

An Orange House for Work

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on my approach to adaptive reuse in architecture, shaped by professional experience in Southern Italy, where limited budgets often make it necessary to preserve and transform existing structures. For me, reusing buildings is not only a practical constraint but also a creative opportunity: I seek to harmonize preexisting elements and grant new formal and functional life even to abandoned or modest structures, suspending value judgments about their original condition. My design method is grounded in sign-based stratification, a geometric and formalist strategy in which layers of architectural “signs” are composed to generate new spatial meanings. By balancing the dynamic and materially focused aspects of design with the combinatorial and syntactic concerns of composition, I navigate between elevation, section and the orthogonal triad, privileging none of them, but employing all to shape imaginative interventions. This Euclidean and constructivist-inspired approach allows me to refine line, eurhythmy and chiaroscuro, transforming abstract two-dimensional studies into meaningful three-dimensional space. I illustrate this methodology through the renovation of the Orange Building in Naples, where I converted an old dairy into corporate headquarters. I preserved the existing masonry while layering new elements – an orange-colored exterior coating, metallic inserts, projections, terraces and interior reconfigurations – each chosen to enhance usability, environmental comfort and formal dialogue with the surrounding context. Every design decision reflects my effort to recombine existing traces and create a harmonious balance between morphological integrity, client needs and imaginative renewal. Through these experiences, I argue that adaptive reuse, approached as a layered and formalist process, makes it possible to transform the ordinary city, generating environmental, functional and aesthetic value while revealing the endless possibilities of architectural metamorphosis.

Keywords: Sign-Based Stratification, Formalism, Euclidean Architecture

Introduction

The literature on architecture without additional land consumption – within a regenerative perspective on the built heritage aimed at reducing the environmental impact of new constructions – is extensive. Referring to it when speaking of adaptive reuse is almost inevitable. Yet I should admit from the outset that, for me, the question of reuse is, on the one hand, the direct consequence of working in Southern Italy and, on the other, the outcome of a theoretical position that sees in the act of adding new signs to existing structures an endless field of metamorphic possibilities.



Fig. 1-2. Luigi Arcopinto (with Vincenzo Franzese), An orange house for work (photo by Riccardo Ricci, 2024)

Let me be clear: I would certainly welcome the opportunity to design a new building from scratch. But since I often must work with extremely limited budgets, maintaining the existing fabric through consonant or accommodating interventions becomes almost unavoidable. Thus, throughout the design exercises I have been able to carry out, my professional experience has led me to confront preexisting structures that needed to be preserved and to identify “strategies for recycling spaces” (Marini 2008, 19).

I believe that harmonizing preexisting elements and transforming them into new inhabitable forms is a profoundly generous act toward the environment—one that requires suspending value judgments about the object of intervention. Within this suspension of judgment, which can of course be set aside when necessary, because “it happens, sometimes, that one must cut and saw; but only where anything else would spoil rather than heal” (Trevisan 2022, 102–109), even shacks or other abandoned buildings can be endowed with new imaginative possibilities, granting them a renewed formal life.

When architecture operates through the reuse of existing heritage, it proposes blending, re-modulation and adaptation as a new form of expression. For me, these opportunities begin with the overwriting of the existing and follow the principles of *Grammatica euclidea* (Arcopinto 2024) in the relationship between form and space.

Thus, in line with the view that understands the project as a product of research (Amirante 2018), I have consistently sought to systematize constructive opportunities along a conceptual trajectory devoted to eurhythmy and chiaroscuro. On one side stands my obsession with refining the line – an unrealizable one-dimensional entity in construction – and on the other, my fascination with chiaroscuro, grounded in harmonic sequences.

One might call this adaptive approach a form of sign layering: a design impulse that acts as a powerful engine for the imagination and often draws upon the study of the architectural world – both built and unbuilt – to extract lessons for reuse. I am fascinated by exploring architecture on a chiaroscuro plane, where I can dissect it into trajectories and basic geometries, transforming them into meaningful patterns to be deployed elsewhere. This approach stands far apart from the model-driven attitude that uncritically embraces extreme formalism. In this sense, the stratification of signs becomes a eurhythmic mantra

that should not be feared in the design process, for every formal trace added to the built world possesses its own legitimacy when viewed through the purity of its figurative essence.

