In Context

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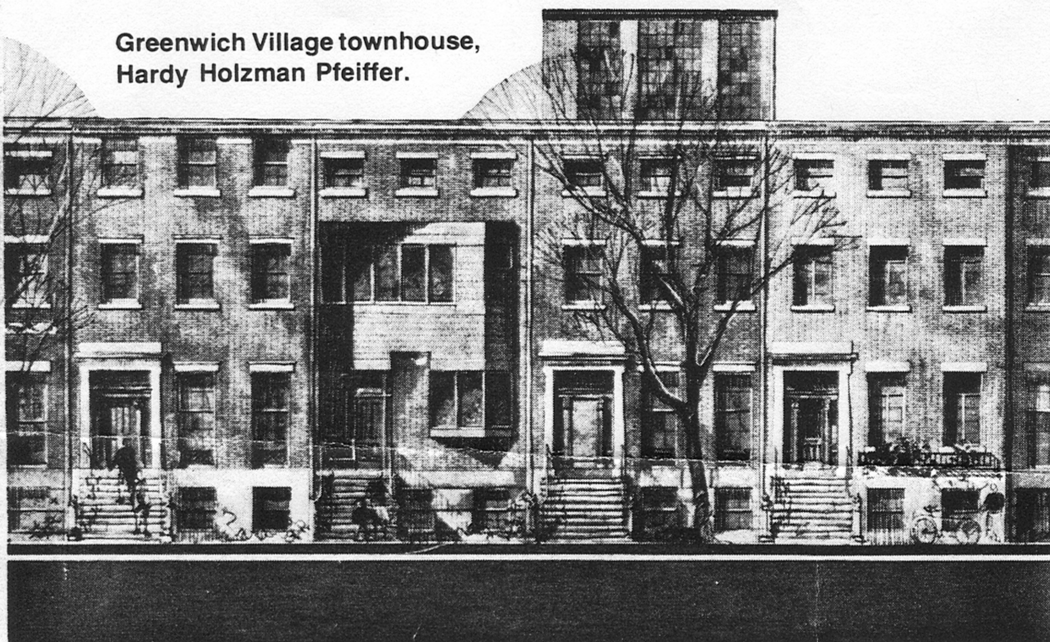
For the first time in half a century architects have the option of designing to fit the visual context.



Greenwich Village townhouse, Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer.

Courtesy of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer

Text and photographs by Brent Brolin

A few years ago an explosion destroyed a 19th-century townhouse on West 11th Street in Greenwich Village, New York. Though the original character of the street had not been perfectly preserved, it did have a strong visual flavor that the residents valued. When it came to replacing the destroyed building, the architects, Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, made a serious attempt at fitting the new building into the existing context. They proposed a facade half old and half new (see model, above). The top and ground floors looked traditional, while the facade of the middle floors looked modern and was rotated so that part stuck out and part was recessed. Though the attempt to evoke the image of the older houses was obvious, the modern floors seemed to be grafted on—an intrusion of new into old rather than a blending. It did not fit it. The local people felt this and managed to delay its approval long enough to prevent its construction. However, New York Times' architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable declared the building to be "a brilliant attempt at synthesis of new and old," going on to say that, "when the old fabric is gone, it cannot be brought back." This, of course, is not true. The only substantiation for this claim is the modernist's implicit assumption that to imitate history is sinful. The materials and methods are available to build the facade as it was in 1840, and it would cost no more than a "modern" version.

Modernism

This is only one example of the modern morality that is still used to rationalize how buildings look and prevents us from returning to a more humanistic, popularly understandable architecture. Anti-historicism today is the most destructive force in the urban landscape.

Until now the modernist's fear of borrowing from history has kept the criteria for fitting new buildings into old contexts quite lax. The typical list includes using similar materials, similar massing, maintaining similar building heights, and keeping the same proportion of windows to wall. It rarely includes evoking the "style" of the older buildings in detail and ornament, one of the most important factors for a successful fit in. Given these criteria, even the most earnest contemporary attempts have had only moderate success.

