

# Discourse on Contextualism in Architecture and Design: The French Hotels and the African Paradigm

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## Abstract

This article discussed the topic of Contextualism in architectural design through its relationship with Modern movement in architecture. Many writers have discussed the concepts of Context and Contextualism in architecture, mainly from the point of view of how Modern Architecture dealt with the subject. From these writings, one theme appeared recurrent: the notion that Modern architecture or Modern buildings neglected this very important requirement of architectural design, but rather presented a pseudo-industrial style of building that was intended to replace the academic eclecticism of the Beaux Arts. To do this, it employed imagery related to machinery rather than to previous building, thus symbolizing its belief in a social and a physical utopia to be created by technology. Very few, in their writings, discuss more than one dimension of this concept. Many tend to focus on physical context alone. However, the works of Robert Venturi explain to us that there may be more than one interpretation of the concept. He posits that one must necessarily include both the physical and cultural contexts. Other works such as those of Colin Rowe, Thomas L. Schumacher and Stuart Cohen have also delved into this concept from different dimensions, expounding on it from the perspectives of Modernism, Post-Modernism, and Deconstructivism. Schumacher, for instance, proposes a scenario where the disparate theories of cultural and physical contexts are included rather than excluded. In this particular article, a common Modern building type (hotel) is used to further explore and fathom the meaning of this concept and how it has been applied in the paradigm of African architecture. In contrast to the failures of Modern Architecture in dealing with the urban context, the French hotels of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Rococo period exhibited a remarkable response to the urban site conditions. These buildings, in a bid to become part of their site, assumed exterior forms that differed from their interior configurations. As opposed to Modern Architecture, the form was basically determined by contextual requirements and considerations rather than by programmatic requirements and considerations. The most profound example of Contextualism in African architecture is revealed in the Great Mosque of Djenne, in Djenne, Mali, West Africa. The profundity of the form cannot be understated as the building's response to its physical and cultural contexts is unequivocally original and authentic. Finally, we looked at some examples of contemporary Nigerian (African) contextual architecture in the City of Enugu and saw how the buildings responded to context within the ubiquity of Urbanism.

**Keywords:** Contextualism, Symbolism, Modern Architecture, African Architecture, French Hotels

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to analyze the concept of contextualism in architectural design and its relationship to the Modern movement in architecture. It is a concept which the Modern movement appeared not to have recognized its importance in building design and urban planning. Beginning with a functional program, the rational design method articulated by modern movement in architecture did not recognize either the cultural context or the physical context. Thus the modern building manifested an abstract form which exhibited an image of dominance of the site where it is located. It did not relate to the existing building or site but rather presented an image that was more related to machinery. This image was stripped of ornamentation because such was considered irrational. The modern building was isolated from its site and detached from its context. Thus, it is arguable to posit that modern architecture tended to be largely an exercise in formalism, which ignored the physical context into which it was inserted and lacked associative cultural meaning or references (Hearn 2003). Consequently, contextualism emanated from the desire to resolve problems of harmony with the historical environment and the placement of new buildings within historical surroundings (Cizgen 2012). In the book, *Hyper-contextuality: The Architecture of Displacement and Placelessness*, Herman (2009) discussed "Placelessness" and "Displacement" in architecture as architecture's paradigm shift. Culture and meaning, as values that are capable of being displaced, are carried from different contexts without questioning their suitability.

## Research Methodology

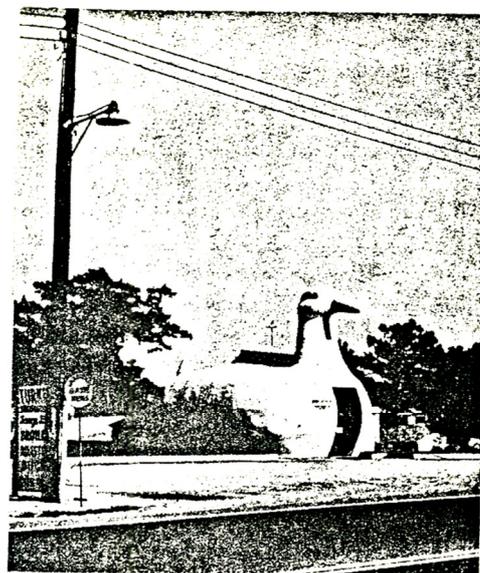
The method of research employed for this work involves data gathering and analysis. The data for this paper are primarily descriptive based on literature review. Data were gleaned from previous research and writings of earlier scholars on the subject. Literary works on Architectural theory and history were reviewed in order to analyze available evidentiary material in the pursuit of support to buttress the *a priori* postulations. The writings

of Colin Rowe, Thomas Schumacher, Robert Venturi, Stuart Cohen and others helped one analyze and fathom the subject. Additionally, personal observations of the writer and discussions held with other contemporary scholars who have experience in the subject also form part of the methodology for this work.

