

BOOK, CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

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# Adaptive reuse of the built heritage: concepts and cases of an emerging discipline.

By Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel.  
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For millennia, a scarcity of resources mandated the reuse of structures and materials. The intentional transformation of an existing structure for a new purpose is instead a primarily modern phenomenon, with the term ‘adaptive reuse’ originating in the latter third of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> While seminal works of adaptive reuse were created then that remain canons of architectural history today, projects such as those of Carlo Scarpa and Sverre Fehn were unique for their time. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, issues of contemporary society have wielded an impact on the built environment. Climate change, urbanisation, deindustrialisation, collective trauma, secularisation have, each in their own way, led to underutilised and subsequently decommissioned buildings and building types. The first decades of the twenty-first century witnessed an explosion of adaptive reuse projects involving varied host structure types: industrial, heritage, trauma sites, religious, energy production. This plethora of reuse projects has given rise to the parsing and placing of these works within the framework of architecture and design. One group of these adaptive reuse projects relates to cultural heritage. Arising from the plight of structures destroyed from revolution, warfare and looting, the disciplines of conservation and preservation have evolved with shifting societal norms. In *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage*, Plevoets and Van Cleempoel present their insights of reuse projects

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary definition of ‘adaptive reuse’ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptive%20reuse>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

related to heritage buildings and sites, drawn from established principles of the field. Offering concepts from a contemporary viewpoint, the book is a scholarly addition to a growing body of work on the age-old practice of adaptive reuse.

Western conservation/preservation practices have their origins in the latter half of the eighteenth century in England and France. The title's inference to adaptive reuse of the built heritage as an emerging discipline references the development of the discipline, especially in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The contemporary recognition of the plight of buildings 'frozen in time' has placed adaptive reuse as a viable alternative. Of this emergent trend, the authors declare their interest, not in 'the relationship between the old and the new but instead.... a process of reevaluation .... between different sorts of values ....' (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019, 1) This process of reassessing is central to the book and its promised concepts. As the title implies, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage - Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* is organizationally bifurcated. Concepts on the practice of adaptive reuse of the built heritage are presented as text in Part I and as case studies in Part II. Part I is an essay in five chapters. Part II comprises 20 projects of the reuse of built heritage.

Part I begins in the Renaissance and is an historical prelude for introducing western concepts of built heritage. It concludes with broader reflections on less tangible ideas: traces, memory, empathy, continuity. The body of the essay examines architectural strategies for built heritage, their effect and their authenticity through three distinct aspects: intervention strategies, urban regeneration and *genius loci*. With the classical premise that built heritage is monument or palimpsest, Chapter 2 focuses on architectural actions upon built heritage. The chapter explores past approaches to built heritage and the classification of such approaches. It concludes with the authors' classification of contemporary intervention strategies as *aemulatio*, facadism and ruination. Premised on a brief history of twentieth century urban planning, Chapter 3 focuses on the effect of architectural actions on urban areas. Meticulously referenced, it is an introduction to the seminal players contributing to this period from Le Corbusier to CIAM and Team X, the Smithsons, De Carlo, the Kriers, Rossi, Jacobs, Lynch, etc. This history provides the context for adaptive reuse concepts of urban built heritage as housing, landscape/urban parks and vernacular or user-led transformations. Chapter 4 examines the authenticity of such actions and the need for an intervention criterion – *genius loci*. This concept is discussed through its many relationships to the environment, the landscape, literature, architectural theory, heritage conservation and adaptive reuse. These

ideas introduced in Part I are supported by 20 case studies in Part II. Each case is presented in a miniature text describing the existing structure, the new programme and the transformation; together, these cases occupy more than 50% of the book. As a two-part book, this distinction of two separate parts is an invitation to interrogate the relationship of the parts to each other and each part to itself. Are the cases simply illustrations for Part I and subservient to those concepts? Or, do they – and, can they – have a life of their own as a group? Is there understanding to be gleaned from this particular set of projects? As the grouping of projects in Part II defies the nature of a simple list, what does it convey about the subject of adaptive reuse of the built heritage?

