

Rethinking Adaptive Reuse: Three Buildings and Their Curious Disappearance

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Abstract

This paper explores the nuanced histories of three buildings in Türkiye, which have disappeared from sight and returned in three different ways. The first is the Bank of Provinces in Ankara (1937). When it was bulldozed in 2017, many believed that the conservative mayor had intentionally targeted the building because its architecture symbolized the values of the western-oriented regime. Its demolition has further amplified its status as a modernist architectural icon. In the second instance, a slaughterhouse in İstanbul's Golden Horn (1923), a registered historical landmark, was repurposed. The municipal administration first demolished it and then rebuilt it larger than the original, to serve as a congress center (2009). The decision stirred a heated debate among scholars of architecture and preservation. The final example is the French Consulate building in Izmir (1906). It was one of the few survivors of the Great Fire (1922), which destroyed the majority of the city's non-Muslim built and cultural heritage. Converted to an art center in 2011 through adaptive reuse, the building has since continued its existence, standing along mid-rise modern apartment buildings. In the paper, I investigate how the changes that occurred in the history of these buildings could inform our understanding of the original works: What happens when the demolition of buildings, or the erasure of their memory through reimagining and reconstruction, also become a material for history writing? What would be the emerging themes and new methodologies through which such buildings could be examined, contextualized, and historicized? Can we still talk about a loss, or an absence, if the materiality of the object is present in one form or another? I conclude that by critically revisiting the concepts of preservation, adaptive reuse, and memory, one could forge a critical dialogue between the past and the present in architectural history writing. Keywords: Politics of memory, disappearance, decontextualization

Introduction

This paper tells the story of three buildings in Türkiye, which have disappeared and then made a comeback in three different ways: The first example is the Bank of Provinces in Ankara (1937), Türkiye's capital city, by Seyfi Arkan. It was bulldozed in 2017, and for many, this act of vandalism was intentional: The conservative mayor had targeted this modernist building because its architecture symbolized the values of a western-oriented, secular regime. In the second instance, a slaughterhouse in İstanbul's Golden Horn (1923) by Vedat Tek, a registered historical landmark in the so-called national architectural style, was repurposed. The municipal administration first demolished it and then rebuilt it from scratch, larger than the original, to serve as a culture and congress center (2009). The decision stirred a

heated debate among scholars of architecture and preservation. The final example is the French Consulate building in Izmir (1906) by Emmanuel Pontremoli. It was one of the few survivors of the Great Fire (1922), which destroyed the great majority of the city's non-Muslim built and cultural heritage. Converted to an art center in 2011 through adaptive reuse, the building has continued its existence by becoming a popular site for visitors, but in isolation, standing along mid-rise modern apartment buildings as a sole reminder of a bygone period. The paper focuses on the nuanced historical and contemporary narratives that underlay these three buildings before and after their "disappearance." It investigates how the changes that occurred in their personal history could inform our understanding of the original works as well as their afterlife. In doing so, it contends that by critically revisiting the concepts of preservation, adaptive reuse, and memory, one could forge a critical dialogue between the past and the present in architectural history writing.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

In a literature review article that explores "the rise of adaptive reuse scholarship and the emergent epistemology it represents", Lanz and Pendlebury (2022, 441) talk about a recent shift in the field of adaptive reuse:

While the debate on adaptive reuse has been continuously developing since the 1970s, it did so mostly with a focus on mapping and depicting an architectural phenomenon, and identifying tools and strategies to instruct practitioners and designers. However, more recent works on adaptive reuse are increasingly seeking to go beyond a pragmatic and practice-focused approach, and to investigate adaptive reuse in a more conceptual way.