### Literature Review

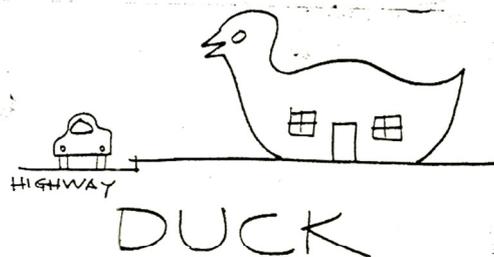
#### Physical Contextualism V. Cultural Contextualism

In an article written by Stuart Cohen, titled “*Physical Context, Cultural Context – Including it all*” (Cohen 1974), the idea of contextualism is discussed from the points of view of its physical and cultural contexts, exploring its relationship with the more esoteric ideas of *inclusivism* and *exclusivism*. This issue is approached by criticizing Modern architecture for having failed to recognize its urban context but rather focusing on symbolism and making reference to history. According to Cohen: “The Modern movement in architecture presented a pseudo-industrial style of building that was intended to replace the academic eclecticism of the Beaux Arts – a style no longer seen as evocative of the times. To do this, it employed imagery related to machinery rather than to previous building, thus symbolizing its belief in a social and a physical utopia to be created by technology”. (Cohen 1974) Based on this maxim, Modern architecture is seen as having conformed too much to idealism, its *Utopia*.



The Duck and the Decorated Shed

1. “The Long Island Duckling” from *God’s Own Junkyard*



2. Duck



3. Decorated shed

Drawings & Images Courtesy: Venturi, Robert, Complexities and Contradiction.

In its rejection of the preceding school of thought, it removed ornamentation (which it considered irrational),

relying instead mainly on spatial articulation as a mode of form determinant (*form follows function*). As a Utopian architecture, it generalized and idealized even the most specific and particular requirements in relation to its millennial fantasies. While as a revolutionary school of thought, its ideas may have succeeded, its anticipated Utopia did not follow afterwards. Hence it is impossible to judge it better than Beaux Arts or any other idea which it sought to replace. It was exclusive of any visual and social values other than its own. As an exclusive architecture, it detached itself from cultural, symbolic and physical aspects of an existing context. To this extent, buildings were seen as free-standing objects and as abstract form. It condemned all existing architecture and any adjacent building by direct confrontation. "This stance, when described pejoratively, has been called *Exclusivism*, while an enlightened and *unexclusive* architecture would exhibit tendencies of *Inclusivism*." (Cohen 1974) In other words, *unexclusive* in the sense that the building form becomes cognizant of the physical and social attributes of the site on which it is located and respects them rather than relying solely on its own programmatic requirements as a form determinant. In discussing contextual design as a complex and perhaps comprehensive design phenomenon, Antoinades (1992), posits that with *inclusivist* concept, not only a single value but also every component found within the context must be guided in the design.

In the book, *Niche Tactics: Generative Relationships between Architecture and Site*, Caroline O'Donnell (2015), recalls Le Corbusier's famous comparison of architecture and the soap bubble and draws an analogy between the two similar concepts. In the book, O'Donnell examined the history of theories related to the idea of context, from Vitruvius to Koolhaas, explaining in great detail the difference between working *in* the site as opposed to working *on* the site. Explained more simply, working *in* the site presupposes or represents an architecture that respects its physical context, while working *on* the site represents an architecture that, on the other hand, does not respect its physical context or environment, and tends to ignore it. This is a significant metaphor, appropriate for explaining the concept in a deeper meaningful realm.

O'Donnell pointed out that Rem Koolhaas' bold provocative and dismissive call to ignore context spurred a return to the idea of focusing on programmatic requirements and interior dominated design considerations. In her words "Koolhaas' study of architecture's relationship to its urban environment in his oft-quoted essay on *Bigness* is in many ways a call to understand the building as an isolated object, uninterested in and unfettered by external conditions" (O'Donnell 2015).

In further elaborating on this idea, O'Donnell, refers to Le Corbusier's influence on context, stating that "Architecture's unlikely, yet persistent reluctance to engage fundamentally with issues of context can most notably be traced to Le Corbusier's renowned comparison of Architecture and the soap bubble". In other words, free-standing buildings do not have to relate to their physical environment. The interior layout, stemming from programmatic requirements or function, determines the form and not the other way round.

In a simple but rather profound writing, Tracy Nasr (2015) proposed what she referred to as "Criteria for Contextualism in Architecture". The thesis of her paper was that Context in architecture is an evolving concept, not yet defined in constant terms. The concept "evolves with people, technology, and cities". She, therefore, propounded certain criteria that could help one determine if a building fits its physical context. She proposed the idea that this approach would necessarily include a determination of both "the physical and non-physical attributes" of the *immediate context* (near context) and *regional context* (distant context).

She identified three poles of reference from Vernacular architecture that should be considered in contextual design. These are: *Man*, *Site* and *Materials*. Borrowing from Vernacular architecture she proposes that "Man is at the center of the non-physical, social-political, economic, and cultural environments. The site is the physical environment where the building sits, defined by the physical site conditions: views, trees, land topography, urban morphology, climate.... Meanwhile, materials represent any building material used in construction." Borrowing from Modern architecture, she proposes taking the utilitarian aspect of the site, "Different fenestrations on the four facades; the use of shading devices; planning of functions within a studied building orientation".

In a somewhat similar article titled "*Contextualism: Architecture and Context*" Abdel-moniem El-Shorbagy (2006), defined Contextual architecture as "the architecture that responds to the specific physical characteristics of its site". He further states that "unlike any specific architectural style, contextualism can be seen as a set of values, which help distinguish the architectural work. It includes three distinct aspects: 1. Vernacularism, 2. Regionalism, and 3. Critical Regionalism.

