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Selected examples of integrating contemporary architecture into an ancient context

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Abstract: Integrating contemporary architecture into an ancient context is no easy task. High-quality contemporary architecture must interact with older buildings while helping to protect and enhance the inherited heritage. However, the reality on the ground is ambiguous. An examination of contemporary buildings in an ancient context shows the rivalry between several divergent trends in the integration of contemporary architecture in an ancient context: the first trend, oriented towards dissidence with the ancient context, the second trend, geared towards mimicking neighbouring buildings and the third trend, in which contemporary buildings skilfully respect the ancient context in which they are located, while conveying a contemporary and sustainable feel. The distinction in practices for integrating contemporary architecture into an ancient context is an issue that needs to be addressed. We ask the following question: why this distinction in practices for integrating contemporary architecture? This article is an attempt to reflect on this question. It questions the practices of integrating contemporary architecture into old urban contexts, which has been and remains a major issue. It also shows the tangible difference between the provisions of heritage protection legislation relating to the integration of contemporary architecture into an ancient context and the reality on the ground. In terms of methodology, we have compiled a diverse body of data, made up of written documents (books, published research articles and theses) and legal documents (texts of international charters for the protection of heritage). Today, the implementation of legal texts relating to heritage protection, in particular the integration of contemporary architecture into ancient urban contexts, poses problems in the field. The ancient urban context is a whole that must not be fragmented. The traditional setting must be preserved, and any new construction that could alter the volume relationships must be avoided.

Keywords: contemporary architecture, ancient context, rivalry, trends, discrepancy, challenge, protection

INTRODUCTION

Following the adoption of the Venice Charter in 1964, several other charters have been drawn up to protect heritage and ancient contexts (Panayotopoulos, 2015; Mazouz, 2015; Brianso and Tebbaa, 2021). These charters have not only created room for heritage and defined procedures for its conservation. They have also sought to integrate contemporary architecture into ancient contexts, as an integral part of their preservation. In these charters, it is argued that contemporary architecture should interact with older buildings while helping to protect and enhance the heritage, as part of a dynamic and sustainable vision (CAUE, 2015). However, the reality on the ground is quite complex. An examination of contemporary buildings inserted into ancient contexts shows several divergent trends in the integration of contemporary architecture (Woitrin, 1979; Champy, 1999; Mazouz, 2018).

An examination of contemporary buildings reveals rivalry between at least three trends (Mazouz, 2018): the first trend, oriented towards dissidence with the ancient context, which combines more than one style, all distinct from each other, stemming from the different individual options of their designer architects. The second trend, geared towards mimicking neighbouring buildings, where contemporary buildings are not only locked into the past, but also exclude the progress made in construction. Finally, there is the third trend, in which contemporary buildings skilfully respect the ancient context in which they are located, while conveying a contemporary feel and a commitment to the present, and even the future, through the principle of sustainability. We ask the following question: why this distinction in the practice of integrating contemporary architecture into an ancient context? We hypothesise that there is a difference in the way of integrating contemporary architecture into an ancient context, due to the difficulties of implementing international legislation in practice. The international legislation remains global.

The aim of this article is twofold: on the one hand, to examine the practice of integrating contemporary architecture into ancient urban contexts, through selected examples and secondly, to show the tangible difference between the provisions of international heritage protection charters and the reality on the

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ground, particularly in terms of integrating contemporary architecture into an ancient context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first part of the literature review deals with the coexistence of new and old buildings. The second part examines the difficult relationship of harmonisation between old and contemporary buildings in an ancient context.

Coexistence between new and old buildings in an ancient context

Ancient contexts must evolve, integrating contemporary architecture that incorporates parameters from these ancient contexts, in order to mark the contemporary era while respecting what already exists (Milena, 2008). The texts highlighting this approach are by Gustavo Giovannoni (1931) and date back to the early twentieth century, when timber-framed and glazed buildings became models for a new architecture. In Italy, Giovannoni was the first to consider ancient town centres as bearers of history and at the same time catalysts for the invention of new spatial forms. (Choay, 2007) Gustavo Giovannoni opposed the modern town planners who considered the old town to be obsolete, he wrote: "*Transforming and renovating, but in a measured way, without wiping the slate clean, but building on what already exists*". In his view, context was of paramount importance: "*The heritage value of parts of towns is much more than the result of a concentration of buildings, or also the extension of architecture; it is the very structure of the sets that carries meaning and has heritage value*" (Giovannoni, 1931).

