

# GENUINE ARCHITECTURE

## ON AUTHENTICITY AND ADAPTIVE REUSE

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Judging by the various contributions to this issue of the *Bulletin*, authenticity is a loaded term in the world of architecture and heritage. Its use in the context of adaptive reuse is often so complicated as to induce people to come up with alternatives or to ignore it altogether. In this article authenticity is understood as historicity: the genuineness and singularity of a historically evolved building and its surroundings, in both a physical sense and as the embodiment of cultural significance. At issue is what the concept of historicity might mean in the context of adaptive reuse – an expanding design task that is increasingly being seen as separate discipline.<sup>1</sup> If ever there was a need for a clear conceptual framework it is in this design practice in which architects in particular increasingly adopt the role of historian as well. In the recent spate of publications on adaptive reuse there is little evidence of a clearly defined research subject, let alone of a scholarly attitude vis-à-vis the historical living environment and the way designers operate within it. At the same time this often has serious consequences for the value and significance of the building, city and cultural landscape. In practice, based on the interpretation of the building as architectural artefact a new design concept or an ‘intervention’ is worked out in a combination of preservation, restoration, demolition and new build, geared to the building’s ‘new life’. But does the historicity of our environment receive enough attention in this process? This article is an appeal for independent, broad architectural-historical research prior to redevelopment, to protect the historical value and cultural significance of buildings.

- 1. Nederlandsche Bank, Frederiksplein, Amsterdam, 19 December 1967. This building, designed in 1961 by architect Marius Duintjer, was extended in 1991 with a round tower designed by Jelle Abma (photo G.L.W. Oppenheim, Stadsarchief Amsterdam, collection Oppenheim)





## ALL BUILDINGS GROW

Today the building industry is anxiously trying to deal with climate change, the shortage of natural resources and disruptive human behaviour. In light of that, the idea that buildings can simply be discarded is becoming increasingly problematic. What can architecture do to better facilitate change and to become more resilient and sustainable? The architectural profession and the heritage industry have embraced the growing adaptive reuse market of empty and obsolete buildings, a task in which new architectural design and preservation techniques are combined. This means a return to premodern practice, when the architectural culture was dominated by permanence, durability and gradual change.<sup>2</sup> In order to continue to function buildings have to move with the times, to remain in sync with the changes taking place around them. All buildings grow, observed Stewart Brand in his compelling book *How buildings learn. What happens after they're built*.<sup>3</sup> One major difference with premodern practice lies in the approach to the existing built fabric. In most of the recent literature on adaptive reuse – written largely by and for architects – an implicit distinction is made between the ‘original’ building and later additions. There is often more respect shown for the architectural design than for the

changes those buildings have undergone and which are part of their cultural history and significance.<sup>4</sup> There is a relative lack of interest in the history of use, in ad hoc pragmatic alterations and in whatever has been done to the buildings over the course of time to ensure their continued existence.<sup>5</sup>

Even when a building has outlived its purpose, it is rarely worthless. The only value to have largely dissipated is of a financial and economic nature.<sup>6</sup> The building possesses other values beyond those of use, such as its spatial value as an urban design and architectural object. People tend to overlook the intangible value that is associated with individual and collective memories and which derives from use, specific events and testimonials in word and image. There are few for whom Amsterdam’s Paleis voor Volksvlijt is a living memory, yet the exhibition hall’s continued popularity shows just how great an intangible value based on documents, testimonials and stories can be.<sup>7</sup> The historian is best placed to trace and elucidate that value and significance.

## HERITAGE MARKET

In recent decades architectural historians have voiced their disquiet about the fundamental change affecting heritage buildings as a result of, to quote Hilde Heynen,

2. Frederiksplein, Amsterdam, remains of the Paleis voor Volksvlijt (1864) after the fire, April 1929 (Stadsarchief Amsterdam)





3. Jacob Cats, *Het inrukken der Fransche Troupen in de Utrechtsche Poort*, 1796. Drawing of the entry of French soldiers into the (later) Frederiksplein in the early hours of 19 January 1795, seen from his house on the Amstelgrachtje. Left the Utrechtse Poort (1664-1858) (Stadsarchief Amsterdam)