Vernacularism in architecture, according to El-Shorbagy, is derived from the Latin word *vernaculus* which means "domestic, native or indigenous": from *Verna* meaning native slave or home-born slave. This Latin derivative could be extrapolated to mean buildings that were built by local inhabitants utilizing locally available resources, such as building materials and the like.

Regionalism in architecture refers to the notion that architecture should simulate not only the physical context but also the cultural and political contexts that envelope it. Thus, Regionalism "evokes responses to the essence of particular places, cultures and climates within a modern context".

Critical Regionalism, according to El-Shorbagy, represents a reaction to the presumed lack of meaning in Modern Architecture. This idea stems from the perception that Modern architecture failed to respond to its

physical context and was rather too abstract, generating free-standing buildings whose forms were determined by interior and programmatic requirements.

El-Shorbagy noted that the idea of critical regionalism was first mooted by Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefavre, but later buttressed by the writings of Kenneth Frampton. In his book, Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points of an Architecture of Resistance, Frampton pointed out six (6) critical points which are oriented towards the shared features of architecture in which the processes of interpretation have succeeded in producing novel and essential forms. Frampton proposed a Critical Regionalism which adopted “Modern architecture critically for its progressive qualities but at the same time consider and value responses particular to the context. However, emphasis should be put on topography, climate, and light, rather than the attractive visual appearance of the building.” (Frampton 1983)

Kililo Mtamu (2015) in an article titled, “*Architecture of African Origin: Beyond the Distant Ethnic Onslaught*” criticizes the contemporary trend in African architecture for its “direct borrowing from Western architectural styles” with little effort made to make the buildings fit the local context, both culturally and physically. This statement holds true for much of Africa’s architectural landscape. He used the city of Asmara in Eritrea as an example of where “Italian architects of the time had little regard for the natives’ culture and architecture.” “We will remember Asmara for the greatness of the modern designs but not in its context”. Mtamu noted that even in architectural education in Africa the same flaw is evident, in that so much of what is taught as unsullied designs are direct borrowing from the West. “Most of the aspects we articulate our architecture upon within Africa is hired from without the continent with little regard to context”. This is indeed alarming but profoundly accurate to a great extent. Nonetheless, the affirmation itself, begs a question as to what a better approach should be. The answer is left open-ended by the writer.

### **Pablo Picasso**

However, regardless of Mtamu’s position on this issue one must note that architecture is, of necessity, a universal concept. Its development through the ages has been relatively cyclical. No one region can claim that its civilization is completely unsullied from other civilizations. As we develop in progression, we learn from each other. No civilization develops in isolation. Much of the Western belief or claim that Africa lacked originality and authenticity in its architecture and art had been disproved by earlier and contemporary research on the subject. (Frobenius 1913; Cessaire 1955; Jon-Nwakalo 2018)

Western architecture did not develop in isolation. Its sources include African Architecture and art. The Cubist and Surrealist painter, Pablo Picasso, for instance, was influenced by African sculpture and traditional African masks during the proto-Cubist period (Negro or Black period: 1906 - 1909). (Richardson 2010)

### **The Paradigm of the French Hotels**

In contrast to the failures of Modern Architecture in dealing with the urban context, the French hotels of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Rococo period exhibited a remarkable response to the urban site conditions. These buildings, in a bid to become part of their site, assumed exterior forms that differed from their interior configurations. As opposed to Modern Architecture, the form was basically determined by contextual requirements and considerations rather than by programmatic requirements and considerations.

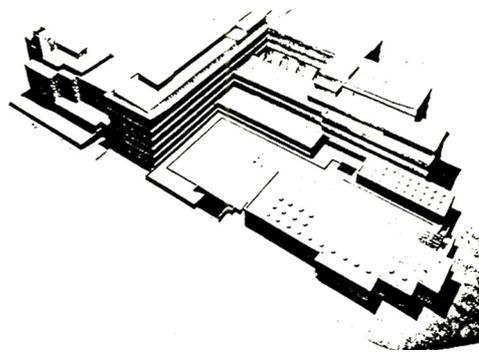
### **Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Venturi**

Robert Venturi has been credited with championing the ideas of *inclusivism* and *exclusivism* or more or less, clarifying them. In the event, he had posited that Modern architecture, in its attempt to attain a purist realm, the ideal or *Utopian* haven, has been utterly exclusive. He, therefore, proposes the architecture of *inclusivism*, architecture of “*complexity*” and “*contradiction*” rather than architecture of “*simplification*” or “*picturesqueness*”. In Mr. Venturi’s words, “architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional *Vitruvian* elements of *commodity*, *firmness* and *delight*. And today the wants of program, structure, mechanical equipment, and expression, even in single buildings in simple contexts, are diverse and conflicting in ways previously unimaginable. The increasing dimension and scale of architecture in urban and regional planning add to the difficulties. I welcome the problems and exploit the uncertainties. By embracing contradiction as well as complexity, I am for vitality as well as validity.” (Venturi 1977)

