CONSERVATION—ADAPTATION

KEEPING ALIVE THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE
ADAPTIVE REUSE OF HERITAGE
WITH SYMBOLIC VALUE

Donatella Fiorani
Loughlin Kealy
Stefano Francesco Musso

Editors

EAAE
European Association for Architectural Education

estratto

Hosting Institutions

Université de Liège

UHASSELT   Hasselt University

This book presents presents the papers written by 39 participants following the 5th Workshop on Conservation, organised by the Conservation Network of the European Association for Architectural Education in Hasselt/Liège in 2015. All papers have been peer-reviewed. The Workshop was attended by 73 participants from the following countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Turkey, United Kingdom.

Organising Committee
Stéphane Dawans, Claudine Houbart, Inge Lens, Bie Plevoets, Daniela Prina, Koenraad Van Cleempoel

Scientific Council
Donatella Fiorani, Giovanna Franco, Claudine Houbart, Loughlin Kealy, Stefano Francesco Musso, Bie Plevoets, Koenraad van Cleempoel

ADAPTIVE USE AND REUSE: A TIME-SPECIFIC PROCESS

Francesca Murialdo

Middlesex University, United Kingdom
F.Murialdo@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract

Reuse, in its different forms and meanings, is one of the crucial topics currently being explored from a cross-disciplinary perspective. This paper, considering the status of the speculation on the topic, introduces the concept of adaptive reuse as a time-specific strategy for keeping the building active, both from a material and immaterial point of view, mediating the relationship with the past and its different layered meanings. The conceptual framework is built around the idea that the built environment is always time-specific; it is planned and realised according to specific needs in a specific timeframe. In this perspective, every further adaptation is meant to keep the architecture updated to be suitable for the new timeframe: adaptive reuse is intended as a process that uses different tools and tactics to keep the buildings active.

Reused buildings merge the values of the original construction and of subsequent adaptations. The evaluation of the adaptive reuse process relates to the capacity to add a new layer of sense to the existing significance and to the quality of reusability that the intervention achieves (Fig. 1).

Preservation strategies

The building sector, in the contemporary debate about the concern of the uncontrolled exploitation of resources, has been engaged in the last few years in much speculation, research and propositions, all aiming to address strategies for framing a new building ecology. Among research for new materials and techniques, the reuse of existing buildings is a key issue that enables us to consider the question from a broader point of view. If the preservation of existing buildings makes sense in terms of reusing resources and assets, a more complex evaluation of the practice of reuse is – alongside the tangible, intangible values that are, though immeasurable – valuable and worth preserving. The EAAE workshop *Keeping alive the spirit of the place* explored how we can evaluate, understand and transmit these values once the physical context needs to be transformed.

Preservation is linked with the idea of rescuing something from the danger of decay, damage or destruction. In order to preserve an existing building it is necessary to keep it inhabited, occupied, active. The adaptive reuse of a building is one possible preservation strategy and it has been a considerably growing practice in the past few years in terms of number of interventions made and cultural debate[1].

Different strategies, tools and approaches can be adopted according to the importance of the different aspects to be protected – for example, material features or symbolic meanings – and the interpretation that is given to the conservation practice. The debate on conservation, preservation and the different modalities of realisation is one of the most interesting architectural discourses of the last few decades; positions taken are re-

207

estratto

FIG. 1. Venice (2014).

flections of an evolving relationship with our heritage and history. 'Every history, after all, has to establish relationships of engagement and detachment, insight and overview, which connect it with the past it describes, and every subsequent reading of a history (or, to change the scene, every visit to a historical monument or a museum) effectively requires a return to these same issues' (Salber Phillips 2004: 125).

The intention in re-using an existing building to accommodate new functions, meanings and activities needs to establish to what extent the intervention wants to relate to the existing. The graft of the adaptation into 'the already written, the marked "canvas" [...] becomes a "package of sense" of built up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed or suppressed (refused)' (Machado 1976: 49).

