PERSPECTIVE
RE-INHABITING. THOUGHTS ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE TO ADAPTIVE INTERVENTION: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND IDENTITIES

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WORKING *WITH—IN* PREEXISTING BUILDINGS

It is widely believed that working on the built environment is increasingly becoming a predominant condition of the contemporary architectural practice. As many authors point out, this can be related both to the decreased capacity of urban territories to accommodate new buildings in a full urban fabric as well as to a new approach toward an environmental, economic, and socially sustainable development. Assuming, with Attiwill, "the concept of interior" "as a question and problematic within contemporary culture" (2009, p. 2), I will argue here that the centrality of adaptive reuse for contemporary architectural theory and practice can also be associated with the shifting social and cultural conditions of modern European cities. By proposing an idea of reuse as re-inhabiting, I investigate the entailments of adaptive interventions toward identity and memory work within a consolidated urban context increasingly characterized by quick profound changes in the composition of its population and built environment under the impact of intense migration flows, augmented mobility of people, and the global economy.

Although the relationship with existing buildings has always been a crucial issue regarding the theory and practice of architecture within the European architectural debate, the interest on the topic of reuse has been increasing (Baum & Christiaanse, 2012; Cramer & Breitling, 2007; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2013; Scott, 2008). Numerous publications, research projects, conferences, and training programs investigate the topic from different perspectives: from urban planning to social, economic, and cultural studies; from restoration to building physics and architectural design; from theory to education and practice. In such a context, the contribution of interior studies has always been particularly relevant, notably supporting, through both theoretical thoughts and actual projects, the development of the philosophy and the practice of building on, and within, preexisting buildings and the built environment (Brooker & Stone, 2004; Cairns, 2013; Cornoldi, 2007; Forino, 2007; Huber, 1997; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2014; Postiglione & Lupo, 2007).[1]

Within the European architectural culture, in fact, there is a long-standing relationship between the practice of adaptive reuse and interior design. In the matter in question, the Italian case is a prime example. While analyzing the Italian context toward the European scenario, Imma Forino asserts that "...the practice of intervening on pre-existing buildings—peculiar of the Italian interior architecture tradition within the frame of the wider field of restoration—might be regarded as the most original contribution of our architecture to the developing of a European architectural language" (2002, p. 36).[2] Looking at the Italian cultural and professional architectural tradition, indeed, the issue of the relationship between architecture and the built environment is well-established and has been widely debated and explored through both theoretical studies and realizations since the 1950s, to which interior architecture has been provably contributing (Cornoldi, 2007; Ferlenga, Vassallo, & Schellino, 2008). We are reminded, for example, of the

postwar interventions of Italian masters such as Carlo Scarpa; the BBPR group; Franco Albini; Ignazio Gardella; and, most recently, of the projects by Giorgio Grassi, Gabriella Ioli, and Massimo Carmassi, Andrea Bruno, and Guido Canali. Their work represents a reference to a forward-looking approach toward restoration and a crucial moment in the development of the Italian tradition of museography and interior architecture, whose legacy spreads across time until today, greatly influencing the theory and practice in the field in Italy and abroad (Forino, 2002; Huber, 1997).

However, we may say that working on the built environment is inherently intertwined with the theory and the practice of interior architecture. Some authors, such as Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone—as well as scholars and teachers who have been investigating this topic and widely publishing on the subject in recent years—even suggest that working within preexisting buildings is the distinguishing nature and the specific realm of interior architecture itself. "Interior architecture, interior design, interior decoration, and building reuse—state Brooker and Stone—are very closely linked subjects, all of which deal, in varying degrees, with the transformation of a given space" (2010a, p. 46). Drawing from Machado's theory on "remodeling" defined as a "formal intervention upon existing form" where "the past takes on a greater significance because it, itself, is the material to be altered and reshaped" (Machado, 1976, pp. 46–49), they propose an approach toward the reuse design process focusing on the relation between the new intervention and the existing building. Brooker and Stone (2004) put forward a three-stage process, consisting of "Analysis," "Strategy," and "Tactics." Each phase is further broken down into different tasks regarding, respectively: the analysis and study of the building in relation to its history, architectural structure, context, and the proposed new use; the intervention strategy defined according to the relationship of the new project with the former spaces; and the spatial and design characteristics of the reuse project concerning the spatial and material features pertaining the intervention. The authors investigate these same aspects in several publications, in which they detail and implement them further (Brooker & Stone, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010b).