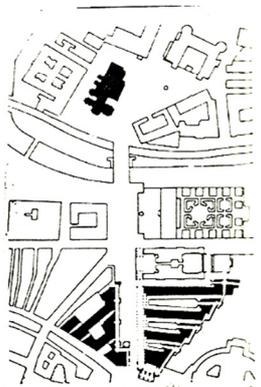
It is Venturi’s contention that the idea of exclusion is sometimes resorted to as a way out of tackling complex problems, an easy way out of design difficulty. However, in doing so, one ends up making the problems worse. Thus he stretched Mies’ statement that ‘*less is more*’ by proclaiming that ‘*less is more work*’. By this statement, he implies that this saying smacks of *complexity* and justifies *exclusion* merely for *expressive* purposes. It permits the architect to be highly selective in determining which of the problems he or she wants to solve. “If some problems prove insoluble, he can express this: in an inclusive rather than exclusive kind of architecture there is room for the fragment, for contradiction, for improvisation, and for the tensions these produce.” (Venturi 1977)

Venturi tried to describe the variety of realities which he felt an *inclusive architecture* should synthesize. He, therefore, states that “----architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern Architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than ‘pure’, compromising rather than ‘clean’, distorted rather than ‘straightforward’, ambiguous rather than ‘articulated’, perverse as well as ‘impersonal’, boring as well as ‘interesting’, conventional rather than ‘designed’, accommodating rather than ‘excluding’, redundant rather than ‘simple’, vestigial as well as ‘innovating’, inconsistent and equivocal rather than ‘direct’ and ‘clear’. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the ‘non-sequitur’ and proclaim the ‘duality’” (Venturi 1977).

In another work Venturi discussed *inclusivism* from the point of view of architectural imagery or symbolism. In this, distinction is made between the ‘duck’ referring to Long Island Duckling, a roadside building made to resemble a duck (deformed into a symbol) and the ‘decorated shed’ (i.e. a building on which decoration had been applied as symbol) (Venturi 1972). Venturi prefers the latter basically for the same reason that he prefers the architecture of complexity and contradiction. The applied ornamentation is very explicit in its symbolism rather than the implicit symbolism of the duck. To understand the duck one has to read into the undecorated physiognomy of the building through associations and past experience; it provides layers of meaning beyond the ‘abstract’ expressionist messages derived from the inherent physiognomic characteristics of the forms.



Finnish Public Institute,  
Helsinki. Alvar Aalto, architect, 1952.  
Model and site situation.



Royal Chancellery, Stockholm.  
Gunnar Asplund, architect, 1922.  
Site plan.



Derby Civic Center Competi-  
tion, Derby. James Stirling, architect,  
1970. Existing and proposed alteration  
to town.

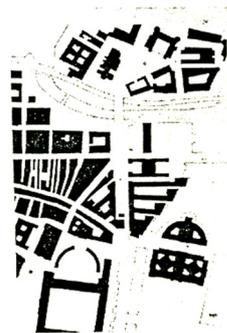
The relevance of Venturi’s work to this paper is founded in the idea of the ‘duck’ being representative of

how Modern Architecture's response to its own programmatic requirements overshadowed its ability to address the physical demands of the site. The 'duck' is a form generated to denote what the building functions as, a duck farm as it were. It is the equivalent of designing a 'fish' to denote an aquarium indicating that this is a 'fish' house. By so doing the building, ultimately becomes an icon in itself, free-standing, assertive and unrelated to its surrounding. One has to deduce its function by seeing it as a duck or fish per se and then analyzing what a duck house or fish house, for that matter, should stand for. (Cohen 1974)

### Contextualism Defined



51, 52 / A. Aalto: Finnish Pensions Institute, Helsinki.



By definition, the idea of including by recognition or replication, the defining aspects of a local physical environment has been referred to as *contextualism*. (Cohen 1974) Its strategies and the general critique they imply came as an answer to the inadequacy of Modern architectural design theory to deal with the traditional city as well as it dealt with suburban site, its presumed ideal. The Twentieth Century town physically consisted of two main types: 1. the *Traditional City* that is made up of corridor streets, grids, squares, etc. and 2. The *City in the Park*.

The traditional city is primarily an experience of spaces defined by continuous walls of buildings which are arranged in a way that emphasizes the building volumes. These elements were considered as being organized by grid (gridiron), radial, linear or composite schemes. The *City in the Park* (the *Ville Radieuse*, as proposed by Le Corbusier) is compositionally the opposite of the *Traditional City*. It was a composition of free-standing buildings in a park-like setting. It emphasized the building volume and not the spaces which the buildings define or imply. It is essentially the dilemma posed by this odd constitution of the Twentieth Century town that contextualism has attempted to resolve. To do so, it employed an empirical design process in its recognition of exigencies and irregularities. It was to produce a physical continuity of urban form. The new structure was to relate to the existing by constituting an extension of the style of the adjacent architecture and urban fabric or imply or express the growth process by which the traditional city had developed. This was to be accomplished through the process of *infilling*, *completion* and occasionally, *subtraction or replacement* as seen appropriate to a particular site.

