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Citation: Ring, Paul (2008) Re use: archaeology and storytelling. Northumbria Working Paper Series: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Built and Virtual Environment, 1 (2). pp. 93-101. ISSN 1756-2473

Published by: Northumbria University

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# Re Use: Archaeology and Storytelling

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## **ABSTRACT**

Attempts to describe and characterise the re use of existing buildings in recent interior architectural theory have often centred on the language and syntax associated with literary arts. Remodelling and interior interventions are often described in terms of translation, interpretation, poetry, essay and narrative. This is not without substance and indeed it is not only the act that is described in such terms but the very thing itself. The intervention or remodelled architectural form is an essay on and narration of the existing building. It translates and interoperates a previous history and story manifest within the fabric of the existing building and act as its biographer. This act of storytelling is predetermined by the excavation of the story. As a precursor to the narration, the designer translates and adopts the behaviour of the archaeologist. It is a process of careful and predetermined removal and discovery that allows the depiction of previous lives, events and culture to become part of the present. The intervention as a mechanism for re use is a biographic interpretation of the previous and an auto biographic narration of the present. It is this ability to be both representational of the past and the present that establishes the significance of the intervention as a key contributor to place within this persistent context. This paper aims to contribution to current discourse in relation to the validity and authenticity of the built interior and the re use of the existing.

Keywords: architecture, design, intervention, place, refurbishment

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

‘This process of engagement with and entering into the physical fabric of places; of being open to the cascade of significance which flows from the specificity of places; of attending with precise archaeological care to the lives lived, which we can read from its layered fragments; or unravelling its intricate web of relationships: this is what De Carlo calls “reading”’ (McKean 2004, p24).

Giancarlo Di Carlo’s reference to the palimpsest of territory and physical fabric of places as being something that is read or readable could be said to have an approach that is governed by an archaeological aesthetic. It is an approach to the existing that goes beyond a celebration of architectural style and doctrine but concentrates on narrative and the imaginative. This approach removes the act of reuse from the mechanisms of conservation and preservation of built heritage and elevates in into that of the literary, the poetic, and the artistic. It is a process of precision, of distinct controlled acts, akin to the archaeologist’s approach to the removal of sediment and sand. It is an approach that is convergent on the revelation of ancient artefact and building fabric (*fig 1 & 2*).



*Fig. 1.0 and Fig.s 2.0 Whithy Abbey Visitor centre. Contingent space between the existing and the intervention revealing built fabric as artefact.*

## 2.0 ARCHAEOLOGY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Archaeology is in itself an exercise in reading; reading the discoveries within the field study, reading the field study in its own right and ultimately, an exercise in reading the story of human past. Archaeology uses the remnants from the field study, the hypothesis from the laboratory and supposition from theory and interpretation to script this story of human past. This story is not ready made, it is a story formed of fragments which require reading.

‘For one able to interpret the meaning of what has remained engraved the transformations of

society leave unmistakable, highly specific signs on physical space. And it is possible, if you're capable of deciphering them, to reconstruct the essence of the human vicissitudes that produced them. Not only do you come to understand when this mark was made and what the motivation behind it was, but you also become 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' (Di Carlo, 1995-1).

The buildings and artefacts that have been left to us by previous societies and cultures are, within anthropology and archaeology, referred to as 'material culture' (Renfrew and Bahn, 2006). This material culture can often be pre-history (before written history) in origin and requires imaginative resources to establish its origin and purpose. Each of these *things* (buildings and artefacts) brings with them a memory trace linking back to their originator and user. They bare marks that tell of events, peoples and the mechanics of societies. They disclose narrative; they are narrators of the previous, the current and the potential. The other side of such investigative anthropology is of course scientific. Although archaeology is reliant on a range of scientific processes, technologies and material chemistries to aid its activities and to support archaeological theory, it is, like art forms, not without supposition, narrative, interpretation and imagination. It is an activity and process that hangs onto the narrative conditions of the found material culture.

