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Reframing Heritage

Hans Hollein's Transformation of a Mansion into a Museum[1]

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Abstract

This paper examines the adaptive reuse of Tehran's Qavam House, a Qajar-era mansion, into the Museum of Glass and Ceramics (Abgineh), designed by Austrian architect Hans Hollein in the late 1970s. By employing modern materials, lighting systems, and exhibition technologies within a self-contained spatial framework, Hollein created a reversible, non-invasive system of reuse that respects the historical fabric while engaging modern design principles. While the project was initially described as remodelling, conservation, or restoration, it represents a distinct approach to adaptive reuse, striking a balance between preservation and innovation. Through archival research, site analysis, and critical evaluation of Hollein's strategies, this paper explores the process of designing the museum and situates it within broader debates on adaptive reuse, demonstrating how interventions can allow historical structures to accommodate new functions. In addition, it discusses the tensions that emerge when modern design approaches risk overshadowing the lived memories and identities of the original building.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Hans Hollein, Museum of Glass and Ceramics (Abgineh)

Introduction

Building reuse is not a recent phenomenon. However, its formal recognition as an architectural discipline is comparatively new. Today, adaptive reuse occupies a central position in architectural theory and practice. It is no longer a marginal or purely technical concern but a critical response to the challenges of sustainability and cultural continuity. (Stone 2019, 1). The terminology surrounding this practice continues to evolve; adaptive reuse has increasingly become the most widely accepted term, though others such as conversion, rehabilitation, remodelling, or retrofitting remain in use (Stone 2023, 477–478). In contemporary discourse, adaptive reuse refers to the process of transforming an existing building whose original function has become obsolete into a new use suited to current needs and users. This process involves reinterpreting the building's spatial, material, and historical dimensions to accommodate new functions while maintaining a sense of continuity with its past. Existing structures carry inherent character, historical depth, and cultural meaning; their layers of history form what is described as an architectural palimpsest (Huyssen 2003), where new programs and interpretations are written over traces of earlier ones (Stone 2019, 1–4). The ICOMOS Burra Charter identifies adaptive reuse as a method that sustains the heritage values of a building while enhancing its usefulness for future generations. This approach bridges the gap between preservation and innovation, ensuring that historical

structures remain active participants in the evolving urban landscape (Arfa et al. 2022, 149). The act of working with an already-built structure implies compromise; it suggests that the designer, rather than imposing their own vision on a specific place, must first understand the building's agenda before presuming to change it. This process requires negotiation, agreement, and conciliation (Stone 2023, 477–478). The architect and designer have the ability to envisage alternative futures for buildings and situations. A building may have a definite starting point, but the architect's imagination allows new possibilities to emerge, even as every alteration remains influenced by the building's past (Stone 2019, 2).

The work of specific architects and designers has embodied a balance between respect for the past and the creation of new meaning. Figures such as James Stirling, Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, and Hans Hollein pursued contextual approaches that combined a deep love of heritage with a postmodern sensibility. Their projects often sought narratives and fables embedded in the existing fabric of the built environment. (Stone 2023, 482). In this context, Hans Hollein's Museum of Glass and Ceramics in Iran, though designed in the 1970s under terms such as «remodelling», «conservation», «renovation», and «restoration» (Architekturzentrum Wien Archives 1977), stands as a significant example of adaptive reuse. By embedding the new function within the historical and material character of the original building, Hollein demonstrated how adaptive reuse can serve as both a preservation act and a creative redefinition. His approach reflects the broader postmodern interest in context, narrative, and continuity.

Despite its conceptual depth, this Museum has received very limited scholarly attention, particularly in relation to Hollein's architectural practice. This paper addresses that gap by examining the project through archival research and site analysis to explore how it negotiates between the old and new, material authenticity, and modern functionality. It situates the Museum within the broader framework of twentieth-century adaptive reuse theory and discusses the struggles this museum faces in accommodating new meanings, while marginalizing or erasing the past layers of memories and identities of the original building.

Historical Background

During the late Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, the country experienced significant cultural development, driven by an oil-fueled economy. The Queen's special office (Daftar-e Makhsus) played a key role in supporting cultural projects and establishing new museums. In the 1970s, the Queen's special office hosted two international congresses in Iran, inviting renowned architects such as Louis Kahn, Kenzo Tange, and Alvar Aalto, among others (Honar va Me'mari 1974/75, 26–27). Some major national projects in Iran were proposed to these famous international architects during these congresses.