Two main principles underlie this task, viz: i) *Strategy of response*; and ii) *Strategy of the deformation of the ideal types*. Stuart Cohen illustrates the application of these principles by using Alvar Aalto's Pension Institute in Helsinki, the terminus of a terraced park; and Gunnar Asplund's project for the Royal Chancellery in Stockholm, which to each side reproduces the adjacent urban configuration while forming one end of an urban axis, as examples of strategy of response. James Stirling's Civic Center Competition for Derby with its references to Royal Crescent at Bath has been used as a prototype of the application of the ideal type, either deformed or adjusted to fit a context. In contrast to these two buildings, the typical Modern building is

puritanically idealized into a free-standing structure, completely detached from its surroundings, thereby making a statement of importance in an urban context. Even when deformed, it does so not in response to the urban physical context but usually in conformance to an aesthetic system (externally), or internally through programmatic requirements.

### Hotels and Context

As a Modern building type, hotels fall prey to these weaknesses of Modern architectural design. Basically, there are two types: 1. Those located in the inner city and 2. Those located in the suburban site. Due to the need to maintain a large flow of clientele and consequently, to increase profits, hotel design has generally emphasized aesthetics even at the risk of sacrificing response to the physical context. This condition is more common in the inner city hotels, where the building seems to conform to an aesthetic system on the outside and by so doing, becomes totally exclusive of the physical character of the urban site where it is located. Similar to other Modern building types, their *contextual* response becomes limited to their inherent *physiogenic character*, depicting the building form as a response to their programmatic requirements. Hence, the main entrance and the window arrangement become symbols of this building type. The building type is iconic, taking on the symbolism of hotel. The facades are unmistakable images of the building type referred to as *hotel*.

### Early Hotel Plans

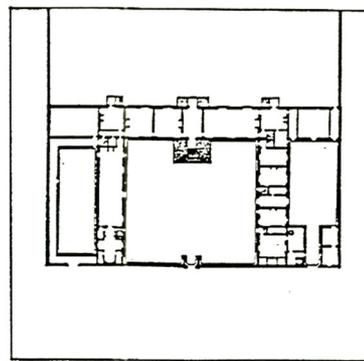


Fig. 1 Serlio: Le Grand Ferrare

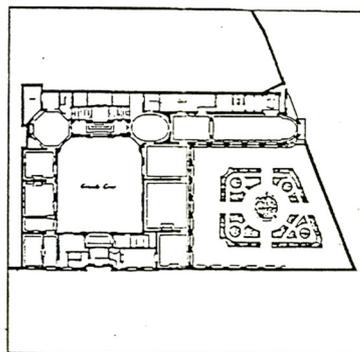


Fig. 2 Louis Le Yau: Hôtel Lambert

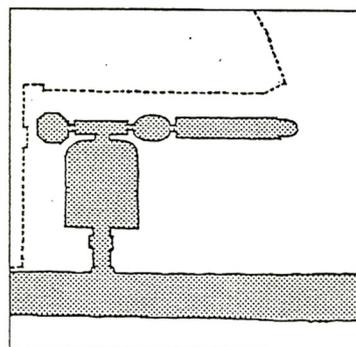
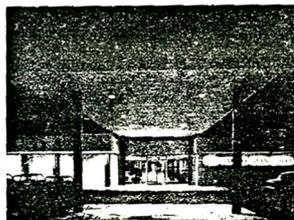


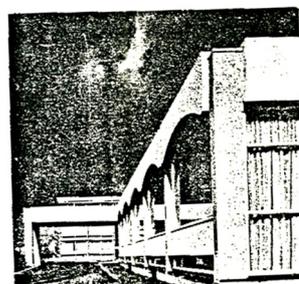
Fig. 3 Hôtel Lambert, Spatial sequence



53. Royal Lancaster Hotel, canopy



54. Portes - Cochere



55. Portes - Cochere

The term ‘hotel’ has its origin from France (Dennis 1977). It was a town-house of which the standard design was established by Serlio’s “Grand Ferrare” in Fontainebleau (ca. 1544 – 1546), that is , a corps-de-logis with narrower wings forming a courtyard which is enclosed towards the street by a wall or by a stable and kitchen block, broken in the middle by the entrance door. The best surviving early example is Hotel Carnavalet in Paris by Lescot of about 1545, it was usual to have a garden or small park behind the corp-de-logis. The corps-de-logis often contained a gallery on the first floor. Mansart’s Hotel de la Vrilliere, Paris (1635 – 1645) became the model for the classical Parisian hotel.

Michael Dennis (1977), in an unpublished thesis at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA, studied a series of French hotel plans of the Rococo period of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The study showed that these plans remarkably and successfully dealt with irregular urban site conditions, resulting in solutions of collision and discontinuity. He found that the primary lesson of these plans was the notion of successive levels of figure-ground relationships, maintaining the independence and identity of the part without sacrificing the unity of the whole. In spite of the ambiguity of the interior arrangements, their response to site was spectacular.

The French Hotel as town-house was urban and/or contextual building. It was a parti-wall that contributed to the making of the traditional street or public space and thus could be seen on the most general level as what might be described as Urban Poche – the streets and squares being the figural elements of the city. In contrast to the examples of Medieval or early Renaissance houses, it was not seen as a private event but as a primary poche to the semi-public space of the court and sometimes, the garden. Inside the house, similar ideas hold true with the vestibules, stairs and main public rooms being supported by the secondary poche of the private part of the house which in turn is backed up by the tertiary poche of the service elements.

Reverting to Serlio’s Grand Ferrare as an example, one notices that the plan is u-shaped around the forecourt on the public side and the court is related axially or symmetrically to the private garden behind, through the corps-de-logis and consists of a single flight or zone of primary rooms. The narrower wings flanking the forecourt contain the service rooms on one side and a gallery on the other and these in turn screen the service or base courts. This plan is a rather symmetrical one built on a regular site.

