

Layered Architectural Readings of Sandi Simon Center for Dance

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Abstract – The act of engaging in architectural 'reading' entails the discernment of constructed realities within the context of the built environment. The newly introduced dance studio, Sandi Simon Center for Dance, has chosen to be read in architectural dimensions to reveal the concealed meanings in the form of interpretations and anticipations. The study aims to analyze an architectural narration that involves the understanding of conceptual features together with the interpretation of perceptual understanding, thus the messages perceived by the constructed reality will be illuminated through the architectural storytelling. It dwells upon Marshall McLuhan's pioneering statement of 'medium is the message'. It is posited that the architectural reading of the Sandi Simon Center for Dance reveals a multilayered understanding of the constructed reality within the built environment by revealing the intricate relationship between the physical environment, human experience, and the intentions of the architect. Furthermore, it showcases how the design choices, spatial arrangements, and materiality of a building contribute to its narrative, meaning, and significance within its cultural and social context.

Keywords – Architectural reading, Space experience, Architectural storytelling.

I. INTRODUCTION

The act of engaging in architectural 'reading' entails the discernment of constructed realities within the context of the built environment. The newly introduced dance studio, Sandi Simon Center for Dance, has chosen to be read in architectural dimensions to reveal the concealed meanings in the form of interpretations and anticipations. The intention is not only to deduce the established narration of the building but to appreciate it through a multilayered architectural reading that involves the understanding of conceptual features together with the interpretation of perceptual understanding, thus the messages perceived by the constructed reality will be illuminated through the architectural storytelling [1]. In this manner, the story told by the architect has been conceived as the one to give 'order to the experience' of the people - in the case of Sandi Simon Center for Dance, mainly the dancers and students - whereas the story to be narrated within the report attempts to read the intended experience from different perspectives and layers to perceive the acquired understanding [2]. Hence, the report belongs to the notion of architectural sense-making by deciphering mainly the meaning beneath the spatial arrangements and the tendencies observed in human interactions in relation to social, contextual and historic intercourses. A philosophical discussion is attempted in order to, as Pallasmaa suggests, understand the interaction between the world and human existence built through the 'embodied material act of construction', which is architecture [3]. The following three attitudes towards architecture, listed by Adam Sharr, have paved the way to read the chosen piece of architecture by regarding its context, elements, cultural insights and given messages as it is driven from the architectural fabric.

1. Buildings are evidence of the cultures that made them; [...] a building is the best indicator of its own intellectual position.
2. Buildings have multiple authors. [...] The role of inhabitants in configuring and reconfiguring spaces is just as valid as the role of any professional.
3. Architecture is anticipated through drawings and contract documents. [...] the gaps between their abstract conventions and people's sensuous appreciation of the material world can yield important insights into the professionalized cultures of architects and others in the construction industry [4].

In light of them, architectural readings in this report dwell on the discussions about the cultural particularities of the building, the role of the inhabitants - or to use Anders Aman's terminology - acquired meanings produced over time [2], and lastly the altered messages in relation to changing mediums: the two intertwined concepts as raised by McLuhan's thesis: Medium is the Message [5]. In this point, before starting to read the building, the architectural features, and how and in which intentions it has been designed will be discussed by giving brief information about the design, the context, and the history of the site.

II. INTRODUCTION OF THE WORKING AREA

The Sandi Simon Center for Dance is a three-level, approximately 3100 square meters study and performance venue; it was designed upon the strategy of adaptive reuse of the historic Villa Park Orchards packing house (Figure 1) in California which was originally built in 1918 [6]. The building was retrofitted by preserving the main structural systems and the outer shell of a former orange packing warehouse, and it was launched in January 2023. The project under consideration exhibits characteristics indicative of a nascent endeavor, marked by its novelty and contemporaneity. The responsible

architect charged for this revitalization project was the architectural studio LOHA, also known as Lorcan O’Herlihy Architects, who had the renovation idea of converting an agricultural building into a light-filled dance studio. The historic building was preserved with the characteristic envelope keeping the industrial aesthetics as it is while the spatial arrangement was thoroughly changed. The specificity of the building is reflected in being both a dance facility and a historic retrofit, which makes the building structurally sound and incorporates the unique aspects of the historic space into the new dance center [7].