From the 1970s, building reuse has been explored in practice and theory within different frameworks. Various terms have been used to describe reuse strategies: 'altering' (Scott 2008), 'remodelling' (Machado 1976; Brooker, Stone 2004), 'retrofitting', 'converting' (Cunnington 1988; Powell 1999), 'revitalising' (Jäger 2010), 'rehabilitating' (Highfield 1987), 'refurbishing' and 'adapting' (Robert 1989). 'Adaptive', more than the other synonyms, underlines the ability of the building to be flexible, open to change and capable of an active role; buildings have always been modified in order to host different inhabitations over time: they are able to accept different adaptations.

Among the different disciplines involved in the preservation process, interior architecture/design has played a fundamental role in being able to build (not only) physical connections in between spaces, people and objects. The tools and methods of this discipline are able to draw connections to the social context, being flexible enough to be malleable to specific situations, to promote social innovation, to raise awareness about values and beliefs and to question the borders of established ways of living, working and consuming. In this perspective, reuse implies a context; to build on buildings, to consider the transformation process as a palimpsest where layers are added and merged with previous ones.

Timescales and updates

The term *genius loci* was introduced by the Norwegian architect and theoretician Christian Norberg-Schulz (Norberg-Schulz 1980) to describe what he considers the main ingredient of the immaterial experience of architecture. In this perspective, the site is the characteristic that better defines the distinctive traits of the building and lends coherence to the hierarchy of components. A building occupies a specific position, has its own identity and

Francesca Murialdo

needs to be understood in terms of its relationship to context. The context has to be intended in a broader sense: not just physical (the position in relationship to other buildings or landscape, its orientation, etc.) but also social, political and economic. The aspects that are linked to the materiality of the site (building materials, construction techniques and technologies, for example) decay but do not change dramatically; analysis of the broader context is more complicated and needs to acknowledge how economy, politics and society have affected/do affect the building.

The built environment is always time-specific, as it has been designed and built according to a time specific idea/need, but the lifespan of a building is often longer than the purpose for which it has been built. In light of the passage of time, buildings need to be updated to survive societal changes that affect their form, role and meaning. Buildings are part of a process and have '[...] to be understood in terms of several different time scales over which they change' (Groak 1990: 15).

The idea of a continuous time-specific built environment links us with the concept of grades of reusability: the writing or rewriting of the building as a time-specific usable asset enables us to conceive of it as flexible and fluid.

The idea of the built environment as invariable, permanent, steady, as historical witness conflicts with two important considerations.

The first relates to the understanding that radical and deep transformations are underway in our society (in terms of demographics, access to communications, organisational structures, awareness of the environmental issue, legislation) so it is anachronistic, and probably anti-economic, to conceive persistent structures: use and reuse should take reference from conceptual models that are incomplete, imperfect and elastic, capable of withstanding continuous innovation and adaptation.

An architecture of time incorporates not just present or sensory and mental experiences, but makes present instants in past or future times; to create an eternal and real present by remembering the past and making the future of the architecture become the basis for a continuous time experience (Quiros, MaKenzie, McMurray 2011).

The second consideration questions the certainty that the value and the significance of the 'cultural experience' can be read thorough the preserved materiality of the site: it is necessary to acknowledge that architecture cannot be dissociated from what happens inside the building and that changes according to different timescales.

> 'Architecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action and what happens in space [...] architecture cannot be dissociated from the events that happen in it [...] event is an incident, an occurrence, [...] events can encompass particular uses, singular functions or isolated activities. They include moments of passion, acts of love and the instant of death' (Tschumi 1981: X-XI).

From this perspective, adaptive reuse is not just a possible strategy, but a necessary continuous process that is able to update buildings. In order to keep alive the spirit of the place/time, what is the capacity of the intervention to accept further modifications and what is the grade of reusability that the intervention established with the previous state? The following two sections, *To live is to leave traces* and *Grades of reusability*, introduce two themes linked with the idea of considering time as a key ingredient of the design process.

estratto

FIG. 2. Florence (2011).

