

Interior Reuse

An Italian Conversation with the Built Environment

Imma Forino

Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy, imma.forino@polimi.it

Abstract

The essay explores the theme of architectural reuse, with particular attention to the Italian context, where transforming the existing built environment represents one of the principal challenges and opportunities for contemporary design. Beginning with Bernardo Secchi's reflections in the 1980s, it is emphasised that the future of architecture lies in the ability to reinterpret the already built, in response to a halt in urban growth and a renewed focus on existing heritage. In Italy, the culture of reuse is especially evident in the field of interior architecture, where interventions within internal spaces assume a central role, one that remains theoretically underdefined. The concept of "architecture as interior" emerged in the post-war period through the critical contributions of Bruno Zevi, Giulio Carlo Argan, Luigi Moretti, and Renato De Fusco, who placed interior space at the heart of architectural thought, redefining architecture as the art of *spaziare*. This theoretical approach is grounded in an empathetic and psychological relationship between human beings and space, conceived not merely as a physical envelope but as a site of experience. Conversation with the past—whether through the recovery of historic or ordinary buildings—translates into a transformative action that often preserves visible traces of historical stratification. Various intervention methodologies, ranging from the "creative restoration" of Carlo Scarpa, Franco Albini, or BBPR, to philological conservation or stylistic reinterpretation, attest to a plurality of design strategies. More recently, a tendency has emerged to reinterpret the existing fabric with respect and expressive autonomy, foregrounding interior space as a mediation site between the ancient and the contemporary. In summary, in Italy, "interior reuse"—a term that qualifies as the more commonly used "adaptive reuse"—constitutes a privileged field for engaging with the relationship between history and design, tradition and innovation, technique and spatial narrative.

Keywords: Interior Reuse, Italian Adaptive Reuse, *Spaziare* (Art of Spatialization)

Introduction

Within contemporary architectural discourse, increasing attention is being devoted to the reuse and reinterpretation of the existing built environment. In Italy, architectural practice today is distinguished less by expansion than by a deepening engagement with processes of transformation, adaptation, and regeneration. This essay seeks to contribute to this debate by exploring the theoretical and cultural underpinnings of the shift from building *ex novo* to strategies of reuse, with reference to the Italian urban condition. Drawing on the insights of leading scholars, the discussion underscores how the challenges posed by historically

layered urban fabrics have not only reshaped the operational priorities of the profession but have also redefined the architect's role in relation to memory, context, and continuity.

Reflecting on the contemporary urban landscape, Bernardo Secchi emphasised that the issue at stake in the city was no longer new construction, but rather giving meaning to already existing materials—that is, to the built heritage. He also stressed the «need for a method» (Secchi 1984, 12) that, through analysis, interpretation, and design, could link the culture of urban development to that of recovery and reuse of the existing heritage.

In Italy, the complexity of the urban scenario—including the coexistence of monumental works, widespread artistic value, and a fine-grained, compact urban context that has been repeatedly reworked, alongside persistent elements of decay—together with the progressive decline of new building activity in favour of the relocation of residential and tertiary functions within the historically sedimented areas of cities, has changed the needs and expectations of communities. This shift has increasingly directed the work of contemporary architects towards a culture of reuse (Forino 2004, 279-284) and, as foreseen by Renato De Fusco (1980, 5-6), this represents a clear trend in current architectural discourse, especially in Europe and Italy, where greater attention is now paid to the conservation and reuse of existing buildings than to the creation of new constructions.

Within this context, the most feasible line of action appears to be the reuse of the interior spaces of architectural artefacts. Indeed, most of the current professional activity can be categorised under the term “interior restructuring”—a designation that refers to what is created or altered within the interior spaces of buildings (Brooker and Stone 2004; Brooker 2016; Wong 2017; Plevvoets and Van Cleempoel 2019; Wong 2023). Although this field still requires theoretical clarification, in practice it may involve structural and masonry components, technical systems, windows and doors, flooring, the underside of the roof, and sometimes the roof itself, as well as internal spatial distribution, the design of built-in furniture, and attention to detail.

