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# **Juxtaposing inside and outside: façadism as a strategy for building adaptation**

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# **Juxtaposing inside and outside: façadism as a strategy for building adaptation**

## **Abstract**

Façadism is usually described as the practice of preserving historical façades and the construction of new buildings behind them. While it became a frequently used strategy for urban conservation in the 1960s, it was strongly criticised as an architecture of poor quality that also led to a loss of authenticity in building. This article questions this predominantly negative perception of the practice of facadism to demonstrate its potential for contemporary architectural practice, especially in the field of adaptive reuse. As such, it does not strive to justify all forms of facadism, nor does it evaluate its compatibility with local legal frameworks regarding conservation and planning. The article rather seeks to launch a more nuanced discussion of various forms of facadism, based on a conceptual analysis of the subject to elaborate on its potential beyond its merely economic or pragmatic aspects. The article starts with a literature review to offer an overview of the definitions and interpretations of façadism. It then illustrates how four different forms of façadism (façade retention; refronting existing buildings; functional upgrading through façade intervention; and the creation of a coherent streetscape) are implemented in contemporary architectural practice. The ensuing conclusion is that façadism has the potential to become a valuable design strategy.

## **Introduction**

Façadism is widely understood as the practice of ‘retaining the front or exterior walls of a building while reconstructing the interior’.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s, it became widespread as a strategy applied to historic buildings in the context of urban regeneration. As such, it was then a reaction against the Modernist principles of urban development, including the extensive demolition of historic urban areas, which destroyed the familiar townscape. Façadism was regarded as a method of upgrading urban infrastructure, while simultaneously preserving its historic appearance. For this reason, several town regulations, including those of Brussels,<sup>2</sup> Paris,<sup>3</sup> Lisbon,<sup>4</sup> Chicago,<sup>5</sup> and San Francisco,<sup>6</sup> among numerous other cities in the UK,<sup>7</sup> Spain,<sup>8</sup> and the USA, also supported this

model of urban regeneration. Even today, façadism is adopted in historic towns worldwide as a strategy for urban conservation and adaptive reuse of buildings.<sup>9</sup>

However, the limited accounts of façadism in the fields of architecture, planning, and conservation are far from positive. Architectural discourse refers to it as an ‘architecture [that] is reduced to an image’,<sup>10</sup> or ‘a process of devitalisation, comparable to mummification, where the internal organs are removed and the skin only remains’.<sup>11</sup> In urban conservation, it is being described as a ‘compromise solution’,<sup>12</sup> or in more negative terms such as ‘failures of town planning management’,<sup>13</sup> and ‘adaptive reuse gone wild’.<sup>14</sup> Experts with a conservation background are even more critical, describing façadism as a ‘brutal expression’,<sup>15</sup> ‘the most radical transformation a building can endure short of total demolition [...] creating an artificial backdrop to urban space’,<sup>16</sup> ‘a disjunction between architecture and conservation’,<sup>17</sup> ‘architectural taxidermy, [which] whether total or partial, is both costly and wasteful. It trivialises the built environment as theatrical scenery. It disguises major destruction to the physical and social fabric and to cultural Identity’.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, doctrinaire texts by authoritative conservation networks such as ICOMOS and UNESCO denounce the practice of façadism as a valid conservation method,<sup>19</sup> as stated most explicitly in the ICOMOS Charter ‘Principles for the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage’ of 2003:

The value of architectural heritage is not only in its appearance, but also in the integrity of all its components as a unique product of the specific building technology of its time. In particular the removal of the inner structures maintaining only the façades does not fit the conservation criteria.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, despite this overarching aversion to facadism in theory, several renowned renovation projects in fact exemplify it in practice, since they retain only the building envelope to completely replace the interior. Such projects include Giancarlo di Carlo’s Il Magistero in Urbino or Herzog & de Meuron’s transformation of the nineteenth-century power plant for the Tate Modern in London. Similarly, the canon of European architectural history includes many examples of buildings whose façade contrasts with the interior structure and layout. These include Leon Battista Alberti’s refronting of the Gothic Santa Maria Novella in Florence with a Renaissance façade, Pietro da Cortona’s refronting of the Santa Maria Della Pace in Rome with a Baroque façade as part of a radical transformation of its urban context, and several Neoclassical urban projects such

as Baron Haussmann's renovation of Paris.<sup>21</sup> Such observations reinforce the hypothesis that the practice of façadism holds potential for contemporary architectural and adaptive reuse practice. A more nuanced description of the concept might therefore serve as a valuable contribution to architectural theory today.