Fig. 1 The former Villa Park Orchards packing house [6]

III. READING THE ARCHITECTURE

A. Breathing new life into the legacy of antiquity

“Architecture carries content through the arrangement of spaces, materials, social relationships and the cultural purposes with which it is invested” says Sophia Psarra [8]. Her argumentation delves into the examination of architectural conception as it exists within the abstract domain of formal and spatial relationships. To comprehensively look into design intentions and perceptual meanings, it is crucial to comprehend the occupation of physical space by the corporeal reality in conjunction with spatial relations.

The most apparent spatial organization of The Sandi Simon Center for Dance evokes a sense of movement and integrity. Conceptually and programmatically, the dance studio is portrayed by the ‘calculated cut’ through the floor plane (Figure 2), allowing for a readjustment of the space into three interconnected levels. In an endeavor to design functional spaces harmonious with the human scale, the once monolithic space belonging to the image of a warehouse has given way to a fragmented configuration comprising interconnected spaces. The levels are structured around a precisely described circulation through the former packing house which, programmatically, connects the courtyard on the bottom floor to the dance studios, communal spaces, and classrooms by scripting a storyline arriving at each of the floors with an uninterrupted circulation and the multi-floor atrium. Therefore, with the intention of bringing a sense of motion throughout the entire structure, the center of the original workspace floor has been carved out. It has dropped the entry-level one-story to the former basement, which was formerly nicknamed “the dungeon” — untapped potential that became central to LOHA’s strategy [6]. In this sense, the experience of the motion has affected the image as Charles Jenks posits [9]; the design office has defined a point of departure, a welcoming entry where the journey leads to catwalk-like circulation starting from a sunken courtyard. Here, it is seen that, a basic design operation turns into a manifestation to interpret how spatial relationships are proposed and perceived. The extracted

space and the void it produces are strategically employed to shape and reconfigure space. The media - void - is the message that demonstrates the penetration, flow, and involvement; the messages can be multiplied.

Fig. 2 LOHA opened up the interior by making a “calculated cut” through the floor plane [6]

Architecture conveys meaning in two similar ways, says Jenks, “either through opposition or association” [9]. In this context, the central essence of the project lies in the intentional emptying of content facilitated by the atrium void, thereby evoking a discernible contrast with stability while fostering a sense of openness and connection. In other respects, the design operation, perceptually and in fact, conceptually opens a “porous lens on the ancient boundary” [10]. Holl explains this porosity as “the experiential phenomena of spatial sequences



within, around, and between which triggers emotions and joy in the experience of architecture. [...] porosity, when fused with light, attains choreographic virtuosity” [10]. The notion of “choreographic virtuosity” presents itself as a captivating concept, wherein the activities surrounding the void become perceptible as studiously orchestrated or ‘choreographed’. This acquired connection between the intended design and the function of the building gives rise to an interesting narration. Jenks expresses these creations by saying, “[...] in the usual experience there is always a percept, a concept, and a representation. This is irreducible. In architecture, one sees the building, has an interpretation of it, and usually puts that into words” [9].

On the ground and upper floors, curvilinear volumes engage in a choreographed interplay reminiscent of dancers, dynamically shaping the spatial composition akin to an architectural tango (Figure 3). The physical body is invited to resonate with this physical dynamism of spaces by being a part of the experience, as the movement is ‘an instrument of the body and bodily memory for experiencing architecture’ [11]. The movement initiated from below also seems choreographed as it is viewed from the elevated stage when the visitor makes their way to the top-level loft. In the spirit of citrus packing and dance studies, these ‘hardworking interiors’ have retained some of their industrial character by showcasing the dynamic essence.

