

Topographies of Care

Adaptive Reuse, from Last-Scape to Safe Space

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Abstract

«*Austero ma non freddo, elegante con imperfezioni*»¹: adaptive reuse today stands as one of the most significant practices for rethinking the relationship between heritage, community, and the city. In an era marked by profound social, environmental, and cultural transformations, the regeneration of disused structures and marginal spaces cannot be reduced to a mere functional restitution; it must instead take on the responsibility of generating belonging, recognition, and new forms of inhabitation. Central to this perspective is the possibility of transforming abandoned places into *safe spaces*. Originating in the social sphere, the concept of the safe space here assumes a spatial and architectural dimension: not a physical enclosure, but an environment in which different subjectivities can feel recognized, heard, and free. Architecture thus becomes a tool for shaping places where the experience of dwelling transcends functionality, acquiring emotional and symbolic depth. Within this framework, reference is made to the concept of *hogar* [1. Hearth; 2. Home – Garzanti Linguistica], which goes beyond the mere physical dimension of the dwelling to enter the cultural and sensorial sphere of inhabiting. *Hogar* represents the symbolic fire around which the deeper sense of belonging is constructed, evoking ritual, memory, and continuity. In this sense, the architecture of reuse becomes a practice of listening and mediation, capable of restoring meaning to suspended territories and connecting past and present. A crucial role is played by *last-scapes*: landscapes of abandonment that, rather than signifying loss, become spatial and narrative resources. The project, far from imposing forced overlays, activates new layers of meaning, turning abandonment into a generative condition. This contribution offers a theoretical and design-oriented reflection on these themes, interpreting reuse not merely as a technical strategy, but as a cultural and social paradigm: a practice of care, capable of generating spaces of trust, cohesion, and new possibilities for shared inhabitation.

Keywords: Safe Space, Last-Scapes, Cultural Memory

Introduction

In the contemporary architectural landscape, the need to confront what remains—spaces suspended between use and abandonment, permanence and transformation—has become a defining challenge. The acceleration of social, environmental, and cultural change has generated an urban condition where obsolescence and renewal coexist, questioning traditional notions of heritage, function, and time. Within this framework, architecture

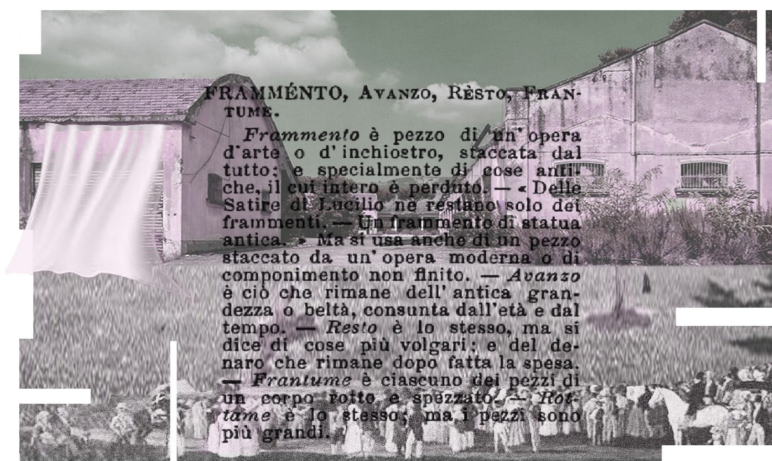


Fig. 1. Frammento, digital collage (Concetta Tavoletta, 2025)

