

From “Definitive” to “Reversible” Architecture

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Abstract

How does a project emerge in relation to the existing built environment?

This seemingly simple question implies complex answers that are not always exhaustive. For this reason, it is often necessary to recalibrate the mind toward new approaches doing so allows for more innovative solution that effectively address social, formal and environmental issues, especially in relation to the existing building. The type of modality I propose is that of intervention on the existing through installations, which, by their nature, are modular, removable and easily recyclable and overlap the already made, reducing waste and respecting the pre-existing structures. This approach can be divided into two categories: “definitive” and “reversible” interventions. Among the first is the restoration of Liliana Grassi in the courtyard of the icehouse of the Ospedale Maggiore in Milan, where the new intervention is clearly distinguished from the pre-existing one. Or the intervention of Carlo Scarpa at the Castelvécchio Museum where the architect restores the entire factory and designs the exhibition apparatus harmoniously integrating it with the context, through a deep study of pre-existence. Another significant work is that of Ezio De Felice at the Archaeological Museum of Salerno, composed of a steel structure that supports the ancient architectural system, transforming it into an exhibition object. Integration tends to create an innovative and modern space while preserving purely historical elements. As for “reversible” interventions, we can mention the projects of Franco Albini, such as the exhibition of Italian Contemporary Art in Stockholm (1953) or the Montecatini stand with Franca Helg (1961). In these cases, the use of lightweight and removable frames allows a temporary interaction, thus respecting the built space. Adaptation and reversibility make it possible to regenerate the degraded built with limited resources, returning a new function, even if only temporary. This approach makes it possible to design in an agile, sustainable and context-sensitive way, offering formal and environmental solutions in continuous evolution.

Keywords: Installations, Definitive, Reversible

Introduction

How does a project that relates to the existing built environment come into being?

This question, which at first glance might seem simple, actually has complex and not always fully exhaustive answers. For this very reason, it is often essential to prime the mind for new approaches, so as to make the “answer” truly innovative. This kind of dynamic enables the designer to address complex issues, such as social, formal, and environmental ones, with greater ease and awareness. The key to this process lies in adopting a mode of action for

adaptive reuse that is flexible and capable of considering multiple aspects simultaneously, in order to respond comprehensively to contemporary needs. A design method that I find particularly interesting and effective is one that engages with the existing through installations. These installations can be modular, demountable, and easily recyclable design configurations, characteristics that make them architectural elements capable of minimising environmental impact and reusing available resources. In this way, it becomes possible to respect the formal and structural rules of the built environment, layering over what exists without destroying or altering its spaces. Starting from these premises, the aim is to combine innovation and form in order to respond to a practical necessity that invites reflection on how every project can become an opportunity to improve the condition of places and adapt them to new requirements. Architecture today, in fact, is increasingly required to engage with what already exists, with the goal of integrating past and present in a harmonious way. This thesis can be demonstrated through a number of references that, upon initial analysis, can be differentiated into “definitive” and “reversible” interventions.

Definitive Approach

“Definitive” installations are projects that make use of elements that assert themselves decisively within the context, sometimes even blending seamlessly with it. An example is the work of Ezio De Felice in one of the rooms of the Provincial Archaeological Museum of Salerno: the architect designs a steel structure made of IPE beams and HE columns that supports the entire pre-existing structure of the Apollo’s Hall and articulates the space by placing its vertical supports next to the ancient columns. Its presence frees the pre-existing structure from any structural function and transforms the ancient trilitic system into an exhibited object. The environment of the hall, despite containing ancient elements, becomes an innovative space with modern characteristics thanks to this integration. This fusion between installation and structure enriches the pre-existing building, giving it a new function and adapting it to the needs of its time. In this way, new spaces are defined, areas rich in meaning and indissolubly linked to the place.

The issue of functional transition, especially concerning the existing heritage, can be explained through the works of Carlo Scarpa at the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona and at Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo. In both cases, the architect starts from a restoration, converting the space into a museum through strategies of stylistic reconfiguration. This approach has ensured that both places are still in excellent condition and capable of hosting visitors and tourists. At the Castelvecchio Museum, Scarpa rehabilitates the building and designs the entire exhibition apparatus within it, harmoniously blending it with the existing structure. This is achieved through an in-depth study of the pre-existing building, engaging with the space to transform it into a “grandiose artifact” (Los, Frahm 2002, 73), while conducting a series of targeted excavations aimed at bringing to light the “historical layers” (Los, Frahm 2002, 73) that have progressively shaped and altered the structure over time. For Scarpa, architecture is not merely a shelter, nor even a machine for displaying objects; rather, it is a critical tool used to see the works, to make them understandable (Los, Frahm 2002, 82). The architect therefore works on spaces by designing elements that enhance each individual artwork, creating around it a bespoke exhibition “container,” much like a tailor crafting a unique garment designed to fit perfectly the form and identity of its wearer. Using a similar formal approach, Scarpa engages with Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo,