To live is to leave traces[2]

Every period has to face transformations that affect lifestyle and therefore the built environment. If the last decades in Europe have been significant in terms of experiencing social and economical changes, we need to acknowledge that the reuse of existing buildings is a practice as old as architecture, one that has always been put in place privileging the *now* over the *before*. Buildings, even important ones with an high symbolic significance, were built and then transformed uninhibitedly over time as the occupation needs changed, to allow a continuous reuse: for example, we can see clearly on many buildings the different window patterns – the traces of what changed on the inside according to different time spans (Fig. 2).

Churches traditionally rose from previous existing ones: not only was the same site used and reused again, but the practice of recycling existing architectural elements by incorporating them into new buildings without any modern concerns about authenticity was also broadly diffused.

Richard Sennett argues that from the 18th century we moved from the concept of wholeness to the one of integrity (Sennett 1990); this shift has modified our perception of the building environment 'from structures which extended an existing continuum of urban fabric to discrete objects, objects with an integrity which would be destroyed by change or addition' (Groak 1990: 154–156).

Francesca Murialdo

estratto

The 20th century faced new concerns about the existing built environment: in addition to earlier patrimony, we inherited industrial heritage, which quickly and over a short period of time became redundant, deprived of content and meaning, an empty container. In the 1950s Michael Rix, a historian from Birmingham University, started using the expression 'industrial archaeology', claiming that buildings do not have only a material value and that official architecture, representative and celebratory, is not the only architecture able to unveil the layers of history. Significance, remembrance and commemoration are embedded and perceived also in buildings that were designed to fulfil a specific function – such as the industrial ones – and are still today an important reference for the community, even if the functions they have been designed for are no longer relevant.

If we investigate the etymology of the word 'heritage', we realise that its Latin roots are linked with the word 'heres' ('heir' in English), which has an extensive meaning linked with the idea of a legacy that includes both material and immaterial values, without any economic content.

Reflection on the opportunities to reuse a heritage with immaterial values has encouraged thinking on the overall topic of preservation. Introducing time as a key ingredient, an approach to heritage should encourage the acceptance of further modifications. Every consecutive adaptation adds a new layer of sense to the existing significance and emphasises the idea that buildings are valuable as 'memory spaces' and 'cultural experiences' more than as integral entities. Relationships and equilibrium between the previous and the new intervention depend on the cultural values taken into consideration. The questions raised in the workshop on *Adaptive Reuse of Heritage with 'symbolic value'* focus on the significance of the inherited object and the impact that interventions have on it.

Grade(s) of reusability

Opportunities and strategies for adapting the (historical) built heritage depend on many different factors that are partly cultural and partly structural, acting as constraints or opportunities in the reuse process: the form and structure, the historical and contextual meanings, the sustainability opportunity.

Time operates as a factor that can either weaken or strengthen the building's characteristics: on one hand it triggers an unavoidable decay and damage arising from everyday use, decelerates its social utility, negatively affects its economic life; on the other hand it transforms the particularity and the historical qualities into values, activating opportunities for preservation and reuse.

A building may have played different roles at different times, not only in terms of occupation but also as a reference for the community with regard to its role as a site of significance, remembrance and commemoration (symbolic value, place for past important events, etc.). According to Mark Salber Phillips, historical understanding 'is inconceivable outside of the affective and ideological engagements that give the past so much of its meaning, or the formal structures that make representation possible' (Salber Phillips 2013: XI).

The material aspects of buildings are valuable in terms of economics – the construction techniques, the materials used, the artefacts – recognisable and protected by law and regulations: according to the different national laws (for example 'Planning for the Historic Environment', 2010 by the Department for Communities and Local Government in England or 'Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio', 2004 by Ministro dei Beni e delle

