Big Urban Things

Nathan Geller
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This project has evolved from an interest in architecture’s role and impact in the city, as well as a developing interest in the philosophy of Object Oriented Ontology.1 As a way to explore these interests, this project is about contextualizing Bigness2 through the writings of Graham Harman.

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1 Object Oriented Ontology is a movement in contemporary philosophy founded by Graham Harman that rejects the privileging of human existence over that of nonhuman objects.

Context

Physical
Also identified as sensual context, physical context is characterized as anything that can be perceived or felt by the subject. This includes the buildings in the city, the grid of the city, the climate of the city, and the city’s identity.

Discursive
Discursive context pertains to influences from contemporary architectural discourse that influences the building’s design.

Political
The political context presents itself in the form of zoning laws and building codes.

Economic
The economic context of capitalism also influences design decisions.
Context

When considering context, the relations between people and objects and objects and objects present themselves differently depending on scale and the distance to the Big Urban Thing.
Context

When closest to a Big Urban Thing, the contextual relationship is much more tangible. The building form relates to its context through the framing of views, adjacencies to other buildings, and its relationship with the user.
Slightly further from the Big Urban Thing, the contextual relationship mediates between a tangible relation and intangible relation. The relationship to the context presents itself as a more nuanced relational form and posturing within its surrounding context.
Context

At the furthest point from the Big Urban Thing, the contextual relationship is primarily intangible. In this sense, a Big Urban Thing relates to its context by reacting to the city’s identity, character, and essence.
The interest with context, and being contextual, is born from the belief that the ultimate manifestation of architecture is in the built environment. What separates architecture from the fine arts of sculpture and painting is its unavoidable interaction with not only intangible context but tangible context as well.
When considering recent projects that claim to be driven by the influence of Object Oriented Ontology, a lack of a rigorous study of architecture and its context presents itself as a major shortcoming.

2. Zach Grzybowski, Maria Nikolaevski, Danica Selem. “Objectified Field”.
5. Daniel Caven. “Anamorphic Carcases”.
8. Moksud Khan. “Object-Oriented Artifacts”.
10. Cédric Al Kaczyński, Jadran Šm. “Objects in Objects on Objects”.
11. Alex Blügermann, Smita Laskose. “Withdrawn”.
Object Oriented Ontology
Flat Ontology—Vicarious Causation

Object Oriented Ontology claims that all objects, human or otherwise, belong on the same ontological plane. This places the object to object relationship that buildings have with one another on the same level as a person's relationship to a building. In speaking of these relations, Graham Harman introduces vicarious causation as a way to understand and characterize the way in which objects interact with one another. These characterizations (Containment, Contiguity, Sincerity, Connection, None) can perhaps begin to inform new ways in which architecture can begin to relate to its context.
"...many of the relations of containment—one object in another—that you might think are real might not be. It might be that, maybe the house isn’t part of the city. Maybe the house is part of the block and the block is part of the city. The fact that you can state that there is a relation between one object and a larger object doesn’t necessarily mean that it is there."1

**Containment**

*Architecture Relating to the City*

When discussing the problem of context Graham Harman presents this theory of containment which states that a house (or singular building) cannot relate directly to the city as a whole. A house can only relate to its surrounding block, the block can relate to its district or neighborhood, and then that district can relate directly to the city as a whole.
“...many of the relations of containment—one object in another—that you might think are real might not be. It might be that, maybe the house isn't part of the city. Maybe the house is part of the block and the block is part of the city. The fact that you can state that there is a relation between one object and a larger object doesn't necessarily mean that it is there.”

**Containment**

*Architecture Relating to the City*

A Big Urban Thing is something that is too large to be contained by anything except for the city. By introducing a Big Urban Thing into the city, the relation of containment is exploited in a way that allows the relationship between building and city to become present.
How does a Big Urban Thing relate to the city in which it exists contextually?

How does a city absorb something that does not fit within its inherent logic?

**Big Urban Things**

A Big Urban Thing flickers between singular object and a collection of spatial experiences.

A Big Urban Thing is an object and a thing. It oscillates between an object relating to other objects—a physical relationship to built context—and an object in relation to its inhabitants.

