

Interior Reuse

Rewriting the Infra-Ordinary for Flexible Living

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Abstract

In line with Renato De Fusco's theoretical reflections, the relationship between containing space and its contents, as a system of signs, is defined by the binary (in Italian) *invaso/ involucro*: the envelope (*involucro*) with the role of signifier and the enclosure (*invaso*) as signified. It is in the enclosure—the place of interior design for the domestic—that the changing and varied nature of modern society is measured, the phenomenological locus of mutations. Interior design, with respect to the pre-existence of the enclosure, succeeds in the process of assigning new meanings. Then, whether in those regions where historical stratification is present or where the pre-existing architecture is ordinary or without precise qualities, we need to “inhabit the existing” by reviewing the usual terminology of *Adaptive Reuse* and accepting the use of *Interior Reuse*, for those interventions that particularly emphasize the architectural enclave. Starting from the doctoral research titled *Interior Reuse: for flexible living, from theories to practices, from spaces to things* (2025), edited by the author, a reflection is presented on how interior projects can completely rewrite the infra-ordinary and featureless pre-existence, including through the furniture system, for the definition of a possible flexibility. This thesis accepts what Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani has already argued: that to build in uncertain times, one must transform in order to create lasting values for a changing society. This theoretical reflection is supported by the architectural interventions of the duo Kilo/Honč, working in Bratislava, who interpret, through a process of sustainable adaptation, the type of popular housing called *panelák*, typical of the area between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as a paradigmatic case of the Interior Reuse approach.

Keywords: Interior Reuse, Infraordinary, Panelak

Introduction

The relationship between a containing space and its contents, understood as a system of signs, is defined by the binomial *invaso* and *involucro* (cavity and envelope). Renato De Fusco, in *Segni, storia e progetto dell'architettura* (1973), eloquently clarifies the connection between a system of empty and usable architectural units—defined by the presence of an envelope—and the elements that shape and delimit the cavity.

Building upon this valuable and well-known binomial distinction between *invaso* and *involucro*, De Fusco introduces the consequent concepts of signified and signifier.

In the study of interior architecture, this biunivocal relationship precisely indicates the connection between the habitable—or inhabited—interior space and those elements that construct the form of the void, the external “skin” with all its components. The *invaso*

is therefore the interior space of the building: the empty, habitable, and usable volume it contains, representing the active, lived, and inhabited space capable of welcoming the human.

In architectural language, the *invaso* expresses the very meaning of architecture, as it conveys values of functionality and utility, but also of sense and experience. This meaning, especially in reuse projects, is not only determined and constructed, but also placed in tension, and sometimes in crisis, in its relationship with the *involutro*, which in this discussion assumes the role of signifier. The form of the envelope, with its specific characteristics, acts in shaping the cavity: the visible part retains within itself the pre-existing values of architecture, which the reuse project, starting from the interior, reworks and interprets in the process of transformation.

The *invaso* is therefore the domain of interior design and, to some extent, also of furnishing (Forino 2024), as it measures the «changing and varied flow of modern society» (Bossi 1994, 69). Architecture and furnishing are thus neither consequential to the architectural project—understood as mere completions, as part of the Anglo-Saxon culture maintains—nor entirely autonomous. One determines the other, and together they represent the phenomenological site of transformations. Compared to preexistent architecture, interior design can therefore introduce quality into the process of assigning new meanings to the architecture of reuse.

Following this line of thought, it becomes necessary to rethink the act of inhabiting the existing starting from interiors – both in regions where historical stratification is strongly present and of high artistic value, and in those where pre-existing architecture, widespread and conceived for the masses, lacks specific qualities or is, in other words, “ordinary” or “infra-ordinary,” to quote Georges Perec (1989, 2023).

This approach from the interior constitutes the main field of interest in the phenomenon of reuse, where dialogue with the already-built becomes more complex and intimate, manifesting itself as an intervention within the construction, including and anticipating issues related to spatial flexibility. The field of interiors thus emerges as the most flexible one, capable of mediating between recovery and development.