Giovannoni also thought about how the new buildings would fit in with the old ones: "*When new buildings are grafted onto older neighborhoods [....], in stylistic terms, we need to maintain harmony between the old and the new [....] proportions, colors and shapes. [....] must be taken into account [....] New buildings must remain in keeping with their tone, even when they when they proceed by bold new inspiration*" (Choay, 2009). In 1964, the promulgation of the Venice International Charter led to greater respect for heritage, insofar as it stipulated that heritage is inseparable from its context (Pomerleau, 2007). Article 6 of this charter provides for the demolition of part of the historic monument and its possible modernisation, while requiring respect for the ancient context: "*No new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and colour must be allowed*". This charter has been supplemented by other texts, in particular the International Charter for the Protection of Historic Towns and Urban Areas, known as the Washington Charter, adopted in 1987, article 5 of which introduces the 'safeguard plan' as a tool for heritage conservation.

The provisions of Article 10 of the Washington Charter also advocate the introduction of contemporary architecture in an ancient context: "*The introduction of contemporary elements, provided they do not detract from the harmony of the whole, can contribute to its enrichment*". Furthermore, the Vienna Memorandum on 'World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture', adopted in May 2005, in particular Article 26, states that contemporary architecture must contribute to the development of the urban landscape and respect its configuration.: "*The development of contemporary architecture [....], complements the values of the historic urban landscape and remains within limits so as not to compromise the historic character of the town".* It should also be noted that Article 7 of the Memorandum states that contemporary architecture and the preservation of the historic urban landscape must avoid all forms of pseudo-historical design, insofar as they constitute a rejection of historical and contemporary aspects.

In 2011, the Valletta Charter stipulated the need for contemporary buildings to be coherent with their context: "*Contemporary architecture must be consistent with the existing spatial configuration*", but also: "*Contemporary architecture should be expressed through projects that respect the scale of the sites, where they are located, maintaining a relationship with the pre-existing architecture and the development model of their context*". On the whole, the recommendations of international charters, as meant by the Venice Charter before other charters originated, stipulate that old and contemporary buildings must not be mutually exclusive, so as not to hinder the coherent development of the ancient urban context. However, the provisions of the charters remain very general and lack practical details for architects. It is in this context that the recommendations of the international charters are being put to the test.

Relationship between old and contemporary buildings in an ancient urban context

Gustavo Giovannoni wrote: "*In the past, as today, there are two opposing conceptions when it comes to renovating an old town centre and defining the relationship between context and new development: according to the first, the vestiges of the past—excluding the most remarkable works and monuments—are so many obstacles to urban reorganization; the second, on the other hand, considers them to be intangible foundations. Such a divergence of points of view has all the appearance of an irreducible opposition between life and history: on the one hand, the positive needs of modern development and lifestyle; on the other hand, respect for historical and artistic memories and maintenance of the general setting of the old town*" (Giovannoni, 1931).

Ancient built environments need to be renewed by contemporary constructions required by the evolution of life. This approach involves using former industrial or urban wastelands, for example, or renewing dilapidated buildings (Mazouz, 2015). It is necessary to develop the old frameworks built in order to preserve them (Mazouz, 2018). However, this need for evolution and innovation requires recourse to context and the notion of contextuality, i.e. an in-depth reflection on the relationship with the site, which was one of the main contributions of post-modernity, initiated in the 1980s. Indeed, postmodernism has the merit of having given importance to history in contemporary creation (Pomerleau, 2009).

Robert Venturi (1966) was undoubtedly one of the very first architects to offer an in-depth critique of the main dogmas of the Modern Movement, paving the way for postmodernism in architecture. Venturi and his followers criticised the purity of modern geometric forms and the rejection of ornament and symbolism. Postmodernists, on the other hand, want to reconnect with different architectural traditions, turning their backs on the universalism defended by the moderns and promoting pluralism (Didelon, 2010). In their view, in order to define the contemporary identity of an architectural intervention in an ancient urban context, it was necessary to have recourse to history, to which, by definition, heritage belongs, and it is precisely in this context that contemporary architectural identity hesitates between the affirmation of its own existence and the literal or metaphorical exploration of historical referents. (Pomerleau, 2009) Linking the two types of architecture, old and new, and creating a balanced whole is a major challenge (Savard, 2015). For many architects, architectural integration means architectural uniqueness, which would be an impoverishment (Woitrin, 1979; UNESCO, 2005) (Fig. 1).

