Context as Palimpsest

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ABSTRACT

The earth which has been considered as Palimpsestic tablet in architecture including different layers of meanings such as history, the bed in which they are formed, environmental and peripheral specifications etc after pause during modern periods affected by the globalization and stopping communicating with the past and the created history and consequently is regarded as white board which the designer designed without considering its layers and elements have been considered by urban architects and designers in addition to other options. These designers try to create architecture which deals with internal, environmental and peripheral issues whether objective or subjective by paying attention to it and translating it according to the modern logic. It is important to know Palimpsest like context, fundamentals of philosophy and its design method especially in historical regions because we can hope that such intertextuality will be created which will express metanarrative belonging to its time while reading and respecting for the test and the past narrations. For this reason, we try to define word Palimpsest and then its specifications for better understanding of this concept and then elaborate different narrations of the concept in architecture with some Iranian and international evidences.

KEYWORDS: Palimpsest, context, inter text, context reading, context drilling, physical Palimpsest, semantic Palimpsest

INTRODUCTION

Relationship between architecture and its constituent before postmodernism especially in eastern architecture were affected by many factors such as stability of social traditions, limitation in selection of material and construction methods and were strong relationship in most cases (although they preferred their ambitions over any other principle in western architecture after renaissance such as romantics period or this relationship was change more or less). According to this approach, designers and architects designed and created their ideas. This unique relationship can be found in some regions with historical record such as Esfahan, Yazd, Rome etc. in modernity period, this relationship was damaged and collapsed on the basis of modernity thoughts which relied on absolute mind and imagined its proof in stopping communicating with the past concurrently with emergence of Stuttgart plan in 1927 and international style in 1932 which predicted a similar type of architecture and urban planning all over the world in order to release from chaos in century 19. According to this approach, we saw formation of metanarrative which includes similar glassy cubes, crystal cities such as cities of Persian Gulf countries especially Dubai and generic cities in developing countries such as Tehran without regard to the land and its constituent bed, the narration which regards itself as spirit of the times and makes other narrations useless.

In postmodernist period, this approach was reviewed when difference and heterogeneity (Bahreini, 2006) became important again and the context as antidote which the modernists had in element of architecture and inattention to place of design and regionalism as the option which reduced modernity globalization claim (meaning its equalization) and allowed emphasis on regional differences were considered by the designers. This attention was paid to architecture and its social philosophy in middle 1970s when post modernity thought was based on three principles of decoration, context and historical documentation (Stern, 1981) and manifested as practical imitation of the Rome and Greece Classic architecture or expanded selective and visual quotation. On this basis, designers tried to achieve legality by imitating the past elements and forms as Taylor believes in book “modernity, post modernity, realism: critical point of view for art “that followers of these persons imagined history as an unlimited source against the events which they faced (Taylor,1987). For this reason, perhaps architecture of this period can be regarded as the architecture which considers visual elements more important than the meanings and symbols and tries to imitate elements belonging to the past.

In the next decades, some concepts such as Deconstruction were developed by French poststructuralist philosopher who was born in Algeria and rhizome like thought and concept of fold was developed by Gilles Deleuze, French poststructuralist philosopher who emphasized on rejection of dual contrasts and redefinition of relationship between writer, text and reader and Félix Guattari, French radical psychiatrist who persisted on concurrence and equivalence of all narrations, this relationship between
designer and land and its bed changed to some extent and were transferred from face and appearance to essence ad internal part. This group of modern designers whom Charles Jencks called young drillers (Jodat 2006) considers the land and its bed not as white board such as modernists or fossilized work belonging to the past but as historians who consider Palimpsest tablet containing different and sometimes contrastive layers from the past and present as secret source beyond their time which can cause to protect historical continuation from the past to the present and to be recorded in the collective memory. Such designers express intertextuality and narration against omission of other narrations or rewriting of the past narration which cause to promote and enrich architecture and its bed while respecting for other narrations constituting architectural bed.