A diptych is an artwork consisting of two panels, often hinged in Medieval times, that can be 'attached or presented adjoining each other.'<sup>2</sup> Most often, the panels are two, related but different, images that complement each other. Viewed separately, the individual panels have their own structure and content, albeit irregular and perhaps incomplete. Viewed together, they represent a singular piece of art. *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage* is such a two-part work where text and cases, viewed together or apart, offer different interpretations. On its own, the concepts explored in Part I are derived from the seminal writings of historians, theorists, and practitioners as well as the deliberations of international congresses and organizations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS. These voices establish a framework for the introduction of the authors' concepts and, in a way, posit them as heir to an architectural lineage. As such, Part I is a resource of contemporary and Western literary sources. However, the reliance on these architectural histories and theories, in part, mandates the specificity of the concepts presented and perhaps the omission of others. Chapter 4, for example, focuses on the effects of adaptive reuse interventions that are developed from a history of urban planning. Concepts of urban regeneration result from such a history. But, that body of literary sources could not lead to new concepts such as regenerative interventions in suburban or rural environments. With the conferring of heritage status upon structures outside urban centers today, these are emerging areas for adaptive reuse that are fertile grounds yet to be explored. While Part I has its unique identity in literary sources, Part II is less easily classified on its own. The cases are mostly European interventions to built heritage but also include a single American example. They are mostly from the last quarter of the twentieth century but include cases from the 7th and the 16th centuries. There are canonical works as

<sup>2</sup> Definition from the Tate Museum <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/d/diptych>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

well as lesser-known examples. They are a quirky group. But this characteristic is perhaps critical in understanding the development of adaptive reuse of built heritage as both an ancient practice and an emergent, contemporary one. While Part I and Part II might each have its own agenda, when viewed together the text and cases present a European perspective, substantiated by contemporary theory, on the reuse of built heritage at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is a glimpse of a moment in the evolving history of built heritage and is valuable for all readers interested in the ongoing conservation/preservation debate in the West.

The book presents a decidedly European perspective but, in the conclusion, Plevoets and Van Cleempoel address the reuse of built heritage in future societies as ‘a universal question.’ (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019, 110) In their final chapter, they include a single reference to a project from Asia. Wang Shu and Amateur Architecture Studio’s Ningbo Historic Museum is noted for its reuse of materials and deemed a contemporary example of the Western concept of *spolia*. The Ningbo Historic Museum is part of a growing body of new and interesting reuse projects of built heritage from China. 1933 Old Millfun, a conversion of a slaughterhouse in Shanghai,<sup>3</sup> 798 Art Zone, the reuse of a former munitions factory,<sup>4</sup> the Long Museum West Bund, a new structure built around a vestige of industrial Shanghai,<sup>5</sup> the Tsingpu Yangzhou Retreat, a conversion of abandoned industrial heritage,<sup>6</sup> the Alila Yangshuo, a conversion of a 1960s sugar mill,<sup>7</sup> are some such notable examples. Mostly of industrial heritage, these projects of Chinese built heritage are not yet part of Western literary sources. But they are on their way to becoming part of the contemporary body of adaptive reuse projects of built heritage. A current exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art titled, ‘Reuse, Renew, Recycle - Recent Architecture from China’ is a harbinger of that change.<sup>8</sup> With adaptive reuse of built heritage as a relatively new but global phenomenon, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage - Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* offers Eastern and Western readers - preservationists, conservationists, architects, designers, historians and those interested in the future of the past—a glimpse into this practice as it comes of age.

#### Abbreviations

CIAM: Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (International Congresses of Modern Architecture); UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; ICOMOS: International Council on Monuments and Sites.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikiarquitectura.com/building/shanghai-1933/>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>4</sup> 798 Art District <http://www.798district.com>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Long Museum <http://www.thelongmuseum.org/en/west-bund.html>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Neri&Hu Design and Research Office <http://www.neriandhu.com/en/works/the-brick-wall-tsingpu-yangzhou-retreat>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Vector Architects <http://www.vectorarchitects.com/en/projects/32>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>8</sup> MoMA <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5342?>. Accessed 5 January 2022.