

Care as Design Strategy

Adaptive Reuse as a Curatorial Practice

Francesco Chiacchiera

UNIVPM DICEAA, Ancona, Italy, f.chiacchiera@staff.univpm.it

Abstract

In the current contemporary polycrisis context, marked by urgent ecological, social, and political issues, the adaptive reuse of the built heritage emerges as a central architectural practice in the transition toward more sustainable and responsible relationships with urban environments. This contribution proposes a reflection on the interpretation of reuse as a form of care: a design paradigm that entails a complex approach to the existing, not solely technical or conservative, but also critical, interpretative, and forward-looking. Care, understood in a sense close to curatorship, involves an act of listening and the recognition of the latent qualities of the existing, oriented toward a future vision. From this perspective, the unused or transitional built heritage within urban contexts is interpreted as a “value-laden complex”: a cultural and social infrastructure, layered in its material, spatial, symbolic, and functional meanings, which is activated only through a projective gaze capable of listening and rewriting. This leads to a redefinition of heritage value—not based on formal or monumental integrity, but on its potential for activation, on its incomplete, open, and adaptable nature. In this sense, Adaptive reuse design strategies are thus a meaning-making device, a space of negotiation between permanence and transformation, between matter and memory, and a fertile ground for design creativity. This theoretical framework is articulated through the analysis of exemplary case studies, such as Sala Beckett by Flores & Prats and Atelier Kempe Thill interventions on Wintercircus in Ghent, in which architectural design engages with the existing as a living matter to be critically re-read. Adaptive reuse thus emerges as a strategic design tool to responsibly address some of the challenges of the contemporary city, contributing to a renewed relationship between project and heritage, between past and future.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Architectural Care, Built Heritage Values

Introduction

In the contemporary context, marked by a condition of polycrisis—environmental, social, economic, and cultural—the architectural project is called to redefine its field of action, shifting from a logic based on production and the infinite exploitation of resources and land, towards one of greater responsibility towards the urban heritage, broadly understood as an anthropized context that encompasses both cities and the surrounding territories with which they are interrelated. From this perspective, the reuse of the built heritage assumes a central role as a critical device capable of establishing new relationships between the existing and the future. The architectural project can thus be understood as a form of “care”: an

act of attention and proximity towards what is already given, recognizing in the existing a reservoir of meaning, matter, and possibility. The growing attention towards reuse—also evidenced by the international recognition of numerous award-winning projects in recent years—signals the emergence of an authentic design discipline, capable of redefining the relationships between permanence and transformation, between matter and memory. As Lacaton & Vassal remind us, “it is urgent to stop demolishing, eliminating, erasing, cutting, and to start from the city as it is, exactly as it is: to act and invent with everything we already have”. From this viewpoint, the existing does not represent a limitation, but a resource: a dense material of potential, ready to be critically reinterpreted and projected towards new futures. Reflecting on the occasion of the 2023 Venice Biennale, Flores & Prats recalled how “each generation has the right to work with what it inherits from those that came before [...] until design actions are no longer new, but rather an evolution of what already existed”. The architectural project, therefore, is not founded on the idea of innovation as rupture, but as a process of critical continuity: a work of interpretation and listening that re-reads the built environment as a fertile ground of possibilities.

The Existing Built Heritage as a Complex of Values

The modes of intervention on the existing fabric and their classification can result from different and ever-evolving interpretations, readings, and approaches (F. Bollack 2016, Wong 2017, Plevoets e Van Cleempoel 2019). From this perspective, the built heritage takes the form of a *palimpsest* (Corboz 1983, Machado 1976): a rewritable text that preserves within itself the traces of different epochs, uses, and meanings—often overlapping or even contradictory. The metaphor of the palimpsest conveys the dynamic nature of the existing, understood as an open field of possibilities in which past and future do not oppose each other, but rather coexist and overlap. In this sense, the project of reuse is always an interpretative act: a process of reading and translation that selects, orders, and reformulates the traces of time. It is never a neutral gesture, but rather a deliberate stance toward the built environment—its value and its potential. To reuse an existing building is always the result of a process of interpretation and re-evaluation of values, meanings, and the legacy that the designer encounters. Various design strategies can be applied to an existing building depending on the designer’s sensitivity, the conditions of the context, and the constraints imposed by external factors (regulations, client requirements, heritage protection) as well as those internal to the design process itself (budget, time frame, etc.). These strategies stem from the designer’s interpretation of the palimpsest (Machado 1976) embodied by the existing fabric.