**Palimpsest**

The word Palimpsestic has been derived from Latin work of *palimpsēstos* which has been borrowed from ancient Greek language is a compound which has been made of two parts *palin* meaning again and *psēstos* meaning Rubbed Smooth (oxford online dictionaries). Most of known dictionaries such as Oxford, Britannica etc introduce Palimpsestic as article or handwriting on Papyrus, buckskin, adobe surfaces etc which have been written on effaced writing not completely. Motivation for this case during the history-rewriting – can be found in economic reasons (although Britannica Encyclopedia mentions purification of the Jews handwriting for receiving text of Church as one of the other motivations for this action). In ancient times and before promotion of printing technology in century 15 AD, the old article was effaced due to difficulty and high cost of articles preparation in order to reuse it and then new writing was added on it, Papyrus and buckskin were washed with alkaline material, stone tablet were rubbed with their surface stone and cleaning was not successfully done and some of the previous writing remained on the writing stone in most cases. This action might be done for times and the previous texts created uniform intertextuality belonging to its time besides the new text. This concept was expanded over time and attributed to what includes trace of its past similar sample including culture, language, object, place etc in spite of change over time (oxford online dictionaries).

On the basis of the above definitions, we can claim that trinities are hidden in Palimpsest. The first writing (ancient narration), cleaning (deconstruction of narration) and new writing (new narration). These trinities can occur for times and it is surprising that we will face new intertextuality which is found in border of culture and different times at the end of each period belonging to these trinities. It mixes texts of different periods and we don’t face a uniform text with fixed and reliable values but we face forty part text comprising of different and heterogeneous sets which transfer different rhizomes to the audience. Some narrations with more complexity are formed and text will leap toward higher degree of organization and will have more historical thickness.

Modern example of Palimpsest can be found in carbon papers which are abundant. These papers which are used between two pages should transfer text from upper article to lower article. During this transfer, the written text is recorded on the carbon and if act of writing is repeated for times, we will face different layers of texts which slide on each other and are recorded. Palimpsest plays both roles i.e. protecting traces and readiness for new writing like carbon papers.

With regard to characteristics and definitions of Palimpsestic concept, the second phase of trinities of Palimpsest i.e. cleaning can be regarded as starting point of Palimpsest formation. In this phase, text transformation started and text started to change. The point which is considered in this phase of Palimpsest phase is that effacement in Palimpsest is not a perfect Palimpsest otherwise, there was no text left to be combined with new text and Palimpsest will lose its characteristic. Such traces are left to be ambiguous, full of secrets and anagrams from the old text – pretension of the primary narration which will allow the audience to create and present his narration using it. This phase is similar to concept of “Sous Rature” which has been translated by Babak Ahmadi in book “structure and paraphrase of text “into “exposed to omission” and refers to the text or writing which is cross out and omitted but it is retrieved and written. The third phase may be regarded as the most indexed phase in continuation of Palimpsest because relationship between layers...
is created in this phase and the former layers provide the opportunity for strengthening the latter layers. On the other hand, new layer (narration) seeks their presence in the former layer (narration) and such movement from one narration to another narration is possible. In Palimpsest, relation of layers with each other is not time sequence and is Juxtapositional. Layer A letters may efface layer B letters or vice versa or no part of the effaced tablet and mark and writing may not be available on it. But no one can say that layer A has been turned into Layer B (Bi, 2004). Each layer and text which reflects its former texts is introduction to the future texts that is each layer is trace of other traces (Shaygan, 2002). On this basis, the more uniform combination the new narrations create besides the past narrations on the basis of their conditions changes, this symphony will be more specific and innovative, otherwise, full effacement or rewriting of the past narrations will create uniform or repetitive work. On the basis of above definitions, Palimpsest can be imagined as pluralistic tablet composed of different variables option, effects and effacements, clarity, ambiguity and disorder of additions And erasure, overlap and interference of the material, rewiring of the old elements etc which refer to what has changed over time but trace of the primary forms has remained. On this basis, as said at the beginning of this section, Palimpsest has been released from its original meaning and includes broad scope of concepts such as civilization, culture, language, art, architecture etc which respected its previous narrations and took action regarding rewriting of its narration.

