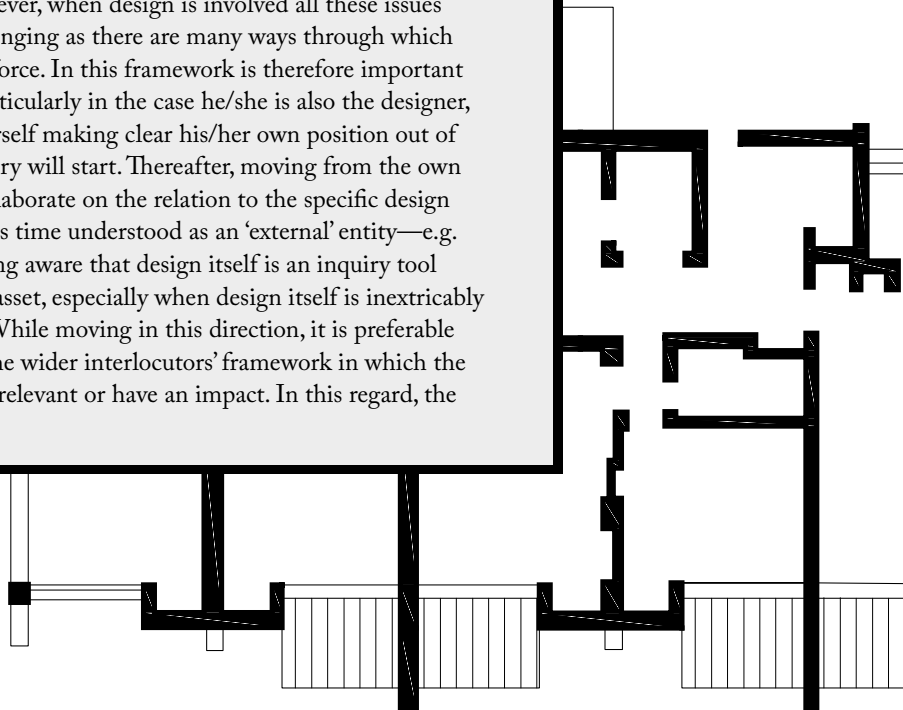
Design and context interactions

As stated here above, the interaction between design and context—here not only intended as a physical but also as a societal context—plays an important role. When focusing on spatial transformations of our cities, we should endeavor to unambiguous and sustainable anchoring between buildings, outside spaces, and urban environment. The mutual relationships between building and context can be achieved in different ways and scale levels, hereby I will mention just a few recurring options. For example, by strongly relating position, orientation and/

or approach route to the building (or part thereof) in relation to elements that are already present in the project area. In addition, the designer can create new important visual relationships between the building and the urban environment, interconnecting them in many ways. Relationships with the context can also be activated from the interior of the building, for example via spaces that are meant to work inside out and/or outside in. Moreover, the interaction with the context can be emphasized using certain materials and/or through the facade design. The above-mentioned forms of interaction between building and context are observable and therefore mainly physical. However, other, evenly strong, forms of interaction are conceivable. Even without physical connections, an intervention by means of its intent, program or meaning can have a strong relationship with the context. For example, the intervention may be inspired by or related to historical, social and/or societal events that are linked or took place on the site. Or it can have a strong connection to the identity (not just physical) of the location and its inhabitants.

Designer and context

When we talk about research, we should make clear what are the research questions and the relevant aspects, specify approach and methodology, and highlight the degree of novelty as well as the matter of transferability. However, when design is involved all these issues are getting more challenging as there are many ways through which design can come into force. In this framework is therefore important that the researcher, particularly in the case he/she is also the designer, contextualize him-/herself making clear his/her own position out of which the design inquiry will start. Thereafter, moving from the own realm, he/she should elaborate on the relation to the specific design matter and context, this time understood as an 'external' entity—e.g. the urban context. Being aware that design itself is an inquiry tool (Elkjaer 2009) can be asset, especially when design itself is inextricably linked with research. While moving in this direction, it is preferable to make explicit also the wider interlocutors' framework in which the research is likely to be relevant or have an impact. In this regard, the



interplay between personal position, motivations, and triggers with third-party stimuli or other exterior factors becomes crucial for the contextualization of the particular project.

Contextual designs; a set of practical guiding questions and some hints

As already mentioned before, different, and often heterogeneous transformations lead to fragmented and not always cohesive urban environments. Therefore, and more than ever, there is a need for designs that can respond to the lasting and sustainable characteristics of the urban context. It is essential to include these aspects very early in the design.

