

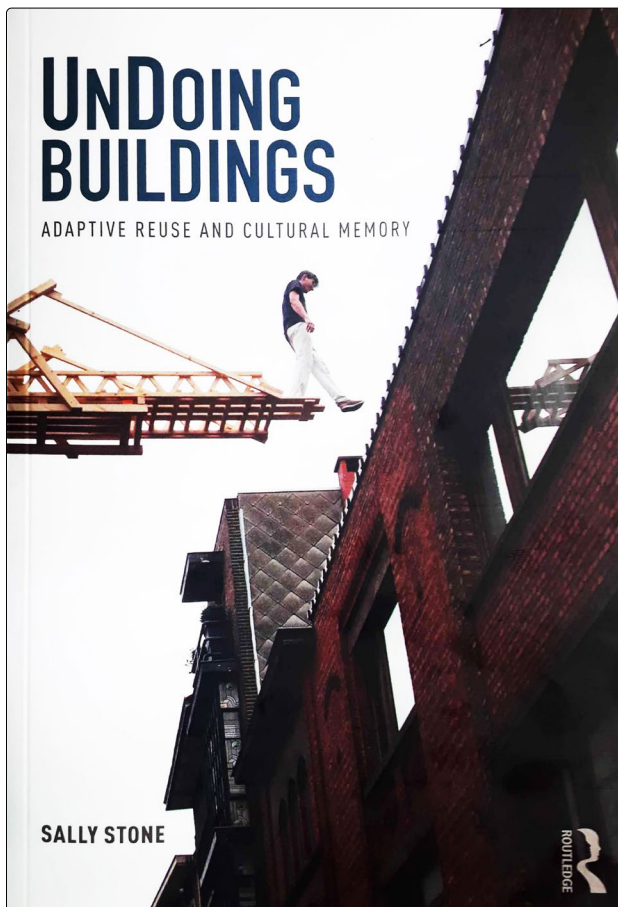
BOOK, CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

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# UnDoing Buildings: Adaptive Reuse and Cultural Memory, by Sally Stone. Routledge, New York, 2019. 266pp. ISBN 9781138226616

Christina Malathouni\*



Published by Routledge in 2020, the monograph *Undoing Buildings: Adaptive Reuse and Cultural Memory* is written by architect and educator Sally Stone. As the title suggests, the book aims to cover a very important and topical subject as it focuses on the reuse of existing buildings and therefore also relates to all the associated environmental and cultural benefits of such practices. The recent award of the 2021 Pritzker Architecture Prize – a prize often paralleled to a Nobel Prize for Architecture – to Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal in recognition of their ‘commitment to a restorative architecture that is at once technological, innovative, and ecologically responsive’, and whose critical choices have prioritised reuse and transformation of existing structures ‘instead of demolition and reconstruction’, underlines the relevance of this publication to pressing global issues within the built environment sector (<https://www.pritzkerprize.com/laureates/anne-lacaton-and-jean-philippe-vassal>; accessed on 15 May 2022). Similarly, national professional bodies, such as the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), have expanded the range of their activities to introduce a Conservation Register for their members and also include a special category on Conservation in their annual RIBA Regional Awards. Refurbishment projects have also been featuring in the RIBA Awards alongside new buildings.

Including the initial ‘Introduction’, the book comprises fourteen chapters that break down the overarching theme to 13 topics, starting with a focus on recognition and perception in ‘Reading and Recognition: Landmarks of Memory’ and ‘The Perception of the Past: The Task of the Translator’. The emphasis then moves to associations with monuments and museums in ‘Site Specific Art:

\*Correspondence: c.malathouni@liverpool.ac.uk

School of Architecture, University of Liverpool, Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 7ZN, Merseyside, UK

Unintentional Monuments' and 'The Problem of Obsolete Buildings: A Society Can Only Support So Many Museums,' before an initial shift towards current uses in 'Memory and Anticipation: The Existing Building and the Expectations of the New Users.' A clearer connection to heritage and conservation follows in chapter seven, as highlighted in its main title: 'Conservation: A Future Orientated Movement Focussing on the Past,' before the volume continues with the presentation of a variety of practical approaches to the re-use of buildings in the remaining seven chapters: 'The Sustainable Adaptation of the Existing Building,' 'Spatial Agency or Taking Action,' 'Smartness and the Impact of the Digital,' 'On Taking Away,' 'On Making Additions: Assemblage, Memory and the Recovery of Wholeness,' 'Itinerant Elements,' and, finally, 'Nearness and Thinking About Details.' Although a rather slim volume, the book is illustrated with over 120 black & white images, the majority of which are photographs of realised projects. These are complemented by a small number of reproductions of historic photographs, drawings and other graphic material.