**Palimpsest context**

Context in post modern architecture which was concurrent with emergence of new concepts was promulgated in philosophy twice but on the basis of its time among a group of modern architects who tried to defreeze closed form of architecture in that period. These architects looked at the context of architecture as intermediate including mysterious information which the architect should have translated and objectified them on the basis of the common philosophical issues in order to read the hidden narrations. For these architects, a concept called context lost its traditional value as a field for positioning the building and was converted to innovative medium which has new position in design process due to its internal information. Context is no longer an inspirational source for historian layouts in post modern style but it is converted to long and detailed source of study including a set of narrative and metaphorical massages through which architecture is revived like writing in its formation process, is expanded and grew from its heart. In this case, architecture may be formed which is quoted by Rafael Monee to be called Poly phony (in negotiation with William Kortis, 2000). Rafael Monee is an architect who respects for all available texts in context and doesn’t intend to reject each of them. Concept of Palimpsest in architecture was applied by Peter Eisenman in 1983 on the basis of Derrida’s thoughts in design of Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio where he introduces concepts of "extraction and Palimpsest " as his idea in this project. He explains: we applied the site like Palimpsest: a place for writing, erasing and rewriting, (six concepts, 1999). This concept was used in other works of the architects such as Bernard Tschumi, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid etc which looked at field of architecture including historical, social and physical field. This group of architects believed in context not as neutral tablet which is living and dynamic entity with unique ability to record the events which could have acted like continuation of peripheral memory (Rapaport, 2005). These persons following ideal of Lukach who believed that artistic work doesn’t express feelings, emotions passions and mind of the artist but indicates its internal forces and obtains these forces by contacting the live reality (Ahmadi, 1996) believe that architect is not like panting paper which is used occasionally and on which we draw any design we want but context and site in architecture have internal meaning which can be used as source and reference with which we can start working. Eisenman quotes that land is a unique phenomenon. Land may be available in painting and sculpture but architectural land is not only place of the project execution but also its historical record. On the other hand, land in architecture is like Palimpsest. It means that history is in it and it is not only an empty surface. We try to bring the history to the present as Proust says in order to create the future (Eisenman in Global Congress).

These architects look at the context as text which needs to revise and extract overt and covert interpretations from its heart. Such text constitutes architectural context from abstraction to transformation objectivity and architecture is converted from neutral work with unremarkable aesthetics to dramatic work, the work which follows richness of narration rather than clarity of narration. As result of this attitude, a work will be created which goes beyond its site borders (as a place for layout of the work) to link with and penetrate into its constituent context so that it is not possible to separate work from its context.

**All types of Palimpsest concept in architectural works**

Although use of Palimpsestic concept emerges in works of different Architects in different and contractive forms, we can divide it into two groups structurally and substantially. However, these two cases can be combined with each other. Designers in the first group pay attention to physical elements constituting the context while the second group considers semantic elements as important. On the other hand, what are important in the first group for the designers are the available physical elements while nonmaterial and subjective elements are more important for the second group.
Palimpsest in structure:
This concept emphasizes on the projects in which there are physical residues and trace of the past in the context such as renovation or development of historical parts and are considered in architecture in two forms:
- use of old monuments and residues of the old buildings as idea, structure, origin of new design
- Design of new building in such a manner that the former buildings or its wreckage can be distinguished or used which occur automatically in renovation and reconstruction.

On the basis of this attitude, designers try to mix the relics or traces of the past with their contemporary narrations while protecting them and such strong link is created between the old and new as if the new one protects the old one and you will see the past and future altogether (Austin, 1998).

What is important in this attitude is respect for the past not blind and unconditional respect like what the historians believed which was conscious respect which the designer tries to mention the past narration as new form on the basis of its time. In this case, the past architecture spirit which is hidden and imprisoned and will be delivered and start new life when it is dying. It is necessary to note that such attitude dates back historical antiquity and such thought has been available up to now except the cases which were mentioned above though there may be difference in its expression method at different times and places. For example, such attitude can be found in architecture during periods before modernity especially eastern architecture and architecture of Iran. New architecture didn’t efface the former architecture at most times when it replaced the old architecture but it accepted the old text (Shirazi, 2004) and Biaggio Rosetti, an Italian urban developer and architect who lived five centuries ago believed that architecture and urban development of the past should not be only protected but also we should regard the past and present as integrated organism and blow spirit of the times in body of the architecture and city of the past. He believed that such architectural spirit which is imprisoned and deserted and is dying will be delivered and live a new life (Gharib, 2003).

