

The task of the architectural project is to reveal, through the transformation of form, the essence of the surrounding context. V. Gregotti, 1982 introduction to French edition of Gregotti 1966, 12

Introduced into the architectural vocabulary in the 1960s, 'context', 'contextual' and 'contextualism' were part of the first substantial critique of modernist practice, and might on that account be classed as postmodernist terms. But whether they were the last modernist terms, or the first postmodernist ones matters very little; they are included here partly on chronological grounds, as belonging to the period of late modernism, and partly because they were wholly directed towards the discourse of modernism, but most particularly because they illustrate so well the imperialism effected by the act of translation from one language to another.

The story begins in Milan in the 1950s, when in the editorials written by Ernesto Rogers for the magazine *Casabella Continuità* in the middle of the decade there appeared the first serious critique of the work of the first generation of modernist architects. Rogers criticized their tendency to treat every scheme as a unique abstract problem, their indifference to location, and their desire to make of every work a prodigy. Rather, Rogers argued, consider architecture as a dialogue with its surroundings, both in the immediate physical sense, but also as a historical continuum. The terms used by Rogers were '*le preesistenze ambientali*' (surrounding pre-existences), or '*ambiente*', and although both have since been translated into English as 'context' this is misleading, for Rogers used neither this word, nor its Italian equivalent *contesto* – which entered general use in Italy in the 1970s as a translation of the English word 'context' only after that had become current in the USA. It is worth investigating what Rogers meant by *preesistenze ambientali*, for it differed in several respects from the Anglo-Saxon 'context' with which it has subsequently become

confused. Compared to previous arguments for the responsiveness of architecture to location – such as the *genius loci* of the English picturesque, or the English critic Trystan Edwards's objections to the 'selfish' modern commercial building (1946, 2) – what distinguished Rogers's concept was the absolute importance of the historical continuity manifested by the city and existing in the minds of its occupants. As Rogers wrote in one of his editorials, 'to consider *l'ambiente* means to consider history' (1955, 203). For Rogers, the two concepts of *preesistenze ambientali* and 'history' (see pp. 196–205) were indissolubly linked: 'to understand history is essential for the formation of the architect, since he must be able to insert his own work into the *preesistenze ambientali* and to take it, dialectically, into account' (1961, 96). Rogers's idea of *ambiente* as a historical process came from a variety of sources, but one in particular which he cited specifically was an essay by the poet T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1917). It is worth quoting from this essay, for it helps make clear the interconnectedness of continuity, history and *ambiente* in Rogers's mind. Eliot wrote, 'the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' –

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. (1917, 26–27)



Shop, office and apartments, 2–4 Corso Francia, Turin, Italy, Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peresutti and Rogers, 1959. The '*ambiente*' revealed through this project included the Italian historical tradition of mixed-use buildings shaped to fit existing plots; covered arcades over the pavement; and the marking of the city boundary by monumental towers – all reinterpreted in the idiom of modern architecture.

It is this sense that all work impacts upon present consciousness of the historical past that was so essential to Rogers's notion of '*ambiente*'.

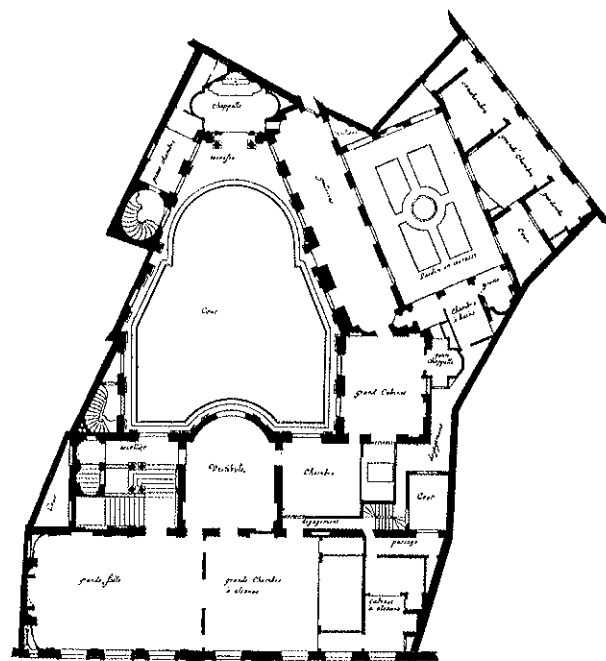
Two examples will suffice to show how Rogers used *preesistenze ambientali* in his critique of orthodox modern architecture: 'One might accuse of formalism an architect who does not absorb into his work the particular and characteristic contents suggested by the *ambiente*' (1955, 201); or,