Contemporary buildings will inevitably be out of step with the times and will seem to have always existed in the places where they are integrated. Nevertheless, it is possible to achieve morphological integration by respecting volumes without respecting styles. Morphology is a characteristic of the ancient urban context. Maintaining the size and the structure of urban land is also important when renewing dilapidated buildings (González Mar-

tínez, 2017). Successful architectural integration means subtly and effectively integrating different architectures or volumes into an architectural whole, allowing the introduction of a plurality of choices (Woitrin, 1979; González Martínez, 2017) (Fig. 2, 3).



Fig. 1. The Royal Hotel, in Oran, Algeria. Although the hotel was built recently, it gives the impression of being as much a historical legacy as the surrounding buildings. The external envelope is treated with fluting. The balcony railings are made of wrought iron. However, the hotel's roof is not flat, and it is lit by mansard-roofed openings inspired by the context. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

Conversely, architectural breakthroughs can be achieved through architectural disintegration, as in the case of the verticalisation of the old urban fabric through the construction of high-rise buildings, a reflection of integration with globalization (Rezk-kallah et al., 2021) (Fig. 4) and the economic dynamism generated by the transition to a market economy. This situation shows that the principle of respecting the morphology of the old urban context often comes into conflict with property interests and encourages the adoption of architectural responses to this conflict (González Martínez, 2017).



Fig. 2. Paris Music Factory designed by Gaétan Engasser, in 2020, Paris, France. According to its architect, the building was conceived as a cultural and architectural event in the street. The roof of the building has a vegetable garden that covers a part of the needs of the restaurant on the ground floor. The façade has been designed as a monumental work in its own right. It is white and punctuated with niches, revealing the interior of the venue, or with spaces for expression, sometimes featuring paintings by painters or street artists, and sometimes retransmission screens for live or recorded broadcasts of concerts. (Photo: PARIS, 2021)



Fig. 3. The Dutch Embassy, designed by OMA/Rem Koolhaas, in 2003, Berlin, Germany. Rem Koolhaas combined an obedient approach (strictly respecting the perimeter of the block) with a disobedient approach (building an isolated cube). The cube houses offices, and is surrounded on two sides by a wall—of the same height, housing the embassy residences, and creating a protected inner courtyard. Inside the cube, circulation is provided by a 200-metres path that zigzags through the building's eight storeys. The regularity of the cube's glass and steel façade is again disrupted at times when the path skims the exterior, making itself visible from the outside and offering strategic views of the exterior. (Photo: Kimmel, 2015)



Fig. 4. The headquarters of the National bank in Oran, Algeria. The outer-envelope of this is completely glazed, expressing the nature of its function and its need for the maximum light. The metal structure of the building has been maintained setback to create the curtain wall. The transparent façade of this building is in dissent with the masonry wall pierced with windows of surrounding buildings. A sharp contrast of material and colour is marked between the new building and that old one. This maximum transparency of the envelope on street is confronted with the closure of high side walls delimiting the plot, consequence of the compulsory alignment of buildings along the street. The great office height destroys the effect of perspective on street, whereas continuity between the inside and the outside of the building is developed. The significant elevation of the building shows that the architect-designer lost in this building, his role of "intercessor", between the building and its context. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

Starchitecture is another form of architectural disintegration and exclusion from the ancient urban context (Woitrin, 1979). Created by world-renowned architects, starchitecture is often commissioned by public authorities who want to give their city a new image (Georgescu Paquin, 2014), whose design goes so far as to impose itself and challenge the surrounding order

(Flouquet, 2004). Flagship architectural projects can be used as exclusionary mechanisms to promote culture and tourism, as in the case of the Royal Museum of Ontario in Toronto (Fig. 5), whose nature is eminently political (Dempsey, 2023). These flagship architectural projects have been denounced as a form of denaturing historical heritage in an ancient context. Contemporary architects are more concerned with spectacular beauty and pleasing forms (Di Stefano, 2019).