‘the combined effects of tourism, commodification, the shifting place of the public realm and the transformations of the experience of time’.<sup>8</sup> Tourism and entertainment seem increasingly to dominate how we deal with our built environment. Museumization is one of the problems being vigorously debated both within and beyond the heritage world. This tendency is not confined to historical city centres and listed heritage buildings. Everywhere you look historicity is being exchanged for a vague kind of nostalgia that chiefly fuels consumption and entertainment, and whereby the preservation of historical fragments serves as an alibi for commercial redevelopment and property deals. History is being replaced by entertainment.<sup>9</sup> In the process, protection and preservation go hand in hand with a loss of genuine concern and esteem for the authentic significance of built heritage.<sup>10</sup>

The turn of the century saw the emergence of ‘adaptive reuse’ in the international construction and heritage world; in the Netherlands, since the launch of a new government spatial policy (*Nota Belvedere*) in 1999, this approach has been promoted under the motto ‘preservation through development’. Interest in adaptive reuse was further boosted by the increasing tendency to link heritage value to economic return. As the government’s 2011 policy statement ‘Opting for character. Perspective on heritage and space’ put it: ‘Without value creation there is no sustainable basis

for preservation and we also miss out on opportunities to maximize economic profit from this “gold in our hands”’.<sup>11</sup> Wholly in line with this, heritage preservation has been transformed into heritage management and adaptive reuse has become a revenue model that is hugely appealing for the building industry and property developers. But what does this mean for the authenticity of our built environment and how is historicity to survive in this largely commercially and entertainment driven dynamic? The fact that the addition of new values is accompanied by the loss of old values, significance and historicity has so far received little attention in the debate about adaptive reuse.

#### THE BUILDING AS ARTEFACT

Most recent publications on adaptive reuse are a combination of lip service to the heritage canon, design conceptions geared to redevelopment, and a personal selection of practical examples.<sup>12</sup> The use of existing literature is fragmentary and arbitrary, resulting in a lack of academic rigour. Interestingly, Brand’s study is largely ignored in the majority of publications.<sup>13</sup> This could well be deliberate, because in the final pages of his book Brand suggests that we should no longer regard architecture as the art of building, but rather as “the design-science of the life of buildings”. A shift that minor could transform the way civilization manages its built environment – toward long-term respon-

sibility and constant adaptivity.<sup>14</sup> Critical scholarly reflection on the task, position and authority of the architect within the heritage discourse is virtually absent. The existing building is analysed as an architectural artefact, as a material remnant, so that all attention is focused on documenting the historical building substance and determining the rarity and integrity of the physical elements. Seldom are the value and significance of the building as a cultural-historical object – sometimes cherished, lived in, used and adapted for generations – mentioned as the starting point for intervention. And because of this, there is a lack of awareness that a comprehensive redesign results in the loss of the authenticity of what has evolved over time and with that its historicity. This raises the question of just how resilient and sustainable an adaptive reuse project is or should be. Brand contends that ‘Almost no buildings adapt well. They’re designed not to adapt, also budgeted and financed not to, constructed not to, administered not to, maintained not to, regulated and taxed not to, even remodeled not to.’<sup>15</sup> Instead of cherishing a building’s resilience, an overly radical or large-scale redevelopment adversely affects the potentially irreplaceable experiential value and collective memory. As for the lasting ‘value creation’ benefit of such projects, that is as yet unknown.

#### THE ‘GENIUS OF THE PLACE’

In their recent book, *Adaptive reuse of the built heritage. Concepts and cases of an emerging discipline*, Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel offer an alternative for the authenticity concept by harking back to ‘the genius of the place’.<sup>16</sup> The term was coined by the eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope in reference to the particular qualities of English landscape architecture in which existing nature was rearranged in accordance with the spirit of the place to the greater delight of human beings. They also invoke the ‘genius loci’, a term introduced in relation to architecture in 1980 by the architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz.<sup>17</sup> The authors regard adaptive reuse as ‘an opportunity to recreate, rethink, or strengthen the genius loci’.<sup>18</sup> The building is seen as a place where

the juxtaposition of different historical layers has enhanced the authentic experience of the site and the richness and depth of its memory.<sup>19</sup> Plevoets and Van Cleempoel argue that the new discipline of adaptive reuse should not just respect what we have inherited from the past, but also actively search for the values and memory of the host space and, through a succession of tangible and intangible associations, establish meaningful relations between past and present.<sup>20</sup> Put like that, no one could object to their proposal. But Pope’s ‘genius of the place’ in the landscape is quite a different matter from an old building or an intensely experienced place. We might well wonder whether it is such a good idea to allow the designer to also evaluate the significance of a building or place. After all, an architecturally successful adaptive reuse project may also result in substantial loss of historicity and cultural-historical significance, even while the historical building substance remains virtually intact.

