CONTEXTUS: A MODERN INTERVENTION IN THE URBAN FABRIC
BY RICHARD GALLAGHER

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture in the Department of Architecture.

Defended on 27 July 2007 at the Washington Alexandria Architecture Center, Alexandria, VA

Susan Piedmont-Palladino - Committee Chair
Paul Emmons - Committee Member
Jonathan Foote - Committee Member
Jaan Holt - Committee Member

All drawing and writing herein is the work of the author, unless otherwise noted.
copyright 2007, Richard Gallagher

Keywords:
civic architecture, context, public library, public space, Shaw Neighborhood, Washing-
ABSTRACT

The word “context” originates in “contextus”, which is Latin for “weaving.” An architectural question arises as to how a building can so integrate itself with a community that is truly woven into the urban fabric.

The Shaw Neighborhood branch of the District of Columbia Public Library system closed in 2004. The building at the intersection of 7th Street and Rhode Island Avenue could no longer serve the needs of the community, and shall be replaced by a new facility on the same site. What are the needs of the community that should be addressed, and by what methods? As a civic building, what role will the new library play beyond that of a place to find books? What are the contexts that the new architecture will confront, and how does this building transcend the contexts of the present to endure as something equally valuable in the future?
This work would not have been possible without the help of many hands. Special thanks is due to the following:

To my colleagues at the Washington Alexandria Architecture Center, for their inspiration and criticism, especially Bill, Erin, Hodges, James, John, Kate, Marissa, and Patrick.

To Ellen, Marcia, and Sebastian, for their interest and ideas.

To Brandon, for giving me an appreciation for public space.

To Mom, Dad, and Caitlin, for their unwavering support through six years of architectural education.

To Megan, for pushing me when I needed to be pushed, and for pulling me back when I didn't.

Most importantly, to my committee, Susan, Paul, Jon, and Jaan, who have been mentors and friends, and whose patience and empathy have given me the courage to succeed.

Thank you!
contents

abstract ii
contextus 03
context of the neighborhood 05
context of the site 17
context of culture 23
context of a library 49
context of building 67
context of time 77
context of process 81
bibliography 93
vita 94
context  construction, composition XV; connected structure of a composition or passage, parts immediately before and after a given passage XVI.


[see also textile, textual, texture]¹
I initially approached this journey with the goal in mind of creating a modern interpretation of an historic vernacular in a particular urban neighborhood. I had always been fascinated by the study of history until quite recently when I realized, through the preparation of this thesis, that the true product of studying history is not a gained acquaintance with the past, but rather a greater understanding of the present. One's current situation is made clearer when considered within the context of all the circumstances that led to it. Thus it is history as the context for the modern world that interests me, more than history itself.

Frampton wrote that "historicism can only result in consumerist iconography masquerading as culture."2 The idea here is that a building that attempts to achieve an antique aesthetic simply for the sake of fitting in will create an environment more akin to a theme park than an actual, working city. This does not, however, advocate architecture that is oblivious to its surroundings, but rather an architecture that is sensitive to the physical, social, and environmental conditions surrounding it. The relationship between a building and a city goes far deeper than the façade.

The word "context" originates in "contextus", which is Latin for "weaving." An architectural question arises as to how a building can so integrate itself with a community that is it truly woven into the urban fabric.

The Shaw Neighborhood branch of the District of Columbia Public Library system closed in 2004. The building at the intersection of 7th Street and Rhode Island Avenue could no longer serve the needs of the community, and shall be replaced by a new facility on the same site. What are the needs of the community that should be addressed, and by what methods? As a civic building, what role will the new library play beyond that of a place to find books? What are the contexts that the new architecture will confront, and how does this building transcend the contexts of the present to endure as something equally valuable in the future?

2. Frampton, Kenneth, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," Perspecta, no. 20, 1983, pp. 147-162. Frampton argues here that, essentially, architecture should come from the culture of a place, not create it.