estratto

FIG. 3. The Selexyz Dominicanen, Maastricht (2015).
FIG. 4. Kruisherenhotel, Maastricht (2015).
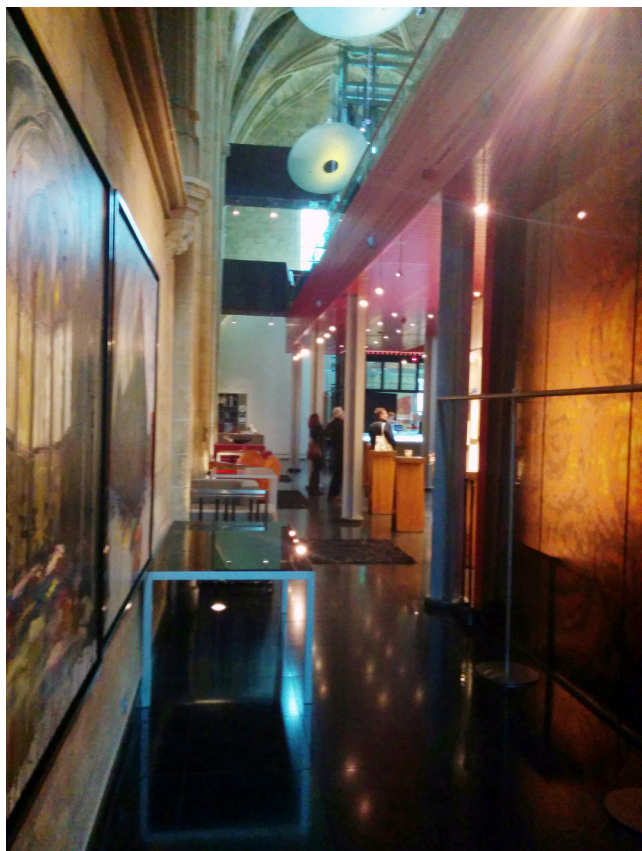
Attività Culturali in Italy), a grade of value is stated together with the compatible intervention typology that defines what is or is not modifiable, renounceable, removable, reusable. As a consequence, we could say that an initial grade of reusability of the building is set by law. The debate around the opportunity to reuse a building has focused mainly on function, concentrating on the slippery territory of the identification of the compatible functions while very little attention has been given to its immaterial legacies, disconnected from the sphere of economics and thus difficult to evaluate. In that regard a number of buildings have faced musealisation as a neutral choice, able to keep the narrative alive with very little intervention; in many cases that choice, being unable to direct activity and occupancy, has led to further ageing of the building.

The way we read and understand the stratified meanings embedded or interpret and intervene through adaptations affects not only the current building/environment, but also the future grade of reusability. The intervention can be temporary or reversible, in order not to affect future decisions, or decide to what extent to allow the 'existing' to play an active role.

Francesca Murialdo

estratto

Recognition of the cultural experience: three churches in Maastricht

Which aspects of a building should be preserved in order to enhance the recognition of its cultural experience when the site, according to the actual timeframe, has no connection with the original function it was designed for?

This is the case for buildings where everything, from structure to decoration, is linked to the message of religion. These buildings are affected by a strong decrease in religious practice and structurally present formal constraints due to the specific traits of the typology. Today's reuse process is very controversial, but in the past these buildings have experienced continuous change due to discontinuity of use and a radical shift in the perception of their usefulness and meaning.

The EAAE Thematic Network on Conservation, Workshop V proposed for discussion three different case studies of adaptive reuse of religious buildings, all in the city of Maastricht and all realised over the last 20 years: the Selexyz Dominicanen bookshop (2006), the Kruisherenhotel (2005) and the Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg (1996). In the following section these three interventions – with different outcomes, yet produced by the same temporal and cultural context – will be investigated in order to understand to what extent the meaning of the building is embedded in the intervention and its effect.