To look at a building as a palimpsest means to acknowledge that it contains multiple testimonies, multiple stories inscribed upon it, all deserving the possibility to unfold and to be narrated. Therefore, for the existing heritage to be used in a forward-looking way throughout its life cycle, there must be an awareness of its potential (Baum 2014). This potential should not be measured solely in economic terms, but rather in terms of a *complex of values*—that is, the ensemble of historical, material, patrimonial, and identity-based values that the existing built environment holds in relation to the city and its local communities, positioning itself as a resource for the city of tomorrow. Furthermore, the built fabric possesses an intrinsic value in itself: in cases where the building is not in total ruin, its main structures, technical infrastructures, and “land consumption” have already been paid for

by the community, often resulting in considerable savings in terms of both material use and energy consumption. In general, then, we may state that the existing built heritage constitutes a repository—an inheritance of “values” that testify to the past and to the identity of place. The concept of the complex of values broadens the notion of value itself, moving beyond a purely economic or monumental conception of heritage. The existing is not relevant solely as a historical or artistic asset, but as a bearer of relationships, identities, and collective meaning. As Baum argues, it is a resource for the city of tomorrow—a cultural and social infrastructure capable of triggering regeneration processes starting from what already exists. From this standpoint, the value of the built environment lies in its capacity to be activated: in its openness to use, its adaptability, and its inherent condition of incompleteness. The project, therefore, does not “add value” to the existing, but reveals and re-actualizes it through a process of conscious knowledge and transformation. This reading finds resonance in recent theories of adaptive reuse, which recognize in the existing a *dynamic-stable structure* (Baum e Christiaansee 2012): a condition where permanence and transformation, identity and openness, coexist. Abandoned buildings and urban fragments thus represent potential spaces—capable of generating new forms of inhabitation and relationship. Their strength lies precisely in their incompleteness, in already containing within themselves the premises for further transformations. The recognition of the existing as a complex of values also entails an epistemological shift: knowledge of the built environment is no longer entrusted solely to historical or conservation disciplines, but becomes a design process in itself, in which reading and transformation feed each other reciprocally. The analytical phase cannot be separated from the design phase but rather constitutes its operative premise: to know the existing already means to transform it, through an interpretative act that reveals its values and explores its potential for reuse. From this perspective, the reuse project becomes a cognitive device, capable of translating into forms and spaces the dialogue between past and future, between memory and use.

This approach also allows the recognition of the active role of communities in defining the values of heritage. *Use value* and *relational value* (Baum 2014) become fundamental components of the notion of heritage, shifting the focus from protection to care, from ownership to sharing. When reinterpreted as social infrastructures, abandoned buildings and spaces can once again become vital nodes in the urban network—places of interaction and belonging. Their regeneration, therefore, does not coincide with a mere physical recovery, but with a cultural and communal process capable of reactivating bonds and generating new forms of collective identity. In this vision, the built heritage is not a static collection of testimonies, but a living organism, subject to continuous transformation. From this point of view, working with the existing becomes a critical device capable of operating within a system of values, rather than on a mere physical object. The dimension of the unfinished, the fragile, and the potential becomes an integral part of the design process itself. To recognize the existing as a complex of values thus means to shift the focus from conservation to care: not to protect the past as an image, but to keep alive its capacity to produce relationships and meaning in the present.

Adaptive Reuse as Care

Within this theoretical framework, *adaptive reuse* can be interpreted as an act of *care*. The word *care*—from the Latin *cura*—encompasses a broad semantic field that includes

attention, responsibility, maintenance, but also dedication and interpretation. In the design realm, it describes an attitude of listening toward the existing, a practice that engages with built matter not as an object to be repaired, but as a subject with which to establish a dialogue. Designing through reuse thus means *taking care* of buildings and their histories, as well as of the social and environmental systems they embody. It is a curatorial operation in the dual sense of the term: on the one hand, care as the responsibility of preservation and protection; on the other, curatorship as a proactive and creative act, capable of staging new meanings and new narratives. The notion of care implies an attitude of responsibility toward the *other*—in this case, the building, the urban context, and the communities that inhabit it—and evokes an operational mode grounded in listening, mediation, and continuity. Understood in a sense close to curatorship, care takes shape as an interpretative process, capable of reading, selecting, and orchestrating the multiple material and immaterial traces that constitute the built heritage. It does not coincide with conservation in its traditional sense, but rather with a critical and projective practice that operates through subtle overlays, stratifications, and partial rewritings.