an ancient building destroyed by bombing during the Second World War and restored by Mario Guitto and Armando Dillon between 1950 and 1953, redeveloping the area. He focuses on designing the exhibition space and, to do so, carefully studies both the works to be displayed and the surrounding space, seamlessly integrating his approach while fulfilling the formal requirements that characterised the context at the time. In this way, he designs systems that highlight the historical and aesthetic qualities of the complex, aiming to place the visitor at the center of the museum experience. This approach is realised through the integration of carefully curated elements and materials into the space, layering onto the historical stratification of the complex while preserving its integrity. Such a dynamic allows the entire complex to be enhanced and reused, enabling it to be experienced and maintained through conservation strategies that highlight its historical and cultural values. The difference between permanent and flexible interventions is subtle but substantial. As seen in the examples of De Felice and Scarpa, although their stylistic approaches differ,



Fig. 1. Palazzo Abatellis. Carlo Scarpa (Giuseppina Bosso, 2025)

both follow a strategy of integration with the context, conceived to endure for an unlimited period of time. Their critical capacity enables adaptive reuse to be implemented through the integration of a series of design elements that respond to the specific needs of the moment, thus fostering long-term conservation. As demonstrated by the previously cited examples, the technique of addition through installations can be realised in different ways, including starting from a restoration. Although restoration is not always defined as an installation, it can nevertheless contribute to a better understanding of how the proposed approach is characterised by a plurality of coexisting identities. This gives rise to a spontaneous

question: when can a project be considered an installation, and when, instead, a restoration? Can the two dimensions coexist?

I believe that not all restorations can be interpreted as installation methods; however, in some cases, as will be shown through the examples described below, a notable affinity can be identified in both technical and stylistic approaches.

The restoration and adaptation intervention by Liliana Grassi for the Ospedale Maggiore in Milan and the work of Andrea Bruno at the Castello di Rivoli share a common strategy that combines respect for history with the introduction of contemporary elements. The Ospedale Maggiore, built in 1456 by Antonio Averulino and bombed in 1943, presented itself as a devastated shell well suited to a total formal recomposition. Grassi intervenes in the courtyard of the icehouse primarily through a philological restoration, expressing a true critical recomposition by stylistically separating the old from the new. A particularly significant aspect of this type of intervention is Grassi's ability to highlight the traces of the past while introducing a new language to the existing structure, one that adapts seamlessly



Fig. 2. Digital collage of Museo Archeologico di Salerno. Ezio De Felice and Mostra di Arte Contemporanea Italiana a Stoccolma at Liljevalchs Konsthall. Franco Albini (Giuseppina Bosso, 2025)

to it. In this architectural project, an installation technique applied to the outdoor space can therefore be interpreted as potentially effective, integrating the content (the area designed by Grassi) with the container (the icehouse courtyard), just as in an exhibition installation. Similarly, Andrea Bruno at the Castello di Rivoli preserves historical integrity through philological and structural restoration work while introducing lightweight and reversible design elements that integrate with the existing building and simultaneously enhance its modern aspects. A particularly relevant example is the system of vertical connections located along the castle's long wing, consisting of three stair towers built outside the building using exposed reinforced concrete, steel, and glass panels, modern, lightweight, and reversible materials. In this way, Bruno restores and transforms the entire complex, adapting it to a new cultural and museum function without compromising its historical value. From these considerations, we can observe that in both cases there was formal and material experimentation that helps define a strategic line aimed at differentiating the old from the new, seeking to establish a non-invasive dialogue that highlights the characteristics of both identities forced to coexist in the same place.

We can therefore affirm that “permanent” interventions are fundamental to understanding methods of approaching pre-existing structures and the adaptive reuse of spaces. They suggest the importance of intervening in a clear and decisive manner, but with respect and a profound study of what already exists, so as not to alter it and to ensure its conservation and use over time. These elements represent the cornerstones for the successful formal and stylistic refunctionalisation of a pre-existing structure.

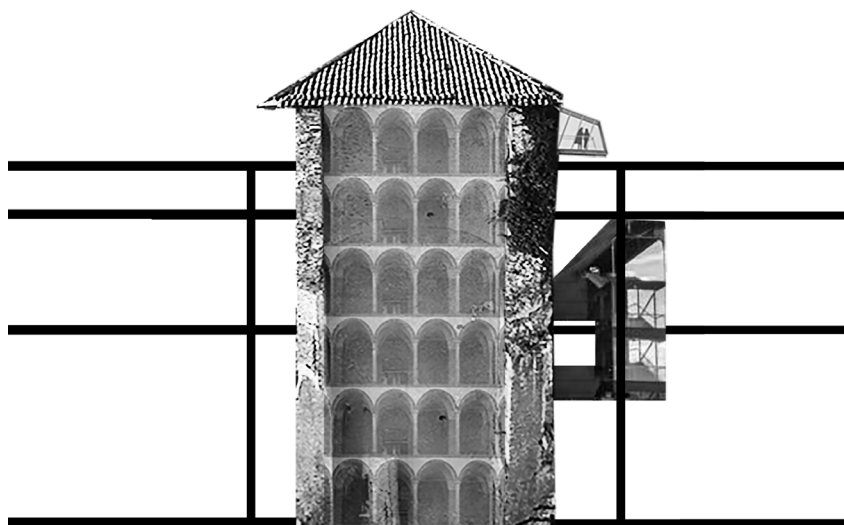


Fig. 3. Digital collage of Castello di Rivoli. Andrea Bruno and Ospedale Maggiore in Milan. Liliana Grassi (Giuseppina Bosso, 2025)