Architecture and/is Interior

Already in the early decades of the twentieth century Salvatore Vitale emphasised the very essence of architecture, wherein «space is not solely external, but also, and above all, internal, [...] [it is employed] in the totality of its constitutive relationships, as both volume and mass; [...] in architecture space, whilst retaining its essential character as pure extension—essentially, as void—nevertheless in some manner acquires a quasi-corporeal semblance and solidifies; the architectural work, in short, is not merely something that exists within space, but also something that makes space live within itself. [...] in architecture all space is ordered in its relations of inside and outside, in the entirety of its expansive capacity» (Vitale 1926, 94).

Since the post-Second World War period, the study of architectural history in Italy has increasingly intertwined with the notion of interior space as both a foundational element of the architectural discipline and a possible interpretative lens for its phenomenologies. Influenced by theories of pure visibility (Fiedler 1887), of architecture as *Raumgestaltung* (Schmarsow 1914), or as the art of shaping a hollow three-dimensionality (Sörgel 1921), Bruno Zevi asserted that the true protagonist of architecture is interior space (Zevi 1948, 21). While space may be investigated through content-based, physio-psychological, formalist, or empathic perspectives – such as the *Einfühlung* theory which, according to Robert Vischer

and Theodor Lipps, associates specific psychological responses with particular forms (De Fusco 2017, viii–ix)—for Zevi, the interior becomes a critical parameter through which to renew historiographical approaches, emphasising the biological and psychological correspondences between the human being and space.

Contributing to the theoretical debate, Giulio Carlo Argan proposed defining the interior as *interiore* – that is, what is experienced within architecture—and conceiving architecture itself as the process of establishing or determining space, a process which the art historian refers to as *spaziare* (Argan 1948, 21). For Argan, equally decisive is the relationship that human beings establish with interior space, since «space is nothing other than usability, navigability, the possibility of action and relation» (Argan 1955, 5). Subsequently, the elements structuring architecture in terms of interior space are articulated by Luigi Moretti, who writes: «Interior volumes possess a concrete presence in and of themselves, independently of the figure and material substance that encloses them, as if they were made of a rarefied substance lacking energy yet highly sensitive to receiving it» (Moretti 1952–53, 10). Moretti identifies several qualities that characterise these interior volumes: *geometric form* and *dimension*, both of a geometric nature; *density*, referring to the quantity and quality of natural light diffused within the architectural volumes; and *energetic pressure*, which depends on the configuration of the architectural envelope, the elements that intersect the «rarefied substance» through which one moves, and, finally, the extent to which the enclosing walls exert «pressure» on the emotional sphere of the user (ibid.). While the first two qualities are objective and rational, and thus readily perceptible, *density* and *energetic pressure* are understood through «an intellectual and psychological order» (Moretti 1952–53, 13). These reflections are illustrated by Moretti through a series of photographs of plaster models and drawings, depicting the interior volumes of paradigmatic architectural works, such as Guarino Guarini's unbuilt design for the Church of San Filippo Neri in Casale Monferrato (1671), and the Villa Adriana complex (2nd century A.D.) in Tivoli. Later, Argan (1959, 580–610) returns to the relationship between interior space and formal qualification, considering the type of interaction established between individuals and the external world – both natural and social—while a place is defined through the spatial boundaries of walls, ceilings, and floors. A further defining factor is furniture, which Argan distinguishes between fixed elements—integrated within the architectural design – and mobile furnishings, which are light and transportable. Renato De Fusco also recalls «the assumption that the most peculiar characteristic of architecture is its internal spatiality» (De Fusco 1973, 24), explicitly referencing Schmarsow's *Raumgestaltung* (Schwarzer 1991; Castagnaro 2017). He extends this notion within a structuralist-semiotic framework, arguing that «the sign is the minimal spatial unit of architecture (a room, an environment), composed of a hollow space = “signified” and an envelope = “signifier”» (De Fusco 1973, 35). In this view, the *hollow* denotes the void—the space of lived experience – while the *envelope* comprises the walls or other elements that delineate the space. In conclusion, from the post-war period onward, Italian architectural discourse has increasingly regarded architecture as *interior* and the architectural project as an *art of spatialization*. In particular, interior design is seen—following Argan's teaching—as the inseparable union of space and furnishing, as exemplified in the finest works of Italian architects engaged in the post-war reconstruction. It is in this context that the term *interior architecture* (*architettura degli interni*) gains widespread and consolidated usage.