Ulrich Franzen's Jehovah's Witnesses Building, in Brooklyn Heights (1970), is particularly interesting because it is considered a successful fit in by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. But when I first saw this building in the Historic Preservation Bulletin, I assumed it was offered as an example of what not to do. Although it shared certain gross similarities with the adjoining buildings, to my eye it still did not fit in comfortably. The 19th-century townhouses beside it are complete compositions; each has a stoop, bay window with paired windows above, and is topped off with a decorative cornice. The new building follows the modern mode and its facade is a part of a continuum. As a composition, it starts with the tower on the corner, but the fact that it stops where it does on the right is pure coincidence. If the old buildings were not there, it could go on forever.

It is vertically uncomposed as well. The architect cuts it off at the old cornice line, but without the visual emphasis that the old cornices give. The entire facade is the corner of an enormous piece of graph paper that could extend to infinity in two directions. Though the intellectual effort to relate is evident, the mind does not convince the eye.

The fact is that the rules defining what makes a new building sympathetic to its neighbors play down the importance of small-scale detail and the concept of style, which depends to a large extent on ornament. The same Historic Preserva-

tion Bulletin declares that "style" is the least important element in fitting in. The opposite is probably true.

The Danieli Excelsior Hotel in Venice fits in better in a much more difficult context. This is surprising as it does so without paying particular attention to the accepted formulas. The Danieli has a different number of floors from either adjoining building, the proportion of window to solid wall is different, and the window shapes differ from those of either neighbor. There are subtle alignments that contribute to its working well, among them the fact that its height makes it a step between the lower building on the left and the other Danieli Hotel on the right. But the most significant elements are the balcony railings that mimic those on the older hotel. The newer version is more severe, but the building would be considerably less successful without this fine-scale detail.

Graves

The timid return to eclecticism in so-called post-modernist architecture demonstrates two things: that modern morality still inhibits designers and that obscure historical references do little to enhance the context. Michael Graves' addition to the Claghorne House in Princeton is a recent effort at eclecticism.

The old clapboard house was built in the 1870s. The addition looks like a collage from the early 1920s. With the exception of a touch of molding and lattice work, there are no obvious historical elements that would make it familiar to the uninitiated. Graves said he used historical symbols, and I asked him what they were. He said that as the original house derived from classical Greek architecture, the new addition could relate to it by returning to the same Greek precedents. So the addition is polychromed as were classical Greek buildings, and a four-sided shape is put over the kitchen window to recall half a classical pediment. Part of the other half is found to the right, over a door leading from the patio to the dining room. I did not notice this until it was pointed out and I still have difficulty making the visual connection. Other historical references are equally vague.

The architect's obliqueness may come from an intellectually defensible obscurantism, but it more likely grows out of a fear that borrowing too literally opens him to the charge of "copying" rather than "creating."

A more visually appropriate if less noticeable addition could have come from taking visual inspiration more directly from the old house. But post modernists, or the new eclectics, are a peculiar breed. They declare an interest in using historical allusions to make architecture once again comprehensible to the public and then throw away the chance to do it by ignoring the most obvious and insistent history, what is already in front of their eyes.

Venturi

Two recent buildings by Robert Venturi help to clarify the value of a visual relationship based on a closer response to the immediate context—the Brant House in Bermuda, and the addition to the Allen Memorial Museum of Art, Oberlin College.

The Bermuda House addresses its context sympathetically. It relies on specific visual references to the local style. The additive character of its massing recalls island architecture, not monolithic in defense against hostile weather, but spread out, to be penetrated by the breezes. The ornamental pediment over the entrance recalls grander days, when the "Great House" was great. The spacing of the seaside colonnade does not align perfectly with the doors behind, recalling the informality of living (and building) in the colonies. But the house also has distinctly modern elements, such as its non-traditional-looking roof. It is eclectic, modern and successful in evoking a sense of place.

The addition to the Oberlin Art Museum tries to fit in by contrasting with the original building by Cass Gilbert and, to my eye, is unsuccessful. When I saw the Bermuda house, Venturi said nothing to explain why it fit in. The Oberlin addition did not speak for itself. Looking at the colored elevation and working drawings, I still needed an explanation of why the two were related through "contrast." One way, he said, was that every other square of the addition's checkerboard street-facade is made of stone from the same quarry as that used in the original building, but it is used as a thin skin rather than as a solid masonry wall. The new flat roof

Jehovah's Witnesses Building, Ulrich Franzen.

Danieli Excelsior Hotel, architect unidentified.

also contrasts with the sloped tile of the old, and the addition's continuous 1950s factory fenestration (on the right side, not visible in this elevation) contrasts with the traditional windows punched in the masonry wall.