The transformative work that begins from interiors makes explicit and visible those often minute and secondary values that nonetheless tell the story of people’s lives, as they are closely connected to dwelling. Embracing Imma Forino’s proposal to inhabit the existing, *«si è proposto l’uso della terminologia di Interior Reuse, a differenza della più usuale Adaptive Reuse: si è cioè individuate una categoria metodologica a se stante—per la ricerca interpretativa come per la messa a punto del progetto—per interventi che valorizzano in particolare l’invaso architettonico»*¹ (Forino, Rapisarda, 2018, 384). From this perspective, metamorphosis of the interior speaks to the ductility and transience of interior spaces, constantly susceptible to events and in continuous transformation. For these reasons—and for subsequent developments—it can be confirmed that interior architecture has a fundamental role as a mediating discipline between recovery and development. It moves from the interior to rewrite the history of existing architecture, that is, to construct a project that places at its center the relationships between space, humans and non-humans, tested through flexibility and changeability. This applies not only to the phenomenon of adaptive reuse but to the entire architectural process, since every architecture is always the externalized manifestation of the spatial value of an interiority (Esposito 2025).

Rewriting the Infra-Ordinary Values: to Question the Habitual

For Georges Perec, the ordinary—and above all the infra-ordinary (1989, 2023)—represents what presents itself to the human being day after day. Perec focuses not on what can be considered extraordinary or exceptional, that is, on elements extracted from the flow of the ordinary, but rather on the banality that often characterizes what is no longer seen precisely because it is always present—because it belongs to the world of things and events that occur every day, that is to say, the everydayness of events.

Everyday life, for the French writer, is full of meaning because it reveals, through «quello che succede ogni giorno e che si ripete ogni giorno, il banale, il quotidiano, l'evidente, il comune, l'ordinario, l'infra-ordinario, il rumore di fondo [...]»² (Perec 1989, 2023, 8), a part of the world not sweetened by spectacularization—and which, for the same reasons, is often excluded from any attempt at analysis. The banality of the everyday intercepts the “world of life” in which the human is immersed: it is the background noise that describes a way of dwelling often characterized by habit and rituality, by the absence of stratification and by a history too recent to have formed a *patina*—the very *patina* that, by contrast, constitutes a noble feature of some buildings, to the point of becoming the motive for processes of protection and conservation.

Perec invites the reader not to embark on a journey along the margins of the magical and the marvelous, but rather to reflect upon a slow observation of the smallest folds of the banal and the everyday, rediscovering, in these metaphorical creases, a latent beauty: one that arises from «schegge di vissuto dolorosamente conficcate nella descrizione del tessuto urbano, a ricordare come il quotidiano dei luoghi, l'infraordinarietà che i più non percepiscono sia fatta anche di questo intreccio di ferite private e di fantasmi collettivi»³ (Micheletti 2023).

This dichotomy between the sedimentation of the extraordinary and what Perec defines as the endotic—that is, “what concerns the inside,” referring to the domestic, ordinary, and intimate dimension—marks an essential distinction in the field of Interior Reuse.

In classical and ancient architecture, the traces and sediments of time are elements of value and become, in the design of Interior Reuse, anchor points for a critical rewriting sensitive to recovery. Conversely, for that part of architecture lacking evident qualities—thus ordinary and infra-ordinary—the same sediment often reduces to a superficial layer of dust, destined to be removed, sometimes to the point of the building's very erasure when it cannot be “swept under the rug.”

Time, through its stratification, contributes to the construction of the palimpsest, and the design action of Interior Reuse is oriented toward preserving memory through context-sensitive interventions. Interior architecture, however, also acts according to other parameters: it seeks to reassign value to ordinary and widespread architecture, often located in peripheral areas. The dimension of the ordinary everyday remains, in many cases, a dormant and invisible condition—typical of that minor, popular, and low-cost architecture that contributes to the greying of the landscape. Yet it is precisely this architecture that today constitutes a significant and paradigmatic case for starting from interiors when rethinking reuse.

Interior Reuse as a “Critical” Practice: Sustainable Adaptation of the Panelák by Kilo/Honč

Between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there exists a term used to describe a building constructed from prefabricated and pre-stressed concrete panels: *panelák* (plural: *paneláky*). It derives from standard Czech *panelový dům* or Slovak *panelový dom*, literally meaning “panel house” or “prefabricated section house”.