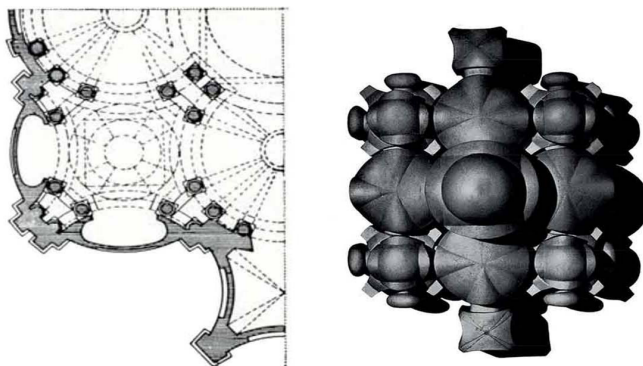


Fig. 1. Guarino Guarini, Church of San Filippo Neri, Casale Monferrato (project) – Interior volumes of church spaces, from: Moretti 1953, 9

Italian Conversation with the Built Environment

In Italy, the connection with the past is constantly materialised through the continuous superimposition of ancient and new building structures within urban fabrics. The Italian culture of stratification is characterised by the co-presence of old and new constructions, placed side by side or layered one atop the other. It is also evident in individual architectural elements built at different times—or even centuries—within the same structure, resulting in an accumulation of diverse qualities, traces, and materials. This represents a kind of meta-historical and arbitrary continuum which, through processes of removal, aggregation, and construction, reshapes earlier elements to relate them to contemporary forms—without entirely erasing their original vestiges, but instead engaging in a dialectical exchange with them (Forino 2002, 32). It is a composition of disparate fragments that forms a morphological context of considerable documentary value: the transformation of this ensemble over time ensures its continued use and thus its survival in the present, even at the expense of its original characteristics. This corresponds to what Vittorio Gregotti refers to—when discussing the concept of “modification”—as a situation in which «the existing has become heritage: beyond the passivity of the notion of reuse, every architectural operation increasingly entails a partial transformation» (Gregotti 1984, 4). Following the Second World War—which left deep scars across the Italian territory, particularly due to aerial bombings—various approaches emerged in the reuse of the built heritage. For many years, «the confrontation with history (...) more or less ambiguously, would characterise the trajectory of Italian architectural research» (Tafuri 1982, 11), albeit in differing modes. Among the post-war interventions, one notable tendency is that of «creative restoration» (Bonelli 1959, 11; Collotti 1993, 105-07), which encompasses internationally renowned and highly sophisticated projects. Examples include Carlo Scarpa's work in Palermo (restoration and museographic reorganisation of the Galleria Regionale at Palazzo Abatellis, 1953-1954) and Verona (restoration and museographic design of the Museo Civico at Castelvecchio, 1957-1974), Franco Albini's interventions in Genoa (museographic layout of the Gallerie Comunali at Palazzo Bianco, 1949-1951, and restoration and display design at Palazzo Rosso, 1952-1961), the BBPR's work in Milan

