re-readings

interior architecture and
the design principles
of remodelling existing buildings
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About the authors

Graeme Brooker MA, is a senior lecturer in Interior Design at Manchester Metropolitan University and was until recently a senior lecturer at University of Wales Institute Cardiff.

Sally Stone MA, is a practising designer and a senior lecturer at the Manchester School of Architecture. She teaches a studio course concerned with building re-use and the relationship between interior architecture and installation art.
The Baltic Art Factory, Gateshead. Ellis Williams Architects, 2002
Fig. 1. American Bar
by Adolf Loos,
Vienna, 1907
History of remodelling

Buildings outlast civilisations, they evolve and they are changed, but their reuse emphasises continuity. A building can retain a remembrance of the former function and value; it has a memory of its previous purpose engrained within its very structure. The exploitation and development of this can create a composite of meaning and consequence. The inherent qualities of the place and its surroundings, combined with the anticipation of the future use, produce a multi-layered complexity impossible to replicate in a new building. Louis Kahn once asked: ‘What does it want to be?’ and it is the purpose of this book to show that the unique answer is hidden within the profundity of the existing building.

Throughout history, buildings have been adapted for new uses; there is really nothing new about the remodelling of a structure to contain a new function. The Roman Arena in Nîmes, France, became a small fortified town in the Middle Ages; the inhabitants resided within the massive arches of the structure and built houses in the open performance space. The Baths of Diocletian in Rome were converted into a church by Michelangelo (Santa Maria degli Angeli) and the Great Mosque in Cordova was remodelled by inserting a new church directly into the middle of its structure. Sir John Soane, who remodelled a pair of town houses in London at the start of the 19th century to house both his family and his extensive collection of art and artefacts, created an extremely dexterous sequence of spaces and environments within a surprisingly small building.

It appeared that the art of remodelling was lost to the dogma of modernism, but this is patently untrue. It has not always been the case that the modernists overlooked the existing. The work of the great architects such as Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, Ludwig Mies Van De Rohe, Alvar Aalto and Frank Lloyd Wright often made reference to the past without ever reworking existing buildings (with a few notable exceptions such as Le Corbusier’s Beistegui apartment in Paris, 1931 and the American Bar by Adolf Loos). Many examples of modern architecture were the product of a formal system that was essentially self-sufficient. Yet this denies the fact that much of its qualities were based on an interpretation of the city, through technology, nature and function, locating modernity as a product of its cultural context. Nevertheless, modern architecture is characterised essentially by the image of the crisp white villa situated in the landscape unfettered by its surroundings (Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier). The emphasis on the development of contextualist and continuous approaches to buildings and urbanism is characterised by later modernists such as Eric Gunnar Asplund, Aldo Rossi, Giancarlo de Carlo, Carlo Scarpa and Giorgio Grassi. Scarpa, who practised almost exclusively in and around the Veneto, is recognised as having developed a constant dialogue with history in his work. This is particularly conspicuous in the designs for the Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice and the building that is considered to be his masterpiece, the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona. The contribution of these architects to the development of the city and its buildings is based upon the notion that they are objects and places that are to be analysed and then reworked according to their latent
characteristics. This idea is personified by de Carlo who, when reflecting on his career in an interview in 1990, stated;

I believe a lot in the revelatory capacity of reading...if one is able to interpret the meaning of what has remained engraved, not only does one come to understand when this mark was made and what the motivation behind it was, but one also becomes conscious of how the various events that have left their mark have become layered, how they relate to one another and how, through time, they have set off other events and have woven together our history.¹

The rise in the number of buildings being remodelled and the gradual acceptance and respectability of the practice is based upon the reaction to what is perceived as the detrimental erosion of the city and its contents by modern architecture. The development of conservation and preservation laws, in America the 1966 Historic Preservation Act and in Britain the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, encouraged authorities to designate conservation areas in cities and towns. The lobbying by many major modernist architects, such as the Smithsons, against the demolition of Euston Arch in London did much to promote the cause of condemned worthy buildings. Today, with the planning authorities desperate to preserve the cultural heritage of a place and avoid the wholesale demolition prevalent in the modernist age, any building over a certain age, however dubious its quality, is considered worthy of conservation and the result is the stultification and overburdening of towns and cities with old buildings, which are retained solely because they are old. Also damaging is the remodelling of a building in such a way as to be a copy or pastiche of the existing in order to fit in or blend in with the context. Another process of doubtful value is the practice of retaining just the façade of a building and constructing behind it a sometimes huge and frequently unsympathetic structure. This gives no dignity to the retained façade and compromises the new building. The city is in danger of becoming little more than a theatre, the real buildings hidden behind the stage sets of the retained façades. Nevertheless, society, especially in the UK, values the old and the picturesque; the ideal of the garden village and the utopian vision of the days long past is still prevalent. This means that the backlash against modernism is the predominant attitude. Just as in the mid-20th century, when Victorian buildings were seen as having little worth, so those constructed during that period of demolition in the 20th century are now being demolished themselves, without consideration for their quality or the possibilities of adaptation. The bus station in Preston, northwest England, is a fine example of a heroic concrete structure built by the BDP Partnership in 1969. The whole area needed re-ordering, but the 2001 masterplan by Terry Farrell Architects proposed demolition, the possibilities of reuse not even being considered by the council. It will be a great loss that will be regretted in the future.
Clarification of the different methods of building conservation

There are a number of different approaches to the problem of the particular attitude to take to the existing building and it is important to distinguish between the different methods used in the conservation of a structure.