A single word for an entire world—a metonymy representing both place and artifact—it coincides with the notion of dwelling, and therefore with the domestic space, for thousands of people not only in Eastern Europe.

This architecture—lacking evident qualities, a byproduct of the attempt to impose order on the city, especially during the communist period—represents the everyday ordinary for that part of the postwar population that was neither yet nor any longer bourgeois. It was an architecture conceived to address, in a short time, the issue of housing shortages through large, standardized quantities accessible to all, with construction and rental costs kept low during a period of economic austerity. This type of building was, first and foremost, the renunciation of immediate and recognizable beauty, in favor of other, more pressing necessities of the time, such as functional efficiency of distribution layout and the optimization of dwellings to maximize their use.

As always, in uncertain times (Magnago Lampugnani 2016, 64-77), what appears superficial at first glance is easily removed from the equation. Postwar devastation, resource scarcity, and the need for a unified response to a common problem were the factors that dictated the predominance of this widespread, low-cost housing model, especially in the peripheral areas of Prague and Bratislava. If for the bourgeois class—still recognizable as such—beauty triumphed over comfort or functionality, for the inhabitants of the *paneláky* the opposite was true: functionality came first. Yet the *paneláky*, innocent victims of housing massification, in their own way embody a certain ideal of democratic beauty, particularly when viewed through the potential of their transformation, an aspect that enriches the broader debate on their conservation, renewal, and adaptation.

Within this framework operates the Bratislava-based studio Kilo/Honč, founded by Richard Kilo and Matej Honč, who reinterpret, through a process of *sustainable adaptation*, the “slab-built” housing typology of the 1960s. Their phenomenological reading begins with a critique of the typical layout of public housing, reversing its logic: from a space calibrated according to fixed quantities per inhabitant (square meters per function) to a

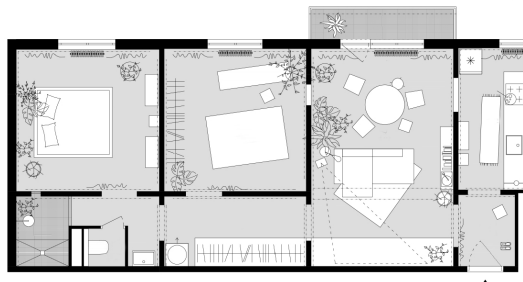


Fig. 1. Panelak, reconstructed condition. Kilo / Honč

space of relationships, domestic and intimate, focusing on the scale of the home and the relationship between designed space and its role in intergenerational living.

The rigid, schematic space of the building—and especially of its plan—due to the structural and tectonic constraints of the *panelák*, is organized around a three-dimensional grid of columns and beams, which strictly defines the room's boundaries. This productivist rigor of the housing model implicitly represents the functionalist paradigm. As Henri Lefebvre argues, functionalism emphasizes function to such an extent that, since every function has an assigned place within space, the very possibility of multifunctionality is eliminated (2018, 1974). Thus, all discourse on the flexibility of modern housing, as a space capable of accommodating unforeseen uses and genuinely adapting to human life, is effectively erased. The design work of the Kilo / Honč studio develops from within, interpreting the concept of Interior Reuse as a means to redefine atmospheres and spatiality. For the architects, this approach also serves to narrate the history of buildings which, though devoid of intrinsic architectural value—thus not assessable solely in terms of material consistency or formal matrix—nevertheless act as containers of plural lives and as testimonies to a shift in both perspective and the demands of dwelling. As the authors themselves explain, the real estate situation in Bratislava leads young couples to invest in *panelák* apartments even though «their lifestyle is not compatible with the spaces offered by these units» (Kilo / Honč 2022). Once again, the theme of adaptive reuse—Interior Reuse—goes far beyond being a mere compendium of design solutions: it carries with it an agency and a performative capacity of the dwelling, one that first interprets the socio-cultural transformation in order to redefine the very meaning of inhabiting. Ultimately, it also acts as a catalyst for a renewed culture of reuse of these architectures, through their adaptation to contemporary needs, with the aim of ensuring their preservation. The precariousness of materials and construction systems



