

Adaptive Reuse at Stöng

Architecture as Interpretive Transformation

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Abstract

This paper explores adaptive reuse as a design-led and theoretical practice, focusing on how it recalibrates relationships among heritage, contemporary architecture, and community resilience. Using the reinterpretation of *Stöng* in the *Þjórsárdalur* valley, Iceland—realised by SP(R)INT STUDIO—as its central case study, the paper advances a model that moves beyond static conservation, by treating the past as an active generator of spatial, cultural, and ecological meaning. Rather than simply erasing or restoring historical strata, the project pursues temporal continuity, positioning architecture as a mediator between ruin and renewal, memory and projection. The transformation of the 1957 shelter at *Stöng*—initially built to protect a Viking Age archaeological site—demonstrates a design philosophy grounded in environmental sensitivity, cultural humility, and theoretical rigour. Through minimal yet expressive interventions, the existing structure was revalorised rather than replaced, becoming a framework that connects the site, landscape, and visitors. New elements, such as pathways, transparent roofing, and atmospheric interior volumes engage time, weather, and light as active design agents, fostering a spatial narrative in which incompleteness and impermanence are embraced as virtues. The project exemplifies how adaptive reuse can promote sustainability, public engagement, and cultural continuity while respecting the layered complexity of historical sites. It signals a shift in contemporary design discourse from static preservation to interpretive transformation. Key theoretical questions—authenticity, temporality, and phenomenology—are explored through built form, challenging binary distinctions between old and new, architecture and ruin, function and atmosphere. In an era of ecological instability and cultural fragmentation, the *Stöng* intervention illustrates how adaptive reuse can serve as a strategy for resilient futures in both urban and rural contexts. By integrating architectural design, theoretical discourse, and public memory, the project repositions heritage not as a fixed relic, but as an evolving space for imagination, encounter, and collective identity.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Design Strategies, Interpretive Transformation

Introduction

Adaptive reuse is increasingly understood not merely to extend the technical lifespan of ageing structures, but as a dynamic mode of cultural production, where architecture negotiates relationships among past, present, and possible futures. In the context of ecological instability and cultural fragmentation, the challenge is not only how to preserve historical sites, but how to activate them as spatial, social, and environmental infrastructures

capable of producing new meaning. The reinterpretation of *Stöng* in the *Þjórsárdalur* valley, Iceland, exemplifies this shift. The project centres on a mid-twentieth-century shelter, constructed in 1957 to protect exposed Viking Age remains. Rather than demolishing the shelter or treating it as an untouchable artefact, SP(R)INT STUDIO repositions it as a mediating instrument. The shelter is neither erased nor fetishised; it is revalorised and made operative. The objective is temporal continuity: to allow distinct historical layers—settlement archaeology, mid-century conservation, and contemporary design research—to coexist and remain legible, without collapsing one into another. This paper contends that the *Stöng* project models adaptive reuse as interpretive transformation. Here, architecture is not an inactive frame for heritage, nor a superficial embellishment of established narratives, but an interface through which landscape, ruin, climate, and visitor interact. Meaning is not imposed through a single authoritative narrative; rather, it is co-produced through encounter, situated perception, and the atmospheric behaviour of the site under changing conditions of light, moisture, and wind. The project thus challenges traditional binaries in conservation discourse—old versus new, restoration versus innovation, artefact versus infrastructure—by advocating a practice in which incompleteness, ambiguity, and reversibility are treated as necessary conditions for resilience. The study develops three lines of inquiry. First, it situates the project within a theoretical framework, drawing on Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1989)—a book describing artworks that invite multiple interpretations—and Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), which emphasises the continual shaping of identity and meaning through ongoing relationships. Second, it describes the methodology of SP(R)INT STUDIO, whose Total Design approach integrates design practice, spatial research, collaboration, and long-term care. Third, it analyses key spatial, material, and ecological strategies at *Stöng*, considering their implications for authenticity, public engagement, and sustainability in both rural and urban contexts.



Fig. 1. *Stöng* and the volcanic field of *Þjórsárdalur*. SP(R)INT STUDIO. (Studio CAPN, 2024)

Theoretical Framework: Openness, Relation, and Temporal Continuity

The *Stång* project can be productively understood through Umberto Eco's concept of the *Open Work*. In simple terms, Eco distinguishes between *closed works*, which communicate a singular, predetermined message, and *open works*, which set up conditions for multiple readings, forms of participation, and future reinterpretation. In essence, an *open work* invites interpretation and participation from its audience, rather than prescribing a single meaning. Within this framework, architecture is more than a bearer of information; it is a structured invitation to interpretive agency. The reworked shelter at *Stång* does not present a didactic device that instructs visitors in one official version of history. Instead, it creates space for plural readings. For example, the circulation through and around the shelter is choreographed so that several interpretive sequences are possible, rather than one prescriptive route. Light and weather act as narrative agents, shifting the spatial tone over the day and across seasons. Surfaces are not made visually neutral; they register time and climate, exposing the incompleteness and fragility of any attempt to fix the past.

Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* further expands the stakes of interpretation, moving from the scale of the work to the scale of culture. Glissant's theory emphasises that identity and meaning are shaped through ongoing relationships and exchanges, rather than fixed origins. He rejects the idea of identity as rooted in a single, pure origin, arguing instead for identity as produced through contact, translation, exchange, and mutual becoming. He also defends the value of opacity: not everything must, or should, be made instantly transparent or consumable. In the context of architectural heritage, this means resisting two temptations: the urge to monumentalise the past as a closed national narrative, and the urge to flatten complexity into a simplified story for rapid consumption. At *Stång*, opacity is not obscurity but respect for the site's layered character. The project refuses to deliver a single explanatory script, instead enabling embodied engagement with partial remains, climatic exposure, and material weathering, maintaining a productive distance between past and present while still allowing meaningful connections.

Read together, Eco and Glissant encourage a shift in the definition of authenticity. Traditional conservation often frames authenticity as either material originality (the untouched fragment) or visual continuity (the persuasive reconstruction). The *Stång* project proposes a different reading: authenticity as temporal continuity. Here, authenticity is measured by the site's sustained capacity to generate situated meaning across time for multiple publics, not by strict material purity or aesthetic coherence. The shelter becomes a temporal interface, mediating between ruin and landscape, and between mid-century conservation culture and contemporary environmental ethics. Heritage is thus understood not as inert evidence of the past, but as an active field in which cultural identity continues to be negotiated.

This reframing also has consequences for authorship. If meaning emerges relationally, the designer does not author the site in a singular sense. Instead, design establishes conditions under which new readings and attachments can unfold. Adaptive reuse, in this sense, is less about stabilising form and more about enabling ongoing, situated, and collectively produced interpretation. The project is intentionally unfinished: it can continue to be read, adjusted, and cared for. This incompleteness is not a lack of resolution; it is a declaration that the work remains open.



Fig. 2. Stöng (re)interpretation. SP(R)INT STUDIO. (Studio CAPN, 2024)

Methodology: Total Design as Research Practice

SP(R)INT STUDIO operates as a practice of spatial (re)interpretation, based in *Reykjavík* and engaged across architecture, urbanism, and territorial analysis. Its working method—described as Total Design—integrates design, research, collaboration, and long-term stewardship. This approach is non-linear and does not separate technical evaluation from theoretical positioning. Instead, it treats design as an investigative, humanistic method, grounded in evidence and directed towards public meaning.

The studio advances a research-driven approach. Archival material relating to the 1957 shelter, archaeological documentation of the Viking Age remains, and climate data from the *Þjórsárdalur* valley are studied alongside site observation and on-site prototyping. The practice insists on multiplicity and plurality—what it terms polysemy—in spatial interpretation. No single reading of the site is regarded as definitive; rather, different readings are generated, tested, and compared. This aligns with the idea that built work can function as a research instrument, producing knowledge about how visitors move, what they attend to, and how weather and light condition their understanding of the site. For example, the team observed that visitors often linger at the new pause points, using them for reflection or conversation, which in turn informed further design adjustments. In this respect, the studio operates as a laboratory as much as a design office, with exploratory, empirical, and applied research understood as part of design, rather than as pre-design inputs.

Collaboration is intrinsic to authorship. The design process involves archaeologists, structural engineers, ecologists, local authorities, and craftspeople as co-producers. Collaboration is not limited to consultation at milestones; it is sustained across scales, from territorial thinking to individual joints and fixings. This mirrors Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*: the project

becomes the outcome of negotiated interdependencies, rather than a single authorial voice. It also anticipates that the future of the site will depend on these same actors. By embedding stakeholders into early decision-making, the project constructs the social infrastructure of care required after formal completion. For instance, local community members will be involved in maintenance workshops, fostering a sense of shared stewardship.

Sustainability is framed in both environmental and social terms, linking large-scale ecological performance to small-scale spatial experience. Path surfaces, runoff management, and vegetated swales are designed to stabilise ground conditions around the ruins, reduce erosion, and direct water in ways that support local ecologies. At the same time, accessibility, wind protection, and calibrated resting points are considered for different bodies and speeds. Sustainability here is not only a matter of carbon, materials, and maintenance cycles; it is also the capacity of the site to remain a place of encounter for diverse publics, without being overexploited or overprotected.

Reversibility and care are fundamental criteria. Interventions are conceived to be demountable, inspectable, and adjustable without destroying archaeological evidence or requiring high-energy reconstruction. Mechanical fixings are favoured over irreversible bonds. Patina is not polished away; it is retained as information. Maintenance protocols and monitoring routines are specified as part of the design and envisioned as ongoing civic practice. The project assumes that stewardship is not separate from design, but one of its primary outputs. In doing so, it addresses a persistent weakness in heritage work: capital investment is often intense at the moment of intervention and minimal thereafter. Total Design argues that this model is no longer viable under present ecological and cultural conditions.



