

Seconded Subjectivity

Design Agency in Reuse

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Abstract

This paper theorises architectural subjectivity in adaptive reuse projects and opens opportunities for critical engagement with the ethics of design. Drawing on Felix Guattari's ecosophy, it adapts James Nisbet's concepts developed in *Second Site* (2021) from art criticism to architecture. These prove more useful for understanding the process of design within a historical and ecological continuum than the dichotomy between pre-existing and proposed. This terminology is redeployed to analyse and compare two projects: Leon Battista Alberti's 15th-century renovation of *San Francesco* into the *Tempio Malatestiano*, and Carmody Groarke's contemporary enclosure of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's *Hill House*. In both cases, adaptive reuse produces a seconded experience. The revised building has a fundamentally altered relationship to its function, users, and context, through overlays and additions rather than erasures. Alberti's envelope serves as both a literal and a metaphorical screen, concealing the Gothic church while subversively asserting the architect's own disapproval of his patron. Nisbet's concept of succession helps articulate this temporal layering as a critical design act that remains legible for us today. The *Hill House Box*, meanwhile, reframes both the building and its landscape. Once understood as a pioneering site-specific work, the house now appears as a vulnerable object under glass. This shift reverses how the site is occupied and how it is perceived—producing a seconded spatiality that foregrounds maintenance, climate, and access. The paper thus offers an interpretation of adaptive reuse as a process of architectural resubjectivisation: for architects, users, and buildings alike. It contributes to contemporary discourse by repositioning reuse as a generative site of ethico-aesthetic design agency.

Keywords: Secondness, Subjectivity, Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm

Introduction

James Nisbet's *Second Site* (2021) offers a conceptual framework to understand the complex relationship between site-specific artworks and the passage of time. Transposing this to an architectural context through Guattari's ecosophy allows us to understand architectural reuse in an ethico-aesthetic register. Readings of Alberti's *Tempio Malatestiano* and Carmody Groarke's *Hill House Box* reveal “secondness” as an uncomfortable affect with a generative potential. It identifies fertile grounds for subjectification for architects and users alike in the temporal and material discontinuities of architecture.

Second Site (2021) as an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm

James Nisbet's *Second Site* (2021) attempts to define complex notions of authorship and the passage of time in land art. The book is divided into three chapters, each expanding a key concept. First, "Successions" borrows this ecological term to denote perceived steps in a rapid evolution of site conditions. Second, "Time Worlds" contextualise these evolutions in a broader context of ongoing anthropic land transformation. Third, "Site-Images" are the recordings of "successions" of site in photographs, films, but also drawings, and other media.

Richard Serra's *Shift* (1977) undergirds the three chapters and illustrates their concepts. Its low concrete walls trace paths across a field, indexing local topography (Nisbet 2021, 3-4). After the land was sold it underwent a succession and became cropland, obscuring the walls, turning them into obstacles for harvesters. Site-images keep this contrast legible, while the site's time world recalls its colonial history (Nisbet 2021, 33). A "seconded" experience arises from the gap produced by a succession. This is the jarring superposition of land art and agricultural obstruction, or the recognition that "untouched" nature is a fiction (Nisbet 2021, xx-xxi). Nisbet produces a seconded reading of *Shift* focusing on the dissonance between Serra's approach to landscape ecologically and ethically (Nisbet 2021, 33). This is akin to producing a seconded piece of land art such as Rebecca Belmore's *Biinjiya'ning Onji (From Inside)* which harnesses this unsettling potential to intentionally produce an affect of criticality (Nisbet 2021, 34-37). Secondness is therefore not only an affect of difference, but a percept of design opportunity (Deleuze, Guattari 1994). Perceiving secondness in a work also spurs on the speculation or production of new work. It can therefore be a subjectivising force (Guattari 1995). Nisbet's vision of differentially dynamic timelines shifts how we think about architectural reuse. Interventions become successions among successions, site-images fragment the present by freezing earlier states and proposing new ones, time worlds situate these shifts in broader trajectories, and secondness generates a critical response to these overlapping successions (Nisbet 2021, xix). This points to a possibility of discussing and envisaging architectural reuse projects in a primarily ethico-aesthetic register. Faced with an increasing reliance on technological discourse, Félix Guattari defines these ecosophic modes of practice in his *Three Ecologies* (1989). By cultivating singularising subjectivities, these develop forms of life which resist the homogeneity resulting from pseudo-scientific reductionism. We will discuss Alberti's *Tempio Malatestiano* and Carmody Groarke's *Hill House Box* through their productions of secondness. This exploratory probing will attempt to find existing subjectivities and subjectivising forces within these canonical examples.

