

The Aesthetic of Reuse

An “Unglorious” Condition for Contemporary Architects

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural, theoretical, and professional implications of architectural reuse in a context where renovation and adaptation increasingly surpass new construction, redefining the priorities of the built environment. It distinguishes between restoration and re-edition as two critical yet fundamentally different approaches to the existing, examining their respective aims, methods, and conceptual frameworks. In doing so, the paper highlights how reuse is not merely a technical or economic necessity, but also a cultural and ethical stance toward the built heritage. The study further investigates the evolving role of the architect within this shifting scenario, where opportunities for new construction are progressively reduced and intervention on pre-existing structures becomes the dominant field of action. This condition challenges traditional notions of authorship and originality, weakening the issue of the “star-architect” model and opening the way to alternative models, such as the architect as curator, or “healer” of the existing. Finally, the paper proposes the emergence of new aesthetic paradigms proper of the culture of reuse, identifying different possible approaches to the relationship between old and new, from strategies of contrast to those of continuity, up to more nuanced intermediate positions. In this sense, adaptive reuse is framed not only as a practice of transformation, but also as an opportunity for the development of new architectural languages. The paper ultimately argues that contemporary architecture is undergoing a profound shift, moving from a model of authorship centered on creativity to one focused on care, transformation and continuity, within an ongoing process of spatial and temporal reconfiguration.

Keywords: Re-Edition, Heritage, Architect as Curator

Introduction

This contribution does not aim to present case studies or best practices; rather, it seeks to raise a series of general issues surrounding the culture of reuse. In particular, it questions how the role of the architect is changing in a context where reuse has surpassed new construction, how architectural languages are evolving, and whether it is possible to identify specific languages for reuse.

The first step to carry on this argumentation is to disambiguate two concepts that too often overlap: the concept of restoration and the concept of re-edition of the existing. On the one hand, restoration can be defined as a “critical” operation of conservation and, in some cases, completion of an existing artifact, aimed at recognizing the intrinsic values of the pre-existing structure. It means that, in the case of heavily damaged monuments, where it is impossible to re-establish the original elements of an architectural work, restoration

must always prioritize integrity over innovation and renovation. The key concept is that, in restoration, what matters is what is “original” (i.e., authentic), not what is merely “newly created”. In this sense, restoration is primarily concerned with conservation rather than transformation.

On the other hand, differently from restoration, interventions of mere renovation are primarily concerned with the reuse of a building, often with limited attention to its intrinsic values. In such cases, the focus tends to shift toward functional adaptation and economic and technical performance, rather than toward the recognition and preservation of the historical, cultural and material significance embedded in the existing structure. As a result, renovation may risk overlooking the deeper identity of the building, reducing it to a support for new uses rather than engaging critically with its pre-existing qualities.

Between these two positions stands the concept of “re-edition”. It is directly aimed at reusing a building but, at the same time, it shares with restoration a critical dimension, related to the awareness of the idea of editing something that was written before, by someone else, in another time. To synthesize, a restored building may still be in use, but use is not the principal goal of restoration, while a re-edited building, by contrast, always generates a new use for the building, as the economic sustainability of the operation is central. At the same time, just like restoration, re-edition is also a critical operation, since it seeks to enhance the values of the pre-existence, which comes to be considered as the text on which a new script comes to be interwoven.

The Second Life of the Buildings

From what has been said, it follows that, while the primary goal of restoration is conservation, re-edition represents the most appropriate conceptual frame to intervene on existing structures in a critical perspective of adaptive reuse. In brief, a true re-edited architecture aims, above all, to make the building reusable, reactivating its capacity to accommodate new functions, but it also aims to bring into the organism new critical meanings. By this way, the concept of “re-edition” becomes the real critical category that stands between restoration and pure renovation, capable to breathe new vitality into the artifacts of the past, bringing them to a “second life” (Posocco, Raitano 2016).