As an urban architecture, the French Hotel has a lot to bequeath to contemporary hotel design in terms of contextual response. Its relevance can be found in its relationship to the street, or the relationship of the inside to the outside. Not only “contemporary hotel design,” but also contemporary buildings in general. African architecture which is sub-thematic and relevant to this article could benefit tremendously from this response to context.

## Selected Contemporary Examples

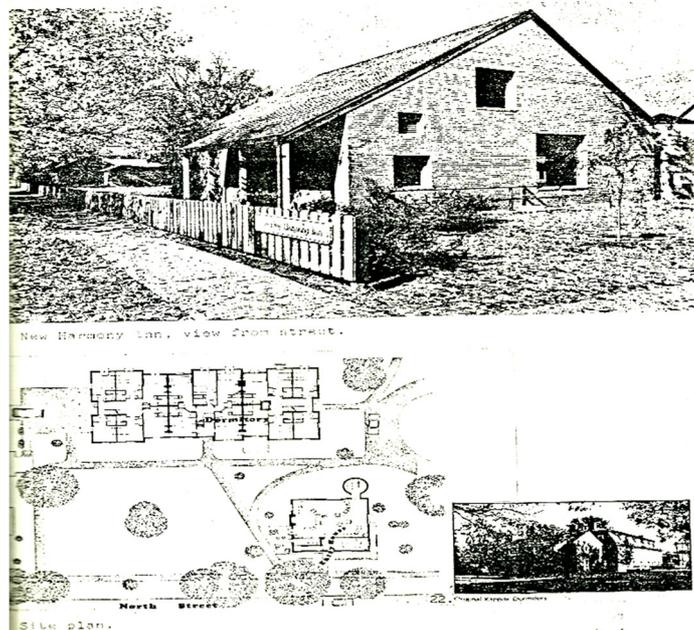
### 1. New Harmony Inn, New Harmony, Indiana, USA

Architects: Woollen Associates



New Harmony is a Midwestern town of about 900 people. It was founded in 1814 by a communal sect of German Lutherans known as Rappites. After the Rappites had started building the town, erecting dormitories for men, they sold it to a wealthy Scottish cotton mill owner, Robert Owen. Owen hoped to found a Utopian society based on universal education, and though the communal aspect of this effort failed, New Harmony survived as an important intellectual center, well into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. New Harmony later became the subject of renewed development, to turn it into an important center for tourism and educational programs.

New Harmony Inn is a 45-room house that was designed to respond to the physical context of the town. It does this by using brick as the building material and by limiting the building height to no more than three stories. This is significant because the architectural character of the community consists mainly of three story buildings that are rendered in brick masonry. Thus the new inn reinforces this character.



Unlike a typical dormitory or inn for that matter, the building form looks more like a typical suburban home. The roof is pitched shingle style system, sitting on top of the building like a bell jar.

The program consists of two separate buildings. The smaller one, and the one nearest the street, is the entry house. This contains a registration area, a lobby and a small chapel. The lobby is designed to be large enough to encourage meetings, lectures and small concerts; chairs which are stored in the balcony level can be brought in for these activities.

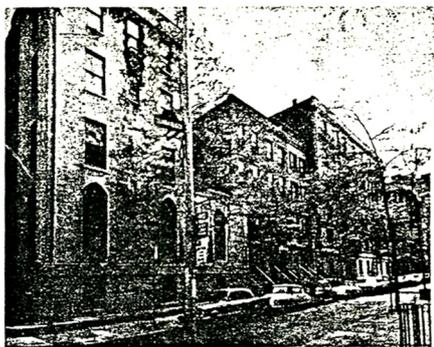
The large building is a dormitory and organized not along corridors, but according to the entry system, with rooms opening directly onto one of three stairways.

In some ways, this scheme, while addressing the physical context of the community, has also addressed the cultural context. The latter aspect is seen in the program layout, thus, a chapel becomes part of the entrance to the building. This is symbolically significant to New Harmony as a settlement of a religious sect.

The idea of the pitched roof is drawn, not only from the existing architectural context but also from the earlier men's dormitories that were erected by the early settlers. In this sense, the scheme recognizes both the

past (as symbol) and the present physical context.

## 2. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society Residence Building, Brooklyn Heights, New York, USA



Existing corner building above was replaced, but three adjoining landmarks were left untouched on the outside, remodeled inside to become part of the new hotel.



Watchtower Bible and Tract Society Residence Building, ground floor plan.



Entrance from street.

Architects: Ulrich Franzen & Associates, 1968

This scheme is a hostel for some of the 1,400 Jehovah's Witnesses who make up a missionary "family" in the area. The client is the witnesses' Watchtower Bible & Tract Society. The site is a prominent corner in Brooklyn Heights, New York, USA, an attractive residential area that was inducted in the National Register of Historic Places in 1963.

The Witnesses own many buildings in the area. Some of their earlier construction, over a twenty-year period was high-rise buildings that paid little respect to the character of the site. However, due to pressure from Brooklyn Heights Association to generate a solution that would be more sensitive to the physical context of the area, a different approach emerged as the solution.