Figures 2 to 5: pictures of Esfahan Mosque

Top example of this implication can be found in architecture of the Iranian mosques where primary mosques were constructed on wreckage of the past temples (fire temple, atashgah, Mithraeum and the like). One of the most important works is Esfahan Mosque as Palimpsest treasury which shows 13 centuries of change. Such complex which seems to be established on Sassanid building basis was constructed as shabestan with columns in 156 AH of which mihrab and wall facing Mecca have been found today. In 226 AH, a fire destroyed it but larger mosque was constructed on its wreckage. Al-e Buyeh expanded it in century 4 AH and four –patio mosque in centuries 5 and 6 AH. Afterward, domes, patios, shabestans and minarets were added to it over years and periods until it was turned into the present form. We can claim that the available text of the mosque has welcomes abundant texts during different periods.

On the basis of this attitude, we see creation of innovative projects in which designers tried to narrate the old narration with new song. An example of these works can be found in works of the known designers all over the world. One of these remarkable works was Hearst tower constructed by Norman Foster located in New York. When Foster received an order from Hurst Publication Company for construction of a main building in order to gather their staff in Manhattan and near Central Park, main challenge for him and his group was protection of the old building which had been constructed by Joseph Urban in 1920 which was regarded as symbol of identity and long years of this building. On this basis, Foster submitted diamond 40-story tower with approximate height of 182 m to the board of directors with use of his modern language by understanding goal of Joseph Urban in design of the old building which was creation of luxurious but reasonable and honorable form and he emerged a unique complex with use of the old building as gate for the building as if new building was shot by Joseph Urban to the sky like shining missile from the platform designed by Joseph Urban. Such work was created and the old and the new were close to each other as if these two ones were beside each other from the beginning.
In contrary to the first concept which focused on objective realities of the context, this concept considers metaphysical narrations of the context which may emerge at different periods and disappear gradually or be forgotten. For this reason, we can claim that these persons are like psychologists who try to transfer unconscious mind flows to conscious mind flows by reading the unconscious mind. These architects believe that the context has information which is piled on each other due to events and protected as codes in it. Architect is responsible for translating, decoding and then converting this information to the codes relating to their periods. For this reason, architectural borders are beyond physical borders of the project for these designers and penetrate into texture of the history. On the other hand, these designers try to separate from their contemporary history and refer to different history or what was seldom considered.

For these designers, an architectural work should be revived like writing in its formation process, expanded from its heart and penetrate in its surrounding environment. This attitude causes to change formation process of architecture. These designers don’t regard design of a work as directing it from origin to the end but imagine it as open end for it. When these designers name architecture as inter text and mention equal position of work and audience , reading means understanding unwritten massage (juxtapositional architecture) by the audience(or text reader) but because there is no specified end for his inter text , he is forced to change cliché and relationship between text, writer and reader, position of writer and reader are changed. In this complex process, work changes its position to the studied object to a stage in architecture creation process while communicating with the receiver.

Oswald Mathias Ungers , German architect and theorist believes that architecture will survive only when it has amicable negotiation with Genius Loci for which it has been created (Roman myths believe that Genius Loci is the spirit which enlivens people and places and determines their nature from birth to death). Architecture conceives its subject from the environment in which it is located and expands form, language, words and set of shapes in this text. When architecture is not related to conditions in terms of space and concept, it will be nothing but empty and meaningless prestige (Mohammad Zadeh, 2003). It can be considered as manifest for these designers who believe that production of a text is based on context, bed of thought and spatial culture from which text originates, what is in lower layers of the context which includes architecture, what will occur above the building and what will occur around the building penetrate into space of architecture and are effective on design decisions of the architect. For these architects, history means useless and fossilized concept belonging to the past which has changed and is regarded as special representation in heterogeneous narrations.