This article aims to reappraise the role of façadism and highlight its potential for contemporary architectural practice, especially in the field of adaptive reuse. It does not strive to justify all examples of façadism, nor does it evaluate its compatibility with local legal frameworks regarding conservation and planning. It rather seeks to open a more nuanced discussion of various forms of façadism, including its implementation at different scales, ranging from the building and the architectural ensemble to the street- or townscape. Through a conceptual analysis of façadism, the article elaborates on its potential beyond its merely economic or pragmatic aspects to encompass its aesthetic, social or functional implications and reintroduce it in architectural discourse. The article starts from a literature review of the various interpretations and definitions of façadism in conservation, architecture, and planning. It then discusses four different ways of implementing façadism in contemporary architectural practice: façade retention; refronting existing buildings; functional upgrading through façade intervention; and the creation of a coherent streetscape. The conclusion conceptualises these precedents to contemporary architectural and adaptive reuse practices and proposes various promising areas for future research on the topic.

### **Façadism: definitions and literature review**

The word 'façadism' is derived from the word 'façade', which came into use in English in the second half of the seventeenth century, referring to the front portion of a building. Later, the word 'façade' was also used in a figurative sense, referring to a way of behaving or appearing that gives other people a false idea of one's true feelings or condition. The suffix '-ism' is used to point to a doctrine, theory or religion; an adherent system or class of principles.<sup>22</sup> Hence, façadism can be described as an extreme, or dogmatic, approach to the built environment, in which the façade prevails over other architectural elements. Building on the figurative meaning of the word 'façade', façadism can also be interpreted as an approach that seeks to hide an actual condition with a false mask.

But the multiple interpretations of the term in architectural, conservation, and planning literature are rather ambiguous. First, façadism is generally understood as the

practice of retaining just the front façade or building envelope while replacing its interior with a new construction.<sup>23</sup> Second, the term may refer to the practice of refronting an existing building with a replica of a historical façade or a facsimile of a specific historical style.<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, it can refer to the practice of refronting with a contemporary façade to give the building a more contemporary look.<sup>25</sup> Third, besides an aesthetic purpose, the practice of refronting an existing building with a contemporary façade may also be implemented to improve the building's technical or functional performance.<sup>26</sup> Fourth, the term 'façadism' is used when the main elevation of a new building is designed as a component in a larger streetscape, to make it fit within its context, without corresponding to this building's structure or interior layout. This can be implemented as a strategy to render a new project more acceptable for a wider public.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, the term may refer to buildings whose façade contrasts with the interior, a strategy that has been deliberately employed in renowned works of postmodern architecture.<sup>28</sup>

Because it is mainly regarded as a result of economic pragmatism, façadism has not received much attention in scholarly literature. Although it was extensively applied for over sixty years, there are few books and articles on this topic. It was only in the 1990s that the practice of façadism was first discussed in architectural writings, albeit primarily from a practical and technical point of view.<sup>29</sup> The first theoretical writing is Jonathan Richards's book *Façadism* (1994) which starts from a broad interpretation of the term and elaborates on the concept from the vantage of architecture and conservation. This dual vantage has also been adopted in the literature review that follows.

### ***The architectural perspective***

Richards outlines a set of architectural strategies for new constructions characterised by a conceptual separation between the façade and interior. Recalling Andrea Palladio's refronting of the Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza, he argues that many buildings now regarded as architectural treasures are not conceived according to the dogma, introduced by Vitruvius and reclaimed by the Modern Movement, that the façade of a building should be a natural expression of its interior. Criticising Modern architecture for denying the importance of the façade and its role in communicating meaning to the onlooker, he promotes a postmodern discourse such as that of Robert Venturi and Roger Scruton.<sup>30</sup> Although Richards's chapter on the architectural perspective somehow