Viewed through the lens of care, reuse becomes a form of resistance to planned obsolescence and land consumption, but also a cultural response to the loss of meaning of places and to the crisis of the project understood as an authoritarian and totalizing gesture. Care introduces into the design process a different temporal dimension: a long temporality that accepts continuity and change as constitutive conditions of architectural form. Design for reuse is therefore not configured as an instantaneous or definitive action, but as an open, iterative process capable of adapting to future transformations. By its very nature, it is an exercise in attentiveness: a projective act of listening that recognizes the latent qualities of space, its layers of memory, and its unexpressed potential. From this perspective, care is not merely an ethical or aesthetic gesture but a way of producing knowledge through design. It requires a direct and sensitive engagement with the matter of the existing—with its structure, its voids, its discontinuities—and implies a position of humility and proximity on the part of the designer toward the work. Care is, in other words, a form of operative attention, one that transforms reading into action and observation into design. The designer, in this sense, assumes a role akin to that of a curator: constructing a narrative, a sequence of relations, an equilibrium between permanence and transformation.

To interpret reuse as care therefore means to recognize architecture as a device of mediation between past and future, between matter and memory, between permanence and adaptation. It means restoring centrality to the act of design as a gesture of relation rather than imposition. In a time when the construction of new buildings can no longer represent the sole form of progress, the ability to read and transform what already exists becomes the measure of a new design ethics. Reuse, from this perspective, takes the form of a laboratory of practices and tools for addressing the complexity of the present—a field of experimentation capable of linking the technical and the symbolic, matter and time, the city and its inhabitants.

Case Studies: Practices of Care and the Rewriting of Identity through Adaptive Reuse

Two exemplary projects that illuminate how adaptive reuse can embody a practice of *care*—and, at the same time, a form of active preservation of cultural identity—are *Sala Beckett*

in Barcelona by Flores & Prats and the *Wintercircus* in Ghent by Atelier Kempe Thill. Both interventions engage with built heritage not as an object to be conserved, but as a living material to be interpreted and reinserted into an evolving cycle of uses, meanings, and relationships.



Fig. 1. Sala Beckett. Flores & Prats (picture by the author, 2022)

Sala Beckett, Barcelona. Care as Poetic Rewriting of the Existing

The project by Flores & Prats for the new headquarters of Sala Beckett (2011–2017) stands as one of the most emblematic examples of the Catalan approach to adaptive reuse, founded on an intense empathetic relationship with the built environment and with the social memory of place. The intervention originates from the encounter between two distinct stories: that of the former workers' cooperative *Pau i Justícia* in Poblenou—an abandoned yet still emotionally charged building within the collective memory of the neighborhood—and that of the theatre company Sala Beckett, compelled to find a new home. These two narratives merge into a single architectural story. Flores & Prats approach the pre-existence as a fragile palimpsest, dense with immaterial values: a non-monumental building, lacking

formal protection, yet endowed with a strong sense of communal identity. The decision to recognize it as a heritage asset—less for its architectural quality in the classical sense than for its lived memory and its ability to represent a collective patrimony—translates into both an ethical and design stance. “Why must the concept of heritage always be associated with something prestigious or monumental?” the architects ask, arguing instead that heritage is “a shapeless mist that emerges from time and experience, from what is radically collective.” Their design approach takes the form of a *discipline of the existing*, grounded in direct knowledge, meticulous surveying, cataloguing, and care for the built fabric. Every element—doors, floors, decorative apparatuses—is recorded and preserved as an emotional trace, a fragment of an “affective” rather than formal heritage. From this process emerges a genuine inventory, a grammar of elements that becomes both a design instrument and a critical device for communicating with other actors involved in the project. (Fig. 1) Within a fragile economic framework—where the initial budget was reduced from 8 to 2.5 million euros—the project assumes the value of an exercise in resilience and responsibility. Having abandoned the initial idea of a vertical extension, the architects work “from within” the building, through selective operations of consolidation and rewriting. The spaces are reorganized around a large double-height central lobby that functions as an “internal street” and a performative space where the boundary between architecture and theatre dissolves. Sala Beckett thus becomes an open urban machine, where the public dimension, that of the theatre company, and that of the citizens intersect. The bar and foyer spaces, open to the neighborhood, reestablish a dialogue with the site’s memory, returning a fragment of its history to the community. In this sense, the project does not merely preserve cultural identity but reactivates it through a process of care and translation: the building is no longer a ruin to be contemplated, but a living, performative organism that continues to generate meaning.