Let us resist the affected cosmopolitanism which in the name of a still shallowly felt universal style raises the same architecture in New York, Tokyo, or Rio; identical architecture in both the country and the town. Let us seek rather to blend our works into the *preesistenze ambientali*, both the natural surroundings, and those created historically by human genius. (1956, 3)

The scheme which first brought these ideas to international notice – as well as contributing to Rogers's own formulation of them – was the controversy in 1954 over Frank Lloyd Wright's Masieri Memorial in Venice. His project, which would have occupied a prominent location on the Grand Canal, provoked passionate argument inside Italy and abroad about the suitedness of modern architecture to historic sites, and about the degree to which Wright's design did or did not take sufficient account of its surroundings. That the scheme was not built had less to do with the merits of the design than with the political objections at the time to an American building in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Rogers's *ambiente* became a topic of general discussion amongst the circle of Milan architects associated with *Casabella*, and featured significantly in their writings; particularly worth remarking on are Vittorio Gregotti's *Il Territorio dell'Architettura* (1966), and above all Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* (1966) whose subsequent fame has eclipsed all other Italian architectural criticism of that era, but which can only satisfactorily be understood in relation to it. *The*

*Architecture of the City* is in part an extended disquisition upon the concept of *ambiente*. For readers of the American edition of the book, where the word *ambiente* was translated throughout as 'context', this nuance is rendered invisible, and it is made to seem that Rossi was party to the same debate as Colin Rowe and others at Cornell University where, as we shall see, 'contextualism' was invented. Nothing could have been further from the truth: the word Rossi used throughout was *ambiente*, never *contesto* or 'context', and his objections to 'context' were in fact objections to Rogers's *ambiente* (or its perversion by others), and unrelated to any New England conversations. The paradox presented to readers of the English-language edition, of how someone could be so critical of 'context' and yet put forward such a persuasive argument for it, is purely an effect of the translation and does not arise in the Italian original. Rossi's objections that 'context seems strangely bound up with illusion, with illusionism. As such it has nothing to do with the architecture of the city' (123), or 'As for the term *context*, we find that it is mostly an impediment to research' (126), were, we must remember, objections to *l'ambiente*, not 'context'. Rossi's criticism of Rogers's *l'ambiente* was that it was insufficiently concrete: and what Rossi wanted to



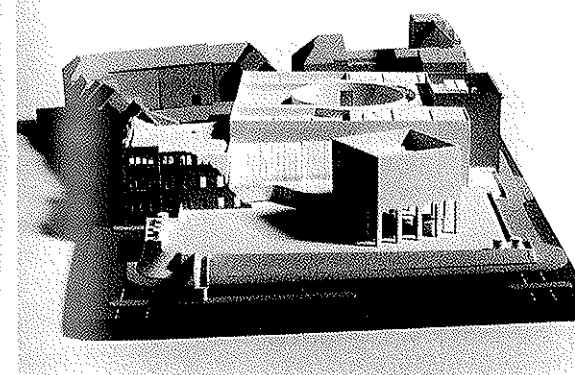
show was that it could be made concrete if one studied architectural forms themselves, independently of their functions, for in these forms was the only tangible point of contact between the economic processes of cities, on the one hand, documented through the verifiable histories of land development and partition, and on the other hand the vagueness of the 'collective historical consciousness' of the city that was Rogers's *preesistenza ambientale*.

If we turn now to the history of the English-language word 'context', its first significant appearance within the vocabulary of architecture seems to have been in Christopher Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* of 1964, though its presence in this particular text seems to have had little to do with its subsequent usage. Alexander used 'context' as a synonym for 'environment'; introducing the book, he wrote 'every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form in question, and its context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem' (15). This mechanistic relationship is softened later in the book – the aim of design, he writes, is not to meet the requirements in the best possible way, but 'to prevent misfit between the form and the context' (99). Nonetheless, the purpose of the book was to devise a scheme for ordering the variables that constituted 'context' so as to develop a method of design free from all the preconceptions that, in Alexander's opinion, had hampered previous efforts to achieve truly functional design. Alexander's choice of 'context' instead of the more customary 'environment' may have been due to his desire to include cultural variables, but otherwise his strictly functionalist use of the term had little to do with its subsequent history.