With no doubt, Brooker's work was enormously influential in setting the basis for the research in this field. Its didactic approach, accompanied by a rich apparatus of examples and case studies—actually typical of other authors as well, as Plevoets and Van Cleempoel (2011) pointed out—makes this method quite effective for those who approach the topic for the first time. Nevertheless, it ultimately seems a more convenient approach for analyzing and comparing accomplished interventions rather than fostering the development of a critical thought concerning interior architecture and its contribution to the theory and practice of adaptive reuse.

Indeed, the attempt to taxonomically fix and define a set of principles posits that design can be regarded as a discrete activity, whose limited possibilities can be somehow known and controlled beforehand. Moreover, although the preexisting building and its past are regarded as the context and the reference for the new intervention, the very idea of the preexisting building as a "host space" proposed by these studies assumes it to be a fixed framework for the new intervention, positioning interior design as an "occupation of an existing space […] where space and time are pre-existing entities" (Attiwill, 2009, p. 1). This approach excludes, or at least restricts, the inherent transformative potential of an adaptive intervention that ultimately characterizes what we might call, borrowing the terms from Plevoets and Van Cleempoel (2014), an "interior approach toward adaptive reuse." At the same time, this view limits the contribution of interior architecture to the mere domain of working "inside" something (i.e., an earlier space), renouncing to investigate the deeper entailments of working *with* [together]-*in* [inside] the preexisting building. "Where space is not assumed as pre-existing but produced," says Attiwill,"[…] occupation becomes a process of transformation, of making relations. Interior design shifts from a practice necessarily equated with the design of inside space to a practice of interiorization" (2009, p. 2).

REUSING, REACTIVATING, RE-INHABITING

No matter what we call it—rereading, remodeling, reactivating, rewriting, recycling…—adaptive reuse today may be summarized as a design-based intervention aimed at bringing new life to a

Figure 1 Le Murate, Florence, Italy. The old city's prison, hosted in a former 15th-century cloister, has been converted into a new lively urban space including plazas for events, cafes, restaurants, headquarters of cultural associations, social housing, and the Center for the Promotion of Contemporary Art (PAC). On the right, the main square and the façade of the apartment block. On the left, the former cells restored and used as exhibition space and studios for artists in residence at Le Murate-PAC. A project by Florence Municipality with the consultancy of Renzo Piano Building Workshop (2001–2007).
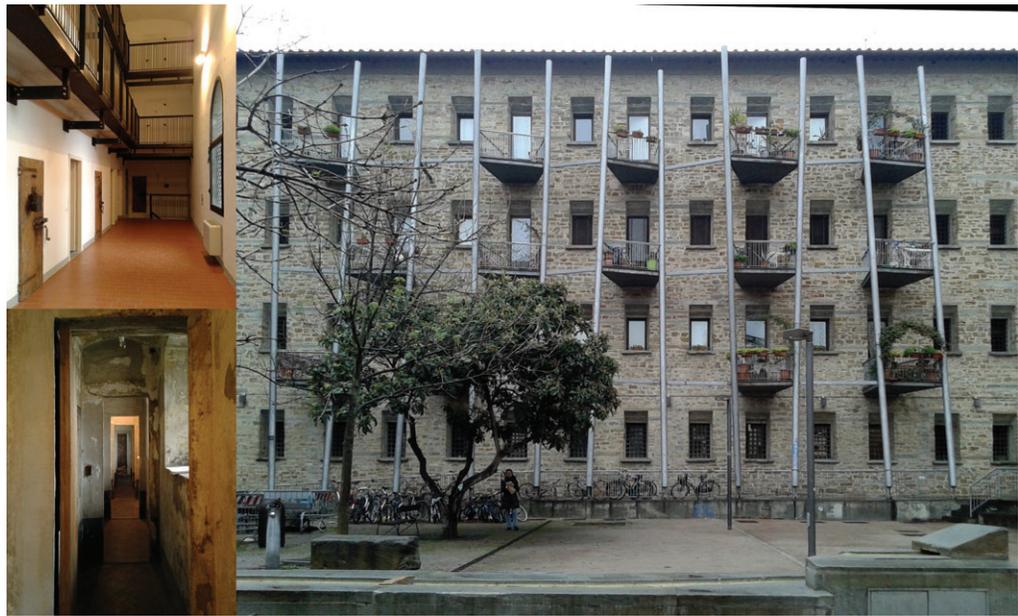
building—often neglected, abandoned, under- or misused—which, for any reason—be it historical/artistic, cultural, or economic—has been considered worthy not to be demolished. This choice, in some way, ascribes a specific value to the building itself, which thus comes under the material and cultural heritage of the community it belongs to, by the reuse project itself. However, different from a mere restoration, the reuse project usually consists of an intervention that, albeit meant to conserve the building at some extent, is primarily aimed at reactivating it within its context, which, therefore, should gain social, cultural, and/or economic benefit. This reactivation, which is the actual goal of any adaptive intervention, may be based on the various kinds of interventions—some of which might be permanent, some other more ephemeral—including the design of a new functional program for the building, a temporary asset, as well as on an art-based action. This reactivation often implies an upgrade of the existing structure from a functional, technological, and spatial point of view; in most cases, it results in a new spatial and architectural layout for the preexisting spaces.