must act not only as a technical response to decay but as a critical practice capable of interpreting complexity and reactivating meaning. The reuse of existing structures emerges as a privileged field of experimentation, where design is conceived less as replacement than as an act of listening, mediation, and reinterpretation. Regeneration must therefore move beyond the rhetoric of efficiency, acknowledging the affective and symbolic dimensions that shape the relationship between space and community. Designing within what already exists means engaging with memory and materiality, translating them into new forms of collective life. Transformation does not necessarily imply rupture but can manifest as continuity, dialogue, and care. Architecture thus becomes both instrument and narrative: a means to reveal the latent potential of places and imagine new trajectories of coexistence between the built environment and its inhabitants. This approach situates the project within a broader discourse that conceives the city as a stratified organism, where past and present overlap in evolving configurations of meaning. By merging design research and theoretical reflection, this work explores how adaptive reuse can redefine the social and cultural agency of architecture, transforming residual sites into spaces of renewed civic engagement. The following contribution develops these premises through a critical and design-based methodology, drawing on the M.A.A.R.T.E. – Museum of Art, Architecture and Regeneration for the Territory and Heritage, a thesis project within the former Ma.C.Ri. Co area in Caserta, conceived as an experiment in architectural regeneration and cultural reconnection.

The Cultural Dimension of Reuse

Contemporary urban complexity calls for an approach capable of interpreting the city as a stratified and composite organism. The coexistence of multiple temporalities has trained us to observe the built environment with the eye of an archaeologist, deciphering the layers



Fig. 2. Falling and dwelling, digital collage (Vittorio Vernazzani, 2025)

through which past, present, and future interact. As Bernardo Secchi (2000) reminds us, what appears on the surface is not always what is most recent, nor is what lies buried necessarily the oldest. The city thus emerges as an accumulation of experiences, where every intervention enters into a pre-existing narrative. Acting within such a framework implies rejecting the notion of *tabula rasa*: the project is no longer erasure, but dialogue.

Michel de Certeau (2001) describes the stories of places as bricolages, «made with the remains of the world»². Contemporary space appears as a mosaic of fragments—oscillating between beauty and disorientation—within which adaptive reuse offers a framework for transforming the unfinished and the marginal into new forms of meaning.

The notion of *last-escape* (De Leo 2006) captures this condition: landscapes of abandonment and latency that resist being read as loss, becoming spaces where absence acquires generative value. This attention to the incomplete marks a shift from restoration to re-signification. Adaptive reuse has evolved into a key strategy for sustainable and cultural transformation, countering both speculative consumption and nostalgic preservation. Rather than replacing the old with the new, it recognizes the existing as a living material capable of sustaining continuity and change, balancing care with invention.

Among the fields that best embody this evolution, cultural architecture—and the museum in particular—occupies a privileged position. Once conceived as a neutral container for knowledge, the museum has become a site of negotiation between memory, identity, and collectivity. In *Radical Museology* (2013), Claire Bishop interprets it as a space of resistance to the spectacularization of culture: not an icon, but a civic organism confronting history and participation. Similarly, Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (1991) describe it as a political and poetic device, shifting from temple to forum, where curatorial and spatial choices shape inclusion and belonging. Steven Holl's *Parallax* (2000) adds a phenomenological dimension,

framing architecture as a field of perception where light, material, and movement produce embodied experience. Within this view, reuse becomes an act of sensory and symbolic renewal, extending the museum's mission from the exhibition of artifacts to the curation of atmospheres.

At this intersection of adaptive reuse and museological thought, the city itself can be understood as a vast museum of unfinished gestures. The recovery of abandoned buildings becomes a practice of care—an architecture that listens rather than imposes—mediating between material memory and new forms of dwelling. Such interventions resist the logic of waste and instead propose continuity, where the existing is not a limit but a resource. In this sense, cultural architecture assumes a curatorial role, collecting and re-narrating fragments of collective history. The museum ceases to be an isolated object and becomes public infrastructure: an open device weaving together art, memory, and everyday life.

The Grammar of Care

If adaptive reuse, when embodied through cultural architecture, represents a practice of care and continuity, its value lies in its ability to renew relationships between people, space, and memory. Within this horizon, three intertwined notions—*safe space*, *hogar*, and *last-escape*—articulate the ethical and experiential dimensions of this approach. They are not abstract definitions but complementary attitudes describing how architecture can respond to fragility and abandonment. Together, they trace a trajectory from perception to belonging, from intimacy to territory, defining a grammar of care translated into spatial practice.