These are, indeed, contrasts, but I am not convinced that a positive visual relationship is established by merely declaring it a fit-in through contrast. A true fit requires no explanation.

Kinds of contexts

When architects build, it is almost always in public view, whether or not the public likes it. Therefore, architects have a responsibility to the context that is different from that of other artists. We all recognize the beauty of older European and American cities that escaped the intrusions of modernism, or completely new humanely-designed modern cities. Their visual success comes in large part from their visual continuity. Conversely, few of us have not shuddered at seeing an aggressively modern building in a traditional context.

Some will say that designing to fit into the visual context is not new. Regrettably, as I have tried to show, the lingering modern morality has meant that the idea receives more lip service than meaningful attention.

There are several different contexts into which architects routinely put their buildings. The first is the relatively pure, clearly-defined historical setting: an old New England village or European town. There are already strong movements for the renovation and reuse of existing buildings, but this can only happen if a building exists. The problem occurs when there is a space to fill. Designing in these circumstances takes a greater reliance on historical precedents than we have been used to, and the best solution in many cases is to design as though you were in the period.

One need not copy, however. With sensitivity, a building can be designed with such an esthetic affinity to the originals around it that it is a welcome addition. This is the richest and most rewarding solution. But the skill to design a new building that slips almost unnoticed into a traditional context has not been cultivated in this century and few designers know how to go about it.

The purely modern is a second context. By now it would be out of place to put anything but a modern building among the glass and steel boxes of upper Sixth Avenue, Manhattan.

The "monument" context offers a third challenge. The Guggenheim Museum is as different from the surrounding grey limestone wall of Fifth Avenue as a Baroque church is from the houses in an Austrian village. Both are architectural gems set among background buildings. The monument context is easily abused because architects have been encouraged for so long to think of their creations as unique and the surroundings as incidental. But it is most successful when the context is relatively homogeneous—truly background—and the monument of a different scale.

A fourth situation is the one that American architects with wealthy clients most often face: the large homesite with a natural but no man-made context. Though it would seem that no particular attention to architectural context is needed, the situation is not always clear-cut. I recently visited Stern and Hagmann's Lang House in Connecticut. Having seen the house in photos, I knew approximately what to expect, and, because it sits by itself on a hillside, I hardly expected to care that the house did not have a "New England" look to it. Nevertheless, when I saw it from a distance, I could not erase the cumulative visual memory of the villages and farmhouses I had passed during the half hour drive through the countryside. Though it stood alone, I had the uncomfortable feeling that this Italianate house was out of place in Connecticut's rolling hills.

Finally there is the urban situation with a mixture of styles. Though there is no strong style, one characteristic often stands out, and this can be a starting point and the visual character would be enhanced over time if each new building reinforced this. When several have been added, each strengthening this character, a sense of continuity will emerge.

Claghorne House addition, Michael Graves.

The turning point

Modern architecture was unique. Never before did a style spring full-grown from "its time" with no reference to the past. New styles always evolved from old. The programmatic anti-historicism of modernism ultimately led to the present dead-end because it came from a negative impulse: rejecting visual traditions. Creativity cannot continue to flourish when it is based on a denial. Renewing our architecture requires unclogging our channels to history and using the past as the source for the future as it has always been. This does not mean making irrelevant and esoteric gestures, so obscure they are again comprehensible only to the initiated. It means working from what is there: the context. This has, I believe, social and

psychological regards for the community as a whole. It can also have the beneficial effect of bringing the architect's values once more into consonance with those of society, or those portions of society with whom he deals at any one time. This does not restrict architects' creativity. Most designers follow a limited set of rules anyway, only it is a set of their own choosing rather than one established by the context.