According to the authors, such perspectives, including non-architectural, interdisciplinary points of views (451), "can expand and enrich the debate on adaptive reuse, opening it up to reflections pertaining to issues of memory and identity, owning and disowning, remembering and forgetting practices, and heritage-making" (457). For instance, when we think of the relationship of the building to its past, or present where it could need repair, is vacant or in use, we should still be able to ask (455):

Does the 'form' equal the façade and the 'function' equal the interior? Is the old equal to the building exterior with the possibility of an ever-changing new building interior? Where does the identity and the memory of a building lie? Is it only in its exterior form and style or is it in its lived interiors? (455)

Rather than thinking of the old and renewed buildings in terms of binary oppositions (455) and imagining space as a passive backdrop, or a theater stage where certain events unfold, we should then keep in mind that space is lived, personalized, negotiated, acted upon, re-appropriated, and through such actions, is "socially produced", to cite Henri Lefebvre's and Michel de Certeau's well-known works (Lefebvre 1991; de Certeau 1988). Furthermore, there has been an increased focus on community involvement, collaboration, and culturally sustainable practices in the field (Oevermann, et al 2023).

This paper situates itself within such new conceptual approaches to the subject matter—one that delves into the complex relationship between adaptive reuse practices with the issues of memory, erasure, and disappearance. But I also intend to inquire into intangible remains – in the form of memory or politics—of a building, and what it means to have "non-material qualities" of that artefact and what it still could tell us architectural historians. Through adopting such perspectives, the paper poses the following questions:

- What happens when the demolition of buildings, or the erasure of their memory through political reimagining and reconstruction, also becomes a material for architectural history writing, especially if such decisions are politically charged?
- What would be the emerging themes and new methodologies through which such buildings could be examined, contextualized, and historicized within and beyond the context of nation-making?
- Could one talk about a loss, or absence, of an artefact, if its “materiality” is still present in one form or another – such as its memory value or political symbolism?

The Selection of the Three Cases

Francesca Borgo and Felicity Bodenstein, in their panel description for the 36th Congress of CIHA (Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art) in 2024, titled “Materialising Loss: Absence and Remaking in Art History”, explored the role of absence in material studies. They have stated that “looking at materiality from the seemingly paradoxical standpoint of absence reveals how much material studies takes for granted in terms of the object’s presence, permanence, and accessibility.” According to the authors, “loss forcefully confronts us with the enabling operations and grounding conditions that go into writing material art history” (1). Indeed, the disappearance and after-life of buildings continue to stir the interest of critical scholars of architecture and urbanism (Cairns and Jacobs 2014).

This paper aims to explore the issue of preserving by repurposing through the lens of such critical perspectives. It dwells on the notion of disappearance, collective memory, and critical readings of adaptive reuse in its selection of the three buildings. Each example represents a nuanced condition that relates to the spatial politics of memory, cultural preservation, and renovation through a distinct state of “invisibility.”

Disappearance as a Political Act: Architecture with Non-Material Presence

The first example is the Bank of Provinces in Ankara (*İller Bankası*, 1937), which exemplifies a complete loss. To many scholars, its demolition was the outcome of a deliberate political act (Özaloglu 2017; Cengizkan 2015) and through this sudden disappearance, its architecture has gained a powerful non-material presence.

Following the proclamation of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923 as an independent nation-state, a series of reforms were instigated, which were immediately echoed in architecture and city planning. European trained Turkish architects, as well as German émigré architects and planners, took the lead for modernizing the cityscapes of the new capital city, Ankara (Bozdoğan 2001). Seyfi Arkan, the architect of the building in question, was a prolific Turkish architect, and an ardent follower of 1930s’ modernist architectural vocabulary (Akcan 2005). This building was placed at the heart of the new capital city alongside many others that represented the new, western-oriented regime.

Since the rise of the political Islamist local and central governments in Türkiye since the mid-1990s, the “war” over symbols became quite apparent (Kılınc 2017). The new governments preferred to incorporate the so-called neo-Ottoman or Seljuk architectural impressions in the design of public buildings. In the meantime, several modern public buildings from the 1930s were demolished by the municipality, and not always to build a new facility. It was usually a sheer act of clearance and erasure.