With this in mind, we can visualise the archaeologist as an imaginative figure with the creative sensibilities of the poet allied with the craft of the sculptor and the dexterity of the surgeon. We are drawn to imagery of the aesthete. Can we then attribute such sensibilities of intention and approach, of care and attention to detail, of precision and reverence to the practice of integration and intervention into an existing building?



Fig.3.0 and 4.0 Emerson Chambers, Newcastle (student project). Composite capitals reveal contrast between the old (existing) and new (remodelled) strata of the interior.

### 3.0 STORYTELLING

Architecture of the existing could then be discussed in the same context as an archaeological find. Or at least, the process undertaken by the designer, when establishing an understanding of a specific site, through study, investigation and research, can be considered to be archaeological in approach and intention. As the designer moves through a strategic process of enquiry, or of what Giancarlo Di Carlo describes as 'shuttling back and forth between reading and tentative design' (Di Carlo G, 1995\_1), they undoubtedly begin to establish a relationship with the building, with the existing built form. It is within the confines

of this relationship that the designer can be said to become, or at least behave like, the archaeologist. They become concerned with sediment removal and artefact discovery as a precursor to any proposed addition (*fig 3 & 4*). Each choreographed move between *reading and tentative designing* brings out a greater reverence of place and place making. The building is in fact the key character in the story of place, perhaps more so than the stories allied to it for it is the lasting participant in the tale, the one legitimate storyteller. As it reveals its role of storyteller the palimpsest of acts through time imbedded in the architectural fabric and character of the building can be unravelled, layer by layer.

The designer becomes and/or behaves like the archaeologist, making calculated adjustments to the sediment and strata of the site in order to discover understand and then express key architectural moments within its language. This revealing of singular elements, as if they are artefacts to be upheld, celebrated, and protected creates a synergy between the existing and the new in a juxtaposition that is both referential and contrastive. The referential is materialised by the peeling away from, the creation of contingent space between the existing and the new that acts as the museum cabinet or celebratory plinth for the existing to be seen through or to rest upon. Paradoxically, it is this same act that brings reference to the existing and allows the story to continue to be told and interpreted in the present tense. It is the contrast of material palette and assemblage of form and language that celebrates this difference, this contingent space, where time is seen in parallel and reinforces the past and the present. It allows the story to become more enchanted as an archaeological aesthetic takes hold and the fabric becomes of the place and the folklore.

They tell a story of a fixed moment in time; they can be read and asks to be so; they carry the inscription of their originator, user and violator. The new addition contributes to the story as it writes a new chapter in the history of place and adds a new layer to the palimpsest. The building then continues its role as the storyteller, but the role is an active one. It both tells the story and continues to participate in it. The same cannot necessarily be said of replacement architecture. A new build in place of a coherent infrastructure of existing architectural form that reinvents the removed or forgotten can often, through strategic town planning or critical regionalism, attempt to tell the same story, but it is a more interpretive one. It is a story that is told within the context of a written history which Di Carlo referred to as being 'subjective and above all fixed in the past, rarely involved in the future'<sup>2</sup>.

As the physical characteristics of the new intervention scribe new strata, create new datum's, and script new sentences in the paragraphs of the story of place, they contribute a great deal more than forming the story of the present. They reveal a new story of the place, or at least, a forgotten or until now unread story. They allow a new context to be established by interpretation of the existing through an as of yet un-experienced vantage. This new interpretative story is not a contrived one as the marks left in space and imbedded in the fabric of the site have not been modified; it is the position of the associated view that has been realigned to reveal this new story. It becomes an investigative one, a story that is told through proximity and immensity. It is a story of craft, of labour, of time and of life and death. It is a story told by the pediments and capitals, the architrave and the cornice. It is a story brought about by a new proximity to the existing.

