

Aarhus School of Architecture // Design School Kolding // Royal Danish Academy

The significance of place

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Published in:
Context 2010/2011

Publication date:
2012

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Andersen, A.-G., & Bock, L. N. (2012). The significance of place. In A. S. Jakobsen (Ed.), *Context 2010/2011* (pp. 20-21). Arkitekt skolens Forlag. https://issuu.com/arkitektskolenaarhus/docs/context_2010_2011/20

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE



Students study and analyse a current restoration/transformation of a historical house at Plomari, Lesbos. Photo by Lars Nicolai Bock.



Fieldwork is a central part of studies. Students measure up a warehouse in Flensburg. Photo by Lars Nicolai Bock.

BY ANNE-GRETE ANDERSEN, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ARCHITECT & LARS NICOLAI BOCK, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ARCHITECT

The issue of the significance of place has been an integral part of architecture for a very long time – both in the practice of architecture and in the ongoing theoretical discussion in the profession. There has been a close almost common-sense and craftsman-like connection with the opportunities made possible by the place and the world one lives in with regard to regional architecture or building customs throughout the world. But there have also been examples of building and architecture that may rather have originated in spiritual or religious circumstances. A mixture of the practical and spiritual and, in recent centuries, perhaps the more theoretical, has influenced architecture. The theoretical approach which, from the outlook of the Renaissance, has developed not least from the 18th century up to today is still the subject of discussions, rethinking and criticism.

The way in which international functionalism spread what was for contemporary modernists an almost universal message, met with fierce criticism as early as the period immediately after the Second World War, and architects more interested in the regional developed “the modern” in relation to regional conditions – in many respects.

In the 1980s, the debate about architecture and the way in which projects were conceived were marked by the idea of “*genius loci*” – also at Aarhus School of Architecture. It was not least the Norwegian theoretician of architecture, Christian Norberg-Schultz, who gained international influence with his articles and books. His book, “*Genius Loci - Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*”, from 1980 is central to his theoretical production.

Under the heading of “*Stedets Tyranni*” (“The Tyranny of place”) in Arkitekten no. 2, 2010,

Mari Hvattum provides an account of her thinking about the development of the “*genius loci*” concept. She relates how, from the 19th century, the interest in justifying an architectonic expression connected with the idea of *genius loci*, anchored in special national characteristics and material authenticity, arrived at an interest in place in contemporary architecture where regional kinship can be experienced as the basic motive for some of our day’s most distinguished works of architecture. Paradoxically, the global view has probably given the local view a new and even more important dimension.

In the last paragraph of her article, Mari Hvattum provides a perspective on the preoccupation with place. The paragraph is headed “*Stedet som handling*” (“Place as action”), and it says that an analysis of place seen as a “*dynamic action space, rather than as a static form, can be liberating and contribute to a new interpretation, rather than writing off the local*”. It could be claimed in continuation of this that in working with architecture, it is not possible to write off the local view because projects will obviously always interact with the physical expression and materiality of their surroundings.

In line with Venturi, Mari Hvattum comes up with a warning about making the space concept an undisputed premise for architectonic form generation, and she rounds off with: “*We must be on our guard in connection with the nationalistic and essentialistic undercurrents of thinking in terms of place, at the same time as we must explore, interpret, describe and build the ‘place itself’*”.

In working with architectonic cultural heritage, the question and discussion of the importance of place is of special significance as the task will always include the concept of “the space of action”. The entire range of history and development that has manifested itself in architecture and over the years

In working with architectonic cultural heritage, the question and discussion of the importance of place is of special significance as the task will always include the concept of “the space of action”. The entire range of history and development that has manifested itself in architecture and over the years has left traces in use and wear via maintenance and changing preconditions – i.e. throughout all culture-historical influences – has become embedded in physical form.

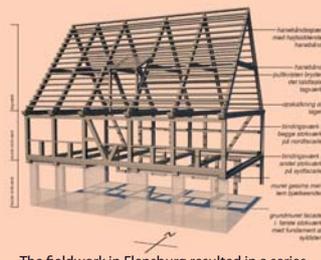
has left traces in use and wear via maintenance and changing preconditions – i.e. throughout all culture-historical influences – has become embedded in physical form.

The task must be to investigate, interpret, evaluate and take a stance in connection with the exploration and preparation of architectural projects that summarise all conscious choices. With regard to the demand that project assignments must show what should be preserved, what values the preserved represents, how these values can be preserved and how “new architectonic cultural heritage” can be created the challenge is precisely to make architectonic values interact with culture-historical values in such a way that all values mutually enrich each other. This is not, in this connection, a question of the tyranny of place, but rather a question of taking an attitude towards and allowing oneself to be inspired by the values of place. In other words, it involves the potential of the place, its architecture, cultural history and narrative properties.