I assume that, ultimately, an adaptive reuse intervention seeks to make the building apt to be re-inhabited while understanding its complex meaning and implications related to its etymological origin. The verb "to inhabit," in fact, comes from the Latin *habitare*, a frequentative form of the verb *habere*, which means "to hold, to have, to possess." In Italian, *abito* is the first singular person of the verb *abitare*, namely "I dwell"; as a noun, it means "dress," whereas as an adjective, it stands for "habit, a way of being, a living behavior." Hence, "in-habiting" signifies not only to dwell but also to live in a space, experiencing it, making it one's own by enjoying the essential social dimension of doing so. From this point of view, the contribution of interior architecture to the theory and practice of adaptive reuse is not so much related with the act of designing the "inside" of something or "inside" something but rather lies in its approach to the design process as "an enfolding and fabrication of space which makes inhabitation possible" (Attiwill, 2009, p. 1).

"Interior studies," affirmed Adriano Cornoldi, "are neither subordinated nor independent [from architecture], but constitute an in-depth study of architecture […]. By deeply investigating the nature of space, interior architecture both establishes and verifies the meaning of a building (Cornoldi, 2005, p. i).[3] Indeed, far from being a subbranch of architecture, an accessory, the completion of an architectural project, or a discipline merely concerning the design of an inner space or a domestic domain, interior architecture is a specific critical and theoretical design approach to the project. By focusing on space, on its functional, aesthetic, and material aspects, it expands the idea of architecture revolving around the implementation, at every design scale, of the relationship between the project itself and the behavior of its future users. Ultimately, interior architecture is

about conceiving, designing, and creating not only spaces where to reside but places where to *inhabit* (Caan, 2011; Cornoldi, 2005; Lanz, 2013; Ottolini, 2000).

ADAPTIVE INTERVENTION: PLACES, PEOPLE, AND IDENTITY

Understanding adaptive intervention as a project aimed at re-inhabiting a preexisting space opens up the discourse on reuse to issues regarding the relationship between people, places, and place attachment, memory, identity, and belonging, and the role of the architectural project in the present society.

According to Gennaro Postiglione:

> Adaptive reuse ensues from the assumption that identities are formed by the correlation and interdependence between places and people(s). Once the interrelations break, a place loses its meaning and people lose their sense of belonging to that place. Places traditionally embody people's identity and are the solid background of people's actions and life, the prerequisite of the creation of cultures, skills, and economies. Place-identity refers to the construction of identity for and by the people(s) while referring to a place. It also constructs the identity of a place, based on its materiality: morphology, architectural forms, spaces, objects, artefacts, namely the material heritage that constitutes a territory. (Bassanelli & Postiglione, 2013, p. 155)

Such a viewpoint shifts the focus of the question from the design strategies of adaptive intervention to the sociocultural and political entailments of a reuse project. It unfolds the issue of adaptive reuse toward the contemporary urban scenario, which is increasingly characterized by fast major changes in its social, cultural, and physical structure, triggered by globalization, and extraordinary material and immaterial flows of objects, business, information, and people.

On the one hand, European cities are inherently characterized by a consolidated and historically layered urban pattern and built environment, where the past and present coexist and contribute to shaping the city's image and identity. On the other hand, although the movement of people, cultures, and knowledge has always accompanied and fostered the evolution of civilizations, a peculiar characteristic of the present age is the fluid circulation of population, goods, and information happening at an unprecedented speed and causing profound political, economic, and cultural resonance. Such a context undoubtedly offers significant opportunities for European cities, affecting their development in many aspects while bringing new energies to them (e.g., Amendola, 1997; Boeri, 2012; Martinotti, 1993; Rykwert, 2000; Sassen, 1991, 1994). However, these dynamics also seem to scatter local communities, blur regional identities, and create and multiply "invisible boundaries" (UN-HABITAT, 2008). At the same time, the global economy is making cities' architecture progressively more homogeneous, affecting the citizens' sense of belonging and the overall urban quality of life. Many authors assert that current changes occurring in cities, which are faster than ever before, increase a sense of disorientation and, consequently, a feeling of insecurity, alienation, and homologation (Boeri, 2012).