However, I would argue that the instance of “disappearance” in the case of Arkan’s building

goes beyond one of the conventional understandings of the term, that is, “vanishing without a trace” (Abbas 1997, 65). The main reason is that the narrative not of its erasure as such, but of the erection of the Ottoman style mosque which replaced it, made it clear that it was made a target (or that it was deemed insignificant, although the building was considered to be a part of the city’s architectural and cultural heritage). This narrative, which has been often repeated in various forms by Islamist and conservative politicians—that the early Republican regime had neglected religion, had not paid any attention to building mosques in cities, and used the existing ones for other, unrelated purposes—became a tool to justify bulldozing this building.

In the common understanding of the subject in question, adaptive reuse might sound irrelevant here. But what if this building was to be rebuilt, most probably on a different site and with a different purpose? How would we as scholars and professionals then discuss the role that architecture could play in this imaginary scenario?



Fig. 1. The Entrance of İller Bankası in Ankara by Seyfi Arkan (1937) (https://tr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:%C4%B0ller_Bank.jpg)

Demolition and Reconstruction as De-Historicization: Architecture without Pretext

The second example is the Söğütözü Slaughterhouse in Istanbul. One could define its destruction and reconstruction process as a brutal de-historicization. The result is architecture without pretext.

The Söğütözü Slaughterhouse was constructed in Istanbul in the early 1920s, designed by Ottoman Turkish architect Vedat Tek—though some sources attribute the design to Ahmed Burhaneddin, Osman Fitri, or Marko Logos (Küçük 2015, 241; İncirlioğlu 1991, 68-72). The complex was established to produce meat under hygienic conditions, inspired by contemporary European models. Its design included features like a biological water purification system, cold storage, and laboratories. The slaughterhouse operated at its original capacity for nearly 70 years before being repurposed as a cold storage facility. Due to the pollution, it caused in the Golden Horn, its main operations were eventually to another district in Istanbul in the mid-1980 (Köseoğlu 2025; Küçük 2015).

The Slaughterhouse was not only an industrial complex, which introduced a modern technology and hygienic meat production system to Istanbul, but it was also significant in

architectural terms. It was built in the so-called “First National Style,” the most popular style of its period in Türkiye in the design of public buildings. The slaughterhouse was one of the important industrial buildings in the Golden Horn, which symbolized the transformation of Istanbul into a modern city in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The renovation project took many years to begin and was finally completed in 2009. The municipality’s aim was to build a prominent cultural-congress center which included rooms for a theater, as well as congress, concert and other facilities. This “re-construction”, however, were widely criticized, as it did not choose to preserve the original building and added new parts, volumes and spaces (Madra 2010; Soğancı 2001).

In “The Story and Conservation Problems of an Industrial Heritage Building in Istanbul: The Sütluçe Slaughterhouse”, Küçük (2015, 244) has given a detailed account of the “imaginative” revamping of the original structure: Nonetheless, it was demolished on the basis that ‘Interior design of the historic building failed to match the construction program projected by the contractor’ and it was replaced with a new building with no documentary value... In this new building, the towers, pointed arches and blue tiles of the ice house—the most accentuated and remarkable part of slaughterhouse—were reconstructed. Aside from that, the previous structure of the old slaughterhouse was alternated with large-mass concert and exhibition halls.

While going through “a process of cultural translation and hybridization” (King 2004, 125) like all works of architecture, buildings assume a different life than they did before, inevitably. But making connections to their past, or preserving the memories they previously possessed, have been one of the important issues that architects tackling adaptive reuse projects have dealt with. In this instance, though, the connection to the building’s past or its original purpose has been totally ousted from its new life. It is quite interesting, but hardly surprising that on the website of the facility, there is not a single mention of the history and previous life of this building (<https://halic.com/en/istanbul-and-halic-region/>). I would argue that by its disappearance, and then reappearance as a rebranded oversized building complex with randomly added features, its spaces “have been dehistoricized into spaces of exchange”, to quote from Abiding Kusno (2010, 122), rather than facilitate an attachment to the place through their memory value.