Notably, neither the main book title and subtitle, nor any of the chapter titles, suggests a particular connection to interior architecture, yet the author herself makes a direct connection to this area in her opening 'Motivation' section. Similar connections are made by reviewers' quotes included in the opening pages, in the 'Foreword' to the book, and in the fields listed as related to the book content on the rear cover page. Despite such an initial emphasis, though, the actual discussion of the book expands to all different directions as regards architectural interventions to existing built structures, including – to name but a few – new additions, art installations, and urban scale projects.

The contradiction regarding the suggested emphasis on interior architecture and its absence from all titles in the book, as well as the density and complexity of the listed contents that are packed in 240 richly illustrated pages measuring 15.5 × 23.5 cm (paperback), sum up one of my principal reservations about the book: the overall approach comes across as overambitious and rather undecided. This issue is further amplified by the publishers' positioning of the book within the fields of 'Architectural Conservation / Historic Preservation,' as highlighted on the rear cover page. The broad and complex scope suggested in the full contents of the book as outlined above – from formally designated, managed and practiced building conservation to adaptive reuse projects that would be subject to general building controls only – indeed involves a key distinction that becomes apparent in the examples discussed in the book, yet is never clearly tackled.

Following a brief section in the Introduction that reflects on the concepts of 'conservation' and 'restoration,' the chapter under the title of 'Conservation' is the longest chapter in the entire book (covering approximately fourteen pages of text) but only appears in the middle of the book, with some more content on this topic following in chapter twelve. Although the author makes it clear that the focus of the book is not on this particular field as such, it feels like an omission that there is no explicit clarity as regards key differences between practices that involve formally protected structures, the different degrees of protection, or the principles under which these are decided, and the rest of our existing built environment which can feature in adaptive reuse projects. What is more, considering the focus of the book is on contemporary practice, one would expect the account of early foundations such as those developed by Viollet-le-Duc and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), founded in 1877, to be further updated so as to reflect their evolution into the contemporary expert professional field with local, national and international philosophies, legislation or conventions, and technical principles of good practice. Chapter twelve includes mention of the 1964 Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites but, even then, related discussion does not progress any closer to the present time.

In a similar way, loose use of key terms adds to the general confusion. There is limited attempt to distinguish between closely related terms such as 'conservation' and 'preservation,' which may be used as equivalent in different geographical settings, or have distinct associations to specific practices, but are used here as interchangeable. Another example could be the fundamental question of 'evidential value' that is missing as a heritage and conservation concept when the author reflects on the role that 'age' can play in heritage assessments of existing structures (p. 110). Likewise, commentary on examples discussing industrial and religious heritage does not acknowledge the crucial differences underlying the original uses behind such structures and, consequently, critical implications in any heritage evaluation or subsequent new uses (p. 80). The strong association of heritage buildings with museums and tourism further seems to overlook the full scope of actual and potential reuse options, whereas the term 'heritage' itself is used quite loosely, as, for example, in the phrase 'historical and cultural heritage' (p. 73). Although one of course accepts that a single book cannot cover everything, there is normally an expectation for some acknowledgment of the full scope of the field and a clear position within it, or else there is a risk that the authority and persuasive power of the discussion will appear unnecessarily limited.