Rykwert states, quoting Kevin Lynch, that with no reference points, "a citizen cannot 'read,' let alone 'understand' his home" as these elements make the place legible and do "not only offer security but also heighten the potential depth and intensity of human experience" (2000, p. 133).

Hence, while fast and crucial changes are challenging the identity of cities, thus making it difficult to create and nourish the relationship between the city and its inhabitants, it is increasingly believed that places can be an essential resource. Indeed, growing attention and an expanding corpus of studies are focusing on places and, mostly, on their role in shaping identities. Investigating the concept of "identity place," Whitehead, Lloyd, Eckersley, and Mason (2015) build on the theory of the gerontological psychologist Graham Rowles (1983) about "incident places." Both of these concepts may be usefully exploited for developing the idea of adaptive reuse proposed in this article:

Incident places retained their power for individuals even after drastic physical transformation [...] A sense of "insideness," or persistent physical, social and psychological/autobiographical affinities with a place, may embrace a plethora of incident places spanning the space/time trajectory of the individual's entire lifespan: "It approach may involve not only spatially displaced settings but also proximate locations remembered as they existed at different points in the individual's life. Individual locations may become imbued with a temporal depth of meaning" (Rowles, 1983, pp. 304–305). (Whitehead et al., 2015, p. 16).

According to Rowles, incident places are mainly informal, occasionally unconscious, elements of the built environment, which embed a particular meaning in the memory of a community and thus play a role in the definition of its identity. They can relate to a community as well as to an individual and can be physical elements as well as reminiscences of it. On the other hand, the concept of "identity place" theorized by Whitehead et al. (2015) draws on Rowles's idea but "involves an extra dimension relating to explicit identity work" (p. 16). The authors define an identity place as "a place that is more or less explicitly and consciously used by individuals and/or groups as a resource for the maintenance or construction of identity, and/or is a place set up, offered or imposed as a resource of this kind through 'from-above' representations such as in museums or in the designation of places as heritage sites"[4] (Whitehead et al., 2015, p. 16).

When approaching an adaptive intervention, we might understand the preexisting building as a system of "incident places" related to its being deeply rooted in the urban fabric. At the same time, it is also more or less consciously embedded in the collective memory of specific urban communities. Therefore, the adaptive intervention itself is a design act that transforms the building into an "identity place." Hence, an adaptive intervention is not only a rising practice because of contingencies linked to the current condition of the urban built environment but also a relevant field of action closely related to broader discourses pertaining to the conservation, representation, and construction of urban identities.

Such a position, however, has the inherent risk of fostering a "reactionary" approach to places regarding identity work, especially if framed in the context of the previously mentioned current sociocultural scenario. Doreen Massey has described what we may think about places as a result

Figure 2 Neuse Museum, Berlin, Germany. The restoration project by David Chipperfield Architects (2009) works with the material and memory traces of the building's past, which are conserved (as for paintings, plasters, and even holes on the walls left by gunshots), reused (such as the bricks in the main hall), reinterpreted (as in the case of the central stair), and eventually reworked through the project itself into a new metahistorical continuum.
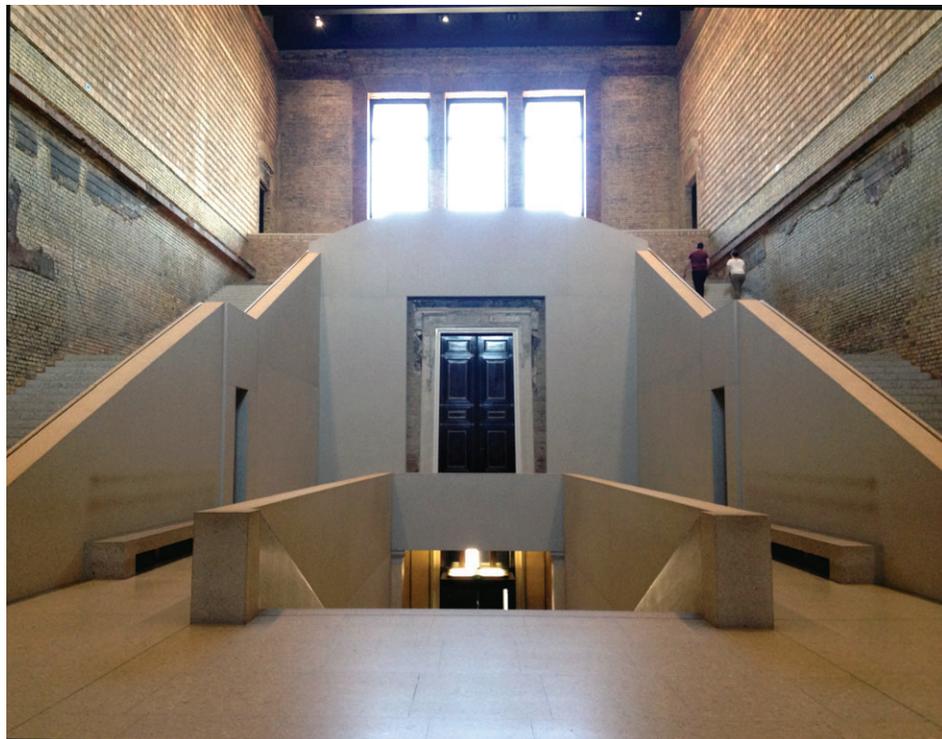
of the changes and the challenges caused by globalization. "The search after the 'real' meanings of places, the unearthing of heritages and so forth, is interpreted as being, in part, a response to desire for fixity and security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change. A 'sense of place,' of rootedness, can provide—in this form and on this interpretation—stability and a source of unproblematical identity" (1991, p. 151).

