

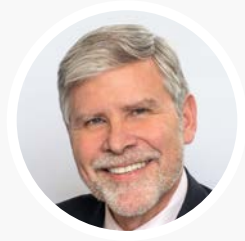
PUTTING CONTEXT  
IN CONTEXT



PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q2: CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS





## Putting Context in Context

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Scott Simpson examines the situation of buildings and its synergistic effects.

Here's a familiar image: the Great Pyramid of Giza, anchored in a sea of sand, baking under the fierce Egyptian sun, with a camel or two parked nearby to provide the appropriate sense of scale, making its huge mass seem even bigger. The pyramid is devoid of decoration; it just sits there in silent dialogue with the surrounding desert. It seems to tell a story by saying nothing at all.

Now imagine that same pyramid transported to downtown Des Moines, surrounded by a parking lot, or to Angkor Wat, strangled by jungle vines. It just wouldn't have the same import or impact. The lesson is clear: Context matters. It establishes our frame of reference and governs our perceptions. Context is what makes content come alive and is much more powerful than we realize.

Another good example is Harvard Yard, which is more space than place. The Yard contains a few trees and benches, is animated by pedestrians and is punctuated by the occasional statue, but it is brought to life by the red brick dormitories that define its perimeter. The buildings themselves, while handsome and well-proportioned, are fairly ordinary. In fact, it's this lack of architectural distinction that gives Harvard Yard its unique character. This character is more a feeling than a location, a feeling both created and enhanced by its context.

How does context shape design thinking? We often take it for granted and are simply unaware of what's going on around us, like the fish in an aquarium who do not realize they are wet. We don't think much about the air we breathe or the background noise that provides the soundtrack for our daily lives, but the power of context is real. It gives us silent instructions about where to go, how to get there, how to behave once we arrive and even what to think. If you doubt this, just ponder the different ways people behave in supermarkets, churches or football stadiums. We do things in one place we would never dream of doing in another, as if responding to an invisible instruction manual.

Good designers understand this mysterious phenomenon. When a new structure is built, it has an obvious impact on its site, neighboring buildings, vehicular circulation and pedestrian patterns, and so forth. Creating a new building is like placing a large rock in a stream bed: It irrevocably reroutes the current, affecting everything downstream.

Context is not limited to the physical environment. It also has political, economic, social, educational and health-related dimensions. Depending upon the context, our choices about

what to build, how to build and what materials to use will vary widely, if only we are paying proper attention.

Good design is both passive and active: It responds to context while simultaneously creating a new context of its own. This is where the power of design is made manifest. A new office building will serve as a point of reference in a city, and if it's exceedingly well designed, it might even become a landmark. But its bigger effect is on the many people who use that building every day. The building's circulation system will determine who goes where and, if it's well done, will serve to maximize the serendipitous interactions that make city life so interesting. Its fenestration will channel the occupants' views, and its mechanical systems will create the ecosystem of air quality and thermal comfort that influence the health of the occupants. If the interior spaces are thoughtfully arranged, they will enhance overall workplace productivity, either by providing privacy where warranted or space for robust team interactions. The building will provide employment to hundreds, if not thousands, of workers, all of whom pay taxes that help support city schools and other agencies. Thus, the new building is more than a static object; it is an active participant in helping to shape the life of the city.



As the world is increasingly challenged by the prospect of climate change, appreciation for the power of context is more important than ever. This opens amazing new opportunities for the design community to play an influential role. Design is not limited to creating static objects called buildings; it extends to all aspects of how people engage with the built environment and with each other. It's just a matter of context.



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*Scott Simpson, FAIA, is a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence.*