A Big Urban Thing is as interested in how its parts relate to one another as how its collective whole relates to the collection of buildings making up the city in which it lives.
Beyond a certain scale, a building acquires the properties of bigness. The best reason to be concerned with bigness is the one given by climbers of Mount Everest: because it is there. Bigness is an ultimate architecture.

In the 1970s, Sigfried Giedion coined the term "bigness" to describe the architecture of large urban areas, such as cities. He argued that the scale of these urban areas is what distinguishes them from smaller, more intimate buildings. Giedion saw bigness as a key characteristic of modern architecture, one that is characterized by a sense of scale, volume, and monumentality.

In recent years, the concept of bigness has been applied to a range of other contexts, from large-scale infrastructure projects to global urban systems. The idea of bigness has been used to describe the scale and scope of these projects, and to suggest that they are characterized by a sense of grandeur and awe.

The concept of bigness is not without its critics, however. Some argue that the focus on bigness has led to a neglect of smaller, more intimate buildings, and to a focus on scale at the expense of other important aspects of architecture, such as form and function. Others argue that the concept of bigness is too abstract to be useful, and that it is not clear how it can be applied to specific projects.

Despite these criticisms, the concept of bigness continues to be influential, and it is likely to remain an important part of the architectural conversation for many years to come.
facade can no longer reveal what happens inside. The humanist expectation of “honesty” is doomed: interior and exterior architectures become separate projects, one dealing with the instability of programmatic and iconographic needs, the other—agent of disinformation—offering the city the apparent stability of an object.

Where architecture reveals, Bigness perplexes; Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What you see is no longer what you get.

4. Through size alone, such buildings enter an amoral domain, beyond good or bad. Their impact is independent of their quality.

5. Together, all these breaks—with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics—imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue.

It exists; at most, it coexists. Its subtext is fuck context.

In 1978, Bigness seemed a phenomenon of and for (the) New World(s). But in the second half of the eighties, signs multiplied
Architecture can only be related to the city through a level of Bigness

**HOWEVER**

Bigness as a theory negates the relationship between architecture and the city.

**Harman and Koolhaas**

Koolhaas’ assertion that once architecture expands to a certain scale that the relationship between building and context becomes internalized creates an interesting paradox when read through the writing of Graham Harman.

It is within this paradox where Big Urban Things find themselves situated. By revisiting Koolhaas’ explanation of Bigness through the writings of Graham Harman, architecture can only be related directly to the city through a level of Bigness.
When looking at existing buildings that can be considered Big Urban Things and comparing their size in terms of square footage to some of the largest buildings in New York City, we can see that the introduction of a Big Urban Thing into New York City quickly becomes the largest project in Manhattan. This perhaps suggests that the strict logic of the grid in Manhattan does not easily accommodate the introduction of a Big Urban Thing. Thus, by introducing a Big Urban Thing into Manhattan, and forcing the grid to adjust, new frictions and relationships will be revealed.
Proposed Trajectory

Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

When comparing the Pentagon to some of the tallest buildings in New York City, the sheer size of the Pentagon can be appreciated.
Proposed Trajectory

*Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City*

Primarily composed of offices for the Department of Defense, the Pentagon also contains a large amount of other programmed areas for the convenience of approximately 24,000 employees.

- 3,700,000 sq ft of Offices
- Pentagon Athletic Center (PAC)
- Meditation and Prayer Rooms
- Hall of Heroes
- (17.5 miles) of circulation
- Food Courts and Shopping Centers
Proposed Trajectory
Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

Originally, the Pentagon was intended to be built on a different site. It is from this site that the pentagonal shape was derived. When the decision was made to change the site for the original design, time constraints did not allow for a complete redesign. Instead, the irregular pentagon designed for the initial site was transformed into the perfect pentagon of which we are familiar.
Proposed Trajectory
Redesigning the Pentagon in New York City

The Pentagon has been moved before. Why not move it again?

By relocating and redesigning the Pentagon in New York City, new frictions inherent in the introduction of Big Urban Things into a city—frictions that the current Pentagon avoids—can be brought to the forefront.