Although Hollein was invited to the second congress in 1974, Empress Farah Pahlavi later mentioned in an interview that it was actually Nasrin Schlamminger who introduced him to her (2019). Nasrin, a friend of Queen, was appointed director of the Museum of Glassware and Ceramics, to be established in a Qajar-era mansion. She was the wife of the well-known German sculptor Karl Schlamminger, and Hollein was a close family friend of theirs (Von Armin 2024). Additionally, Karl Schlamminger was among the nine designers who collaborated with Hollein in the «MAN TRANSFORMs» exhibition at the Cooper-

Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in 1976. As the director of the museum, Nasrin suggested Hollein to the queen to design the museum. Therefore, three years after his presence at the international congress in Iran, Hollein returned to begin designing the museum for glass and ceramics.

The building was originally constructed in the 1910s as both the residence and office of Ahmad Qavam (Qavam al-Saltaneh), a distinguished Iranian politician. In the early 1920s, it was sold to the Egyptian government and used as Egypt's embassy in Tehran. During the 1950s, political tensions between Iran and Egypt escalated, ultimately leading to the embassy's closure. The property then stood vacant for several years. When diplomatic relations were restored in 1970, the long-neglected building was found to be in poor condition. Due to the high renovation costs, it was subsequently sold. In 1976, it was acquired by the Special Office for conversion into the Glass and Ceramics Museum (Fig. 1). The building was built in the Qajar style. A style that, in Hollein's words, was «a meeting point between East and West» (Hollein 1980, 93). On one hand, it carried many traditional Persian architectural elements, but at the same time, it had clear traces of European influences, especially Rococo, along with design ideas that were emerging in Russia at the time (Hollein 1980, 93).

Fig. 1. The Qajar-era mansion in Tehran, Iran, which was going to be converted into the Museum of Glassware and Ceramics (Hollein 1980, 93)

The collection for this museum included glass, ceramics, and items partly donated by private owners. In fact, during the 1960s and 1970s, a policy of repatriating important works that had left the country was implemented. At the same time, new archaeological excavations brought important discoveries, adding to the collection. The pieces of glassware and ceramics date from prehistory, through Achaemenid times, to the main part of the Islamic period, and up to the early twentieth century (Hollein 1980, 94).

After receiving an invitation from the Special Office, Hollein arrived in Tehran on 8 January 1977 (Architekturzentrum Wien Archives 1977, 1). Following a thorough investigation and survey of the premises, including the building and its specific spaces (Architekturzentrum Wien Archives 1977, 2), contracts were finalized with Hollein as the architect and G.U. from Munich as the general contractor. (Architekturzentrum Wien Archives 1977, 5).

Design Strategies and Spatial Transformation

The project centered on two main elements: the historic building itself and the diverse collection of artworks it would house. Hollein and his team faced the challenge of uniting these two aspects. The key question was whether to adapt the old building for museum use or to preserve its exterior and construct an entirely new interior (Hollein 1980, 93–94). A museum requires precise environmental control, specialized lighting, technical systems, and stable conditions for its artworks; yet, this early 20th-century structure was built for a different time, illuminated by oil lamps, heated by fireplaces, and adorned with intricate decorative details throughout. During a visit by foreign specialists to conduct an exact measurement survey of the premises and the building, it was noted that the insufficiencies lie in the load-bearing capacity of certain parts of the building (Architekturzentrum Wien Archives 1977, 9). Strictly applying modern museum standards would have meant sacrificing much of the building's historic charm. Hollein therefore chose to preserve it largely in its original form, avoiding a complete reconstruction within the old shell. To accommodate both the varied artworks and the building's unique spatial character, Hollein developed two main exhibition strategies. In damaged or less historically significant areas, he created a secondary inner shell that discreetly housed climate-control systems and integrated display cases. In the more valuable rooms, where ornate details were carefully restored, he used only freestanding cases, allowing the historic interiors to serve as a contrasting backdrop (Malotki 1981, 8–9) (Fig. 2).