Preservation maintains the building in the found state, whether ruinous or not. The building is made safe and any further decay prevented; the ruined condition is important to the historical understanding of the place.

Restoration is the process of returning the condition of the building to its original state and this often involves using materials and techniques of the original period to ensure that the building appears as though it has just been constructed.

Renovation is the process of renewing and updating a building; a palace or large mansion might be adapted for 21st century living but not substantially changed.

Remodelling is the process of wholeheartedly altering a building. The function is the most obvious change, but other alterations may be made to the building itself such as the circulation route, the orientation, the relationships between spaces; additions may be built and other areas may be demolished. This process is sometimes referred to as adaptive reuse, especially in the USA, or as reworking, adaptation, interior architecture or even interior design.

Sometimes two of the methods may be employed in unison; for example, when designing the Sackler Galleries at the Royal Academy in London, Foster Associates ensured that the façades of the original buildings were completely restored before embarking on the remodelling of the space.

The value of remodelling

The reshaping of the city and its contents poses difficult questions of how to re-address the meaning and the value of the existing built fabric. The relationship between the existing and a new remodelling is dependent upon the cultural values attributed to an existing building, by the economics of the project and by the approach of the designer of the new addition. Of the three, the economic factor is the easiest to discern, and it is the most straightforward to establish. Remodelling existing buildings is labour intensive whereas new build tends to be capital expensive. Remodelling is energy saving whereas new build often consumes enormous amounts of energy and resources. Financial incentives and tax breaks are offered for the restoration and adaptation of old buildings.

The cultural value of ordinary buildings can change considerably; for example, until the last decade of the 20th century, city centre buildings in provincial cities in England were considered quite undesirable, businesses preferred to be located out of town, huge shopping centres were constructed on the motorway at the edge of the city and people wanted to live in the suburbs. This position has now virtually reversed, especially in places like Manchester and Leeds, where loft living in the city centre is the height of sophistication, and shops are moving back and so attracting a lot of businesses.
In Europe over the last few years, the architectural and the national press have devoted huge amounts of coverage to a series of massive new remodelling projects. In the UK, the Tate Modern in London, a gallery housed in the comprehensively reworked massive Bankside Power Station designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, was extensively described. The Baltic Art Factory, situated within a disused flour mill in Gateshead, Newcastle, was also very well reported, as was the re-roofing of the great court in the British Museum in London, to create an enormous new gallery space and circulation route around Sydney Smirke’s magnificent British Library building. These three massive projects demonstrate that the remodelling of the existing is of great cultural value; the adaptation of a building can contribute to the regeneration of an area. In Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, three of President Mitterrand’s nine Grand Projects involved the remodelling of existing buildings: the Musée d’Orsay, a museum placed within a disused train station, the Grand Louvre pyramid and courtyard, and the reworking of the old abattoirs and gardens to become the Parc de la Villette. The politically loaded gesture that involved relocating the German Parliament back into Berlin, from its pre-unified home in Bonn, significantly rehoused the government in the remodelled Reichstag building. An iconic glass dome signalled the residency. In the last twenty years all of these projects have been undertaken by large and famous architectural practices and so have received massive amounts of coverage in newspapers, journals and books. Has remodelling become so respectable that these prestigious architects are prepared to practise it or have the architects raised its profile?

As well as the perceived value of remodelling significant buildings, the reuse of the insignificant and overlooked is also becoming common practice. The reworking of the odd and strange buildings of the city, often changing their function to something completely different, can now be discerned as a viable architectural consideration. Larger-scale and more unusual projects are being reworked to contain cultural and leisure activities. A flak tower in Vienna, one of a series built to defend the city from Allied bombers during the Second World War and with walls that are between two and seven metres thick, is in the process of becoming a new gallery for the MAK Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, Austria. The Thyssen steelwork plant in Duisburg, Germany is now the host to many groups and clubs using the open-air cinema, the diving club in the old water cooler towers and the park created out of the contaminated land. Ramblers roam between the massive blast furnace towers and over the surrounding industrial landscape of slag heaps, coke and ore storage bunkers. The old pump house in Wapping, London, has become an elegant restaurant and art-space among the hydraulics and pumps that previously served London’s buildings with power and heat.
As people become more interested in the value and culture of living in the city centre, so warehouses, offices and department stores are being converted. The Smithfield Building, a magnificent Edwardian structure in the Northern Quarter, just off the centre of Manchester, was originally constructed to hold the Affleck and Brown store. During the 20th century, it underwent a number of transformations from the British Home Stores to the Affleck’s Palace. Stephenson Bell Architects converted the whole building, in the year 2000, into 80 loft apartments with very swanky shops on the ground floor. It would appear that among many of the major projects featured in the pages of architectural press, remodelling is an ever more meaningful way of making new space in our increasingly congested cities.