Wintercircus, Ghent. Care as Circular Infrastructure

A similar attitude of listening and reinterpretation informs the project for the Wintercircus in Ghent, developed by Atelier Kempe Thill together with aNNo, Baro, and Sumproject. The building, constructed in the late nineteenth century as a winter circus and later converted into a garage and automobile museum, represents a complex fragment of the city’s urban and industrial memory. Within a broader regeneration strategy for the Muinschelde area—promoted by the Municipality and the University of Ghent—the project seeks to restore the complex’s active role as a hub for innovation and creativity. The intervention, however, avoids any iconic or substitutive gesture: the Wintercircus is treated as an organism in equilibrium between ruin and infrastructure, in which every trace of time becomes an integral part of the new construction. The large circular hall—equal in size to the Pantheon—is preserved intact and reinterpreted as a covered square, a multifunctional public space capable of hosting events and collective activities. Beneath it, a new underground level accommodates a concert hall, while the surrounding spaces and circulation areas are transformed into co-working environments, archives, and spaces for start-ups. (Fig. 2) The design strategy is based on a principle of curatorship of the ruin, where conservation is not restoration but a process of active care for time and its transformations. Kempe Thill work through minimal additions, recognizing the efficacy of an economy of gesture capable of maximizing resources and minimizing environmental

impact. The intervention does not aspire to formal purity but to the construction of an ecological and cultural equilibrium, in which the existing material—with its imperfections and patinas—becomes a resource. The Wintercircus is neither “cleaned” nor returned to an original state but maintained in its condition of incompleteness: a constructed landscape that bears witness to the accumulation of time and social practices. In its procedural and incremental nature, the entire project reflects an idea of sustainability that transcends the technical dimension to become ethical: the preservation of cultural identity coincides with the capacity to inhabit the existing, to reuse it without consuming it. From this perspective, the Wintercircus becomes a manifesto of circular architecture, where the carbon positive scenario translates into a practice of material and symbolic economy capable of transforming care into a shared infrastructure.



Fig. 2. Wintercircus Ghent. Flores & Prats (picture by the author, 2025)

Conclusions

The theoretical and design trajectory outlined here demonstrates that adaptive reuse cannot be understood merely as a strategy of sustainability or as a measure of energy and material efficiency, but rather as a genuine design posture capable of redefining the relationship between architecture and time. To speak of reuse as care means to restore to the project its humanistic and relational dimension, recognizing architecture not only as the construction

of spaces but as a practice of attention, responsibility, and listening. Care implies a different way of looking at the existing: not as a relic to be preserved nor as an obstacle to be overcome, but as an active interlocutor—bearer of values, fragilities, and potentialities. From this perspective, the project becomes a conscious act of mediation between what has been and what may become, a field of negotiation between permanence and transformation, matter and memory, continuity and innovation. The case studies analyzed reveal how such an approach can translate into design strategies capable of regenerating the built heritage without neutralizing its complexity, but rather amplifying its capacity to accommodate new meanings. The project does not intervene to replace or resolve, but to *take care* of what exists—through reversible, incrementally sustainable operations that remain open to future evolution.

Bibliography

- Baum, Martina. “Re-use. From exception to normality: re-use in urban development.” In *The City as Resource. Texts and projects 2005-2014. Chair of prof-Kees Christiaanse*, edited by Tim Rieniets, Myriam Perret and Nicolas Kretschmann, 145-154. Berlin: Jovis, 2014.
- Baum, Martina, and Kees Christiaanse. *City as Loft. Adaptive Reuse as a resource for sustainable urban development*. Zurich: ETH, gta Verlag, 2012.
- Bollack, Astorg F. *Old buildings, New forms*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2013.
- Chipperfield, David. “The ecology of protection, memory, reuse.” *Domus* 4-5, 2020.
- Corboz, André. “The land as palimpsest.” *Diogenes*, 12-34, 1983.
- Flores, Ricardo, and Eva Prats. “La disciplina dell’esistente.” In *La seconda vita degli edifici, Riflessioni e progetti*, edited by Pisana Posocco and Manuela Raitano, 115-126. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018.
- Machado, Rodolfo. “Old buildings as palimpsest.” *Progressive Architecture* (Progressive Architecture), 46-49, 1976.
- Plevoets, Bie, and Koenraad Van Cleempoel. *Adaptive Reuse of the built heritage. Concepts and cases of an emerging discipline*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Posocco, Pisana. “Modificare per conservare. La memoria è progetto.” In *La seconda vita degli edifici: Riflessioni e progetti*, ed Pisana Posocco and Manuela Raitano, 47-76. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016.
- Wong, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse in Architecture. A Typological index*. Basel: Birkhauser, 2023.
- Wong, Liliane. *Adaptive Reuse. Extending the Lives of Buildings*. Basel: Birkhauser, 2017.