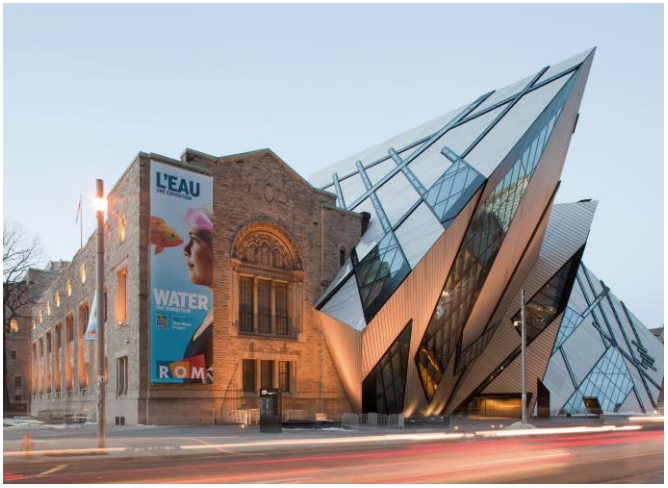


Fig. 5. Royal Museum of Ontario, in Toronto, Canada, designed by Daniel Libeskind. He works on the envelope, not by considering the urban context, but by assuming the cutting-edge identity of his project. As a result, the influence of the context on the project is of little importance to him. He places particular emphasis on the imprint that the building leaves on the urban context. In this way, he seeks above all to create a reflection on the mutation of the context. (Photo: A-Frame Photography; Source: ERA, 2025)



Fig. 6. Citylife Apartments, in Milan, Italy, designed by Zaha Hadid. It features residential and commercial premises along with a large public park, all designed with a focus on sustainability and pedestrian-friendly environments. The residences employ the classical courtyard configuration and naturalistic materials of an historic Milanese neighbourhood, while presenting an asymmetrical layering of the façade. Great care has been given to site and buildings orientation, taking into account environmental and comfort requirements so that most apartments face south-east and at the same time allocate the best views from the terraces, towards the city or the public park. The façades design involves continuity and fluidity: the volumetric envelope of the buildings is defined by a curvilinear movement of balconies and terraces, opening up into a rich variety of private spaces, both interior and exterior, echoing the landscape below. (Photo: Simon Garcia; Source: Archello, 2025)

Sustainable design is also a contemporary concern. It is now a major responsibility for architects. The environmentalist trend is justified by the explosion of universal torment caused by the use of energy and resources. In this context, it is essential to refer to certain fundamental principles of sustainability. One of them is to think in terms of ecological architecture, based on the intelligent use of local materials to adapt and respond to natural climates (Benslimane et al., 2020) (Fig. 6). Alain Liébard and André de Herde (2005) point out that bioclimatic architecture appears to be one of the answers to reducing energy consumption and therefore CO_2 emissions, by taking advantage of the beneficial contributions of the environment, particularly the sun as an inexhaustible, renewable and non-polluting source of energy, while respecting the socio-cultural characteristics of the occupants.

Another equally important principle is biophilia, which must be incorporated into contemporary buildings to combat heat islands in urban environments. The principles of this architecture include the use of natural materials, the integration of natural light, the presence of vegetation, the creation of views over nature and the use of organic forms. By integrating nature and natural local materials, contemporary buildings deliver high levels of thermal and acoustic comfort, improving the health and well-being of residents (Fig. 7). Today, successful new buildings designed within a valued ancient context inevitably rely on the understanding of the character and particular qualities of the context (Macdonald, 2011), but also on sustainability, in order to tackle the climate and health emergency. The historic environment can, in fact, accommodate a rich variety of interpretations and expressions. Nevertheless, the contemporary era is still a threat to ancient urban contexts. The ancient urban context must not be consumed by private profit, as it has a history for each of its inhabitants (Tung, 2001).