This concept refers to a design approach that moves beyond the idea of mere preservation or restoration of the existing. Rather than aiming to return a building to a supposed original state, the notion of “second life” implies a living process of reinterpretation and transformation, in which the existing structure is understood as a resource to be reactivated. This approach acknowledges the layered nature of architecture, embracing the traces of time while introducing new uses, meanings, and spatial configurations. The project, therefore, becomes an act of critical mediation between past and present, capable of extending the life cycle of buildings without denying their history, but instead re-signifying it within contemporary conditions. If we are interested in giving a second chance of life to an architecture, the past must not be a fetish, nor must be the present an imperative. Both temporal dimensions must interact, and their relative significance varies from case to case. Synthetizing, in this context, the expression “second life” should not be understood only as a strict continuation of the previous life of the building, as restoration aims to achieve, but rather as a transformation of its identity that allows it to remain active and relevant within a contemporary scenario, while still reinterpreting its inherited values. Furthermore, the

expression “second life” alludes to the practice of healing. It implies a concept of care that requires an attentive gaze toward what exists, but also the acknowledgment that the urban and architectural spaces in which we live are often affected by dysfunctions. In this sense, they can be understood as “sick”, and architecture can contribute to their healing.

Now an important question arises: is the re-edition of a building always a necessity, or should it rather be considered a choice to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis? In fact, recognizing the potential for a “second life” does not imply that demolition is inherently wrong or illegitimate. In our opinion, in certain situations, a carefully planned demolition can itself be an act of respect and responsibility toward the existing environment, allowing for a redistribution of materials or the creation of new opportunities for the site. While, if a building remains structurally and economically viable for reuse, its re-edition must always be considered as a valuable strategy, enabling the preservation of cultural and architectural heritage while adapting it to contemporary needs. In other words, the decision to reuse or demolish should not be governed by dogma but by a careful assessment of context, functionality, and potential for sustaining the life of the structure.

In this perspective, it must be emphasized that only an “adaptable” asset can be re-edited. Adaptability refers to the capacity of a building to meet the performance requirements of its new life. It depends on the morphological and typological characteristics of the existing structure, but also on the nature of the new function. The new function is never neutral: there is no function that can adapt to every kind of pre-existence. For instance, former industrial sites are often well suited to collective, cultural, or leisure-related uses, whereas their transformation into residential spaces is generally more complex.

These reflections are supported by broader economic data. In Italy, the added value produced by the construction sector in 2013 was significantly lower than in 2007, the year preceding the global economic crisis. At the European level, only Germany recorded growth in the sector. At the same time, residential construction has shown not only a reduction in new projects but also a progressive shift toward maintenance and renovation, which already represented the majority of investments in the mid-2010s. Ten years later, data confirm that the construction market is still in decline, while maintenance remains the key component, representing the largest share of the overall market value compared to new construction¹ (CRESME Report 2024).

Within this scenario, it becomes necessary to reflect on the new conditions facing the architectural profession. In a context where heritage is continuously expanding (Choay 1992), and where opportunities for new construction are correspondingly diminishing, how much room remains for authorship?

An Unglorious Condition

Let us now try to redefine the question above in other terms: in an age in which we live completely immersed in heritage—because everything can be “assumed as” heritage—how can we cope, as architects, with this condition? (Rykwert 2010). If we assume that, in the long term, this will be the natural context of our work, will this condition represent a narcissistic wound likely to shift the model of the successful architect from the figure of the “star” architect, well known worldwide, to that of the “healer,” mostly anonymous? To give an answer, if architects are no longer the creative geniuses who design the new, this can be understood as an “unglorious condition,” one that does not guarantee great visibility

or recognition for architects, who are now called to work within pre-existing structures, often through interior interventions or projects that produce little or no additional volume. This transformation is grounded in a moral imperative: to care for what already exists because it is available and because it constitutes a resource. If in the past the architect was often imagined as a *deus ex machina*, today the profession appears more depersonalized. (Fig. 1, 2) The question then arises: if the architect has abandoned the “glorious” image of the starchitect, what role does he assume? One possible answer is that nowadays architects look more like “curators”. If understood as curators, architects take care of the health of buildings, not only in a physical sense but also through the capacity to rearrange and reorganize heterogeneous elements into a coherent whole. This does not imply looking to the distant past as a model to be replicated, but rather engaging in an eye-to-eye dialogue with the past, in order to bring it into the present as a living presence, with the awareness that every further intervention will be only one more ring in the uninterrupted chain of continuous transformations over time.