Tempio Malatestiano

Leon Battista Alberti was commissioned to redesign the pre-existing Franciscan church in Rimini around 1450 by Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta. It had previously been altered more modestly, chapel by chapel, by his Malatesta ancestors, the rulers of Rimini (Tavernor 1998, 50-51). Wanting to leave his own legacy, Sigismondo Pandolfo first set out an ambitious transformation of the interior with Matteo de' Pasti, but he suddenly expanded the scope of works by appointing Alberti to turn the building into a «monument both noble and holy» (Alberti translated and quoted in Tavernor 1998, 58).

In Alberti's time, the building bore witness to several successions: the first is from a local

Franciscan church to the focus of Malatesta patronage; the second is from this regional bastion to Sigismondo Pandolfo's personal project; the third is the sudden expansion of this project and the introduction of Alberti's design; and finally, the fourth is its abandon following Sigismondo Pandolfo's excommunication. Each of these intervals are legible as discrepancies and produce a feeling of secondness. The Gothic fabric sits in contrast to the classically inspired ornamentation inside. Both diverge from the exterior intervention by Alberti. These three visions for the building exist together in dissensus.

The unfinished façade shows Sigismondo Malatesta's drastic change of fortune. The rational geometry of Alberti's original design intent is truncated by the sudden depletion of building funds. It gives an unsettling feeling which prompts viewers to imagine how it might have looked if it had been completed. A commemorative medal from 1450 hints at Alberti's full vision for the edifice though a rough front elevation featuring a hugely ambitious dome (Tavernor 1998, 58). Both the unfinished building and model reconstructions of the design intent produce secondness. The façade asks to be completed, but the design of the medal is difficult to reconcile with the existing fabric where it diverges from its strict rules.

Additionally, the completed aspects of Alberti's design also produce a seconded experience (Paine 2023, 192). The rhythm and building style are doubled as the old fabric is visible through the Alberti addition. The overlay of the regular all'antica rhythm onto the uneven Gothic façade is surprising. The pointed arches subvert the confidence of the marble piers. The overall effect is staccato—metaphorically from a rhythmic point of view, and literally as these elements are disconnected and set apart. The distancing of Alberti's design from the historical fabric stems from a weariness with the existing building from a technical point of view, from an aesthetic point of view, and from an ethical point of view. This is the source of secondness here. In correspondence about the building works, Alberti warned about the fragility and unreliability of the historical fabric of the Gothic walls of the church (Tavernor 1998, 59-61). He highlighted the unpredictability of time-worn structures in detail in his *De re aedificatoria* (Alberti 1991, 320, 358-362). He thus advocated for an «independent structure» (Alberti translated and quoted in Tavernor 1998, 59) for the *Tempio Malatestiano*. This strategy was supported by his distaste for the architectural qualities of the Gothic church (Tavernor 1998, 59). Alberti's interests in the dogma of Ancient Roman architecture surpassed ornament (as exemplified by Matteo de' Pasti's internal refurbishment) and developed into an architectural ethics. Instead of letting the design intent be altered by compromises with builders or designers (Tavernor 1998, 59) or driven by other structures (Alberti 1991, 320), the architect became a guardian of a new vision of order—a façade removed from past mistakes. Nevertheless, Alberti's distancing came with deference. He discussed the merits of conservation in general in *De re aedificatoria* (Alberti 1991, 320, 358-362) and understood its role for the Malatestas. Despite its lacking aesthetic qualities, the church may have also carried special significance for a life-long member of the clergy particularly influenced by Franciscan thought (Jarzombek 1989, 172). The detachment of the façade may also respond to the growing political tensions between Malatesta and the Pope. Though at the time of the commission the latter had not yet excommunicated the former, Malatesta already had proven himself an unreliable Papal subject (Tavernor 1998, 51). His transgressions may have already deeply affected the architect on a personal level (Jarzombek 1989, 173), though this is uncertain (Tavernor 1991, 312). Alberti's general weariness towards patrons is reiterated several times in *De re*