It is not enough for the architect, à la Pope, to intuitively and associatively read the ‘genius’ of an existing building or place and translate it into a visible and far-reaching transformation, without first having the intangible value and significance of building and place analysed by an independent (architectural) historian. This kind of research into historical and cultural significance has received insufficient attention in the debate about adaptive reuse. At a time when more and more relatively recent built heritage is being redeveloped, genuineness and historicity are extremely important for the accessibility and comprehensibility of the built environment. What is needed above all, in addition to building history analysis, is a description of the historical and accumulated cultural value and significance of building and place as a starting point for redevelopment. Stories about the building and the place, the intentions behind the design, and changes to use: all these intangible aspects together determine the cultural value of the building in society. That historicity or genuineness and singularity is crucial to the building’s significance. Otherwise the spirit of the place disappears to be replaced only by novelty and entertainment, at the service of the contemporary consumer.

#### NOTES

1 This article expands on a few ideas that were conceived some years back in close collaboration with Marie-Thérèse van Thoor, Gabri van Tussenbroek, Ronald Stenvert, Jan van der Hoeve and Edwin Orsel in the course of formulating two applications for programmatic research at NWO (not granted), and on the author’s ongoing research. Literature consulted for this article: C. Bloszies, *Old buildings, new designs*. Architectural

transformations, New York 2012; E. Braae, *Beauty redeemed. Recycling post-industrial landscapes*, Risskov/Basel 2015; Crimson, Re-Arch. *Nieuwe ontwerpen voor oude gebouwen*, Rotterdam 1995; P. Diederer, *Ontwerpen van verandering*. *Intreerede prof. ir. Paul Diederer. Uitsgesproken op 1 juni 2018 aan de Technische Universiteit Eindhoven* (<https://research.tue.nl/nl/publications/ontwerpen-van-verandering>); S. Gelinck et al., *Rekenen op herbestemming. Idee, aanpak*

*en cijfers van 25 + 1 gerealiseerde projecten*, Rotterdam 2015; R. van Hees, S. Naldini and J. Roos, *Durable past – sustainable future*, Delft 2014; H. Ibelings and Diederendirix Architects, *Make it anew*, Amsterdam 2018; M. Kuipers and W. de Jonge, *Designing from heritage. Strategies for conservation and conversion*, Delft 2017; M. Kuipers and W. Quist, *Culturele draagkracht. Op zoek naar de tolerantie voor verandering bij gebouwd erfgoed*, [Delft] 2013; P. Meurs, *Heritage-based*