The book

Re-readings is based not upon the proposed or consequential function of a remodelled building, but upon an understanding of the theoretical method of the interpretation and adaptation employed by the architect or designer. The book proposes an analysis and, from that, a catalogue of the relationship between the existing building and the new elements of the remodelling. The premise is that to establish a satisfactory symbiotic association between the new and the old, the factors influencing the condition of the existing need to be comprehended and an appreciation of why a particular approach was taken has to be established. As one might expect, because the architect or designer is not dealing with a greenfield site, indeed not even considering a cleared site, the existing building in whatever form influences the outcome of the final design. This appreciation will inevitably affect the approach taken by the architect or designer and ultimately the look of the ensuing building. The form of the existing building and the form of the resultant are inexorably linked.

This process can be broken down into a number of different stages, although in practice the separate factors inevitably merge. The formal act of designing is not necessarily a smooth procession of independent considerations. Precedent is used as the basis of the investigation. Each chapter discusses a particular aspect of the process and the argument is reinforced by illustrated case studies. The chapters are subdivided to provide greater clarity of argument.
Analysis
As Christine Boyer observes:

The name of a city’s streets and squares, the gaps in its very plan and physical form, its local monuments and celebrations, remain as traces and ruins of their former selves. They are tokens or hieroglyphs from the past to be literally re-read, re-analysed, and reworked over time.²

The form of the adaptation must be based on the form of the original building. Without an in-depth understanding of the unique qualities of the existing situation, it is impossible to create a coherent and comfortable remodelling. The analysis is divided into four sections; each approaches the existing building differently and discusses a particular yet influential aspect. The Form and Structure of the existing building are often the easiest aspects to understand: how the building stands up, whether it has a distinct rhythm or order and what the relationships between the rooms and spaces are like. The Historical and Functional factors can sometimes be more elusive. The previous use of the building and what has happened to it are very important, but how can that influence the outcome of the redesign? The analysis of the Context and Environment of the existing building establishes relationships between the site, its neighbours and occasionally things further away, and also discusses the influence that climate can have upon the adaptation. Without an understanding of the requirements of the Proposed Function, it is difficult to appreciate whether a relationship with the original building can be established.

Strategy
This chapter examines the specific strategies employed in the reuse of buildings. The approach or the plan for the building is influenced or based upon the factors discovered within the analysis of the place. The three types of strategy are classified according to the intimacy of the relationship between the old and the new. If the existing building is so transformed that it can no longer viably exist independently and the nature of the remodelling is such that the old and new are completely intertwined, then the category is intervention. If a new autonomous element, the dimensions of which are completely dictated by those of the existing, that is, it is built to fit, is placed within the confines of the existing, then the category is insertion. The final classification, that of installation, includes examples in which the old and the new exist independently. The new elements are placed within the boundaries of the building. The design or the grouping of these elements may be influenced by the existing, but the fit is not exact and should the elements be removed then the building would revert to its original state.
Tactics
This chapter could be subtitled ‘the detail’ or even ‘the elements’. It takes a closer look at the methods by which strategies are realised. The tactics express the very qualities of the building, what it looks like, how it sounds, what it feels like. For example, a strategically placed wall can manifest itself in many different ways; the materials that it is made from depend upon its situation, the expectations of the client and the whim of the architect. There are six categories of tactics introduced in this chapter and each section discusses a different type of tactical element and how it has been deployed.

Planes are normally either horizontal or vertical and can be used to organise and separate space. The category is sub-divided into the wall, the floor, the façade and the soffit. Object discusses elements such as furniture or larger-scale things that can provide a focus or a rhythm to a space. The articulation of light and the effect of both natural and artificial light can radically transform a building. Surface is the use of specific materials to confer identity and meaning. Movement refers to circulation and Opening describes how physical and visual relationships can be established between places and things.

Case Studies
The final chapter is dedicated to the in-depth analysis of six significant examples of remodelled buildings. The principles discussed within the earlier chapters are applied to each of them and the analysis and explanation will confirm the reputation of both the building and the architects.

Today, remodelling represents a sizeable market that cannot be ignored. The evidence of big name architectural firms involved in reworking buildings is testimony to the fact that it is a sector of design and architecture that is no longer seen as insignificant. It is important to establish the principles of working with the existing in order to define this field of practice, to demonstrate that this area of work is rich in creative inspiration and packed with some of the best design work of recent years. Re-readings is an attempt to prove that the remodelling and adaptation of building can be based upon a sound analysis and a theoretical approach.