Fig. 7. Freeland Innovation Centre in Madrid, Spain. The image shows the interior of a coworking space, specifically Butic Coworking. It is a "boutique" coworking space, which typically offers a more curated and aesthetically pleasing environment compared to traditional corporate offices. (Photo: Discover, 2021)

MATERIALS, DATA, AND METHODS

From a methodological approach, we carried out an inventory of documents relating to the theme. We compiled a diversified corpus of data from the extensive documentation, consisting of written documents (published books, research articles and theses) and legal documents (texts of international heritage protection charters). Analysis of all these documents has enabled us to identify the power relationship between the legal texts relating to the integration of contemporary architecture in an ancient urban context and the reality in the field. To illustrate our text, we have used a number of images available on the internet, in addition to our own images.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with the provisions of international charters for the protection of heritage and ancient contexts, the architect's role in new projects is to encourage interaction between the old urban fabric and new buildings, in order to reinforce the identity of the old urban contexts. However, the reality on the ground is complex. An examination of contemporary buildings shows

the rivalry between three trends in the integration of contemporary architecture into older urban contexts:

The first trend oriented towards dissidence with the surrounding context, associating more than one style, distinct from each other, expressing the individual options of architect-designers, in search of the drafting of a new architectural style in the downtown, daring and contemporary, not taking into account all the parameters of the context, just like the Royal Museum of Ontario (Fig. 5).



Fig. 8. View of a pseudo-historical contemporary building, the hotel Oran-centre, in Oran, Algeria. The first two levels of the hotel form the base from which the compact body of the hotel emerges, composed of a succession of repeated storeys. Between neo-classical and modern styles of the downtown, the hotel proposes a hybrid appearance, resulting from a superposition of ideas, like its reinforced-concrete structure, in setback of its facades, remaining unexpressed on the envelope, with a grooved cement mortar covering. On its outer envelope, the openings are pierced, in a traditional way, skilfully superimposed over the whole height of the building. Their size and design do not express any space particularity. The exterior of the hotel assumes the fullness without creation and reflects the horizontal closure of the building, reinforcing the continuity between the interior and exterior of the building. The imposing height of the building transgresses the urban regulations in force. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

The second trend is rather more oriented toward an agreement with the neighbouring buildings, where contemporary constructions come to exclude the present and the progress recorded in the construction, as the hotel Oran-centre. But thus, the new buildings remain not only, enclosed in the past, but also miss, of commitment in the present (Figure 8). This stylistic choice does not correspond with the provisions of Article 7 of the Vienna Memorandum on "the world-heritage and the contemporary-architecture", adopted in May 2005, and which stipulate that the contemporary architecture and the preservation of the urban landscape, should avoid all forms pseudo-historical design, in so far as they constitute a simultaneous rejection of the historical and the contemporary aspects (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. The Andalusian studies Centre, in Tlemcen, Algeria. The building was inspired by the Alhambra palaces in Granada (Andalusia, Spain). It is composed of a number of rectangular spaces arranged around small patios linked to a large gazelle patio. The envelope of the buildings on the patio is made entirely of glass in a modern style, while the galleries are Moorish-inspired. In the courtyard there is the gazelle fountain, modelled on the lion fountain. The building is in dialogue with the garden and the water. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

The third trend reflects a competence to edify (Choay, 2007). Contemporary constructions have a coherent relationship with the buildings surrounding them in the patrimonial context, while being carriers of contemporaneity. There are architects who design contemporary buildings that blend harmoniously into their environment, taking into account the history, culture, climate and topography of the site. The task is not an easy one. Architect Jean Nouvel is a case in point. He claims an absence of style all his own. He starts each of his projects with a free mind, free of all preconceived notions, like “the institute of the Arabic world" (Fig. 10). The Citroen car House (Fig. 11) located in Paris, France, is another example.

In essence, architecture is a form of human expression that is here to stay. But it remains fragile and unstable, in need of restoration and transformation, and sometimes even destruction (Verdier, 2014). Through the buildings that remain, as through the memory that is rebuilt, the architect is captured by temporality: *“Every architectural gesture, every project, every achievement, every attitude, intends to be a posture of the present, but we know very well that every work is a rewriting of the past*" (Verdier, 2001). It is an illusion to think that a ready-made projection of a historical period can be transposed to the present (Mazouz and Triqui, 2024). The past cannot be repeated. However, it is not forbidden to copy from the past, and it is even recommended to build on past solutions (Maas et al., 2017). Maas et al. (2017) recommend improving on the explorations, innovations and suggestions of our predecessors at several levels.