remains a theoretical reflection, as it lacks convincing contemporary examples, its main argument is fundamentally significant: the ambiguous relation between façade and interior may be an architectural quality, rather than a problem. This was further developed by Thomas Schumacher,<sup>31</sup> who also questioned the Modernist dogma ‘the outside is the result from the inside’ through examples of widely appreciated buildings that violate its principles, including Renaissance buildings such as Palazzo Farnese in Rome and the church of Sant’Andrea in Mantua, Modernist projects such as Le Corbusier’s Villa Stein, and more recent buildings by Eero Saarinen, Luigi Moretti, and Frank Gehry. Schumacher’s discourse resonates with Rafael Gómez-Moriana’s reflection on ‘camouflage architecture’: buildings that are not what they appear to be, ‘camouflaged’ to fit within their context. Such examples include a church behind the façade of a traditional townhouse, a house behind an industrial shed, or industrial facilities hidden behind the façade of a dwelling. Whether purpose-built or adapted, in these examples the façade is used to conceal something that is radically inconsistent with its appearance and the neighbourhood’s sensibilities.

### *The conservation perspective*

Besides the architectural perspective, Richards also elaborates on a set of urban conservation strategies that focus on the preservation of the façade or streetscape through retention or refronting in a historicised style.<sup>32</sup> Arguing that façadism may be a valuable approach in specific conditions, but inappropriate in another context, he formulates a set of opportunities and threats to the implementation of façadism in urban conservation. Where his chapter on the architectural perspective remains theoretical, his reflections from the conservation and urban perspective are illustrated with numerous examples he encountered in his career as an urban planner in Bristol. According to Richards, such opportunities include the conservation of the look and unity of a townscape, the possibility to include up-to-date accommodation and infrastructure and a greater diversity of functions in historical cores, and the attractiveness to a broader public of historic urban sceneries, when compared to modern buildings. But he also points to threats such as the potential loss of integrity of the existing fabric and the transformation of the ‘grain’ of the historic town. He argues that façadism may lead to a Disneyfication of the past and the ostracising of contemporary architecture from the city centre.

In 1999, ICOMOS International organised a conference in Paris to discuss the implementation of façadism in various European cities. In the *zeitgeist* of the Nara Document on Authenticity, the conference framed façadism as a ‘problem’, stating that: ‘when considering the authenticity of a building, of a “historic monument”, it is obvious that from a conservation point of view it is not enough to just keep the façades’.<sup>33</sup> The ambition of the meeting was to formulate a set of common principles, a charter, to be presented at an international level. The introductory texts of the proceedings elaborated on the problems related to façadism and many of the individual papers adopted the same tone in formulating *solutions, regulations, and cures*. Few papers offered a broader or different perspective. David Lowenthal defended facadism, believing that the façade is an essential element in the organic structure of the streetscape which serves not only the owner or user of a building but whole communities. In the same line of thought, Francis Chassel criticised the ‘satanization’ of façadism in the conservation discourse as it often corresponded with a compelling social demand and economic realism. Sherban Cantacuzino argued that façadism can only be accepted in very exceptional circumstances on the condition that the new building is designed in accordance with the retained façade. He argued that the practice of façadism results from a reaction against the brutal *tabula rasa* strategy of Modernist planning, but that the emerging ‘green economy’ that favours reuse of existing resources and buildings would soon turn façadism into a strategy of the past.

In his book *Conservation in the Age of Consensus* (2008), John Pendlebury expands on façadism as a postmodern approach to conservation. He states that the extensive implementation of façadism in historic English town centres results from the postmodern view on heritage as a commodity rather than a historic source to preserve for future generations, the economic and development pressure on historic cores, and the extensive listing of, even non-exceptional, buildings and historic areas. Although he agrees that in most situations, façadism is a destruction of cultural values, he also points to cases in which it is an acceptable conservation strategy.