(restoration and arrangement of the museums at Castello Sforzesco, 1948-1963), Ignazio Gardella and Carlo Scarpa's museographic intervention in the Primitives Galleries of the Uffizi in Florence (1956), and Giovanni Michelucci's design for the Cassa di Risparmio in Florence (1953). These projects represent an exceptional mode of intervention, not merely restoring monumental buildings or fragments of the city, but providing them with a new and original interpretative framework—a critical reinterpretation that mediates between the ancient and the contemporary without distorting either, and indeed enriching both through their continued interaction. On the other hand, conservation *tout-court* was also pursued—a more philological safeguarding of buildings which, however, often lacked the necessary *design finesse* to adapt them to contemporary uses. Fire protection systems, lifts for accessibility, emergency staircases and other functional requirements often remain unresolved issues in the practice of strict conservation (Scott 2008). Finally, there is the “in-style” reconstruction approach, whereby entire buildings or urban blocks are arbitrarily rebuilt in a «socially legitimised “monumental” language» (Huber 1997, 22), though such interventions are highly questionable due to their a-historical nature. A notable example is the 1970s reconstruction of the San Leonardo block in Bologna in a quasi-Quattrocento style. In more recent years, reuse projects have emerged concerning historic architectural artefacts that are not strictly protected by the jurisdiction of the heritage authorities. These projects adopt intermediate positions involving interpretation and recontextualisation of the past. Often, the existing building is recovered as a mere shell—entirely emptied of its previous internal structures and reconfigured through a new interior architecture that sometimes stands in stark contrast to the original. Here, we see a deliberate intent to “mark” the existing fabric, where the reuse project becomes an intense spatial narrative, even while maintaining a respectful reinterpretation of the pre-existing structure. Notable examples include Andrea Bruno's restorations of the Castello di Rivoli (1978-1984) and Palazzo Carignano in Turin (1985-1994), Guido Canali's work in Parma (Galleria Nazionale—Monumental Complex of the Pilotta, 1965-1986) and Siena (redevelopment of the Santa Maria della Scala Museum complex, 1988), and Renzo Piano's transformation of an industrial site in Parma into the Paganini Auditorium (1999-2001). These projects all exemplify a fruitful dialogue with the past, each carried out on widely differing architectural scales. Alternatively, a line of enquiry emerges that seeks continuity with historical stratification, without ever veering into stylistic imitation. Here, the accumulation of marks left by time on the building is brought to light through the rediscovery and valorisation of its underlying structure and surviving fragments—such as the coexistence of diverse masonry systems, plaster layers, or wall paintings from successive historical periods. In such cases, «the adaptation of an ancient building to new uses is inextricably linked to the act of reading and conserving it, of which it is the natural consequence», write Massimo Carmassi and Gabriella Ioli Carmassi (1998, 29), who are among the most notable proponents of this approach to architectural pre-existence.

Conclusions

Transcending differences in terms of intervention type, formal language, temporal frame and contextual setting, all recent Italian projects aimed at the recovery of the existing built heritage share a fundamental element: the valorisation of interior space. This space is “completed” (from the Latin *compleo*, to fill, to make full) through the insertion of new,

clearly legible structures. These are often conceptually aligned with the idea of “building upon the built” (transposing the approach from the consolidated urban fabric) or with the notion of an “interior within the interior” (Forino 2001). In this sense, the building is understood as a “container” (*involutro*, De Fusco 1973, 30) into which the new project can be inserted—generating new spatial conditions through addition or accumulation, creating a layering and concentration of meaning. From another design perspective, interior space is instead liberated through a calibrated, almost imperceptible intervention. In such cases, the act of redesign focuses on the close analysis of a singular spatial narrative, recovering the very essence of architecture—or of its emptiness. This is not the conventional adoption of a minimalist language, but rather an elegant subtraction: a restrained spatial narrative that engages with the entirety of the built environment precisely by exalting its opposite – spatial *void*. Defined by De Fusco (1973, 37) as inhabitable emptiness, this void is enclosed by the “internal faces” of the envelope—floors, walls, ceilings, screens, etc. (De Fusco 1985, 1)—and constitutes the true, pure and absolute matter of the architectural project. It is the task of the designer to reveal the material, almost tangible, quality of the *cavum* (Lat. void) and its profound resilience—its capacity to endure over time, resisting pressures and disruptions brought by extraneous or short-lived interventions. This resilience may be skilfully designed, carefully reinstated, or otherwise the void itself may be embraced and valued as an absence not to be filled. In relation to the historically stratified fabric of the Italian built environment, to the design opportunities offered by its complex nature, and in continuity with the concept of *spaziare*—first developed by Salvatore Vitale and later by Bruno Zevi, Giulio Carlo Argan, and Luigi Moretti—the term *interior reuse* is here proposed as an alternative to the more widely used *adaptive reuse*. This offers a distinct methodological category – useful for both critical research and design practice—specific to those interventions that focus on the valorisation of interior space. The “rethinking from within” thus becomes a guiding principle for architectural intervention in existing structures, with the potential to foster a renewed dialogue with the urban context through the transformation of interior spaces. Within the broader framework of the culture of architectural reuse, the specificity of interior-focused interventions represents one of the most original contributions offered by Italian architects to the formulation of a distinctive approach to the reuse of the existing. Working on the interiors that have shaped the history of cities and their architecture may therefore constitute the most effective and original strategy for projecting the legacy of the past into the future. This is continuously demonstrated by the Italian architectural culture, which has long engaged with the existing heritage through a constructive dialogue between past and present.