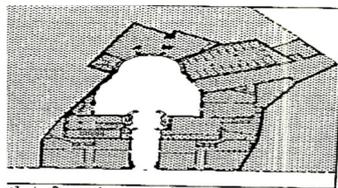
This approach involved retaining three existing certified historic buildings on the site, and replacing the corner building which is not a landmark building with a building that enhances the street while remaining part of the physical character.

To do this, the architect used an iron-spot brick that closely resembles the brickwork of the adjacent buildings (row houses). The façade of the building is broken up with three bay windows that resemble those of the adjacent historic building. The new building also maintains the same height as the adjacent building at the corner where both buildings meet. At the opposite corner, however, the new building assumes a slightly higher elevation, not in response to symbolic meaning of the building as a hostel but in response to spiritual symbolism. This projection is symbolic of the Watchtower, an icon that is synonymous with the sect of Jehovah's Witnesses. In this tower is located the fire stair, which further reinforces the meaning of the tower as a vertical symbolic element that watches over this congregation.

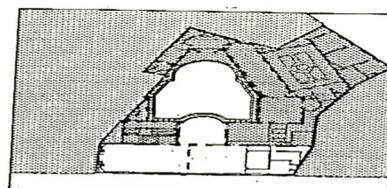
If any element in this building comes close to symbolizing it as a hostel, it is not to be found in the window arrangement, as is common in hotels or apartment houses. Rather, such *iconization* is seen in the well-defined entrance way. Here, three continuous vertical slabs have been used to seek and adapt to the scale of the adjacent building. These seem to form a negative-positive relationship with the massive void that forms the entrance way.

### 3. Hotel de Beauvais

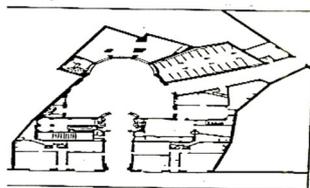
Architects: Antoine Le Pautre, 1652-1655



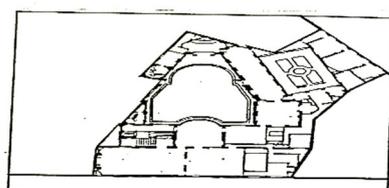
411 Hotel de Beauvais, central figure



474 Hotel de Beauvais, central figure



Le Pautre: Hôtel de Beauvais



502 Antoine Le Pautre: Hôtel de Beauvais

The site of Hotel de Beauvais fronts on two streets. The sides are not at right angle to each other and have a highly irregular configuration with no side parallel to any other side. The area is limited, and therefore there is no large private garden behind the “*corps-de-logis*”. The typical plan is then reversed so that the main street occupied the position of the garden in the typical plan. Entrance is then through a “*porte-cochere*” under the principal rooms on the street side. On the “*piano nobile*” the court is bounded by secondary rooms which are separated from an “*apartement*” by a hanging garden. The remainder of the plan is filled with support spaces and private circulation.

This arrangement makes the building look as if it had been poured into the site, filling it to the street and maintaining the continuity of the street. The façade on Rue St. Antoine is almost symmetrical and generates the central figure of the “*porte-cochere*” and the courtyard, which appears to have been laid into the building mass. This type of organization is *platonian* and controlled on the inside. It is irregular, accommodating on the perimeter of the site. It would appear that it is the strength of this central figure that permits secondary figures or rooms to be “*collaged*” into the plan in concentric, but asymmetric layers, and that permits the organization of rooms to vary from floor to floor. The freedom of the plan produces no less than four separate grids and a variety of room sizes and configurations, not to mention the extended and elaborate sequence or “*promenade architectural*”.

## The African Contextual Paradigm

### 1. The Great Mosque of Djenne, Mali (1907)

Contrary to writings of Kililo Mtamu on African contextualism, many examples exist whose forms and styles may not necessarily be described as Western. For instance, the Great Mosque of Djenné is attributed to be the largest mud- or earth-brick building in the world and is widely acknowledged to be the greatest achievement of Sudano-Sahelian architectural style (The Guardian 2015). This great structure's origin and authenticity as a piece of unsullied African architecture is self evident. Indeed, it is a monument to African architectural contextual adherence as it is inspirational from the region's physical and cultural contexts. The color and texture draw inspiration from the site and the Sahelian physical context. The form is a response to the Islamic history as well as the physical context of the location on which it sits.



The Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali. Photograph: Francois Xavier Marit/AFP/Getty Images

It is located on the flood plains of the Bani River. The original mosque was built in the 13th century, while today's Great Mosque was completed in 1907. The building is massive and occupies a large land area. There are "mini minarets" which define the parapets, appearing to be located on all four facades. The entrances at the front are defined by towers that are capped by minarets. These mini minarets appear to cap the ribs or pilasters which dominate the facades at regular intervals on all four sides. Their projection horizontally in a positive-negative relationship with the skin of the façade juxtaposes the structure with the site contextually. The cladding is brown in color which is taken from this Sahelian terrain. The mosque unquestionably dominates the site as an icon on its own. The *earthy* color and disposition render it sustainable. The scale is impressive as an architectural masterpiece.