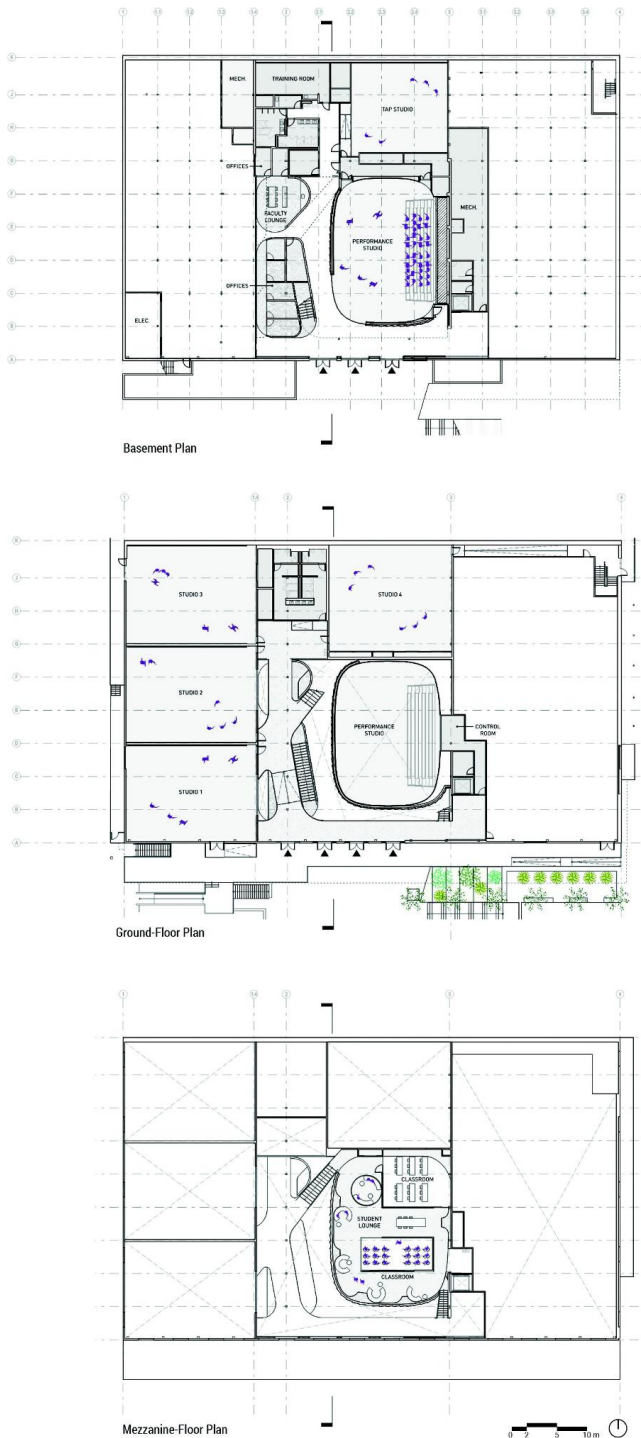


Fig. 3 Floor Plans of The Sandi Simon Dance Center [6]

Although the renovation strategy was designed around preserving the building's existing spaciousness, the associations with dance and movement seem to be built by the introduction of extraction in the form, which is rather a lot interesting in its ability to produce the image of itself. Adopting an adaptive reuse strategy had been embraced as a dedication to the preservation of a local historic landmark yet, the distinction between the old and the new was designated as perceptible. The message derived from the medium, in this sense, is the revitalized cherished connections with the past and the new life breathed into the legacy of antiquity, which is

comprehended through the carved-out former space. By largely emptying specific meaning from form, the building provides a richness to undertake multiple readings and assumptions. The spatial reorganization of the area previously designated for housing stable objects, such as oranges, now accommodates dynamic bodies, exemplifying a transformative process that reflects the evolving nature of the space. This serves as a manifestation of the fact that a single building does not possess a fixed meaning amidst the changing scales, paces, cultural dynamics, and social needs, where messages undergo continuous alterations [2]. As Marshall McLuhan stated, "The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" [5]. In the specific case being discussed, the building's conceptual framework has undergone a dramatic shift, transitioning from its prior function as a warehouse, situated alongside the railroad tracks, to its current incarnation as a contemporary dance school. In this context, the role of ever-changing media blurs the boundaries between the architectural form and its associated symbolism. The two become intertwined within the reorganization of spatial attributes, representing a convergence between the intrinsic nature of the space and the transformative power of the media.

B. Tectonically Built Narrative

Structurally, the building is composed of wood-frames supported by large trusses. Above this heavy timber post-and-beam structure, the original saw-tooth roof ascends, showcasing its timeless beauty. The process of utilizing the elements coming from the existing building is defined as "celebrating uniqueness" by the designers because of the building's structural representation of the industrial vernacular style of its time [7]. The specificity of the tectonics has been preserved, while new structural elements have been incorporated to enhance its strength and structural stability. "We simply painted it white," says LOHA founding principal Lorcan O'Herlihy, "allowing the rawness of the original details to read through" which is according to Wigley, the perception of the "mask of unmasking" [12].

