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STRENGTHENING SURROUNDINGS

**ARCHITECT
JOANNA SHAW ON
ARCHITECTURE THAT
CONTRIBUTES TO ITS
ENVIRONMENT**

Landscape, environment, culture, politics, and emotion define the meaningful relationships between building and context. Joanna Shaw of Winkelman Architecture is inspired by architecture that's founded on a sense of place and in turn contributes to the greater extents of its environment. "The potential for distinct connections is nearly infinite and ever-changing," she says. "Architecture shares identity, reason, and responsibility in a capacity that begs design to strengthen its surroundings. A building's beauty and sensibility is therefore greatly defined by its connections to the land and its capacity to embrace the needs of its inhabitants." *MH+D* asked Shaw to tell us more.



IN *MH+D*'S CONTINUING COLLABORATION WITH AIA MAINE, WE PRESENT TO YOU EACH MONTH A DESIGN CONCEPT FROM AN ARCHITECT'S POINT OF VIEW.

Q. What is an example of contextually inspired work?

A. A beautiful example was captured in MoMA's exhibition *Small Scale, Big Change*. This show celebrated a collection of works that individually stimulated and transformed the communities in which they were built. Each project is unique in context and design, but each is so clearly inspired by the culture that surrounds it. Inspiration may be found in the craft of local tradesmen, existing social structures, and the need to meet economy in its greatest challenges. Among the 11 projects from five continents, Kéré Architecture's primary school transformed the notion of using local materials and skill to build beautiful spaces. Elemental's Quinta Monroy Housing project embraces local population growth and the character of informal housing settlements to create dwellings that invite adaptation. And Auburn's Rural Studio teaches about community strength and resourcefulness to build shelter in places where it is most needed. This show proudly boasts the minimal scale of its projects, "limiting interventions with wide-reaching efforts" to address the collaborative nature of design as a partnership. A commitment to ecology, social sustainability, and economy is a reminder of the strength that grows from modest yet ambitious designs.

Q. What does designing to strengthen a site involve?

A. It relies on discovering the most valuable attributes, hidden secrets, or possibilities. The characteristics of a context offer an opportunity and challenge to tell a story through design. My process is guided by exploring the narratives of a site and its experience. Each project sets forth a path of experimentation, testing ideas to inform new possibilities of integrating space with its environment and landscape. Out of the complex challenges of marrying a client's program to the specific nature of a site, phenomenal opportunities for creativity are born.

Earlier this year I dove into a project that presented challenges around every corner. A beautiful site with north-facing views was tucked in the shadows of its forested edge. The topography contributed a dramatically sloping landscape and a narrow stream. Siting a home here was an invitation to embrace the landscape and the recreational aspiration of its inhabitants. This dwelling was perched out on the edge of a steep descent to harness sunlight beyond the trees' shadows, and the design created access across the terrain as an inhabitable trailhead for hiking, skiing, and snowshoeing in to the beloved site. On my first visit I was captivated by phenomenal views. But, as the stillness awoke into a soft breeze, the trees came alive in a symphony of clapping leaves. The sounds here were unique and crisp, beyond the typical rustling of leaves, special to this place. It became clear to me that, beyond its connectivity to the land, the interior space of the house should be designed to amplify the acoustical qualities of the site.

Context is greater than a moment in time; it is inherent in the longevity of a bond between building and site. The temporal nature of the environment drives architecture to become integrated within its surroundings, continuously adapting and forever binding to a notion of belonging. A building wants to live and breathe as a character in its environment. As leaves fall from the trees, light and view change the sense of space. As people age, their relationship with a building transforms. And, as a city grows around a once quiet plot of land, new life is introduced to an architecture that must stimulate and embrace change.

Q. You've spent some time abroad. How has that influenced your work and this idea?

A. I enjoy designing in regions where the significance of context is culturally embedded in the design process. My time in Australia drew me to the dramatic climate and interwoven aboriginal and western cultures that evolved into a uniquely specific conception of dwelling. Such experiences continue to propel my passion for contextually responsible design and my capacity to relate with the natural and social environment. The people we design for become as much a part of context as the surrounding landscape.

Now residing and designing in Maine, my work continues to carry a great sensibility for local ecology and climate. A client's perception of the environment or personal connection to the land often binds each project. Personal narratives reflecting tradition, family, and the anticipation of future generations carry through the sweep of carefully crafted spaces and beyond the walls of a home to the greater extents of a site. This shared desire to celebrate context enhances my design works, and contextualism thus resonates through my process. *MH+D*