aedificatoria (Alberti 1991, 318-319), and is notably played out in his theatrical play, *Momus*, an allegorical tale of an architect, humiliated then vindicated in service to a fickle Jupiter (Tavernor 1998, 20).

A cautious design approach may have sought a deferred meaning as well—one in which each powerful man would see their authority reflected. In the design of the front elevation, Pope Nicholas V could have recognised Rimini's Arch of Augustus, through which he was planning a jubilee pilgrimage procession to Rome (Tavernor 1998, 58). Equally, referencing the Tomb of Theodoric—a legendary challenger to Roman authority—would have pleased Sigismondo as well (Tavernor 1998, 71-72). The all'antica language of the arcade kept a safe distance from a clear interpretation, but firmly rooted it as a showcase of Alberti's architectural expertise. Alberti, too, kept his distance throughout the build, communicating from Rome through letters, drawings, and models (Tavernor 1998, 59). These representations even implied distance in their production. Alberti's theory of perspective relies on positioning a viewer's eye a set distance from the object across from a gridded screen, the "velum", which gives visual structure and proportion to the composition. Orthographic representation then conceptually relied on an eye situated infinitely far away (Carpo 2011, 17-20). The velum becomes key to understanding Alberti's design. The "staccato" of the gridded façade, in visual contrast and set apart from the Gothic walls, allows tensions and passions to play across its surface without adhering to it. While the pointed arches root us to the old church and its interior, the external classical arcade refers to the major role of the building in the region, country, or architectural history. The experience of the architecture is seconded because of the various disconnections in the time-world of the building. The seconded reading of Alberti's façade allows us to understand these intentional gaps as productive of a subjectivity of ethical deferral, cultivating caution and resilience. Whether this was spurred on by a moral reservation or cynical self-preservation is unknown, but the effectiveness of these architectural features as singularising moments is clear.

Hill House Box

The *Hill House* itself was constructed between 1902 and 1904 by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Commissioned by Walter Blackie in Helensburgh, the house is emblematic of Mackintosh's approach (Crawford 2002, 139). The design experimented with materials in new tectonics, namely the application of roughcast Portland cement to the walls and parapets and even instead of coping stones (Wright 2012, 24, 33). This mixture is porous and absorbs the punishing Helensburgh rain as it expands and cracks. The substrate is now saturated and poses existential issues for the building (Wright 2012, 110). The National Trust in Scotland thus launched an architecture competition to design a shelter to "contain" the house in 2017. The winners, Carmody Groarke, proposed a "Box" (Carmody Groarke 2019) which veils the building behind a chainmail curtain protecting it from the elements (Gaffney 2019). At first glance, this veil separates the building from its landscape in a stark succession, situating the *Hill House* in a "second site" within the *Box*. Extracting a site-specific work from its environment is jarring, especially for its own protection. However, this initial impression quickly shifts when the veil is traversed. Once inside, the Dunbartonshire landscape is distinctly visible in a surprising reversal. Though the *Box* is designed to stop most of the rain, it must crucially allow the structure to dry out. It thus lets in gusts of wind, insects, pollinators, and light (Gaffney 2019). The separation of the house to its landscape



Fig. 1. Hill House Box (exterior). Carmody Groarke (Tom Parnell, 2019)



Fig. 2. Hill House Box. Carmody Groarke (Tom Parnell, 2019)

is greater on the outside than on the inside.

Turning back to the *Hill House*, another seconded experience arises. Witnessing a building within a building is uncanny. The *Box* separates the “inside” of the house and the “outside” of the site through an extra threshold, a space “in between” (Paine 2023, 192). As in the *Tempio Malatestiano* above, distancing is the source of secondness, but in this case, through our displacement to new vistas and pathways around the site.