The concept of *safe space*, rooted in the social sphere, assumes architectural meaning as an atmosphere of recognition rather than enclosure or defense. Safety emerges not from separation but from openness—from the possibility of feeling seen, heard, and included. Space becomes an instrument of empathy, generating comfort and dignity through light, proportion, and material tactility. In adaptive reuse, safe space arises where forgotten architectures are reactivated as places of encounter rather than exclusion, where traces of the past coexist with new uses and identities.

If safe space belongs to the perceptual and relational dimension of care, *hogar*³ grounds it in the affective and cultural sphere of dwelling. Derived from the Spanish for hearth, it evokes warmth, ritual, and the continuity of daily gestures—a symbolic fire around which collective life takes shape. Thinking through hogar means conceiving architecture as a vessel of emotions and memories. In reuse, it reawakens dormant places, allowing them to host new meanings while preserving the traces of previous lives. The notion of *last-escape* extends this discourse to the territorial and temporal dimension. It identifies those landscapes of abandonment where time has fractured continuity but not erased significance. These margins of the city, where absence itself becomes material, are reservoirs of latent meaning—places where designing coincides with remembering. Regeneration, here, is not substitution but reactivation: a renewed dialogue between what persists and what transforms. Considered together, safe space, hogar, and last-escape define a multiscale understanding of care—perceptual, cultural, and territorial. In this triad, adaptive reuse becomes a form of cultural agency rather than a technical solution: an ethical stance where architecture mediates between body, place, and time. Within this perspective, the M.A.A.R.T.E. project in Caserta takes shape—not as an isolated episode, but as a field where these principles are translated into design practice and tested within the dynamics of urban regeneration.

The MAARTE project

Set within the long-inaccessible grounds of the former Ma.C.Ri.Co. in Caserta, M.A.A.R.T.E. – Museum of Art, Architecture and Regeneration for the Territory and Heritage - translates theoretical notions of care into spatial practice. Once a thirty-hectare military compound at the city's core, the site remained suspended for decades between visibility and absence. Its

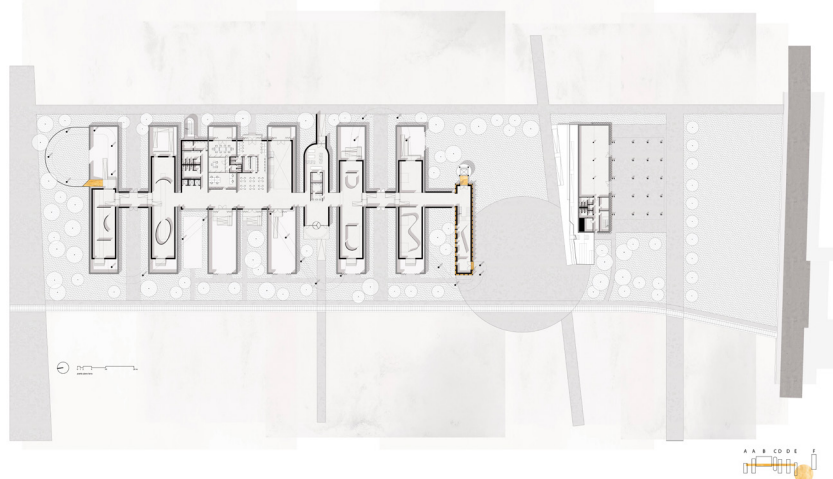


Fig. 3. Masterplan – MAARTE, Caserta, Italy, 2025

prolonged isolation preserved a latent potential for transformation. The 2022 masterplan *Campo Laudato Sì* by Alvisi Kirimoto reframed the area as a collective resource, within which the Parco dell'Arte emerges as a cultural and civic nucleus where M.A.A.R.T.E. takes form. Conceived as an open and adaptive system rather than a static institution, the museum reinterprets the seven heritage-listed buildings as infrastructural anchors for a new cultural landscape. The project resists the logic of substitution: instead of erasing, it listens. Each preexistence is reactivated through calibrated operations of light, matter, and relational voids, weaving new meanings into the existing fabric.