The Selexyz Dominicanen, inaugurated as a bookshop in 2006, has undergone different adaptations since the Dominicans were ousted at the end of the 18th century: a military depot, a school, the city depot, an exhibition space, a celebration hall, a multicultural space, a postal service, the city library, a bicycle storage and finally, a bookshop. The actual design resolution by Merkx+Girod stresses the differences between the content and the container, addressing an independent and reversible intervention. The project interprets the spirit of the place and the spirit of the time in a conservative way while inserting a separate, independent function. The connection to the existing site has been interpreted as a restoration plan that preceded the insertion of the library (Fig. 3). The traces left from the previous occupations have been erased; the different layers of meaning are not considered valuable enough to be retained. In terms of grades of reusability, the approach put in place by Merkx+Girod is more typological than site-specific. The new inserted function is fully contained within the compact intervention: the books and the shelves, the vertical connections and the lighting system are all incorporated into a large-scale object that could literally be disassembled and moved into another similar space. The project guarantees a high grade of reusability for further modifications, being conceptually and physically detached from the context. Since the restoration of the building was the starting point of the adaptive intervention, the significance of the building has been interpreted literally in terms of materiality. The intervention led the discussion on what a compatible function means today, allowing a religious church to be occupied by a commercial space. The actual use of the interior, being at the border in between an open/public and private space (as in all retail environments), facilitates a broad experience of the building by different types of visitors.

A similar approach, though adopting a completely different language, has been used for the conversion of the church and convent of the Crutched Friars into the Kruisherenhotel, even if the story of the building has been quite different due to the lengthy inactivity of the site. During the French Revolution the Crutched Friars were driven out of the monastery, which was temporarily transformed into a storehouse and military barracks. At the end of the 19th century the complex had undergone a restoration process, been put into use as a National Agricultural Research Station and then

FIGS. 5-6. The Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg.
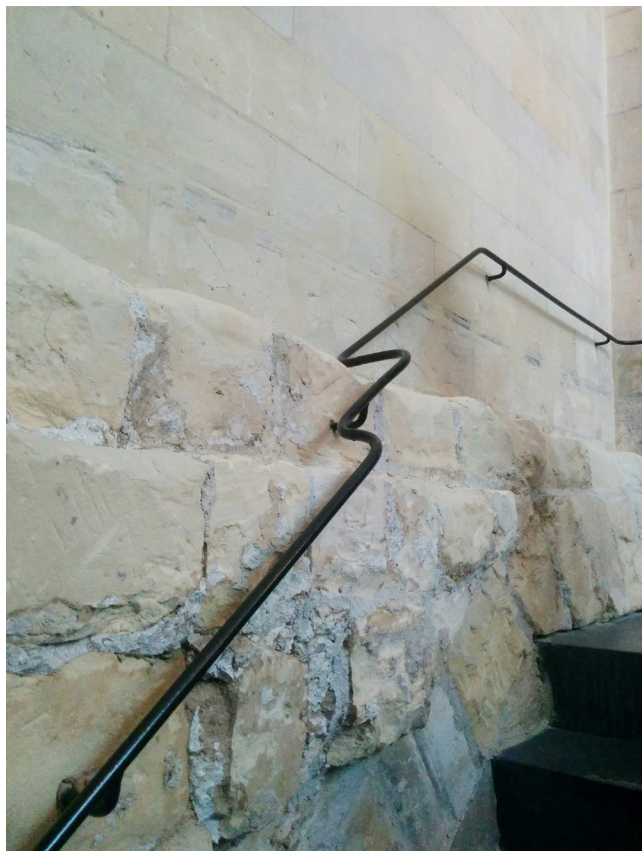
left empty. The city of Maastricht had a plan to buy the complex and transform it into the Academy of Fine Arts, but had to abandon this plan due to the enormous conversion costs. At the beginning of the 2000s the city accepted a proposal from a luxury hotel company to change it into a hotel, under the condition of a 'reversible intervention'. The new contents – reception, restaurant, bar and shared workspace – are all contained inside a new structure, independent of the existing one (Fig. 4). Compared to the intervention at the Selexyz Dominicanen, this intervention occupies more space relative to the existing building: the volume of the church is filled with new functions and the experience of the original spaces is denied.

These two projects, though with two different outcomes, explore similar strategies that are more typology-specific than site-specific, inserting new objects into a restored and untouched context. In this case, due to the choice of the designers to dramatically distort the proportions of the original space, the significance of the inherited object is preserved in an instrumental way in order to add value to the inserted function. For the character of the inserted function, a hotel, the effect of the intervention does not contribute to the feeling of shared ownership that is achieved in the Selexyz Dominicanen.