In connection with investigating “the place” – whether it is a city, a neighbourhood or an individual building – there is a need on all scales for specific and specially-developed investigative methods, partly in order to generate functional knowledge of the objects one is working with, and partly to be able to produce documentation for posterity. This means collecting knowledge of the world created by culture, knowledge that can be used and developed, also by others, in the future. Architectural processes can typically be divided into several *phases* in order to ensure that projects are supported by knowledge, and in order to qualify the arguments for the choices made during the working process, both when training architects and in practice.



Pistoia, city wall and surrounding rivers. A city "atlas" of the historical city was prepared during the stay in Pistoia. The atlas set out the observed properties, preservation values and problem areas. **Drawings showing Pistoia's transformation by Johan Stoustrup Jensen and Gustav Nordgreen Kragh-Jacobsen.**



The fieldwork in Flensburg resulted in a series of thoroughly worked-out building studies. **Drawing by Lise Knakkegaard Nielsen, Lærke Karstensen and Mia Thomsen.**



Design and form projects based on building investigations in Flensburg were performed in the historical buildings. **Project by Jonas Hjortshøj Sørensen.**



Pistoia. Students performed individual form-generating projects at city level on the basis of the atlas and preservation value assessments. **Project by Rikke Romm Jensen.**

The phases could include:

1. method development, 2. investigation/analysis, 3. documentation, 4. preservation value assessment, 5. programming and 6. architectonic intervention (form project).

To illustrate this, a selection of various projects that integrate studies of buildings and cities connected with specific "places" to which architectonic and culture-historical values and significance can be ascribed is shown above. These studies, and the accompanying method development, were carried out during fieldwork in Flensburg, Schleswig-Holstein and in Pistoia, Tuscany, in the 2010-11 academic year.

A fundamental precondition for the ability to work in a qualified manner with place analysis in the subject area of architectonic cultural heritage is basic knowledge of the myriad, complex theoretical problems and discussions that have characterised restoration and transformation projects for centuries.

Knowledge of the history of these theories can be brought into play to advantage in such a way as to develop individual architectural projects. Such knowledge means that interventions and ideas will not exclusively be based on aesthetic judgements and arbitrariness, but also on an awareness that enables the individual player to position himself/herself and take a stance in relation to the many theories and theorists of preservation. A theoretical approach of this kind can also be brought out in the architect's drawings which, as an analytical tool, can help to characterise a given place, its atmosphere and preservation values.

Project example: building transformation – Flensburg, Schleswig-Holstein

Many of the main autumn assignments for third and

fourth-year students were located in the mediaeval part of Flensburg. Excellent cooperation was established here with *Amt für Denkmalpflege*, whose staff did a great job of contacting owners and arranging for a large number of historical buildings to be opened for our students in a way that enabled them to stay and work in the buildings for several weeks. Studies took the form of measuring up the houses and carrying out building archaeology investigations, as well as analysing the city's structure and spaces. The studies came to form the foundation for concrete preservation value assessments and the subsequent programming of individual projects. Transformation and form-generation projects were carried out in connection with the objects investigated with the participation of students from all years. Groups of master's degree students performed in-depth investigations at city and building level throughout the term. These investigations came to form the background for longer-term form tasks in the spring. Some ninth and tenth-term students also worked in other, self-elected contextual areas.

Project example: urban transformation – Pistoia, Tuscany

Some of the main spring assignments, especially for bachelor students, had the Tuscan city of Pistoia as their study and project object. Pistoia bears traces of Etruscan times, Roman times, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and offered many analytical and design-related challenges. A number of urban analyses were carried out and compiled in a city "atlas". This was followed up by a singling out of properties and problem areas, and a number of preservation value assessments were conducted in working parties, which again formed the background for students' programmes. In continuation of this, a number of individual transformation and design projects were

performed. The projects took up the various scales in the city, ranging from problems regarding infill and new buildings to major urban building projects and landscape-related data collation.

Seminars and symposia

A series of ongoing external arrangements in which students also take part will be held in the subject area of architectural heritage in order to support teaching, research and practice.

In the autumn of 2010, a two-day symposium under the heading of "Building studies" was held. It was sponsored by Realdania and arranged by the Department of Architectural Heritage, the Aarhus School of Architecture, Aarhus University, the National Museum of Denmark and the Heritage Agency of Denmark.

A two-day academic and social arrangement was held with the help of the association FORUM, which comprises graduates from the Department of Architectural Heritage, Aarhus School of Architecture.

In January 2011, the annual restoration seminar was held at the Aarhus School of Architecture in collaboration with the Heritage Agency of Denmark and the School of Architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Professionals and students from all over Denmark participated.

Department of Architectural Heritage 2010/2011.