

# An Expanded Definition of Contextualism

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Modern architectural design encompasses style and aesthetics. There are as many viewpoints as there are architects. Following the modern and postmodern era of architecture, the idea of a contextual architecture is at an all-time high; society has turned to the romantic ideals of preservation of our history, culture and environment. Nevertheless, not all architects exude an acute sensitivity to context, and this trend affects students of architecture even more in the studio today. But how can we be faulted for being easily distracted by the physical characteristics of architecture when 90% of all information processed by human is visual? It would be naïve to ignore the many constraints imposed on the conception of a piece of architecture which affects its final product.

Anything made is born out of a framework or context. Context is defined as “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs” (*Merriam-Webster*). It is important to retain a broad definition when considering architecture because context, site, and environment are often used interchangeably in architectural jargon, but the definitions of these terms only marginally intersect. Moreover, the definition of context derives subjectively from our own definition of architecture since it is very difficult, if not impossible, to imagine architecture devoid of context. Consequently, two extremes exist: architecture as an altruistic duty or architecture as an art stripped of its responsibilities to its users. All architecture resides somewhere on this spectrum. The ideal is the middle ground where both views are seamlessly integrated.

Over 2,000 years ago, Vitruvius conceived a critical guideline to review architectural work. It revolved around three principles: *firmistas* (strength), *utilitas* (functionality) and *venustas* (delight). The topic of functionality can be further subdivided into three categories: people, site and function; therein lies contextual design as demonstrated in the Saratoga Avenue Community Center.

The Saratoga Avenue Community Center is located in Brownsville, Brooklyn, home to the now extinguished criminal organization Murder Inc., and a proliferation of public housing complexes and tenements. During its colonial years, the area was a farmland, as well as a manufacturer of slab stones used for construction. Later the area became a disposal site for factories, built around 1880, to encourage Jewish immigrants to move to the suburbs. Ample space with open lots for recreation made it an attractive alternative to the dire living conditions on the Lower East Side. During the 1950s, after World War II, the city viewed the area as a testing ground for its housing development. African Americans began to move to the predominantly Jewish community of Brownsville; what ensued was a palpable racial tension that lasted for the better part of the history of the city, until

its original occupants moved out of the area, leaving behind the poor working class who couldn't afford to move. In the 1960s, the population, which was largely African American, suffered staggering rates of unemployment. In its current constitution, the neighborhood has been labeled at times as the most dangerous in New York City—plagued by poverty, crime and drug addiction.

Eastern Brooklyn is part of Mayor Bill de Blasio's plan to create more affordable housing in the city. Incentives such as giving rights to construct bigger buildings in exchange for a percentage of affordable units would encourage private developers to build in the area with the goal of attracting a more affluent crowd, thereby increasing the wealth of low-income neighborhoods. Brownsville has resisted this trend for some time simply because of its remoteness to fashionable neighborhoods, but as adjacent neighborhoods like Crown Heights, Bed-Stuy, Ocean Hill and East New York are increasingly gentrified, a growing fear plagues the community as the current residents are often the ones left with the worst end of the deal; Brownsville seems to be next in line.

In 2007, the South Bed-Stuy zoning changes were adopted. Subjected to progressive rezoning programs, the neighborhood is constantly being reshaped. Consequently, Brownsville is an architectural amalgamation of identical row houses with a speckle of traditional and charming brownstones, short-lived bodegas, and bland public housing complexes—which make up a significant portion of the neighborhood's landscape.

Closer to Ocean Hill, many limestone and brownstone townhouses have been rehabilitated. However, blocks of multi-family semi-detached row houses are more common in Brownsville. The Nehemiah houses of 1987, red-brick houses with a modest 1,150 square feet of living space, were a joint project between local churches, community organizers, and the City of New York. Several residents of these houses enjoy a gated driveway and a lovely, albeit small, garden. The program was conceived to engage committed homeowners, and stands ironically against the towering forest of public housing.

If one lives in New York, bodegas are a common sight. Small shops with corrugated metal awnings (covered with bright-lettered signage and ads concealing every square inch of windows) occupy almost every corner. Those local grocery stores have become important members of the architectural library of the city: Brownsville is no exception. The word "*bodega*" means grocery store and is closely associated with the Hispanic community, but the model has mutated since its original incarnation. Ownership of these stores changes rather quickly, while the buildings remain somewhat permanent with the signs simply painted over rather than undergoing a full-scale renovation.