### **Façadism in architectural and adaptive reuse practice**

Over the last decades, architectural practice has shifted from proposing new constructions to adapting existing structures, what is often referred to as ‘adaptive reuse’.<sup>34</sup> Cantacuzino’s prophecy that this would ostracise the practice of façadism did not materialise, since façadism has been widely used as a strategy for adaptive reuse



(Fig. 1). However, although the relationship between the old and the new has become a significant topic in architectural and conservation theory, and various strategies to deal with the existing fabric have been discussed in scholarly literature,<sup>35</sup> façade retention has not received much attention as a strategy for adaptive reuse so far. The following paragraphs attempt a first mapping of this uncharted territory to illustrate how different forms of façadism are implemented in contemporary adaptive reuse practice at the architectural and urban scales. These include: façade retention; refronting; functional upgrading through façade intervention; and coherent streetscape. The fifth form of façadism retrieved from the literature review, namely that of new buildings whose interior contrasts with the exterior, is not discussed here, since this article focuses on the implementation of façadism in the context of adaptive reuse of existing buildings.

### ***Façade retention***

Despite the critiques of façade retention in conservation theory, the practice is still widely adopted as a strategy for adaptive reuse of buildings with modest or no formally designated heritage value. In Caixa Forum in Madrid, Herzog & de Meuron worked with façade retention as a strategy for adaptation. The building, a former power station, was transformed into a cultural centre located at the Paseo del Prado, one of the most prominent cultural districts of Madrid. Although this industrial building did not really fit into its surroundings, neither functionally nor aesthetically, it could not be demolished because it was protected as an urban landmark. Herzog & de Meuron seemingly ‘uplifted’ the building from the ground by removing the plinth of the façade to create a square beneath the building that serves as a meeting place and entrance to the cultural centre. In the retained façade, they bricked up all existing windows in a similar colour, while leaving visible the marks of their intervention visible; they made a new window opening to conform to the new interior layout to allow daylight and provide a view to the exterior. Moreover, a massive, corten steel volume is towering above the historic façade and houses additional functions such as exhibition rooms and a café (Fig. 2). The interior of the Caixa Forum is thoroughly contemporary; it does not refer to the historic host building.

The appearance of Caixa Forum does not try to hide the new intervention behind a historic theatrical set. Instead, it is characterised by an almost complete negation of the former structure of the building. The visual dominance of the new intervention compared to the remaining façade is not only expressed in its height but also through

the seemingly utilitarian way in which new openings are created and existing ones are bricked up. Although the building was listed to be protected, the concept of its transformation does not seem to have been dictated by the historic value of the site, as a witness of the former urban infrastructure that provided energy to the city, but by current architectural and urban demands and the ambition to create a contemporary, iconic landmark in the vicinity of the prestigious Prado Museum.

The façade of the Caixa Forum evokes the metaphor of the palimpsest, introduced by Rodolfo Machado in adaptive reuse theory in the 1970s. A palimpsest is a manuscript or other writing material from which a text has been scraped or washed off to be reused. As the original text reappears after a certain amount of time, different layers of text become visible. Similarly, Machado argues that the different historical layers of a building can be read from its architecture.<sup>36</sup> Besides this formal interpretation, the Caixa Forum prompts a more intangible understanding of the metaphor through the superimposition of different narratives which may co-exist within a building, enriching its presence and meaning. The retention of the historic façade in that sense has not only an aesthetic purpose but also an intangible one: to communicate the site's history without concealing its contemporary meaning.

### ***Refronting***

Replacing existing façades with more contemporary ones while retaining the building behind is a recurring practice in architectural history. A powerful example is Leon Battista Alberti's Renaissance façade for the Santa Maria Novella in Florence, which combined Classical temple forms but respected the existing rose window of the Gothic church behind it.<sup>37</sup>

A contemporary example of refronting a modern building with a historic façade is the Hotel Fouquet Barrière project in Paris. This hotel is located at the corner of the Champ-Élysées and the Avenue Georges V, in the area of Paris renovated by Baron Haussmann in the nineteenth century. In 1999, Group Lucien Barrière bought the famous restaurant 'Le Fouquet', located there since 1899, with the intention to extend it to a luxurious hotel. The complex includes the whole building block which contained seven buildings, among which are two original Haussmann buildings, several Neo-Haussmann- and Neo-Louis-Philippe-style buildings from the 1980s, and a modern bank building from the 1970s. Maison Eduard François transformed these buildings into a contemporary hotel to give it a more prominent and unified look. The most important

exterior intervention was the replacement of the curtain wall façade of the 1970s building, which strongly contrasted with the adjacent façades. The protected Haussmann façade was literally considered as a model for the new façade, which is made up of concrete slabs derived from a scan of the Haussmann building but abstracted in material and relief (Fig. 3). The position of the windows of the model-façade are visible in the subtle relief of the new façade, but they are not used; instead, new openings related to the new plan of the building have been created.