The museum operates as both spatial and social device, where the ethics of reuse meet the poetics of encounter. In dialogue with the surrounding park, M.A.A.R.T.E. is not conceived as an isolated container but as a porous field of relationships. The interstitial spaces between the former military sheds are transformed into connective thresholds—gardens, courts, and walkways—where art and everyday life intersect.

The museum extends beyond its walls, redefining exhibition through open-air installations, workshops, and educational platforms. Art operates here not as spectacle but as a relational act, reactivating the city's symbolic geography through collective participation.

The reuse of existing structures thus becomes not only an operation of physical preservation, but one of civic restitution: the transformation of an exclusionary enclave into an inclusive common.

Architecturally, the project unfolds as a tailored system articulated across four calibrated



Fig. 4. Exterior view – MAARTE, Caserta, Italy, 2025

scales—S, M, L, and XL—rather than a single declarative form. The S interventions consist of compact exhibition pavilions grafted onto the rigid matrix of the sheds: pure volumes open to the sky through zenithal light wells, where light becomes a quiet structuring device. The M scale defines the entrance pavilion, a measured threshold that orients access and choreographs the first encounter between museum and park. At the L scale, Pavilion F reinterprets the archive as an open, productive apparatus: its vertical development accommodates large formats and research uses, while a broad canopy extends activity toward the exterior and the adjacent arena. The XL scale introduces new spatial anchors—the central Pavilion B as civic hub and the panoramic tower as a device of orientation—establishing legible references without overwhelming the historic fabric. Together, these four measures align program, perception, and context, making reuse a multiscale practice that works with preexistences and interstitial voids to produce porosity, adaptability, and a coherent cultural infrastructure.

Beyond its physical configuration, M.A.A.R.T.E. functions as a cultural infrastructure



Fig. 5. Aerial view – MAARTE, Caserta, Italy, 2025

where exhibition and production, education and leisure intersect. It extends the role of the museum beyond collection and display, reimagining it as an active civic laboratory. In this sense, the project embodies the ethical stance of adaptive reuse: regenerating not only buildings but relationships, enabling the city to rediscover its unfinished narratives. By working within the limits of what already exists, M.A.A.R.T.E. translates care into form, making architecture the medium through which memory and possibility are reconciled.

Conclusions

To speak of reuse today is to confront the temporality of architecture itself. Every transformation exposes the distance between what was and what endures, between matter and meaning. Within this interval, architecture reclaims its agency—not as a pursuit of permanence, but as a practice of negotiating impermanence. Reuse becomes a way of inhabiting time critically, acknowledging its fractures while working within them.

Its value lies less in restoring form than in reinterpreting significance. Engaging the existing turns architecture into a porous field of relations—between memory and projection, presence and absence, individual perception and collective imagination. The project, in this sense, is not the resolution of a problem but the opening of a dialogue, where care and critique converge to generate new modes of coexistence.

This stance reframes design as a reflective act that resists both nostalgia and amnesia. It recognizes the fragment as the true condition of the contemporary city, and composition as an act of recombination rather than authorship. To reuse is to compose with remains: to see in the unfinished not failure, but knowledge, and to translate that awareness into spatial practice. What emerges is not a new aesthetic but an ethic of attention. By operating within specific conditions while remaining conceptually transferable, the project suggests a framework adaptable to other contexts marked by abandonment, stratification, and latent potential. Architecture, when it listens to what persists, reaffirms its civic role as mediator of continuity within transformation - inviting participation rather than reconciliation, and enabling shared meaning to emerge within the instability of the present.

Notes

1. «Austere but not cold, elegant yet imperfect» (translation by the authors) - A. Bajani, *Il libro delle case*, Feltrinelli Editore, 2021;
2. «The stories of places are bricolages. They are made with the remains of the world [...]». Michel de Certeau. *L'invenzione del quotidiano* (p. 163). Roma: Edizioni Lavoro, 2001.
3. sp. hogar [1. Hearth; 2. Home] Garzanti Linguistica.

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