Today, the area of Brownsville is a hotbed of public housing complexes, the largest in the country. Midway through the Depression, NYCHA (New York City Housing Authority) was created. Since then, the city has embarked on a long fight to provide affordable housing to impoverished residents. (Historically, these communities lived below modern standards of living, and were surrounded by high rates of disease, such as tuberculosis, diphtheria and cholera.) The projects, as they are called, were meant to be temporary homes until the residents found their footing and financially migrated upward and out of the public housing system.

Built during the 1960s, Saratoga Village is a 16-story high rise mixed-income housing complex with only 50 years under its belt in contrast to its predecessors. With its dull brick facade and complementary stainless steel/aluminum window frames, the complex betrays no exceptional qualities to distinguish it from any other housing built throughout the city. At first glance, Saratoga Village provides no framework from which to derive creative and original additions to the neighborhood. However, public housing developments originate from a 20<sup>th</sup> century planning model. Decentrists popularized the concept of the ideal town, where houses were turned inward, away from the streets, toward sheltered green spaces. Saratoga Village, like most housing developments, is designed around that concept.

The Saratoga Avenue Community Center is a building with a minimal footprint of 3,500 square feet that abuts the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) complex: Saratoga Village. The structure is a modern design with hints of tradition, obtained mainly through its material palette. The heavy use of masonry in the project confers a dignified aura to the neighborhood. This alone gives stature to the remarkably small community center. The selection of warm-colored Roman bricks, an uncommonly used brick that is longer than its standard counterparts, along with mahogany trim, contributes to this decorum. George Ranalli, the architect, subscribes to the idea that architectural design incorporates design at the smallest scale. This project is no exception: copings and lintels are integrated in the design. Against the neighborhood's backdrop of dreadful regularity and austerity, the community center displays a cohesive irregularity in its form. Recessed windows and protruding panels on the interior walls make for an interesting play of light and shadows. This syncopated geometry is maintained all through the interior where window sizes are varied and walls are punctured, featuring labyrinth-like patterns. All this is done without disorienting the occupants. The result is a dynamic reading of form and spaces, which accentuates the massing. The Saratoga Avenue Community Center delights the viewer through a balanced but irregular rhythm.

The recreation center is attached on one side to the housing tower by a corridor, and, on the opposite side, to a commercial building. Ranalli purposefully set back the community center to create inviting public spaces. The main entrance, located on Halsey Street, opens up to a beautiful courtyard that welcomes its neighbors, a contrast to the cloistered green space of public housing. Furthermore, the center provides a multipurpose room for all sorts of community gatherings. The 23-foot high main hall is used for wedding receptions, graduation parties, and so on. In terms of functionality, the community center fills a void that existed in the neighborhood. No other building satisfies this particular need: social gathering.

The Saratoga Avenue Community Center is a successful project because it accomplishes the three criteria of functionality: people, site and function. In blighted neighborhoods, residents often feel indifference from local governments. The success of Giorgio Ranalli's center is in part due to the fact that it taps into the most basic of psychological needs: significance. The people were included in the design process by reviewing the materials used in the construction. *Harvard Magazine* quoted Ranalli as saying, "They said, 'We're actually going to get a

building that's made of this?'" This provides further proof that architecture not only acts on a physical level but in a more intimate realm by giving significance to the people who live in it.

Ranalli's center also performs fairly well in the context of its site. The architect achieved this primarily by taking inspiration from the natural and traditional material palette of the neighborhood. The use of masonry allows the center to seamlessly blend with adjacent buildings. Subsequently, the center is frequently described as fitting in the site. Yet the Saratoga Avenue Community Center is elevated on a platform that distinguishes it from its neighbors. The design itself is a rebuke to other buildings in Brownsville that have been designed with less attention and care. A thoughtfulness towards the finer points of the design reflects a dichotomy in modern architecture that tries both to fit its site and distinguish itself from it; in this case the result is successful. George Ranalli said in an interview with Chatham Press that a building becomes iconic when it responds lovingly to the specificities of a site, which implies its physical context, people and functional need. Brownsville lacks places of gathering, and the architect perceptively identified this need in the community.

Brownsville suffers from a shifting identity. Saratoga Avenue defines the border of two localities after the South Bed-Stuy rezoning, which makes it difficult to pinpoint the neighborhood one belongs to in this particular area. Dull NYCHA complexes dominate the architectural landscape of the neighborhood. Given the success of the Saratoga Avenue Community Center, the building is in a singular position to create a new and solid identity in which the locals can take pride.

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Cite as: Jean, A.L. (2018). An expanded definition of contextualism. *City Tech Writer*, 13, 35-39. Online at <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/city-tech-writer-sampler/>