The deliberate choice to expose and preserve the immense historic trusses creates a commanding architectural presence, where the repetitive and distinctive nature of the structural system reinforces the message of dynamism (Figure 4). From the lower level, the wider view accentuates their lofty stature, while at the mezzanine level, their proximity offers a tangible and awe-inspiring experience, reinforcing the architectural significance of the space. The design facilitated a multi-faceted experiential journey for participants, wherein their spatial positioning determined distinct sensations and perceptions. As Alain De Botton states [13], architecture "invites, rather than orders"; here the visitor is invited to feel various connections with the space through sensual cooperation; where, at some points, the unobstructed exposure of the elements imparts a sense of spaciousness, allowing the performance of the tectonics to complement the movements of the dancers (Figure 5). The renovated space exhibits a thoughtful selection of materials and finishes.



Fig. 4 The sense of dynamism fostered by the repetitive structural elements

The circulation areas retain their existing concrete floors, now treated with a micro-top layer, while the dance spaces feature sprung floors with Marley-type vinyl surfacing. The design team, creatively repurposed the original maple planks from the packing-room floor, utilizing them as vertical cladding for the office volume and main stairway to evoke a historical ambiance. In contrast, new mill work, such as the sculptural hang-out areas and the performance space's shell, is meticulously crafted from pristine maple, resulting in a sleek and precise finish. This intentional juxtaposition of the new and reclaimed materials adds depth and character to the space. The cladding of the performance volume follows the architectural rhythm of the jagged roof, featuring a vertical saw-tooth profile that elegantly traces its curved form, reminiscent of the teeth of a circular saw blade (Figure 6). Here, referring to the term 'material imagination' - which is coined by Gaston Bachelard and indebted by Umberto Eco - holds significant relevance. Eco's conceptualization of the 'connotative' and 'denotative' in relation to architectural elements shows the function of the architectural elements in two senses: utilization for the activities they accommodate and facilitate, while simultaneously embodying poetic associations [14].

Light is also a part of the sensuous experience, which is primarily incorporated into the perception through the saw-tooth roof. The light coming from the operable north-facing clerestory windows illuminate the working spaces and studios by allowing for natural light. By strategically employing translucent, channeled polycarbonate sheeting as partition walls, and incorporating interior storefront windows, or viewing apertures, within the studios, the architects achieved a remarkable integration of light rays and sight lines throughout the entire space. Therefore, the partition walls made of polycarbonate provide translucency and reflectivity, serving as a medium through which the architectural composition arises the concepts of movement and the ephemeral nature of performance inherent in the program; the poetic associations are embodied through the architectural elements as Eco suggests [14]. Translucency, which is often defined by "what it is not" enhances and prioritizes the tectonically built narrative [15]. The approach of translucency juxtaposes the prevalent modernist concept of architectural transparency. While transparent materials promptly expose the spatial realm beyond, translucency in materials does not possess the same

immediate revealing quality. At the same time, translucency does not entirely obscure the space beyond, unlike opaque materials. Translucent materials occupy a middle ground between transparency and opacity, imparting a distinctive quality of mystery and ambiguity typically associated with translucency. In this sense, ambiguity has the potential to generate an intricacy within the realm of sensory perception. Murray points out this by claiming that,

Architects who engage these ideas in their work often do so through the deliberate use of innovative cladding materials and fabrication techniques, resulting in building skins imbued with an enigmatic ambiguity. These constructions respond to the most subtle changes in lighting conditions, and, in contrast to transparency, fully reveal their nature only through the passage of time and through the exploration and experience of both interior and exterior space [15].