- design, Delft 2016; P. Meurs, M. Steenhuis and J. de Groot, *Reuse, redevelop and design. How the Dutch deal with Heritage*, Rotterdam 2017; P. Nijhof et al., *Herbestemming industrieel erfgoed in Nederland*, Zutphen 1994; B. Plevoets and K. van Cleempoel, *Adaptive reuse of the built heritage. Concepts and cases of an emerging discipline*, New York 2019; R. Roorda et al., *Vital architecture. Tools for durability = Vitale architectuur. Geredschap voor levensduur*, Rotterdam 2016; J. Saris, S. van Dommelen and T. Metz, *Nieuwe ideeën voor oude gebouwen. Creatieve economie en stedelijke herontwikkeling*, Rotterdam 2008; F. Scott, *On altering architecture*, London 2008; M. Steenhuis, P. Meurs and A. Kuijt, *Herbestemming in Nederland. Nieuw gebruik van stad en land*, Rotterdam 2011; H. Stevens, *Hergebruik van oude gebouwen*, Zutphen 1986; S. Stone, *Undoing buildings. Adaptive reuse and cultural memory*, New York 2020; K. Vandenbroucke, *Mag dit weg. Methodiek voor herbestemming*, Rotterdam 2020; L. Wong, *Adaptive reuse. Extending the lives of buildings*, Basel 2016.
- 2 E.M. Merrill and S. Gimarelos, 'From the Pantheon to the Anthropocene. Introducing resilience in architectural history', *Architectural Histories* 7 (2019) 1, doi.org/10.5334/ah.406; K. Trogal et al., *Architecture and resilience. Interdisciplinary dialogues*, London 2019; M. Trachtenberg, *Building-in-time. From Giotto to Alberti and modern oblivion*, New Haven/London 2010; J. van Ooijen, 'Resilient matters. The cathedral of Syracuse as an architectural palimpsest', *Architectural Histories* 7 (2019) 1, 26, doi.org/10.5334/ah.65
  - 3 S. Brand, *How buildings learn. What happens after they're built*, New York 1994.
  - 4 See also F. Schmidt, 'Moet opgeknapt worden. Gebouwen en hun aanpassingen', in: R. Stenvert and G. van Tussenbroek (eds.), *Het gebouw als bewijs. Het bouwhistorische verhaal achter erfgoed*, Utrecht 2016, 145-208.
  - 5 Merrill and Gimarelos 2019 (note 2).
  - 6 In D.M. Abramson, *Obsolescence. An architectural history*, Chicago 2016 the author shows that the high turnover rate and discarding of buildings in large parts of the Western world in the twentieth century follow a simple financial model.
  - 7 R. Kousbroek et al., *Het paleis in de verbeelding. Het Paleis voor Volksvlijt 1860-1961*, Amsterdam 1990; E. Wenekes, *Het Paleis voor Volksvlijt (1864-1929). 'Edele uiting eener stoute gedachte!'*, The Hague 1999; G. van Tussenbroek, *Ijzeren ambitie. Het Paleis voor Volksvlijt en de opkomst van de Nederlandse industrie*, Amsterdam 2019.
  - 8 H. Heynen, 'Introduction to the theme "Petrified Memory"', *The Journal of Architecture* 4 (1999) 4, 331-332, 332.
  - 9 H. Heynen, 'Petrifying memories: architecture and the construction of identity', *The Journal of Architecture* 4 (1999) 4, 369-390, which in turn references M.C. Boyer, *The city of collective memory. Its historical imagery and architectural entertainments*, Cambridge 1994.
  - 10 Heynen 1999 (note 9).
  - 11 Policy statement 'Kiezen voor karakter, Visie erfgoed en ruimte'. Parliamentary paper 15 May 2011, 10. www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2011/06/15/beleidsvisie-kiezen-voor-karakter-visie-erfgoed-en-ruimte (20 July 2020).
  - 12 See note 1.
  - 13 Exceptions are Roorda 2016 (note 1) and Kuipers and De Jonge 2017 (note 1), principally in relation to the 'shearing layers' concept borrowed from Frank Duffy.
  - 14 Brand 1994 (note 3), 210.
  - 15 Brand 1994 (note 3), 2. Elsewhere (p. 53) Brand also cautions against 'over-designed buildings', which are well-nigh impossible to adapt.
  - 16 Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019 (note 1).
  - 17 C. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture*, New York 1980.
  - 18 Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019 (note 1), 92-93; 126-131.
  - 19 'This juxtaposing of different historical layers, however, did not compromise the authentic experience of the site. On the contrary, it enhances the richness and depth of its memory.' Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019 (note 1), 92.
  - 20 Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019 (note 1), 93: 'We believe that for the discipline to move further, the future practice and theory of adaptive reuse should aim not just at respecting what is handed over from the past to the present but instead should actively search for the values and memory of the host space and try to establish a meaningful relationship between the present and the past through a sequence of tangible and intangible associations.'

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This article is an appeal for independent, broad architectural-historical research prior to the redevelopment of buildings to protect their potential historical value and cultural significance. Authenticity is understood here as historicity and the article explores what it might signify in adaptive reuse, a growing sector in architectural design that is increasingly coming to be regarded as a separate discipline. In adaptive reuse strategies the building is viewed primarily as an architectural object that is to be given a 'new life'. But does that allow sufficient attention to be paid to the historicity of our living environment? How resilient and sustainable is a

repurposed building? Stories that touch on the building, on testimonies in which place plays a role, on the intentions behind the design, and on changes to use: all these intangible aspects together determine the cultural value of the building in society, community and setting. That historicity, or genuineness and singularity, is crucial to the building's significance. What is needed above all is for the description of the historical and accumulated cultural value and significance of a building and place to be the starting point for redevelopment. Otherwise the spirit of the place disappears to be replaced only by novelty and entertainment, at the service of the contemporary consumer.