Haussmann's radical renovation plan of Paris aimed at rationalising the urban layout, improve its infrastructure, and beautify the public space. His architectural ambition primarily focused on the façades, which were strictly regulated, while the interiors were left to the owners.<sup>38</sup> Francis Chassel has described how, since the 1970s, the heart of Haussmannian Paris was mostly renovated through facadism, either by retaining the original Haussmann façades or by creating facsimiles.<sup>39</sup> Although he argues that this was not always executed with great respect and sensitivity, the idea that Haussmann's architectural legacy is expressed mainly in façades can justify the implementation of facadism as a conservation strategy. Accordingly, the basic concept for the renovation of Hotel Fouquet Barrière, the refronting of an existing building with a facsimile of a Haussmann façade to create a consistent cityscape, is not new. Although its form literally copies the authentic façade of Le Fouquet, its material expression is unmistakably contemporary and in juxtaposition with other buildings of the same block. This spectacular intervention matches the commercial function of the building. Echoing Venturi and Scott Brown's concept of the 'decorated shed', a building whose interior structure is merely functional, while its façade advertises its (commercial) use, the new façade of the hotel serves as a 'billboard'.<sup>40</sup>

Jean Baudrillard's concept of the 'simulacrum' is equally relevant to interpret this project.<sup>41</sup> Baudrillard argues that we live in an era of nostalgia and simulation, in which there is no such thing as an objective reality anymore; instead, reality has been replaced by 'hyperreality', an evolving condition where the model of the real has no origin.<sup>42</sup> He describes this 'decay of the real' in four successive phases of the image:

It is the reflection of a profound reality.

It masks and perverts a profound reality.

It masks the absence of a profound reality.

It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.<sup>43</sup>

Among many other examples, Baudrillard offers Disneyland as a perfect model of the hyperreal. In the first place, Disneyland is an imaginary world which is a commercial operation. But at the same time, it is a social microcosm, a pleasure miniature of real America. He argues:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.<sup>44</sup>

Just as the explicit presentation of Disneyland as fake gives a more authentic impression on Los Angeles, so does the explicit presentation of the new façade of the Hotel Fouquet Barrière: it renders the other façades more authentic – even though the ‘original’ Haussmann façades were probably restored several times and the other façades are facsimiles from the 1980s. The new façade, literally designed through a process of copying its adjacent building, is a striking example of Baudrillard’s simulation as the created image masks the absence of a profound reality, the deceptive authenticity of Le Fouquet.

### ***Functional upgrade through façade intervention***

In architectural literature, the significance of the façade is mainly described as a means to communicate a message about the function and meaning of the building to the public. But besides changing the meaning of the building, the adaptation of the façade can also serve a functional role. Andrea Palladio’s intervention in the Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza (1546–1549) combined the aesthetic with a functional outcome. Wrapping the medieval, Gothic building in a new Renaissance shell by adding a colonnade, loggia, and portico (Fig. 4), significantly altered the relationship between the interior and the exterior of the building and reconfigured the circulation around it (Fig. 5). Although the building, renamed as the Basilica Palladiana, is strongly marked by a Renaissance style, the Gothic architecture of the original structure is not altered and remains visible in the interior.<sup>45</sup> A more practical example of refronting is found in historic towns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries where timber façades were replaced by brick constructions to be protected from fire. In the context of modern conservation, the earlier timber frame constructions have often been restored or even reconstructed.<sup>46</sup>