Fig. 1. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, standing in front of his Crown Hall model

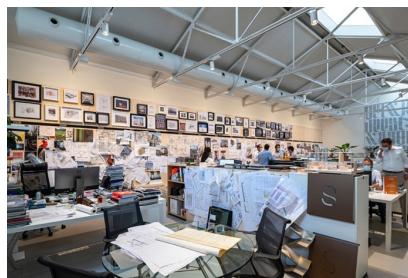


Fig. 2. A contemporary architecture office

The idea of an artist that comes to be mostly a curator has been clearly expressed by Brian Eno, the renowned musician, who stated that being a musician now often means being a curator, suggesting a shift from the invention to the selection, recombination, and reinterpretation of existing materials in a “retromaniac” age obsessed with the repositioning of the past (Reynolds 2011). This “retromaniac” condition is the natural consequence of a most general condition, that of the “retrotopia”, that Zygmunt Bauman described as the inability of contemporary Western culture to consider the future as the primary horizon for arts and science (Bauman 2017).

In this context, re-editing a building as an act of care can be seen as a genuine opportunity to give meaning to our work as a social discipline. It also entails contributing to the development of a new approach to reuse, capable of transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries. This approach involves reconnecting design, technology and restoration within a shared field of knowledge, whose critical horizon is the enhancement and protection of the environment in its ecological, anthropic, and formal dimensions (Grimaldi, 2025).

Conclusions

If architects are curators of the existing, it becomes necessary to understand which specific strategies they can adopt. Adaptive reuse involves actions such as adding, subtracting, and juxtaposing new architectural elements, as prostheses, to an existing organism. Each of these actions carries specific expressive implications. Architecture, in fact, remains after all an expressive language, even when we work in the field of re-edition. That is the reason why simply preserving the existing is not sufficient to produce a meaningful architectural result. In fact, as written before, the work of re-edition is successful only when it introduces a critical dimension that mediates between past and present; otherwise, it risks being reduced to mere construction.

So, in conclusion, it is not only possible, but mandatory, to identify the emergence of new canons, proper of the practice of adaptive reuse, understood as new formal and expressive frameworks, within the context of this “unglorious condition.” These canons can be defined as a specific “aesthetics of reuse.”

Synthetizing, among the instances that characterize this aesthetic, a first tendency is marked by a fascination with the new, in which the pre-existing structure is transformed so as to appear entirely contemporary. In contrast, a second tendency operates in the opposite direction, where the new intervention presents itself as if it were part of the pre-existing fabric, or where the aesthetic of decay prevails (Fig. 3,4).



Fig. 3. Brand-new aesthetic: MVRDV, Frosilos Apartments, Copenhagen, 2001-2005



Fig. 4 Decay aesthetic: Naumann architektur Exhibition space in a former pigsty in Pfalz

Otherwise, between these two positions, lies a third possibility, which can be described as a “third way” for the languages of reuse: this approach seeks to establish a balanced and subtle relationship between new and old, making the new recognizable while avoiding the effect of something entirely “brand-new.” It is an approach closer to the critical concerns of restoration and can be considered characteristic of European research, particularly within the cultural traditions of Mediterranean countries (Fig. 5).

Within this framework, adaptive reuse can and should push the architect toward forms of experimentation that are not only functional but also expressive, capable of producing a new culture of living specific to our time: an age defined more by the modification of things inherited from the past than by the creation of entirely new things in the present.



Fig. 5. The “third way”: Guillermo Vazquez Consuegra, Tomares Town Hall, Seville, Spain, 1998-2004.

Notes

1. As highlighted in the report, “the future of the sector increasingly lies in the recovery, upgrading, and reuse of the existing building stock,” This emphasizes how, in the coming decades, the sector of adaptive reuse of existing buildings will be central to the construction market.
2. As highlighted in the book by P. Posocco and M. Raitano, “the expression ‘second life’ alludes to the practice of healing; it implies an idea of care [...] toward what exists”, framing reuse as an act of attention and responsibility toward the built environment.
3. The concept of “retromania”, as analyzed by Simon Reynolds (2011), describes a cultural obsession with the past, in which new creations are excessively influenced—or even dominated—by nostalgia and the recycling of earlier forms. This tendency leads to the overvaluation of what is already known and familiar, sometimes at the expense of genuine innovation. In architecture, a similar phenomenon can be observed when designers focus too heavily on historical styles or past models, treating the past as a fetish rather than a resource to reinterpret. Recognizing this tendency is essential for practices like

adaptive reuse or the so-called “second life” of buildings: here, the goal is not to replicate or idolize the past, but to engage in a critical dialogue with it, re-signifying existing structures for contemporary needs while preserving their layered histories.

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