Of the abundant works of such class are Rafsanjan Sport Complex designed by Seyed Hadi Mirmiran, Iranian distinguished designer and theorist and Galicia Cultural Complex in Santiago de Compostela designed by Peter Eisenman. Mirmiran has used old fridges of Kerman region (Bani Masoud, 2009) of which sample is available in Rafsanjan yet as model, and could have made this concept compatible with a modern construction model and method without any limitation in its utilization and created attractive building with special form, beautiful fitness with modern and traditional material combination. The building has been made from two transparent and nontransparent parts. Nontransparent part is inspired by dome of the imperfect conical fridge which is lighted from the ceiling and includes sport saloons (gymnasium, squash saloons, badminton and multipurpose saloon). Transparent part which includes closed door pools is believed by the designer to be a construction of long wall shade of fridge on the ground which is spatial imagination with long wall on which glassy ceiling relied and covers surface of the pool. Contrast
between these two transparent and nontransparent parts which are linked with entrance space of the complex is one of the innovative and remarkable specifications of this building so that curvature of long wall (in east) has created desirable balance in response to curvature of the imperfect cone in the saloons on the other side of the building (west).

Figures 9 to 11: pictures of Rafsanjan Sport Complex (http://new.njp-arch.com)

Eisenman started his work with land exploration as data source of different periods by combining objective reality and subjective reality (Ivy, 2003). His idea in this project was to prefer Cartesian network (as a symbol of modern geometry) over organic network and middle ages and transform it with lines of force in all three dimensions and create topological surface. He explains in 21th global congress of architecture in Berlin about project: we used the site as data and didn’t intend to create any image. We wanted to construct the building which is taken from the land talks about its history from culture of San Jack, San Diego, San John. We tried to create a thing which is not similar to anything.

Figures 12 to 15: images of Hearst Tower (http://hearstcorp.com)

**Conclusion**

Land generally means site of project due to its unique ability to record history like Palimpsest tablet in architecture which may be regarded as the unique specification of architecture and the most important factor of difference between architecture and other arts and has been raised by the known architects of the world such as Eisenman, Tschumi, Libeskind etc. such group of architects who can be known as modern contextualistic architects and traditional contextualistic architects firstly pay attention to bed as interactive Palimpsest tablet beyond the past and present in contrary to other modern or postmodern predecessors and secondly bed is important for these designers because it is considered as database including different narrations of the events occurring at that time until formation of earth etc. This group believes that any text is a part of social, cultural and historical verse of which reading and understanding require access to its bed. Space of each text is reflection of the previous texts and introduction to the future texts. On the other hand, we can say that each text relates designer to the audience and connects itself to other texts in any complex matrix. For this reason, these designers regarded the project context as source for starting design process and then they try to read and translate the hidden information and narrations in it by exploring it so that they bring the history to the present time to create the future as Proust says. On this basis, inter text will be created which is formed from inside the bed, grows from the earth, expanded and will connect the project to the city and time. Works of such designers are so sensitive and deep in the context that each of these works narrates the designer’s interpretation of the context while attention to the context was reduced to commonplace fanatical limit and imitation of neighborhoods and Reductionism typology. For these designers, context is not regarded as passive object but as active subject which penetrates into the time and has effect on it. We can say that this tendency as a movement tries to create narration and reading of its periods at any time and period while reading and respecting for different narrations in the context. Such new text is linked to the time and is based on time and era because it is based on “to be” and “reading” instead of “being”. Reading which is recreation of text is different in any new experience and travel.
Footnote
1- Intertextuality is the term which Julia Kristeva inspires from Mikhail Bakhtin’s image of Dialogism (compulsory relation of any statement with other statements) in order to make a text from other texts: a work is not self sufficient and governs on its entirety alone but it results from absorption and change of other texts or is taken from quotations. Intertextuality doesn’t relate to effectiveness of one text on another text) but it is based on historically different relations between works as heterogeneous text productions.

2- Yazdkhast Mosque was constructed on atashkadeh, Brujerd Mosque was constructed on partially destroyed atashgah, Mohammadieh Nain mosque was constructed on a Mihrabeh, Ardestan Mosque was constructed on an exhibit.

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