Fig. 3. Interior of Stöng, with old and new components. SP(R)INT STUDIO. (Studio CAPN, 2024)

Project Analysis: Stöng as Mediating Interface

Before intervention, the 1957 shelter at *Stöng* existed as a functional but conceptually unstable artefact. While it protected the archaeological remains from direct exposure, it had accumulated piecemeal repairs, visual clutter, and environmental inconsistencies. Visitors experienced the site as a container for viewing, not as a layered cultural landscape. SP(R) INT STUDIO's approach did not attempt to fix the site by returning it to an imagined original state, nor to erase it in favour of a pristine new object. Instead, it sought to re-situate the shelter as an interface between ruin, landscape, and visitor.

Spatially, the project employs controlled subtraction and targeted addition. Selective removal of obstructive accretions reopens long sightlines and ventilates the interior, while preserving necessary protection from wind and precipitation. New translucent roof elements introduce diffuse light, making natural illumination and weather integral to the interpretive experience. The shelter shifts from being a neutral buffer to an instrument for perceiving time, seasonality, and climate.

Materially, the project resists both cosmetic smoothing and picturesque decay. Structural elements are reinforced where required, but their age is not visually denied. Joints are made legible, and surfaces are allowed to hold marks of wear. Patina, instead of being treated as a defect, is reframed as evidence. The visible co-presence of new elements and older surfaces challenges the binary distinction between architecture and ruin. The shelter, a product of mid-century conservation philosophy, is now recognised as part of the site's heritage. This move is critical: it reframes conservation as an ongoing cultural practice rather than a singular historic act.

Ecologically, the intervention extends beyond the shelter envelope. Ground works, permeable pathways, and vegetated swales manage runoff and mitigate erosion, while shaping how visitors move through the site. Circulation is not only logistical but interpretive: the visitor's path becomes a narrative device linking the material remains to the surrounding valley, re-suturing archaeological fragments and living landscape. Pause points, subtle thresholds, and wind-calmed niches facilitate dwelling, conversation, and guided interpretation. The project supports public engagement without resorting to heavy-handed didactics or spectacle. Instead, it frames the site as a spatial argument: heritage is inseparable from terrain, and terrain is inseparable from climate.

This integrated approach redefines performance. Performance is not reduced to technical efficiency; it is understood as the ability of the site to sustain meaning and use under changing cultural and environmental conditions. The project challenges the assumption that preservation must always stabilise and standardise. Here, preservation cultivates calibrated exposure, accepting partial openness and partial vulnerability, but managing them through design.



Fig. 4. The frame as a temporal threshold at Stöng, SP(R)INT STUDIO. (Studio CAPN, 2024)

Conclusions

The *Stöng* intervention demonstrates that adaptive reuse can function as an active cultural and ecological practice rather than as a purely preservative one. Instead of reproducing a lost past or enclosing heritage within a fixed interpretive frame, the project establishes conditions for temporal continuity. It positions the past as generative in the present: as a source of spatial organisation, cultural meaning, and ecological responsibility. In this sense, adaptive reuse is articulated not as a defensive strategy of protection, but as a propositional act that sets up futures.

The project also redefines authenticity. Rather than grounding authenticity in material permanence or formal accuracy, *Stöng* locates it in relational durability – in the capacity of the site to support multiple, evolving forms of meaning for different publics over time while remaining ecologically viable. Ambiguity and incompleteness are treated not as failures to deliver clarity, but as deliberate conditions that allow heritage to remain open, discussable, and collectively negotiated.

Methodologically, the work at *Stöng* advances adaptive reuse as a mode of transdisciplinary research and civic infrastructure. It shows that design, when undertaken as iterative, evidence-based spatial inquiry, can simultaneously generate cultural insight, ecological strategies, and publicly accessible structures of engagement. The insistence on reversibility, programmed maintenance, and care reframes stewardship as a designed and ongoing responsibility rather than a post-project obligation. This orientation is especially urgent in the context of accelerating climatic pressures and shifting patterns of tourism and local use. At the same time, the project makes clear that such an approach depends on enabling institutional and social conditions. It requires clients and public bodies willing to accept

ambiguity, shared authorship, incremental transformation, and long-term stewardship. This refusal of closure is both the project's primary strength—allowing heritage to remain alive—and its vulnerability, as it resists conventional expectations of completion, control, and singular narrative authority.

From this position, *Stöng* proposes a recalibration of architectural practice in relation to sites of cultural value. The architect is understood not only as a form-giver or technical stabiliser, but as a mediator of temporal relations, a designer of frameworks for collective interpretation, and a caretaker of conditions in which public memory can continue to evolve. *Stöng* is thus not presented as a finished object, but as an evolving civic platform: a site of encounter, imagination, and identification. In doing so, it offers adaptive reuse—understood as interpretive transformation—as a viable strategy for sustaining cultural resilience across both rural and urban contexts.

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