This proximate dialogue is evident within Sverre Fehn's Archbishopric Museum of Hamar for we can consider this work as an example of this exercise in participation with the storytelling of a history of built place (*fig 5*). As Fehn's building encompasses and canopies the site of archaeological interest, its relationship with the past is as such that it allows the processes of archaeology, in its scientific and anthropological sense, to continue. The building rests upon the remains of a medieval fortress in a manner that is more revelatory than insubordinate and as such participates in this new history. The building acts as the discoverer and preserver and becomes a continuer and biographer of this history. The building is

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<sup>2</sup> *Oral accounts or written documents are always subjective and above all are fixed in the past, rarely involved in the future. The signs embedded in space, on the other hand, come from the past and we register them in the present, aware that they will continue to exist in the future.*" (G. Di Carlo, 1995\_1)

the creator and curator of the very artefacts used to elaborate on the story mapped out within the contingent space between the fortress and the intervention, 'displays unfold like a story; they are organised like voyages to instances and situations at different points in history' (Norberg-Schulz C and Postiglione G, 1997). The contingent space is primarily horizontal in this instance, forming and adding a new built stratum to the geology of the site and of the story of place (fig 6).



*Fig.5.0 Archbishopric Museum, Hamar. Horizontal contingent space adds to the geological strata.*



*Fig.6.0 Archbishopric Museum, Hamar. Horizontal contingent space adds to the geological strata.*

Within this context of re use and remodelling of existing buildings, the story is often one of shifting scales, from macro to micro. The story is told via the relationship between the juxtaposed built forms as a mechanism for setting out the context and characters of the story. The vantage, artefacts, junctions and details tell a story of specifics that can be weaved together and both contributory parts of the story, macro and micro, can be read in tandem. The designer becomes the biographer of the existing whilst forming an autobiography of the new. Fehn constructs a new story that is informed by and informs the story of



Fig. 7.0 Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona. Breaks in material and surface

Hamar, whereas Carlo Scarpa's storytelling at Castelvecchio is an inverted one for the intervention takes on the role of the placed artefact within the museum (Fehn displays the artefact, Scarpa creates the artefact). The layered remodelling tells the story of the existing through the manner within which it sits. There continues to be 'a dialogue between different materials from different [historical] eras, placed closely together yet apart' (Los S, 2002\_1). Yet in this instance the differentiation occurs via a remodelling of the internal spaces by the controlled creation of the museum as an artefact in its own right. It takes on the role of the placed object and is the central controlling part of the museums collection. The intervention as an installed artefact, although constructed in a different way, again becomes a mechanism for revelation and storytelling. The story is two fold as it is of the exiting and the new in equal measure and this equality bring with it a resonance for the new story, or a 'profound reflection on the relationship between ancient and modern and their coexistence' (Beltramini G. and Zannier I, 2007). With Fehn we read a relationship and story that is told via contingent space, via a space where time is seen in parallel. With Scarpa we are able to read a similar story of place via *breaks*<sup>3</sup> in material and surface (fig 7). Scarpa and Fehn alike can be considered to *read* as Di Carlo describes. The manifestation of such reading is definable as belonging to the site in specific and the language of the originator or biographer of the retelling of the story, but the method of reading and writing is alike. As described by Sergio Los, 'Scarpa's preference for designing new things in a historical context should be seen alongside his other favourite activity, museum design. The link between these two predilections was his ability to "read", to decipher "visual texts" in the form of an existing building' (Los S, 2002\_2).

Reuse of the existing is crucial to this continuation of understanding place as being more than simply location. It is this 'totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour' (Norberg-Schulz C, 1980), as described by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980), that remain in a given location as a consequence of the permanence of an existing structure that contributes to the characterisation of place. The building, as existing, as a phenomenological place, becomes a thing and as

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3 "There is a dialogue between different materials... Hence the breaks: the newly laid floors, like carpets, stop some distance short of the walls, while the walls in turn stop short of the ceiling". Los S (2002\_1), Carlo Scarpa,

such a being<sup>4</sup>. It is not simply a consequence of the phenomenology of place but is indeed a condition of the phenomenology of place. The existing structure becomes a codex of the history of the very place within which it is set and is as such representational of that place. In the same way that the existing is a representation of place, the act of remodelling the existing, which can bring about a renewed understanding of the existing, brings about a change in hierarchy and the existing no longer remains itself but is representational of itself (fig 8 & 9).