According to Maas et al. (2017), in contemporary Western culture, the practice of Copy and Paste in architecture is associated with imitation, falsification and hollow echo, rather than creation: ‘It is seen as a parasitic method of production that dilutes original ideas rather than nurturing new ones. In this limited way, contemporary Western culture turns against formal tradition and convention. Although cutting and pasting is seen as a retrograde method, it has always been—with the exception of the spread of the modern movement—a historical necessity: “*Strange as this seems, history shows that Copy Paste has been a primordial power in Western architecture, and one continuously in use*”. Apparently, there are no really original or less original ideas for integrating contemporary architecture into an old urban context. In the same old urban context, although the basic intention is the same, two architects would not achieve the same result, the same design or a similar emotion because their expe-

riences, education, knowledge and cultures are neither similar nor related, given the diversity of landscapes and the identity of the architects and the richness of the heritage (Savard, 2015).



Fig. 10. View of the institute of the Arabic world in Marseille, France, designed by Jean Nouvel. This building follows the profile of the parcel and respects the parameters of the context, and is in adequacy with its immediate environment. Nouvel sees contemporary architecture as a new materialisation through the use of the most representative technologies and materials of the moment, such as wood, steel and glass, which are completely new materials because they offer greater properties and possibilities than in the past. Anxious to preserve the specificity of the site, this architect uses technology and materials to his advantage. Refusing to create banal copies of oriental motifs, he reinterprets geometric ornaments and combines them with technology. In the Institute du Monde Arabe, Nouvel used a number of clear representations of the Arab world, such as moucharabiehs. But these are not just ornaments; he has reinterpreted them and adapted them to the present day. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

Quality contemporary architecture that resonates with its context is part of the heritage approach, its dynamism and its durability. For the architects, it is essential to visit the site where the new building is to be erected. It is a stage in the process of immersing oneself in the place, on the scale of the building and its site. Architects must learn to analyse and look at the built environment. Studying what already exists is an important phase in the development of projects in an old context. Architects should perform surveys, which help to support their design of new buildings. There is no standard solution for successfully integrating contemporary architecture into an old context, but there are solutions adapted to each context, and understanding and appreciating the pre-existing heritage is a prerequisite for the success of a new project (CAUE, 2015). In addition, international heritage protection charters need to be clarified in order to ensure that contemporary architecture blends in as well as possible with an older urban context.



Fig. 11. The Citroen car house in Paris, France, designed by Manuelle Gautrand. The view of the façade shows how the structure of the new building stands out from its neighbours, while echoing their scale. The architect has used the double chevron symbol of the firm, and designed a complex glass façade, highlighting various platforms on which vehicles will be displayed. (Photo: Authors, 2015)

CONCLUSION

The Venice Charter embodies the greatest advances in the conservation of historic monuments and sites, and its principles are still respected by heritage practitioners. But it has undeniably failed to define precise principles of intervention that could be applied to ancient urban contexts, leaving this task as an open question for the contemporary era (González Martínez, 2017). Today, there is a real power struggle between the legal texts relating to heritage protection, in particular the integration of contemporary architecture into old urban contexts, and the reality on the ground. Renewing the identity of a constantly changing historical context is not a simple matter. Integrated into an ancient context, today's contemporary buildings will be tomorrow's heritage. These buildings can be as discreet and modest as they are visible and discursive. Architects have a role to play here.

To the question of how to put architecture back at the service of a strong identity, the answer is that it is first a question of identifying and understanding the territories in which architecture is implanted, then of drawing on the materials (stone, earth, light, plants) that occupy these territories to create an architecture with them (Cassulo, 2016). The ancient urban context is a whole that must not be fragmented. The old setting must be preserved, and any new construction likely to alter the relationship with the old buildings must be avoided. New buildings must be well integrated into their ancient urban contexts, and be contemporary and sustainable. The provisions of international charters must be further specified. Architects must design buildings that have a low carbon footprint (using solar panels,

recovering rainwater and planting purifying vegetation will help to offset their carbon footprint) and that respect the old context in which they are integrated (density, scale, etc.). These buildings must be constructed using natural, local materials, so that they will endure for future generations, while preserving the legibility of the old urban context.

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