In response, Massey proposes a progressive idea of places, understood as "processes" and conceptualized regarding the social relations they tie together (1991, p. 151). Massey's notion of place, which ultimately dovetails with the ideas mentioned earlier of interior architecture and inhabiting, opens up to a new interpretation of adaptive intervention. The process is not a mere practice of "re-using"—which implies a rather passive attitude of the preexisting building toward an authoritarian design action—but rather an *empowering* act, a "process of transformation, of making relations" (Attiwill, 2009, p. 2). Here, the central issue is the interaction between the form and the users, what they do to each other, and how they reciprocally appropriate one another.

CONCLUSION

Assuming the preexisting building to be a place embedding and preserving different memories, to be a process that ties together relations, and to be spaces that need to be reactivated through a project responding to new emerging needs and behaviors of new users, adaptive reuse can be envisaged as a work involving places, memory, and identity. From this point of view, adaptive reuse becomes a crucial and strategic field of action not only concerning a more environmental and economic sustainable urban development but also, and foremost, as an opportunity for building intergenerational and intercultural connections in the context of an increasingly layered, heterogeneous, and changing society. It might also play an important role in promoting an idea of "citizenship" not only based on political, ethnic, or birth origin but also on urban connoisseurship and a sense of belonging understood, at its simplest, as a set of "emotional attachments that lead to feelings of being 'at home'."[5]

While being aware of the very complex nature of any project—its aesthetic and material aspects, the relation between interior and exterior, private and public, architectural and spatial composition, furnishing and detail design—this article ultimately aims at stimulating a debate on strategies and poetics of adaptive intervention (Brooker & Stone, 2004; Forino, 2005; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2014) in politics of reuse. The concepts described here are neither conclusive nor assertive but should be rather understood as open-ended thoughts aimed at sharing ideas while opening up to further reflections. Indeed, by assuming the notion of adaptive intervention as re-inhabiting a preexisting place, this article seeks to outline possible implications for identity and memory work, bestowing a social, cultural, and political scope concerning the practice of adaptive reuse while ultimately exploring the specific contribution of an interior approach to adaptive intervention.

NOTES

[1]Alongside monographic publications, there are projects and installations (designed and realized), international conferences, and research programs, as well as a wide array of academic studies and teaching activities, that largely contribute to the debate and the advancement of knowledge and practice in the field. Just to mention a few, the 'Adaptive Reuse' International Master of Interior Architecture at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of the University of Hasselt (Belgium); the MA program 'Continuity in Architecture' at the Manchester School of Architecture; the 'Int|AR Journal' on interventions, adaptive reuse, and interior architecture published by the Department of Interior Architecture at Rhode Island School of Design; and the many design studio courses held by scholars and teachers of interior architecture within the bachelor's and master's programs at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering of the Politecnico di Milano.

[2]'*La specificità dell'intervento sugli interni dell'architettura italiana nel più ampio campo della cultural del recupero è dunque il contributo più originale che la nostra architettura può fornire alla formulazione di un linguaggio architettonico europeo*' (translation by the author).

[3]'*Le discipline degli interni non sono né subalterne né indipendenti [dall'architettura], ma costituiscono un approfondimento essenziale dell'Architettura [...] indagando in profondità la natura degli spazi, l'architettura degli interni realizza e verifica in essi il senso di un edificio*' (translation by the author).

[4]See the voice: 'identity place' in www.mela-archive.polimi.it
[5]See the voice: 'belonging' in www.mela-archive.polimi.it

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