Bibliography

- Argan, Giulio Carlo. “A proposito di spazio interno.” *Metron architettura urbanistica* 28, 20–21, 1948.
- Argan, Giulio Carlo. *Interni*. In *VII. Enciclopedia Universale dell'Arte*, 580-610. Venezia-Roma: Istituto per la Collaborazione Culturale, 1959.
- Argan, Giulio Carlo. “Il problema dell’arredamento.” *La casa. Quaderni di architettura e critica* 2, 5-10, 1956.
- Bonelli, Renato. *Restauro e architettura*. Venezia: Neri Pozza, 1959.
- Brooker, Graeme. *Adaptation Strategies for Interior Architecture and Design*. New York: Fairchild Books, 2016.

- Brooker, Graeme, and Sally Stone. *Rereadings. Interior Architecture and the Design Principles of Remodelling Existing Buildings*. London: RIBA Publishing 2004.
- Carmassi, Massimo, and Gabriella Ioli Carmassi. *Del restauro, quattordici case*. Milano: Electa, 1998.
- Castagnaro, Alessandro. *August Schmarsow, dalla critica d'arte contemporanea alla Raumgestaltung*. Bari: Progedit, 2017.
- Collotti, Francesco. *Restauro creativo*. In *Dizionario critico illustrato delle voci più utili all'architetto moderno*, edited by Luciano Semerari, 105-107. Faenza: Edizioni C.E.L.I.-Gruppo Editoriale Faenza, 1993.
- De Fusco, Renato. *Segni, storia e progetto dell'architettura*, Roma-Bari: Laterza 1973.
- De Fusco, Renato. 1980. "Il restauro architettonico. Ricchi apparati e povere idee." *Op. cit.* 49, 5-16, 1980.
- De Fusco, Renato. *Storia dell'arredamento*. Torino: UTET, 1985.
- De Fusco, Renato. "Prefazione". In Alessandro Castagnaro, *August Schmarsow, dalla critica d'arte contemporanea alla Raumgestaltung*, vii-xvi. Bari: Progedit, 2017.
- Fiedler, Konrad. *Der Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit*. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1887.
- Forino, Imma. *L'interno nell'interno. Una fenomenologia dell'arredamento*. Firenze: Alinea 2001.
- Forino, Imma. "Cultura del recupero e cultura dello sviluppo." *Op. cit.* 114, 31-38, 2002.
- Forino, Imma. *Abitare fra innovazione e recupero*. In Renato De Fusco, *Storia dell'arredamento*. 279-284. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2004.
- Gregotti, Vittorio. "Modificazione." *Casabella* 498-499, 2-7, 1984.
- Huber, Alessandra. *Il Museo italiano. La trasformazione di spazi storici in spazi espositivi. Attualità dell'esperienza museografica degli anni '50*. Milano: Lybra Immagine, 1997.
- Moretti, Luigi. "Strutture e sequenze di spazi". *Spazio* 7, 9-20, 107, 1952-53.
- Plevoets, Bie, and Koenraad Van Cleempoel. *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage. Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2019.
- Secchi, Bernardo. "Le condizioni sono cambiate." *Casabella* 498-499, 12-13, 1984.
- Schmarsow, von, August. "Raumgestaltung als Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung." *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 9, 66-95, 1914.
- Sörgel, Herman. *Theorie der Baukunst I. Architektur-Ästhetik*. München: Piloty & Löhle, 1921.
- Schwarzer, Mitchell W. "August Schmarsow's Theory of 'Raumgestaltung'." *Assemblage* 1, 48-61, 1991.
- Scott, Fred. *On Altering Architecture*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Tafuri, Manfredo. *Storia dell'architettura italiana, 1944-1985*. Torino: Einaudi 1982.
- Vitale, Salvatore. "Elogio dell'architettura." *Rivista d'Italia* 1, 15 January 1926: 32-46, then as *L'estetica dell'architettura. Saggio sullo sviluppo dello spirito costruttivo*. Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1928, now in *L'estetica dell'architettura e altri scritti*, edited by Cettina Lenza, Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2010.
- Wong, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse. Extending the Lives of Buildings*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017.
- Wong, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse in Architecture. A Typological Index*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2023.
- Zevi, Bruno. *Saper vedere l'architettura*. Torino: Einaudi 1948.