The showcases themselves became a defining feature of the design to the extent that the museum was referred to as «museum of showcases» (Gaskie 1981, 93). They were not only technologically advanced, with built-in lighting, air-conditioning, and humidity control, but also conceptually tied to the artworks they displayed (Fig. 3, 4). Since controlling the climate throughout the entire building was impractical, the cases maintained individual

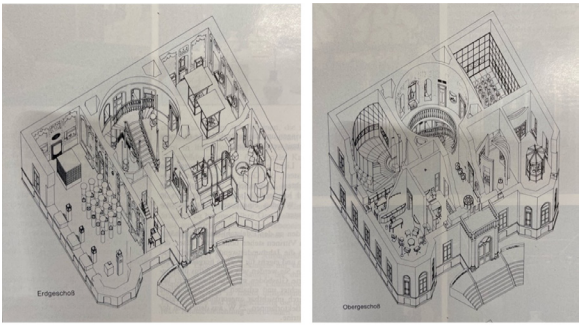

Fig. 2. The Museum of Glassware and Ceramics, ground floor (left) and first floor (right) (Stirling 1984, 13)

microclimates (Malotki 1981, 8). Their forms also reflected the character of the pieces within: in the hall for prehistoric glass and ceramics, for instance, the cases drew inspiration from the tomb of Cyrus the Great, while those in the Achaemenid and Sassanid hall echoed the colonnaded palaces of Pasargadae (Tabibi 2013, 117). Many were custom-made for specific objects, resulting in about 120 distinct types. The simpler units were produced

locally, while the more complex designs were fabricated in Europe, primarily in Switzerland (Hollein 1980, 97).

Several critical issues emerge in the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. Although this project has been widely praised for its functional success and aesthetic qualities, there are aspects that require consideration. In many heritage reuse projects, new architectural insertions or display installations risk dominating or overshadowing the original structure, rather than remaining subordinate or complementary, a concern observable in some rooms of this museum (Fig. 5). Moreover, the design appears to underestimate the continuity of the building's past life, memory, and identity. The intervention largely neglects the historical narratives associated with the building's previous functions, such as its time as the Qavam residence or the Egyptian embassy. While the reuse is successful in functional terms, the building's individual story and cultural memory remain underrepresented. Lanz and

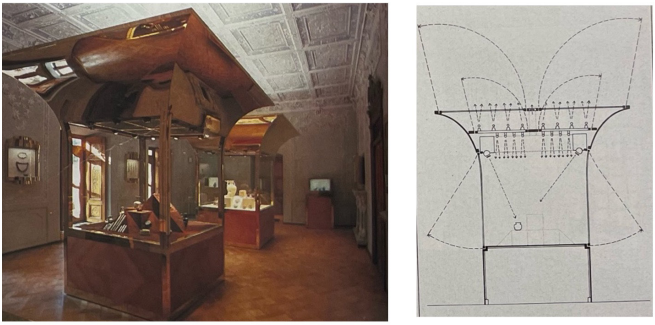

Fig. 3. Showcases of the Museum of Glassware and Ceramics (AA, 1980, 77)

Pendlebury (2022, 456) argue, adaptive reuse is often framed as a moment of disjunction between form and function, emphasizing an oppositional duality between the old, the pre-existing building, and the new, the architectural reuse intervention. This duality is evident in this project, where the original structure risks being reduced to a passive container or "shell" for the new use, highlighting a separation between form and content. When adaptive reuse focuses primarily on the insertion of new design elements, attention is largely restricted to material and physical strategies. Broader considerations, such as memory and identity, practices of remembering and forgetting, and the social, cultural, and political implications of heritage-making, remain sometimes neglected in the intervention (Lanz et al. 2022, 457–8).

Conclusions

As an example of adaptive reuse in this period, Hollein's work is distinguished by its bold conceptual strategy: he inserted a modern, self-contained interior shell into the historic house, creating a contemporary museum environment, without harming the building's structure. Instead of restoring the house to its original style or function, he combined old and new, letting Qajar-era architecture interact with modern exhibition needs. By using modern materials, lighting, and display technology carefully, he preserved the historic fabric while creating a forward-looking cultural space.

At the same time, the project raises questions about memory, identity, and the building's past lives. By prioritizing formal and technological innovation, Hollein's design reinterpreted the domestic spaces in ways that highlighted the museum function, inviting reflection on what may be gained and what may be overlooked when historic buildings are repurposed. The Museum of Glass and Ceramics illustrates the tensions of adaptive reuse, showcasing how interventions can create functional, contemporary spaces within heritage buildings while also illustrating the challenges of engaging with intangible aspects of history, such as social narratives and lived experiences.

Ultimately, Hollein's project serves as both an inspiration and a cautionary example. It emphasizes the need to balance innovation with sensitivity to the historical, social, and cultural layers of heritage architecture, reminding us that every intervention carries complex implications for the memory and identity of the spaces we seek to preserve and transform.

Notes

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