Fig. 5 The movement of the dancers complemented by the architectural elements (Left)

Fig. 6 The sawtooth-profile shell (Right) [6]

In this point, it is crucial to underline that the media employed in the form of large trusses, a saw-tooth roof, translucent materials, and natural light not only convey a message but also epitomize the image of the building. Through a profound understanding of the interplay between the physical environment and human behavior, and recognizing the pivotal role of the architect, these materials and their overt tectonic expression establish a profound statement about the architectural composition. According to Coleman, "embodied experience counters the alienation of form from content and matter; mind from body; and everyday use from formal (or theoretical) virtuosity" [16]. The argument suggests that architectural form should not be detached or isolated from the content it houses or the materiality it is constructed with. In other words, the physical form of a building should be closely connected to its purpose, function, and the materials used in its construction.

The Sandi Simon Center for Dance exemplifies a case where structural elements, lighting, and carefully selected materials have seamlessly integrated into the nature of dance, creating

an inseparable union. The materials have evolved by the function, where the function has reverberated through the materials; and emerged in such a poetic harmony. This architectural manifestation has aimed to generate an image of itself, actively engaging in the process of self-representation and identity construction within the built environment. The architecture becomes, as Baudrillard suggests, transparent:

the murder of the image [...] lies in this enforced visibility as source of power and control, beyond even the 'panoptical': it is no longer a question of making things visible to an external eye, but of making them transparent to themselves. The power of control is, as it were, internalised, and human beings are no longer victims of images, but rather transform themselves into images [17].

In this context, the constructed image through the active participation of the body merits a separate discussion independent of the tectonically constructed narrative.

C. Interplay of body and gaze

Further investigation is warranted into these 'images' produced through bodily engagement as spectacles designed for the spectator. The involvement of the body manifests in diverse alternative forms across the space, where the temporal and rhythmic qualities invite a discussion on movement—especially when the subject of inquiry is a dance studio. In several instances, the building's design encourages outside observers to engage with the interior activities. The visual connection blurs the boundary between practice and performance. The movement that originates within the studio spaces finds its embodiment and reflection in the circulation and recreation areas. Thus, the potentiality of spaces is interconnected with the potentiality of different bodily experiences; the body exists, experiences, and has an impact within this shared realm of space and time. From this point of view, Grosz's notion about the interplay between the body and space concludes that,

The limits of possible spaces are the limits of possible modes of corporeality: the body's infinite pliability is a measure of the infinite plasticity of the spatiotemporal universe in which it is housed and through which bodies become real, are lived, and have effects [18].

The space, in this sense, allows the body to be realized freely within the limits of corporeality. The body possesses the space through expression movement and realization; "we feel pleasure and protection when the body discovers its resonance in the space" [11]. This experiential resonance expresses itself in various points of the design where the interior and exterior space are separated physically by allowing a gaze to experience it through an intentionally designed frame (Figure 7). Therefore, conceptually, spatial experiences within the building are guided to be put on display through the powerful mediums; the window, as the medium, becomes the media to frame the "body's mechanical substitute" or, as Colomina defines by referring to Le Corbusier, "an extension of human limbs" granting individuals the power of sight [19]. The act of showcasing the spaces and the movement of the bodies to an

external gaze evokes the birth of spectacle through the observer's eyes, embracing the unfolding narrative of architectural composition (Figure 7). The spectacle, says Debord, "is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" [20]. In this context, the windows on the partition walls are introduced to give an idea about the interior space by revealing the inside, not only serving as frames capturing the movements of the dancers but also encapsulating their intricate interplay. The gaze through the spaces implies the notion of the relationship between inside and outside, which according to Lefebvre provides a ground for 'empathy with another moving body' where the movement exposes the rhythm of the architecture.



Fig. 7 The act of showcasing the spaces and the movement of the bodies to an external gaze [6]

The body of the observer rests outside not as a mere gaze but being a participant into the spatial experience where social interaction is provided. The rhythm, on the other hand, is promoted by the repetition of architectural elements, repetitive structural elements, and lighting systems – besides the one emerging because of the essence of function. Nevertheless, the arrangement of bodies are perceivable as having notions by reverberating through the architectural rhythm; they become a part of it; as Rasmussen suggests, "how you move in the space makes it rhythmic". The dancers' move, dancing in the defined space, makes the space rhythmic; the space captures the rhythm of the dance. The viewer perceives or grasps this rhythm and unification because it observes the space as a gaze

by being simultaneously inside and outside (Figure 7) as Lefebvre proposes by his notion of ‘Rhythmanalysis’.