Fig. 2. Panelak. Kilo / Honč (Matej Hakár, 2022)

now makes it essential to rethink the *paneláky* buildings, which have also been affected by severe deregulation phenomena, informal appropriation, and consequent decay. Today, considering an average life cycle of sixty to eighty years for such structures, they all require substantial re-evaluation and transformation. It is precisely within this temporal gap that the Kilo / Honč studio operates, intervening from within and through the building, with the intention of offering a flexible and adaptive spatial articulation, while helping to provide affordable housing solutions for young people through new spatial models aligned with current housing needs, thus overturning configurations derived from outdated residential paradigms. With regard to the project entitled Panelák, the studio states:

«We consider it extremely important to speak out about living in slab blocks. About current situation on the real estate market, enormous financial demands for acquiring real estate and young families whose way of life is not compatible with the spaces offered by these apartments. It is important for us to show that it is not necessary to condemn these apartments and that we can adapt them for current needs, in order to preserve them. In this case, we tried to find a manual that works with the space, but also takes finances into account. Opening up the space created overviews and depth by axially arranging openings (all of them dimensioned so that it is not necessary to use steel lintels and frames), directly connecting the kitchen and the day part, creating full-feature space for socialization, decreasing number of doors (to wind lobby, kitchen, corridor, bathroom), and allowing daylight into the internal corridor tract via openings in the habitable rooms, whilst removing period decorative elements. All of these interventions contribute to the creation of full-fledged, airy, inspiring and open space, thus helping to find an affordable housing solution for young people» (Kilo / Honč 2022).



Fig. 3. Panelak. Kilo / Honč (Matej Hakár, 2022)

The cuts made through the pre-existing walls acquire, in this case as well, a mnemonic dimension, maintaining a living relationship with the initial configuration of the apartment, now manipulated and rearticulated. These cuts, like scars, are living presences that resonate with space, light, and sound through a principle of subtraction and erasure. New relationships and connections are established simply through the removal of wall sections, triggering a spatial revolution and refining both perception and introspection among rooms. The plan is critically questioned by the authors, and the transformation, far from mimetic, embraces the new conditions of the inhabitants' lives. Finally, the space is further rewritten through the appropriation and colonization by the occupants' personal objects.

Conclusions. Interior Reuse as a Cultural and Social Strategy

There is no claim to refine a specific architectural language; rather, the necessity lies in reconstructing the minimal values of contemporary dwelling through objects and the transformative action of Interior Reuse, enhancing what already exists and revealing qualities where often only ordinariness is perceived. In conclusion, the Kilo / Honč Panelák project demonstrates how Interior Reuse can constitute an effective cultural strategy for the preservation and revitalization of existing buildings, and not merely a technical approach, safeguarding memory and identity. Through targeted interventions within the apartments, the design succeeds in combining spatial flexibility, economic sustainability, and historical sensitivity, transforming obsolete spaces into functional and, above all, socially appropriate living environments. The studio's approach highlights how selective subtraction and spatial reorganization can generate new relationships among spaces, light, objects, and people, endowing the buildings with mnemonic and performative value. The project thus represents a replicable model of adaptation and reuse, capable of responding to socio-cultural changes and the needs of young families, demonstrating that intelligent reuse can serve as a tool for innovation, sustainability, and the cultural revival of the built environment.

Notes

1. «The use of the term Interior Reuse has been proposed, as opposed to the more common Adaptive Reuse: that is, a separate methodological category has been identified for interventions that particularly enhance the architectural cavity» (Forino, Rapisarda, 2018, 384), author's translation;
2. «what happens every day and recurs every day, the banal, the obvious, the common, the background noise [...]» (Perec 1989, 2023, 8), author's translation;
3. «fragments of lived experience painfully embedded in the description of the urban fabric, reminding us that the everydayness of places – the infra-ordinariness that most fail to perceive, is also made of this intertwining of private wounds and collective ghosts» (Micheletti 2023), author's translation;

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