The Sign-Based Stratification

Pursuing adaptation as the goal of a formalist approach to regeneration drives me to work within the composition–design dichotomy through a strongly geometric approach. By means of a simultaneous and bidimensional method, one that allows me to practice a sort of parataxis of projection planes, considering them simultaneously as both individual and interconnected, I can move freely within the antinomy of composition and design without aligning myself with either tendency. I can shift from composition to design, blending the two approaches as needed. If design can be attributed a dynamic and strongly physical meaning, composition can instead pertain to the combinatory, syntactic plane and to the reciprocal relationship among finished parts: transformation and progress in design versus the complex of a priori and entirely academic notions of composition; the generic nature of design as a transfiguration through a material manifesto versus the artistic specificity of the compositional procedure. Hence, I work in elevation rather than in section (Gregotti 1986, 2-3). However, thanks to sign-based stratification, I can freely employ both tendencies, privileging neither section nor elevation, but instead articulating the entire orthogonal triad³ (Arcopinto 2024, 28-31) to the use and service of the architectural project. In this way, drawing acquires an almost sacred quality: it is one and threefold, scientifically defining the project and introducing an indispensable abstraction that trains me in the interrelation of projection planes, curing me of the ease of three-dimensionality that contaminates architectural design, that inelegant habit which populates architectural figuration and makes it speak only through deceptively seductive, hyperrealistic images. There is an evident two-dimensional Euclidean inclination that pursues the reification of the line, the eurhythmy of the built body and its effects on shadow, seeking a fundamentally optical satisfaction. As in Kazimir Severinovič Malevič's praises of vision, no structured rule seems to hold; rather, everything obliquely passes through the designer's sensitivity, through his training in figuration and through his inclination to heal built space through mutable actions. The Euclidean approach inherent in this accumulative mode finds its foundation in the Constructivist speculations of Moisej JA. Ginzburg and in his definition that the designer must train to work with the complex of plane figures composing a single spatial figure (Ginzburg 1977, 10). In this sense, the eurhythmic flattening of the ensemble of signs summoned to compose form aids me in the imaginative leap from space to plane through a distinctly Euclidean disposition. For these reasons, expressed perhaps somewhat colloquially, I employ sign-based stratification as a formative norm for my architecture. In doing so, the ordinary city gains, in my eyes, its right to exist precisely through the infinite possibilities of geometric manipulation to which it can be subjected without hesitation or guilt.

The Case of the Orange Building

The building illustrated in this text is one of the experimental opportunities I mentioned earlier. We are in Naples, in an area on the border between the INA-Casa subdivisions and the twentieth-century expansion of the city. Here, I faced the challenge of converting an old dairy into the corporate headquarters of a company specializing in automation systems



Fig. 3. Luigi Arcopinto (with Vincenzo Franzese), Night view (photo by Riccardo Ricci, 2024) for production lines.

The building, located opposite the post-rationalist technical institute designed by Cesare Ulisse, is composed of two superimposed load-bearing masonry volumes and three independent elevations: one with few openings, facing a cultivated plot; another completely blind yet rhythmically articulated by three semicircular arches; and a highly complex façade overlooking the internal courtyard, featuring, among other elements, a projection extending three meters from the vertical plane.

Throughout the design and construction process, I followed a line of thought that considers sign layering an indispensable eurhythmic mantra, as I believe that every formal trace added to the built world has its own legitimacy when viewed in the purity of its figurative status. I therefore sought to shape the project through a strictly formalist compositional process, in which a new “writing” recombines the preexisting one in search of a possible morphological redemption. On the exterior, I limited my intervention to coating the existing structure with a base of orange, conceived as a trace, a fragment of what the building once was. All new inserts, by contrast, were given a metallic silver finish. I added new projections around the openings to mitigate weather and sunlight, while the terrace overhang extends into a pergola incorporating slender cylindrical planters. I designed a small canopy, anchored to the existing one, to create an essential shaded area on the courtyard elevation and, above all, to provide shelter from the elements for the patios I carved out to ventilate the basement spaces. On the street-facing side, oriented toward the technical institute on the promontory, I introduced the skeletal structure of a sign – like the frame of a projecting stone – to establish a dialogue with the school’s pointed profiles. I also reconfigured the courtyard’s cobblestone paving, carefully reusing the valuable material to avoid waste, and designed the new entrance gates.

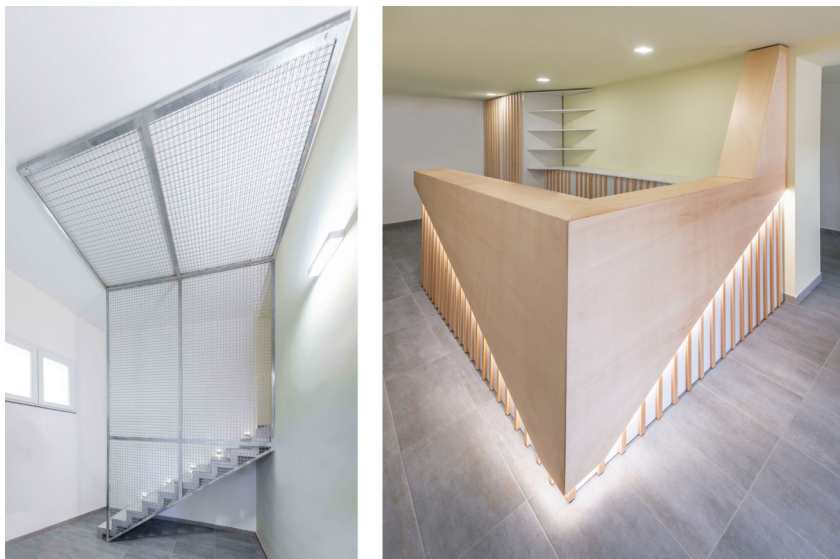


Fig. 4. Luigi Arcopinto (with Vincenzo Franzese), Interior spaces (photos by Riccardo Ricci, 2024)