In order to grasp and analyze rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely: be it through illness or a technique. [...] to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration. In order to grasp this fleeting object, which is not exactly an object, it is therefore necessary to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside [21].

In this context, the instance in consideration - where the spectator and spectacle meet in a designed frame - exemplifies the reflection of Lefebvre. A competent point to analyze the rhythm of architecture is situated along the line where the window separates the bodies as a mere physical obstacle allowing the penetration of gaze. Within the collaborative exchange of gazes, a profound sense of inclusiveness emerges, raising a feeling of belonging and engagement.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research illustrate the dynamic interplay between architectural design, bodily experience, and spatial perception within the Sandi Simon Center for Dance by revealing that the adaptive reuse of a historic structure, combined with innovative architectural interventions, generates a complex and multilayered spatial narrative that goes beyond mere functionalism. Key findings are as follows:

The design of the dance studio embodies a narrative that is both open to be read in terms of conceptual and perceptual meanings. The introduction of voids, particularly the central atrium, establishes a choreography of movement and circulation that is experienced at multiple levels. The interplay of openness and connectivity within the building enhances the quality of space, allowing the users—dancers, students, and visitors alike—to engage with the space on a sensory and emotional level.

Preserving the original industrial elements, such as the heavy timber trusses and saw-tooth roof, and carefully incorporating new materials, fosters a dialogue between the historic and the contemporary. The juxtaposition of reclaimed materials with modern finishes enhances the narrative of architectural continuity and transformation. The integration of old and new materiality is instrumental in creating a sense of identity and belonging within the space.

The role of the human body as a central medium for architectural experience became evident where the dance center’s spatial configuration invites active bodily engagement, transforming the space into a performative environment where movement is both generated and observed. The study highlights how the architectural design facilitates a seamless transition between practice and performance, blurring the boundaries between the two. The positioning of windows and openings strategically frames the movement of dancers, reinforcing the notion of architecture as a spectacle designed for the gaze of the observer.

The research demonstrates that the rhythmic and temporal aspects of the design are integral to the user experience. The repetitive structural elements and the strategic use of light and translucency establish a rhythm that echoes the dynamic nature

of dance. The spatial rhythm is further enhanced by the deliberate orchestration of circulation pathways, which guide the user’s journey through the building, offering varied perspectives and encounters with the architectural elements. This rhythm is not merely a visual experience but is deeply tied to the embodied movement of the user within the space.

The role of architectural design in fostering social interaction and inclusiveness is another point highlighted throughout the analyses. The visual connections established between interior and exterior spaces encourage a participatory gaze, inviting both active users and external observers to become part of the spatial narrative. The rhythmic interplay between the architectural form, the movement of bodies, and the observer’s gaze creates a sense of communal experience that transcends the physical boundaries of the building. Thus, the results suggest that the Sandi Simon Center for Dance successfully embodies a multifaceted architectural narrative that is responsive to its historical context while accommodating contemporary spatial practices. The building exemplifies how adaptive reuse, when thoughtfully executed, can create spaces that are not only functional but also rich in meaning, fostering a deeper connection between architecture, movement, and the human experience.

V. CONCLUSION

The architectural reading of the Sandi Simon Center for Dance reveals a multilayered understanding of the constructed reality within the built environment. The intended spatial meanings of the building convey acquired meanings and messages, that can be deciphered through architectural storytelling. By considering the cultural, contextual, and historical analysis, the report has attempted to unravel the perceptible spatial experiences within the dance studio from different perspectives and layers. It has explored how intentional design choices and spatial arrangements contribute to the dynamic relationship between space, movement, and acquired meanings in architecture. The connection between form, function, and materials, resulting in a distinct architectural identity has discussed then the discussion has led to the interpretation about the creation process of spectacle. Therefore, as the last point, the interplay between the body, gaze, and space in a dance studio's design has explored. The perceptual experiences within the movement framed through architectural elements, and the creation of a rhythmic and inclusive experience for viewers has discussed. In essence, it is seen that, the architectural reading of the Sandi Simon Center for Dance unveils the intricate relationship between the physical environment, human experience, and the intentions of the architect. It showcases how the design choices, spatial arrangements, and materiality of a building contribute to its narrative, meaning, and significance within its cultural and social context.

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