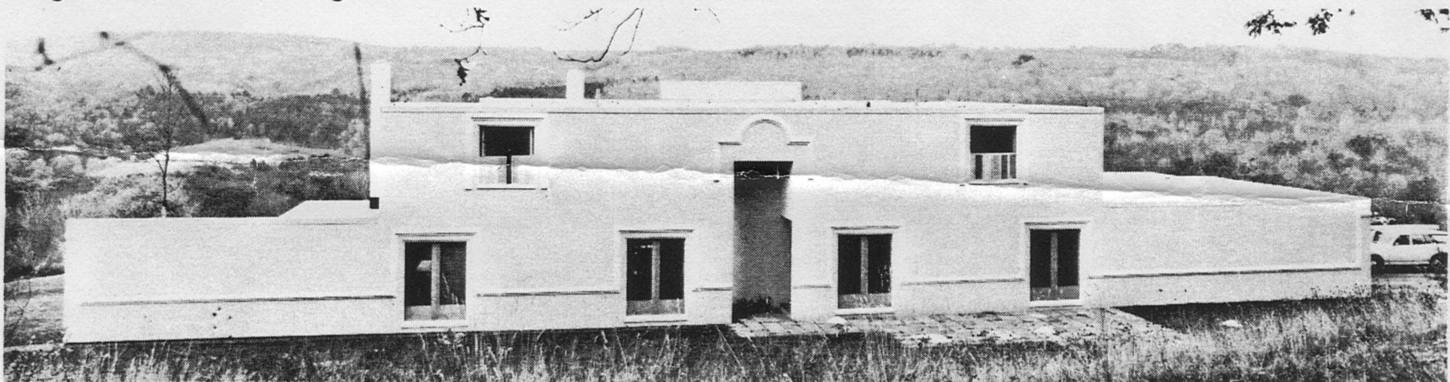
Designing successfully in context requires a revision of our view of history which, however hesitantly, is now under way. The most difficult break will surely be with the idea that architects must search for one set of symbols to capture the spirit of our times. This is hard to overcome because it is a pseudo-search that gives architects a way to establish their own reputations through finding "different" solutions. It is quixotic to believe there is one set of forms for our time. Each economic class, ethnic group and nationality perceives its visual context uniquely and has its own symbols that evoke a sense of belonging. Visual solutions must be sought within each specific visual and social context.

Relearning

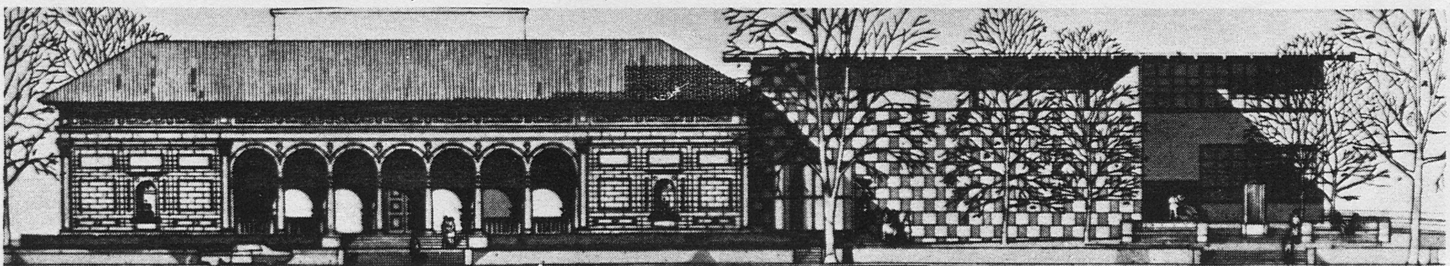
Unfortunately, when crafts such as ornamenting or designing to fit in are not taught for a generation, they are difficult to relearn. Broadening our architectural vocabulary requires that design courses include the study of past styles, including modernism, with particular attention to how they are detailed and ornamented. Old and new techniques will also need to be studied to understand how ornament can be made today. One reason recent attempts at using history in architecture have been so awkward is that no one knows exactly how to go about it. Knowledge about how to use historical sources cannot be invented. It must be relearned from history. Ornamenting and designing for the context will have to be taught as it always was, by studying how architects in the past placed new buildings in old contexts. Eventually a facility will develop which, having come from a study of the past, will have an affinity to it, though it will itself be contemporary and open.

I do believe in evolution and change in architecture, but without the past as a source, creativity and originality will ultimately exhaust themselves. This has been amply illustrated in recent architectural history. The next decade will be a period of floundering and excesses of commission rather than omission. Eventually, however, when the craft of working in context is relearned, it may be possible to produce architecture acceptable to architect and layperson at the same time, architecture that is sensitive to the past and its meanings, and that still establishes connections through the present to the future.

Lang House, Stern and Hagmann.



Allen Memorial Museum addition, Venturi & Rauch.



N.B. Brant House omitted, editorial error. Paget Hall shown below.

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