The introduction of 'contextualism' and 'contextualist' into the architectural vocabulary occurred in 1966 in the Urban Design studio that the English critic Colin Rowe had started teaching at Cornell University in 1963 (Rowe, 1996, vol. 3, 2; Schumacher, 1971, 86). It seems likely that the terms were borrowed from the literary New Criticism movement – even though their sense there was entirely different, and negative, rather than positive, as was the case in architecture. Rowe's Cornell studio developed a critique of modernist architecture that had a good deal in common with Ernesto Rogers's. They shared a distaste for 'prodigy' architecture, and for the modernist supposition that the particularity of a building's programme justified in every case a unique solution; and

First floor plan, Hôtel de Beauvais, Paris, Antoine Le Pautre, 1652–55. Le Pautre's preservation of the internal symmetries and room relationships while adapting the standard arrangement of the Parisian hôtel to an irregular plot was one of Rowe's favoured examples of satisfactory relation of building to context.

many of the examples they chose to illustrate their ideas were the same. But there were also significant differences. Whereas Rogers was concerned with how the dialectical processes of history were manifested through architecture, Rowe was uninterested in this speculative understanding of the historical environment, and concentrated on the formal properties of works of architecture. And whereas Rogers thought of the environment as formed by objects, 'monuments', Rowe was more interested in the relationships between objects and the spaces they occupied. Indicative of Rowe's approach were his preferred exemplars, like Antoine Le Pautre's Hôtel de Beauvais (1652–55) in Paris, where the model French town house was compressed and deformed to fit the irregular site without losing the distinctive features of the type; Rowe compared this to Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, an isolated primary solid, indifferent to the boundless spatial field it occupies (Rowe, 1978, 78). In the first published statement of the Cornell studio's 'contextualism' (which appeared, significantly, in *Casabella*), an ex-student, Thomas Schumacher, wrote: 'It is precisely the ways in which idealized forms can be adjusted to a context or used as "collage" that contextualism seeks to explain, and it is the systems of geometric organization which can be abstracted from any given context that contextualism seeks to divine as design tools' (1971, 84). In general, Rogers's and Rossi's interest in *ambiente* was distinguished by 'history', whereas the Cornell studio's concern with 'context' was formal, marked in particular by its study of figure/ground relationships.<sup>2</sup> And where the Italians were polemical, marked by an underlying commitment to the 'modern', Rowe's aim was compromise, between the modernist, and the pre-modernist city. Rowe has since summed up the studio's approach: 'If not conservative, its general tone was radical middle of



the road. ... Its ideal was a mediation between the city of Modern architecture – a void with objects – and the historical city – a solid with voids' (1996, vol. 3, 2).

In the final testament of Cornell contextualism, Rowe and Koetter's book *Collage City* (1978), the authors made practically no reference to 'context' or 'contextualism'. By this time, though, 'context' had become well established in the architectural vocabulary. Kenneth Frampton in 1976 reviewed James Stirling's 1975 competition entry for the Düsseldorf Museum in terms of its 'contextual' content, and it was not long before Stirling himself began to talk about his own work, including schemes designed before the word had gained currency, in terms of 'context'; for example, commenting in 1984 on the 1971 design for an art gallery at St Andrews University, Stirling wrote 'It was both *formal* and *contextual*' (1998, 153).

Rowe and Koetter were already avoiding the words 'context' and 'contextual' by the late 1970s, yet it was around this time, as if to stiffen up the idea and give it broader credibility, that the Italian *ambiente* was taken over and subsumed into the American 'context'. However, it was not to be long before reservations about the concept itself started to be voiced. Commenting in 1985 on a scheme to extend Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York, the American critic Michael Sorkin wrote, 'A consequence of the profession's present preoccupation with "context" is a kind of collective confidence about the possibility of adding on. There's an implicit argument that architects, duly skilled and sensitized, should be able to intervene anywhere' (148). Sorkin went on to explain why he thought this wrong. By the late 1980s, there was no doubt that many architects were uncomfortable about 'context', and were increasingly prepared to say so; in his 'diary' of the design for the French national library competition in 1989, Rem Koolhaas wrote in exasperation, 'But can such a container still have a relationship with the city? Should it? Is it important? Or is "fuck context" becoming the theme?' (1995, 640).

1 See Levine, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, 1996, 374–83.

2 For a useful comparison of European and American notions of context, see Shane, 'Contextualism', *Architectural Design*, vol. 46, November 1976, 676–79.

Model, competition entry for Düsseldorf Museum, James Stirling and Michael Wilford, 1975. As Kenneth Frampton observed, its 'evident dependence on a broad cultural context stands in considerable contrast to much of his work' (1976).