Reversible Approach

A different approach applies to “reversible” installations, referring to all those interventions that utilize repeatable and adaptable modules. These can be inserted into multiple contexts while interacting with the existing built environment, thus defining a new spatial configuration. In different settings, the same installation produces varied effects, depending on the relationship it establishes with its surroundings. This approach relies on materials and forms that can be easily removed and reused, significantly expanding the possibilities of application. In this way, it fosters a new mode of installation-based settlement and enables the creation of spaces that are highly flexible and adaptable. The architect who most extensively employs this type of intervention is Franco Albini. In his works, the designer introduces modular frames capable of adapting to various spatial and exhibition contexts. Like Carlo Scarpa, Albini places the visitor at the center of the museum experience, attempting to recreate scenarios that fully engage the observer. Notable references include the Italian Contemporary Art exhibition in Stockholm in 1953 and the Exhibition of Scipione and Contemporary Drawings in 1941. In these cases, as Federico Bucci and Augusto Rossari write in *I musei e gli allestimenti di Franco Albini*, the architect intervenes in spaces through slender frames composed of “uprights that define a structure suitable for displaying objects of any kind” (Bucci and Rossari 2005, 34). By varying the arrangement and dimensions of the frames in innovative ways, Albini was able to configure spaces that layer and develop within the container, giving rise to versatile and adaptable solutions that are easily replicable in all types of contexts. These modular elements were composed of lightweight materials so that they could be easily dismantled and recycled. In this way, the system conceived by the architect not only met aesthetic and functional requirements but also contributed to more flexible space management. This adaptive strategy has evolved over time: Albini’s intuition can today be reinterpreted in light of modern exhibition and space-reuse practices, integrating technological innovations and a renewed design sensibility. A particularly significant example is the regeneration and formal reconfiguration project of the Fondation Galeries Lafayette, designed by the OMA architecture studio developed in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas, where a late-nineteenth-century industrial structure is integrated through the design of a modular and reconfigurable exhibition tower that perfectly integrates with the context and adapts to every type of requirement.



Fig. 4. Digital collage of Fondation Galeries Lafayette. OMA, Rem Koolhaas and VI Triennale Mostra dell'antica oreficeria italiana at Palazzo della Triennale in Milan. Franco Albini (Giuseppina Bosso, 2025)

Multimedia Installations and their Application

Through these examples, the aim is to define new strategies that seek to “actively engage” with the avant-garde. Exhibitions, fairs, and pavilions are still visited today by millions of people who, during these events, can interact with the displayed works, which are open and accessible to the public. In doing so, even involuntarily, a new form of relationship between the object and the visitor is established: interactivity. There are many modern examples of interactive and multimedia installations, which are now among the most widely used exhibition techniques. A project that perfectly describes their characteristics is the museum dedicated to director Federico Fellini in Rimini, designed by Orazio Carpenzano, with Studio Azzurro responsible for the artistic and multimedia concept, with consultancy by Marco Bertozzi and Anna Villari. Like all realities, exhibition design continues to evolve, adopting new methods and techniques of representation, such as the use of multimedia. The installation is inserted into a historical context, such as Castel Sismondo and Palazzo Fulgor. In both locations, the project is articulated into different rooms, each characterised by distinct themes and approaches from both a visual and experiential perspective. The entire layout is conceived as interactive, allowing visitors to establish a direct relationship with the objects and placing them at the center of the museum experience, just as in the cases of Carlo Scarpa and Franco Albini. Despite the imposing nature of the installation, the objects do not appear invasive; rather, they create a harmonious balance between the modernity of the multimedia system and the historicity of the architectural complex. This type of design dynamic ensures that the intervention adapts to the formal predisposition of the complex being addressed. In Albini’s case, compositional strategies are employed to adapt to the space available at a given moment, thus configuring a new perspective on conservation approaches that follow innovative traits while also incorporating new technologies.



Fig. 5. Museo Fellini to the Castel Sismondo. Orazio Carpenzano (Giuseppina Bosso, 2025)

Conclusions

Adaptation and reversibility, as strategies for the restoration and reuse of existing heritage, therefore reveal a distinction between the container, which can often be modified, and the content. This distinction enables effective interventions on the built heritage, often within limited budgets, allowing buildings to be repurposed, even temporarily, and permitting the formal configuration of the built space to be altered without compromising its historical character. From these considerations, it is clear that the solution proposed in project theory is highly varied despite its apparent simplicity, capable of addressing multiple domains and, above all, of suggesting a range of methodological solutions, both formal and environmental, that evolve continuously.

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