Inside, I rationalized the floor plan layout to meet the client's needs, alternating yellowish wall tones with metallic and wooden elements. At the ground-level entrance of the first block, a black marble staircase leads to a grand corridor distributing the offices and providing access to the terrace with the pergola, while at the entrance of the second block, a wooden counter surrounds the reception, precluding the development of the other interior spaces. With the double-height atrium, dominated by the staircase with a metal-mesh balustrade, I arranged the offices, workshop, and coworking spaces. Here, the partition for the head of the office acts as a silent observer over the electrified totems that punctuate the open space. Every element introduced in the project seeks to express the latent potential of the traces already present in the existing structure, through a continuous search for a harmony achievable between morphological requirements and the client's needs.

Notes

Cherubino Gambardella is my mentor and my work arises from indispensable engagement with his ideas. For this reason, I have borrowed the words that Vitaliano Trevisan uses to describe Gambardella's work. The reference book gathers the theoretical foundations of my design practice. By orthogonal triad, I mean the set of orthogonal projections – plan, elevation and section – and their abstraction as interrelated planar figures that represent a single spatial form.

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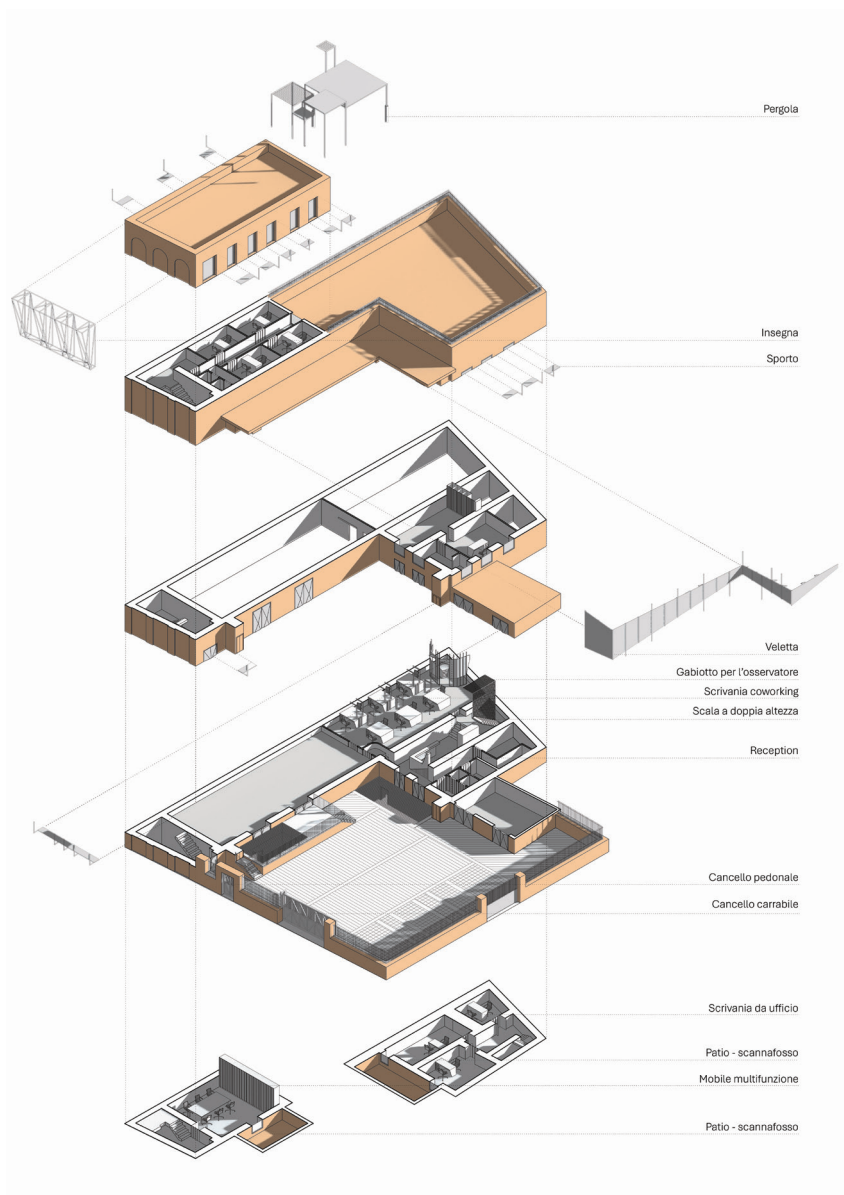


Fig. 5. Luigi Arcopinto (with Vincenzo Franzese), Axonometric exploded view, 2024

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