A contemporary example that works with the adaptation of the façade as its basic renovation strategy is Tour Bois le Prêtre by Lacaton & Vassal. In a study commissioned by the French government, the architects Lacaton & Vassal with Frédéric Druot developed a somewhat generic strategy for the renovation of postwar social housing projects. As this aimed to improve the building's energy performance, enlarge apartments, and improve the incidence of daylight, the strategy basically involved replacing the existing façade. The architects have so far applied their concept in practice in the renovation of the Tour Bois le Prêtre in Paris (Fig. 6). This sixteen-storey high tower was built in the early 1960s as a concrete, loadbearing structure with a curtain-wall façade. Although the original façade had been renovated in the 1990s by replacing the windows and adding insulation panels, it did not comply with the updated housing requirements. The architects stripped the existing façade and added an independent loadbearing structure to extend the existing floors on all four sides of the building. In so doing, they enlarged the apartments with a winter garden and balcony. A new glass façade allowed more daylight into the interior, enabling the inhabitants to enjoy the view towards the surroundings.<sup>47</sup> The primary goal of the project was to improve the functional and technical performance of the building, while the aesthetic impact was rendered less important, as dictated by the more pragmatic constraints of the project. In that sense, the Modernist dogma 'form follows function', which was the underlying concept for the original design as a social housing block, became also key to its renovation concept; the Modernist utopia that endeavoured to allow light and air into each of the rooms in the twentieth century was only realised in the twenty-first century.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the aesthetic impact of the intervention, with the removal of the existing façade and the creation of a new shell, significantly altered the look of the building, giving it an entirely new appearance.

### ***Coherent streetscape***

Over the last sixty years, the most important reason to apply façadism has been the continuity and coherence of the urban decorum by means of its streetscape. Most commonly, this was realised through retaining historic façades with the construction of new buildings behind them. But the reverse strategy in which a new façade covers an existing building to make it fit with its surroundings is also common.<sup>49</sup> Pendlebury discusses the urban regeneration of historic towns in England, including Newcastle upon Tyne, Bath and Stratford-upon-Avon. In such cases that aimed to balance

conservation efforts with the need of modernising the urban fabric and its infrastructure, façadism was a frequently used practice. Pendlebury argues that, rather than constituting a valuable conservation effort, façadism served an economic purpose in the commercial heart of these towns: ‘Developers often promoted such schemes, paying lip-service to conservation objectives while achieving the commercial space they wanted’.<sup>50</sup> Since in many cases the historic centre is also the commercial centre of a town, he continues, the goal of the regeneration was not necessarily conservation-led, but heritage-led. That is to say, it did not aim to preserve and pass on the historic buildings for future generations, but approached heritage as a commodity for attracting businesses, new inhabitants, and retail customers. This process of commodifying the historic town may lead to gentrification and the displacement of low-income inhabitants in the longer term, as in the case of Grainger Town in Newcastle upon Tyne.<sup>51</sup> Similar urban regeneration strategies and processes have also taken place in other European towns.<sup>52</sup>

An implementation of façadism of a different kind can be traced in the regeneration of Wencun Village, a rural village in the countryside of Fuyang, by Amateur Architecture Studio. The architects Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu were concerned with the rapid decline and disappearance of the traditional architecture and culture of the Chinese countryside. As such, they conceived of this project as a prototype for the redevelopment of Chinese rural settlements. The architecture of Wencun consists of historic timber-framed and masonry wall buildings from the Qing dynasty and modern concrete houses whose façades were covered with ceramic or glass tiles. The intervention by Wang Shu and his team included the construction of fourteen new residential courtyard buildings, a bridge, and several public pavilions. In this project, façadism is used as a technique to create a more cohesive streetscape, avoiding a strong contrast between the buildings that are renovated and those that are not. Three different types of façades are applied here: (1) the retention of historic façades in the streetscape as an object or urban artefact, without the construction of a new structure behind it (Fig. 7); (2) the refronting of modern buildings with a new, freestanding façade, constructed by combining modern and traditional materials and techniques (Fig. 8); (3) the refurbishment of existing modern façades by peeling off the tiles and plastering it with a yellow-clay layer and the remodelling of cornices to resemble those of historic buildings. Although the regeneration of Wencun draws extensively on façadism as a means for revival, it aims beyond satisfying a merely aesthetic need. The project neither primarily nor exclusively focuses on the ‘image’ of the city, nor does it adopt a