In terms of geographical scope, examples presented throughout the book are overwhelmingly from Europe and to a large extent from Britain (and there is also some repetition: Carlo Scarpa and Gordon Matta-Clark are definitely two favourites). Two exceptions to this rule are a building in Kuala Lumpur and examples of Matta-Clark's work in New York. This geographical and cultural approach is strongly reflected in the discussion too, as the prevailing perspective remains West-centric and to a great extent Britain-centric too. As such, the tone of several general statements can be questioned (and have a particular impact on questions of heritage and conservation too), as they can appear to suggest that perspectives gained from such specific geographical and cultural contexts can constitute universally accepted positions. For example, although the author does repeatedly refer to pluralist, post-modern perceptions of, and equally diverse approaches to, 'history' (p. 79), such a position is contradicted by statements about individual buildings and their purported connections to 'the society that constructed [them]' (pp. 11, 32) with no reflection on varied, even conflicting, perceptions, priorities, and interpretations within 'society'. Conversely, Stone maintains full confidence in the ability of designers and architects to understand and uncover the meaning of specific places (p. 19).

As widely acknowledged in the field, the above issues are particularly resonant when extended to heritage: what 'heritage' is, for whom it has value, and whether any universality can be applied to such complex notions. The discussion of 'authenticity' in the book is one example on which my comment above regarding a West-centric approach is based: this includes no engagement with the challenges brought to Western perspectives of the notion of 'authenticity' by different cultural perspectives across the globe (pp. 110, 120).

More broadly, limitations as regards precision and lucidity in the use of theoretical concepts, and their associations, both within and across all separate chapters remain a weakness. For example, it is not until chapter twelve that we first hear of existing scholarship theorising building reuse, dating as far back as 1989, or read about a system of taxonomy within the same field that the author introduced in one of her earlier studies dating from 2004, and by which she asserts that she is still standing.

In terms of presentation, there is room for improvement. As regards their individual structure, for example, most chapters include an introductory section and 'Conclusion(s)', yet there are also unjustified diversions from this pattern. Most notably, the final chapter has no conclusion, nor does it serve as a conclusion to the book as a whole, despite the first chapter being specifically designated as 'Introduction'. Chapters six and fourteen

are particularly confusing and some clarification of the purpose of repetitions of positions and examples across chapters would be helpful to the reader. Sadly, the publisher's copyediting also lets the book down in terms of presentation, as there are a number of spelling or typographical errors.

Despite the above limitations, the book evidently aims to encompass a lot and does actually do that. Overall, the text reads closer to a personal memoir of an experienced educator and the various themes that have triggered their engagement with the reuse of existing structures. Key positions regarding such areas of interest, organised into the 13 chapters of the book after the Introduction, are supported by the presentation of examples of realised projects from various time periods, both as regards the original structure and the later intervention. The volume is indeed very rich in numerous interesting examples, including both older and contemporary case studies from various parts of the world. The large number of illustrations also maintains the reader's interest.

In sum, the book is ambitious and full of promise in its conception and focuses on particularly topical issues that support the reuse of existing built structures, beyond the particular focus of designated heritage and its protection and conservation. It presents a rich collection of interesting realised examples of architectural interventions on existing buildings grouped in line with a number of stimulating conceptual lenses, albeit narrow in their geographical and cultural scope. Yet, in its attempt to cover a very expansive scope, it seems to have paid a toll as regards its in-depth analysis. One cannot but wonder whether a stronger emphasis on, and more detailed analysis of, its selected case studies would have served better its intended audience, specified in the publisher's book description as 'upper level students and professionals working in the fields of Interior Design, Interior Architecture, Architecture, Conservation, Urban Design and Development', and become a more useful tool for further design explorations within the field of adaptive reuse. The term 'eclectic', used by one of the reviewers quoted in the opening pages of the book, seems to me to capture the essence of the approach, in relation both to the conceptualisation and analysis of issues and to the chosen case studies.

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#### Author's contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Author's information

Dr Christina Malathouni is a qualified architect and architectural historian. She holds an MSc and a PhD from The Bartlett, UCL, and is currently Associate Professor at the School of Architecture, University of Liverpool, UK. She also has extensive experience in the heritage sector, specialising in 20th-century

architectural heritage. She is full member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC, UK) and member of ICOMOS's International Scientific Committee on 20th-Century heritage (ICOMOS-ISC20C).

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