Francesca Murialdo

estratto

The third example is the Regionaal Historisch Centrum Limburg, situated in a former Franciscan monastery dated 1234, and in a church less than a century older. Similar to the two previous case studies, from 1632 the complex was reused in a number of different ways: as an arsenal, an orphanage, a military hospital, a barracks and a prison, a sauerkraut factory and finally an archive and library. The first adaptation of the church into an archive and library dates back to the end of the 19th century; since then, the complex has undergone further works up until the opening in 1996. This last intervention acknowledges both the existing building and its new functions, exploring circulation patterns achieved through the merging of new insertions with the existing, and is at the same time both site- and time-specific. Traces of previous use, structure and materiality are experienced through the new narrative, and new needs are adapted as new layers (Fig. 5).

The building has been recognised as capable of receiving adaptations; the new space is perceived as perfectly fitting its new 'active' role, both structurally and metaphorically adding value to the cultural experience of the site and embodying the passage of time (Fig. 6).

Interior strategies for immaterial legacies

Adaptive reuse, intended as a continuous process of using and reusing existing structures, environments and buildings is the preservation strategy that allows heritage to play an active role. The term reuse can be misunderstood if focused on use in terms of function. Rather, opportunities for reuse must be explored through investigating how people use and sense a space, both in terms of perception and identification.

Reuse implies the re-semanticisation of places together with the ability to keep traces of a relationship to past timeframes. The projects described are responsible for constructing new interpretations, narrating new stories, writing a new plot. Adaptive reuse is the process that can mediate the relationship with the past and its different layered meanings. These buildings' role, organisation and form are at once mirrors of the past and bearers of societal transformation. The practice of interior architecture/design encompasses a complex network of knowledge, thanks to its culturally and politically situated nature; it is an interdisciplinary space in which many discourses and actors embrace diverse instruments and methods of enquiry. Dealing with strategy, business and politics, interior architecture/design today invents new frameworks that can engage, interpret and foresee alternative processes of intervention.

Interior architecture/design, dealing with the idea of reusing and re-interpreting the content, and thus the significance of the existing heritage, becomes the preferred discipline – able to read, decode and reveal/conceal visible and invisible, tangible and intangible layers that live under the skin of architecture.

Notes

[1] The Stirling prize winners in 2013, 2015, 2016 were all building re-use projects.
[2] Benjamin 1999.

References

Benjamin, W., 1982. *Das Passagen-Werk*. Frankfurt am Main [English ed.: Benjamin, W., 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge].

Brooker, G., Stone, S., 2004. *Rereadings*. London.

estratto

Cunnington, P., 1988. *Change of Use: The Conversion of Old Buildings*. Sherborne.

Groak, S., 1990. *The idea of building*. London.

Highfield, D., 1987. *The Rehabilitation and Re-Use of Old Buildings*. London-New York.

Jäger, F., 2010. *Old & New. Design Manual for Revitalizing Existing Buildings*. Basel.

Machado, R., 1976. "Old buildings as palimpsest", in *Progressive Architecture*, 11, 76. 46–49.

Norberg-Schulz, C., 1980. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York.

Powell, K., 1999. *Architecture Reborn*. London.

Quiros, L.D., MaKenzie, S., McMurray, D., 2011. *Enric Miralles: Architecture of Time*. [online]. Quirpa. Available at: <http://www.quirpa.com/docs/architecture_of_time__enric_miralles.html> [Accessed September 2015].

Robert, P., 1989. *Adaptations. New Uses for Old Buildings*. Paris.

Salber Phillips, M., 2004. "Distance and Historical Representation", in *History Workshop Journal*, 57. 123–141.

Salber Phillips, M., 2013. *On Historical Distance*. New Haven.

Scott, F., 2008. *On Altering Architecture*. Abingdon.

Sennett, R., 1990. *The conscience of the eye*. New York.

Tschumi, B., 1981. *The Manhattan Transcripts*. London-New York.

Francesca Murialdo

estratto