commercial goal to attract tourists, businesses, or customers. Instead, it aims to restore the heritage of rural China, by preserving its historic buildings and their intangible characteristics such as the use of certain materials and techniques, the spatial relation between the village and the surrounding landscape, and the rural way of life. Although the project aimed to serve the local community of the village, the gentrification of the renovated area seemed inescapable: the project effectively isolated the renovated area from the rest of the village, and attracted more tourists as most houses are (partly) leased as tourist residences.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the regeneration of Wencun illustrates that façadism is not necessarily a compromise that springs from the perception of heritage as a commodity in lieu of a source of knowledge and inspiration to pass on to future generations. Instead, façadism may be a significant factor of a sustainable and holistic conservation and regeneration strategy that contributes to the quality of life of local communities and preserves tangible and intangible heritage values in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This article explored the potential of façadism as a strategy for adaptive reuse of existing buildings, drawing upon the dual development of this notion as a strategy for urban conservation and an architectural principle in the second half of the twentieth century. The discussed precedents show that façadism is not necessarily a strategy that aims to mislead or betray the onlooker; it may also serve other purposes. When façadism is applied in explicit terms and the intervention is presented as a palimpsest that reveals rather than covers the different historical layers, through the retention of a historic façade as in the Caixa Forum project or through the erection of a new façade in front of an existing building as in the Hotel Fouquet Barrière project, it can create an explicit dialogue between past and present, interior and exterior, authentic and simulacrum. Besides constituting a conceptual strategy, façadism may also serve functional uses as in the Tour Bois le Prêtre project. The evolution of building practices for sustainable development will increase the need for innovative strategies to renovate and retrofit existing buildings. In such cases, façadism as refronting might be a valuable strategy. Moreover, the implementation of façadism as a conservation measure in the context of the Wencun Village was not a mere compromise to avoid the demolition of the historic fabric. On the contrary, the various forms of façadism implemented in this project, in combination with other concepts and techniques, serve a long-term conservation and regeneration strategy for the village.

These precedents demonstrate only a few directions that the innovative implementation of the strategy of façadism might take in the future. As such, the topic of façadism holds untapped potential for further theoretical and practical exploration. First, a more profound historical analysis of the ways in which the façade is approached in different periods may generate new insights on the roles and meanings the façade might take as a building element. Second, from an architectural vantage, an in-depth investigation of the technical and technological possibilities and constraints of façadism may advance its conceptual implementation. Third, in the context of urban design, approaching the city as an urban interior in which a series of (public) rooms are marked by the surrounding façades may generate an alternative way to look at the design of façades and the relationship between the buildings' exterior and interior spaces. Fourth, in the context of heritage conservation, façadism may be reconsidered as a valuable strategy that can be applied, possibly in combination with other strategies, to enhance the current and future value of a heritage site. Hence, a review of national and international legislation and policy regarding the possible implementation of façadism in (urban) conservation comes to the fore as necessary. Lastly, the concepts and cases presented in this article and most other sources on the topic remain strongly western-oriented. A cross-cultural comparison on the notion of façadism and the meaning of the façade as an architectural element might shed fresh light on the discussion.

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## **Figure captions**

Figure 1. Façade retention of the Bankside Power Station in London, for its transformation into the Tate Modern, Project by Herzog & de Meuron, source: Tate Photography © Tate

Figure 2. Caixa Forum Madrid, old façade with interventions, project by Herzog & de Meuron, Wikimedia commons

Figure 3. Hotel Fouquet Barrière, project by [Maison Edouard François](#), photographed by [laurian ghinitoiu](#)



Figure 4. Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza, showing the Renaissance façade, as an extension of the Gothic building by Andrea Palladio, photographed by Mario Ferrara

Figure 5. Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza, showing the contrast between the Renaissance façade by Andrea Palladio and the former Gothic façade, photographed by Mario Ferrara

Figure 6. Tour Bois le Prêtre, after renovation, project by Lacaton & Vassal, Wikimedia commons

Figure 7. Wencun Village, retention of historic façade as an artefact within the urban fabric, project by Amateur Architecture Studio, photographed by Iwan Baan

Figure 8. Wencun Village, construction of new, ‘freestanding’ façades in front of modern buildings that disrupted the street scape, project by Amateur Architecture Studio, photographed by Iwan Baan

## Notes and references

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<sup>1</sup> John Pendlebury, *Conservation in the Age of Consensus* (London: Routledge, 2008).

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