This “in between” space offers much more than an extended threshold. The experience provided by the walkways around and over the house is even more unusual. These unprecedented views of the building shrink it in our perception and reduce it to an artefact (Carmody Groarke 2019), a «doll’s house» (Samantha Hardingham quoted in Paine 2023, 203), or even a simulacrum (Djabarouti 2021, 110). Becoming an architectural model of itself, the *Hill House* draws us in to examine every detail of its external fabric. But rather than bringing us closer to the reality of the house, this view creates a seconded distance between us and the model-building (Paine 2023, 202-203).

This affect is intensified when the steel grilles take us above the *Hill House*. There, we are confronted with a roof which no longer serves its key purpose of providing weather-tightness – that function has been transferred to the roof of the *Box*. Examining it for signs of water ingress and damage becomes an abstract but unavoidable exercise. Indeed, the *Box* seeks to make the restoration work participatory and highlights its role in the process (Carmody Groarke 2019). The walkways lead to the damaged fabric of the building, to the stained roughcast, worn lintels, and uncapped parapets. This orbital journey is downcast by the building’s apparent design flaws, especially for those without the expertise to see opportunities for renewal and repair. Undoubtedly these are privileged views, but likely not ones which Mackintosh would enjoy (Gaffney 2019).

Moreover, this presentation of the *Hill House* as a primarily physical and material exercise is transgressive to Mackintosh’s understanding of his own work. In fact, the infamous Portland cement roughcast was chosen to abstract its apparent materiality in favour of a geometric (Crawford 2002, 100-106; Wright 2012, 91) or even symbolic (Grehg 1996, 43) reading. Grid fragments of windows, carpets, walls, furniture, joinery and structure

interrelate to frame the house conceptually in a dynamic architectural whole (Greh 1996). Mackintosh was evidently not simply concerned with function (Crawford 2002, 105) or the experience of materials when refining his architecture (Greh 1996, 43).

While any symbolic meanings may be hidden behind very detailed readings, the unfolding of Mackintosh's spatial repetitions and symmetries follows the path from the front gate to the master bedroom (Greh 1996). This design intent is frustrated by the new visitor centre which is placed squarely in front of the entrance of the *Hill House* (Gaffney 2019). It interrupts any visual or experiential connection in this sequence.

The *Box*'s combination of veil, walkways, and visitor centre act as disruptors to Mackintosh's vision. Seconded experiences are produced outside of the *Box* by the veil, and inside of the *Box*, but outside of the house, by walkways and the placement of the visitor centre. The combination of disconnection, shrinking, and delamination pulls the architecture apart into its constituent pieces. The fabric of the building is understood separately from its architectural purpose and from its function. The *Hill House* is read separately from its landscape. The inside is fundamentally separated from the outside by a series of thick thresholds and "in between" spaces.

Though the seconded experience here is particularly jarring, it is eminently productive. The *Box* forces visitors to reappraise each element of the architecture separately – its functions, materials, forms, and spaces. It singularises an analytical and critical subjectivity which questions the location, duration, and presence of the *Hill House*.

The *Box* will leave a permanent imprint on the *Hill House*. It will either be left intact and incorporated into the identity of the *Hill House*, or even if it is dismantled, it will impart its functions back onto the roughcast of the Mackintosh original, thus imprinting itself into the fabric of future successions.

Conclusion

James Nisbet's *Second Site* (2021) and Guattari's ecosophy reframe architectural reuse within an ethico-aesthetic paradigm. In both Alberti's *Tempio Malatestiano* and Carmody Groarke's *Hill House Box*, temporal, material, and conceptual interruptions produce affects of discomfort, but this secondness is valuable precisely for its potential of subjectivation. The distancing in Alberti's façade is understood as a finely tuned ethical restraint, while veiling the *Hill House* transforms its decline into an occasion for critique and reappraisal. The architecture of reuse can invite architects and occupants alike to see material, temporal, and affective disruptions as a fertile territory for the generation of further successions. This points to a participatory, dynamic, and critical view of reuse which merits further study.

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