When facing an assignment, designers often dispose of several options to find an answer. During the process of thinking, it is always a battle between objective and subjective observations, thoughts, or elements. To me, one of the main aspects to work with is to strive for intervention proposals that require a response from other potentially involved people, which may eventually induce follow-up actions—the so-called catalyst effect. It goes almost without saying that it depends on the environment or context in which the design proposal can/should be acting and being discussed. The following questions may help in this respect: what are the (sustainable) characteristics of the specific site and its urban context? Are there already relationships between location and context that should (or could) strengthen the intervention? We should think here not only of physical relationships but also of other aspects related to the identity, and social as well as societal characteristics of the urban context. Are there undervalued or confusing features or other weaknesses in the context? Should the design respond to these issues? If yes, in which possible ways? Given the site and urban context, what would be a logical approach to the intervention? Keep track of your findings by means of sketches, drawings, other graphics, and textual notes.

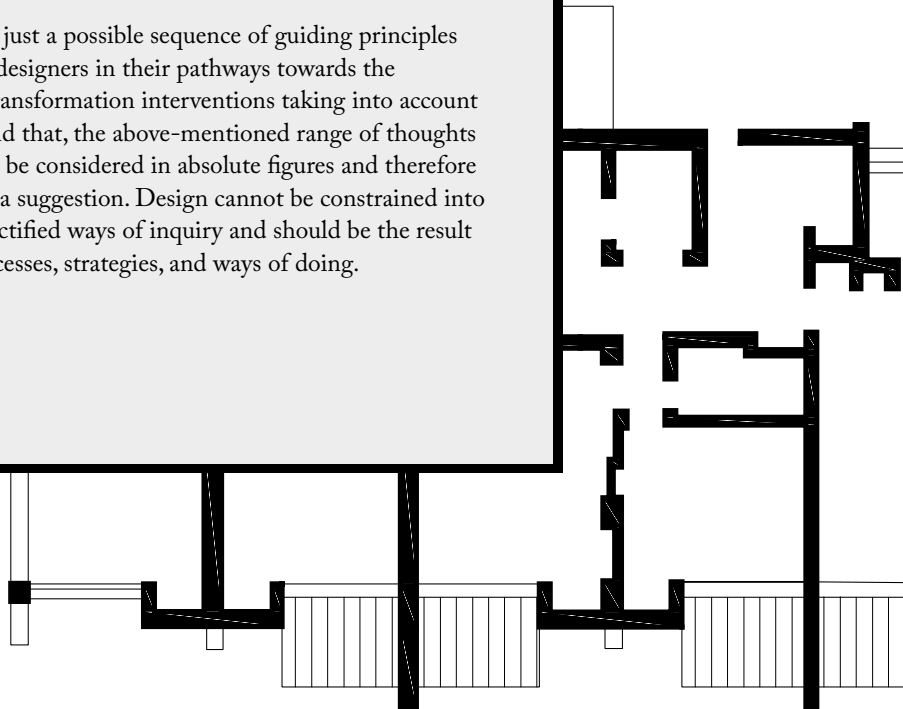
Going further with the design in relation to program and context, do you think the given program fits well in the context? Are relationships

desirable between (parts of) the program and the context? If yes, which design actions could enhance these aspects? To what size or scale level is the interaction between intervention and context desirable? How do you think you can achieve that and what design challenges may arise? Moreover, to what extent and in what ways should the design intervention be autonomous and/or dependent on the context?

What are the main parts of the given program? At this stage an analysis of the spatial and compositional aspects associated with the program should be made. Program wise, what are the most important spatial relationships between program parts? And is there anything you miss? In other words, do you think that (part of) the program is inadequate, or something is lacking?

In the case of a building design, are there relationships to be made between interior and exterior? Is continuity between inside and outside desirable? To what extent is the facade layout related to these principles? What materials are you proposing to make use of? Finally, how sustainable is the envisioned interventions? This point should be considered also in relation to the sustainable characteristics of the urban context. Sustainability must be tackled not only with regard to performance, environmental impact, or lifespan but also in terms of the intervention itself being suitable for fitting in the given context, physical and non-physical.

This set of questions is just a possible sequence of guiding principles that can possibly help designers in their pathways towards the envisioning of urban transformation interventions taking into account the context. Having said that, the above-mentioned range of thoughts and queries should not be considered in absolute figures and therefore should be seen only as a suggestion. Design cannot be constrained into unambiguous and objectified ways of inquiry and should be the result of specific creative processes, strategies, and ways of doing.



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