Fig.8.0 and Fig.9.0 Universidad de Gerona. Refurbishment as a translation of the existing and an authentic fragment of the present

The remains of a previous habitat or structure become the remnants of the very thing it represented and it becomes an abbreviated transcript of itself. This abbreviated transcript is interpreted by the designer, as they move through the process of *reading* and a renewed position or biography is completed. The existing still maintains its 'presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (Benjamin W, 1999), which Walter Benjamin (1999) characterises as being significant if it is to maintain authenticity. Whereas the mechanically reproduced work of art is disconnected from its origin or the very thing it is representational of, the existing building, even after remodelling, continues to be of place and continues to hold onto its *authenticity*<sup>5</sup>. It continues to be present in its place of origin and is unchanged. Its appropriation via the intervention of the remodelling and the manner within which it is *read* are the mechanisms by which it becomes representational of itself and continues to be itself.

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<sup>4</sup> "On the whole the thing here designates whatever is not simply nothing. In this sense the work of art is also a thing, so far as it is some sort of being" Heidegger M (1993),

<sup>5</sup> "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" Benjamin W (1999).

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## 4.0 SUMMARY

With this practice of reading and responsive integration, an argument for reuse over new build becomes more than a political, economic and architectural one. It is societal and cultural; it is about place making and storytelling. Reuse of the existing brings with it a continuation of the coherence of the fabric of the city, town or landscape. It continues to contribute to the story of place and yet adds to this story in a manner that is indeed complementary and enriching, beyond that which can be anticipated by new built form; pastiche or otherwise. It is about the maintained edifice and the interior condition being as important to place making as the territory, the landscape and the topography. As the phenomenology of place informs the built form, the built form becomes place. It is a practice of integrated discovery and action brought about by reading and responding, and of storytelling.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

*Fig. 1.* Stanton Williams, Whitby Abbey Visitor Centre, Whitby 2002, interior (photo by author).

*Fig. 2.* Stanton Williams, Whitby Abbey Visitor Centre, Whitby 2002, interior (photo by author).

*Fig. 3.* Lucy Marlor, Final Year Project, sectional perspective, BA(Hons) Interior Design, Northumbria University 2007.

*Fig. 4.* Lucy Marlor, Final Year Project, longitudinal section, BA(Hons) Interior Design, Northumbria University 2007.

*Fig. 5.* Sverre Fehn, Archbishopric Museum, Hamar 1967-79, interior (photo by T. Solvang, in C. Norberg-Schulz – G. Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn: Works, Projects, Writings, 1949-1996*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997, p.133).

*Fig. 6.* Sverre Fehn, Archbishopric Museum, Hamar 1967-79, interior (photo by T. Solvang, in C. Norberg-Schulz – G. Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn: Works, Projects, Writings, 1949-1996*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 1997, p.133).

*Fig. 7.* Carlo Scarpa, Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona 1957-64; 1968-69; 1973-75, bridge to Cangrande

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(detail), (photo by Vaclav Sedy, in G. Beltramini (Ed) – I. Zannier (Ed), *Carlo Scarpa: Architecture and Design*, New York, Rizzoli, 2007, p.147).

*Fig. 8.* Fuser + Viader, Sede Central de la Universidad de Gerona, Spain. 19 87-93, (photo by Hisao Suzuki, in R.C. LEVENE (Ed) – F.M. CECILIA (Ed), *Spanish Architecture 1993:El Croquis Vol. 6263* Madrid, El Croquis, 1993, p.59).

*Fig. 9.* Fuser + Viader, Sede Central de la Universidad de Gerona, Spain. 19 87-93, (photo by Hisao Suzuki, in R.C. LEVENE (Ed) – F.M. CECILIA (Ed), *Spanish Architecture 1993:El Croquis Vol. 6263* Madrid,

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