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A Global Context for Local Architecture

Historically, “context” has been understood as a local cultural and physical condition. Today, with the collapse of time and space facilitated by the media and the Internet, the very notion of “local” has become ambiguous. The strongest sense of distance contemporary society might feel is from the traditional notion of the local and the particular. Design is not immune to this circumstance in its affair with occupying the foreground at the expense or ignorance of the background.

In 2001, the American Institute of Architects Committee on Design (COD) focused on the relationship of design to context. At its fall conference, “Nebraska: Architecture in the Heartland,” participants considered the notion that in architecture, the global foreground is supplanting the local background as the context for design. Paradoxically, Nebraska’s location in the heartland of America has long filtered out many of the influences arriving on our shores.

This change in the notion of context was particularly evident at the meeting because it took place shortly after September 11. The Oklahoma City tragedy in 1997 certainly shook the foundations of our sense of social connection, but last year’s attacks left many at the conference wondering about not only the future of the civic realm but also the vulnerability that the changing circumstance of context has created.

The conference began with a visual survey of Omaha by Marty Schukart, AICP, a former planner for the city. The slide show featured significant churches (Westminster Presbyterian, Our Lady of Lords), the Horace Cleveland-designed park system (Hanscom Park) and local neighborhoods (Happy Hollow, Dundee, Martin Meadows); considered the influence of topography and the trace

of an old Indian trail (Vinton Street); and identified various ethnic restaurants along the way to connect the group to the culture and rituals of the local ethnic communities.

The first site visit was to the new addition to the Joselyn Art Museum (Sir Norman Foster), an excellent example of the back-and-forth influence of the global and the local. The addition—a simple block that matches the scale and height of the original building and is clad in stone from the original quarry—is highly restrained and not at all the imported firecracker it could be. Foster chose to defer to the original building at the large scale, leaving the precision of its execution and detail to be the imported lessons for the local professional community. Foster’s restraint provided an interesting point of departure for examining the notion of how context is influencing the architecture of the heartland and vice versa.

The next day the group visited St. Cecilia’s Cathedral, a recently restored landmark (Bahr Vermeer Haecker), and the new Hruska Federal Courthouse (James Ingo Freed, DLR), one of the first projects of the U.S. General Services Administration’s Design Excellence program. Both projects represent investment in the local community and aspire to be monuments in the urban landscape. The cathedral, with its imported Spanish revival design, will continue to serve in that capacity given the level of care and energy being spent on its restoration and its longstanding presence in the urban fabric. On the other hand, only time will tell if the bolded distance between the courthouse and the city will be spanned, and whether the stripped-down version of the original courthouse design (the aftermath of a forty percent budget cut) will spark a connection with the local community.



These forum pages are produced under an agreement between *Places/Design History Foundation* and the American Institute of Architects. This article reports on the AIA Committee on Design’s visit to Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska, October 11-14, 2001. The conference chairs were Lowell Berg, AIA, and Patrick Leahy, AIA, and this year’s committee chair was Wendy Evans Joseph, AIA. For information about AIA membership and upcoming programs, call 800-242-3837 or visit www.aia.org/pia/gateways



Later that day the group visited the Boys Town campus, as well as a new office building and a recently completed private residence. At Boys Town, standing out from the otherwise ordinary campus was the newly completed chapel (Dennis Raynor), built employing the stone-on-stone technology of Gothic architecture. This project seemed intent on resisting newly imported styles in favor of connecting to the traditional values taught at Boys Town.

The 120 Blondo building (Randy Brown, AIA) is the prairie's response

to Santa Monica, a collection of composed fragments located at a busy intersection of two arterial streets. The project exudes youthful energy and, according to the architect, presents perhaps a more critical understanding of context that reflects a less romanticized view of the Plains in the contemporary world. The Schragger Residence (Don Polsky, AIA), with its rambling contemporary prairie style, is a minimalist frame for an extraordinary collection of imported contemporary art within. These two projects, in contrast to the traditional Boys

Town chapel, presented the struggle, merits and shortcomings in both local and imported design.

The real architectural highlight was the Bertram Goodhue-designed Nebraska State Capitol building in Lincoln. This project, which originated in a national design competition and was constructed in phases during the Great Depression, is a study in collaboration and the heights that can be reached when local and imported

Nebraska State Capitol (Bertram Goodhue).
Courtesy Nebraska Capitol Collections.



influence work together. The Capitol architect, Bob Ripley, AIA, related how Goodhue's practicality and bold departure from mimicking the national Capitol caught the eye of the competition jury.

Goodhue chose the imported notion of an Art Deco high-rise for the office space of the building rather than the traditional neoclassical domed monument. But he also consulted with Hartley Burr Alexander, the philosophy chair at the University

of Nebraska, on the local thematic and cultural condition. As a result, he incorporated Native American and settlers' themes in the materials, ornamentation, doors, light fixtures, and other components of the building. The resulting blend of imported Art Deco and local themes is a piece of architecture rich in detail at every turn.

The exoticism of faraway places has long sparked the imagination of architects and the public. Today, though, it is the emergence of a more fluid contextual condition, not so much a fascination with the exotic, that shapes the popular imagination.

We can sometimes observe, when our gaze broadens, that the local

foreground fails to have the presence it once did. This results in a disconnection with the particularities of place in favor of a distant vision. Incorporating influences beyond the local condition can and does enrich our environments, yet the tangible nature of that which is close at hand and familiar can be reassuring.

Does the quest to participate in the emerging global, imported context have to be at the expense of local knowledge? Might our fascination with the global context cause us to lose sight of the little things, so important in the discipline of architecture? For example, in a place like Nebraska, with its significant climate shifts over the course of the year, can one design a building the same way that would in southern California, with its benign climate?

The definition of context has changed. Connections are fluid in the collapsed space of our world today; distance can no longer buffer ideas or people from each other. At the same time, to ignore the presence of the local environment would disrupt any sense of continuity, casting one adrift in a world with no points of reference. It is not necessary to choose one vision over another in architectural design; if place is to survive in our time, we must strike a balance between the local and the global.

The conservative nature of the heartland and its penchant for pragmatic approaches provided the visiting architects with an opportunity to explore the emerging definition of context in a place that is still largely oriented toward the traditional. Nebraskans still appreciate the beauty of pragmatism, and favor a things with a tangible, lasting presence. In the Midwest psyche, innovation comes through hard work, not by casual inspiration or assistance from elsewhere, though this does not mean

Above: 120 Blondo Building (Randy Brown, AIA).

Below: Schrager Residence (Don Polsky, AIA).

Photos courtesy Ian Mackinlay, FAIA.



the region is blind to outside influences, as can be seen with the Art Deco Capitol.

Perhaps, though, a healthier civic realm can emerge from a local context that is rediscovered, and reinvigorated, by contact with a diversity of outside voices. Perhaps we can find a middle ground where immediate presence of the local conditions is

enriched by the global currents of our time. I, like many in the Plains, am optimistic about the future.

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Top: Hruska Federal Courthouse (James Ingo Freed, DLR). Photo courtesy Ian Mackinley, FAIA.

Bottom: Joselyn Art Museum (Sir Norman Foster). Photo by Tom Kessler.