### 2. All Saints Church (Anglican Communion), GRA, Enugu



The 'Round-About' located East of the church



All Saint Anglican church GRA, Enugu ( Courtesy: All Saint Anglican church)

This church faces east with the alter on the east while the narthex and entrance are on the west. The church itself is located at the intersection of Garden Avenue and Abakaliki Road. Abakaliki Road runs on east–west axis parallel to the church and terminates at Ekulu Street on the west. On the east at the intersection is a traffic circle or "round-about". This circle location accommodates a police post for traffic control. The church has no apse, as it should, on east end of the building although there is an altar on the inside. It responds to cultural context at this east end with a large cross visibly mounted on this location, a symbol that identifies this building as a Christian place of worship. Next door, further west, is the Polo Shopping Mall. Opposite this mall is a restaurant called Celebrities. This church responds to the architectural character of the neighborhood, which is primarily

residential with a mix of light commercial activities such as restaurants and shops, including a mall. It has a gable roof which is characteristic of the neighborhood. The roofing in the area is a mixture of mostly gable and hip roofs. The roofing materials are mainly long-span, corrugated aluminum sheets, and in some cases, stone-coated aluminum roofing sheets as well. Most of the houses in the area are fenced with CMU blocks and metal gates. The church is also fenced with a combination of masonry walls with metal grills sitting on the coping of the masonry fence, similar to all the other compounds. Barbed Tape Obstacle security feature is mounted atop the fence. The fenestration on the facades consists of glass windows – a mixture of stained glass windows towards the front, awning windows at clerestory and bay windows for the rest of the building on the north and south facades. The scale of the church building is appropriate for the character of the neighborhood. In terms of height, the building is two stories, consistent with the two-story character of the area. So in this sense the design responds appropriately to the physical context as well as the cultural context. It exhibits cultural meaning through its symbolic reference to history.

### **3. Diamond Bank, Garden Avenue, Enugu**

The Diamond Bank is one of the so-called *New Generation* banks in Nigeria established during the bank liberalization policy of the government in the 1990s. The bank adopted a prototypical design that features a barrel roof that projects a fascia of trusses in the front façade. This entrance façade creates an image of Diamond Bank that is unmistakable wherever this symbol is found throughout Nigeria. To this extent, the building through this iconic imagery responds to symbolic and cultural context. The trusses, a structural element convey an image of strength which could be interpreted as an image of trust and confidence for the depositors. Garden Avenue where the bank is located is characterized by mostly commercial and government buildings. So in essence this building fits into the physical context of the neighborhood. Adjacent to this bank building is another bank, First City Monument Bank. Further up the street, on the same side is the Central Bank of Nigeria buildings. Further up is another important bank called First Bank of Nigeria (formerly Standard Bank). Therefore, the Diamond Bank not only responds to the cultural context through its iconic image but also fits into the physical context of the area.

### **4. First City Monument Bank (FCMB), Garden Avenue, Enugu, Nigeria**

Similar to Diamond Bank, First City Monument Bank, has a strong iconic image that is depicted in its reference to history. The façade makes reference to neo-classicism, which is an unmistakably response to cultural context. As to physical context, its location on this bustling part of Garden Avenue with other banks makes it fit well on the site, even though it is the only building in the neighborhood that features this type of iconic classical image.

### **5. Golden Royale Hotel, Independence Layout, Enugu**

Similar to most hotels in the city of Enugu, this hotel building is low rise but it is typically modern, built with concrete, steel and glass. From this point of view, it responds well to cultural context but also responds well to physical context in terms of site planning. Although the site is compact, the architects designed it to fit well into this upscale part of Enugu. The main entrance is well defined and recalls one of the unique characteristics of the French Hotels we saw earlier.



Diamond Bank Garden Avenue, Enugu  
(Courtesy: Diamond Bank PLC)  
Diamond Bank PLC, Garden Ave, Enugu



First City Monument Bank Garden Avenue,  
(Courtesy: FCMB PLC)  
First City Monument Bank PLC, Garden Ave, Enugu



**Golden Royale Hotel, Independence Layout, Enugu**  
(Photograph, courtesy Golden Royale Hotel)

## Conclusion

The foregoing dealt with the subject of Contextualism in Architecture and Design. Literary works on the subject were reviewed with respect to its relationship with Modern Architecture. In so doing, it became apparent that contextualism emanated from the desire to resolve problems of harmony with the historical environment and the placement of new buildings within historical surroundings. It was also revealed that Modern Architecture failed to recognize its urban context and was largely an exercise in formalism. It appeared to have employed imagery related to machinery rather than to previous building, thus symbolizing its belief in a social and a physical utopia to be created by technology. Furthermore, Modern architecture is seen as having conformed too much to idealism, its presumed *Utopia*. Thus Stuart Cohen defined contextualism as the idea of including by recognition or replication, the defining aspects of a local physical environment. Its strategies and the general critique they imply came as an answer to the inadequacy of Modern architectural design theory to deal with the traditional city as well as it dealt with suburban site, its presumed ideal.

At the center of this study is the paradigm of the French Hotels. It was shown that in contrast to the failures of Modern Architecture in dealing with the urban context, the French hotels of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Rococo period exhibited a remarkable response to the urban site conditions. We also discussed contextualism relative to the African experience and reviewed some examples whose responses to both cultural and Physical contexts evoked exemplary architectural design principles. Hopefully, the contextual attributes evoked by this building type will induce some influence on contemporary African architecture.

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