Fig. 2. Sütluçe Slaughterhouse (Sütluçe Mezbahası), original structures (1926-1929), ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S%C3%BCtl%C3%BCce_Mezbahas%C4%B1_\(1926-1929\)_%2815%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S%C3%BCtl%C3%BCce_Mezbahas%C4%B1_(1926-1929)_%2815%29.jpg))

Erasure of Memory: Selective Remembrance through Architecture

The final example, Arkas Art Center in Izmir, is perhaps the closest among the three cases to more “typical” adaptive reuse practices. I argue that its renovation exemplifies erasure of memory as well as selective remembrance enabled through architecture.

The French Consulate building is one of the rare structures, which survived the Great Fire of Izmir in 1922. According to the official website of the Center, restoration efforts, focused on repairing the damaged wooden sections, were initiated by architect Raymond Pere and continued until 1929. The building functioned as the French Consulate General in Izmir until September 1983. In May 1984, it began operating as the French Honorary Consulate. The sections of the consulate building that face the sea were originally used as living quarters and reception areas were then “allocated to Arkas Holding for a 20-year period by the French Government for cultural and artistic purposes.” The building reopened in 2011 as a contemporary art center. The center states its mission as follows: “Arkas Art Center is dedicated to enriching the artistic and cultural life of the country, particularly Izmir, promoting the city’s cultural heritage on an international stage, and fostering a widespread appreciation for art” (<https://arkassanatmerkezi.com/en>).

In his book, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas (1997, 83) wrote that “... preservation is not the same as memory: it is a memory without pain. In preserving what was there, there is a danger of blotting out of memory what was not there, which is just as important. Preservation in its selectiveness is the disappearance of memory...” Indeed, even if materially present, certain spatial memories could also be repressed or are intently looked away from (Law and de Costa Marques 2000, 121).



Fig. 3. Arkas Art Center, Night View (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ASM_Night.jpg)

So, while catering to the interest of the new users, renewed buildings are likely to form a renewed relationship with their new context. On the other hand, like the Art Center itself, the use of a repurposed historical building may also serve to “decontextualize” history. The new function and the selection of the exhibition materials may not have been ideologically motivated, or at times critical of the established norms of art and society. However, more than its current function, because of its context—surrounded by modern day apartment buildings—it is no longer evocative of the Great Fire or its decisive impact on the city’s development. Thus, it contributes to the silent “forgetting” of its cosmopolitan past or delaying its much-needed dialogue with its “difficult heritage” (Logan and Reeves 2008), and the value of its remembrance in the present. But then, how could adaptive reuse respond to such challenges that go beyond the scale of any architectural operation?

Conclusions

In their much renown works, both Christine Boyer (1998) and Aldo Rossi (1984) have discussed how (collective) memory is closely related to images, objects and spaces. Likewise, Patrick Hutton defines remembering “as a process of imaginative reconstruction, in which we integrate specific images formulated in the present into particular contexts identified with the past” (1993, 77-78). One could apply Hutton’s argument to shared memories of societies as well as to personal memories. Indeed, as Maurice Halbwachs aptly wrote, “every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework” (1980, 140). Maintaining and cultivating memory is therefore not independent from spatial practices. In light of these discussions, one should consider adaptive reuse practices as a continuous act of interpretation and (selective) remembrance rather than a matter of dealing with “old buildings” – i.e., treating some archival or archaeological material or bringing a retired artefact back to life through renovation. As the three examples briefly portrayed in this paper illustrate, such a task is significantly more complex than the design challenges typically involved in transforming a building’s interior or exterior, whether in planimetric layout or through structural elements. While architects and preservationists search for a balanced understanding of a building’s previous function against the present needs of its architectural program, an equally imminent task is to project a critical view into the building’s past: How was this past historically constructed, represented, wholeheartedly embraced, negated, or indeed, intently forgotten by diverse users.

Notes

1. Please see the CIHA website for the full description of this panel as well as other related panels and paper abstracts: “36th CIHA World Congress - Lyon 2024,” <https://www.cihalyon2024.fr/en/program/scientific-program/dematerialization-rematerialization-dematerialisation-rematerialisation/materialising-loss-absence-and-remaking-in-art-history>.

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