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Retail-Reuse: an interior view on adaptive reuse of buildings

RLICC alumna presents her doctoral dissertation

By Dr. Bie Plevoets, alumna RLICC

Bie Plevoets studied interior architecture at PHL University College in Hasselt, before she followed a postgraduate master at the RLICC (2007-2009). In 2010 she started her PhD research at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University on the tension between heritage conservation and retail development in historic areas. She defended her doctoral dissertation in September 2015. Supervisor of this PhD was Prof. dr. Koenraad Van Cleempoel, and Prof. dr. Annemie Draye, who is a guest professor at the RLICC. Prof. Luc Verpoest of the RLICC was a member of the advising committee. The research was

financed by a grant of the IWT Flanders. The research of Bie Plevoets was entitled: “Retail-Reuse: an interior view on adaptive reuse of buildings”. Adaptive reuse, which implies partly changing the function and programme of a building and physically adapting it to new needs and requirements, has become an increasingly important part of contemporary architectural and interior architectural practice. Also in the retail sector, a significant part of the occupied buildings are historic buildings that initially had other functions but are now transformed into shops and other commercial functions. This practice, which we have called ‘retail-



Stadfeestzaal, Antwerp - an example of retail-reuse that failed on commercial level, partly due to problems related to aspects of the interior (e.g. circulation, visibility of the retailers, atmosphere) © Bie Plevoets



Raad Van State, The Hague, design by Merckx+Girod - this adaptive reuse project is an 'aemulatio' of the original interior of the building © Bie Plevoets

reuse', faces particular opportunities and threats for the heritage sector as well as the retail sector. Many projects therefore fail as to conservation standards, or as a commercial retail environment. Existing studies on retail-reuse are scares and focus its isolated aspects such as urban regeneration, sustainable design or customer behaviour. A study on the tension between retail and heritage preservation from the smaller scale – the interior – dis not exist so far and became the goal of this PhD research. We looked at the phenomenon of retail-reuse with an interior view, investigating its threats and opportunities. However, in order to elaborate on retail-reuse from an interior point of view, we need a lexicon rooted in and built on the particular qualities of the interior. As such, a second goal was added to the research project, namely developing such lexicon.

Through sketching the evolution of the emerging discipline of adaptive reuse, we showed that adaptive reuse theory – and practice – is influenced by both heritage conservation and architecture. Four different approaches in contemporary

adaptive reuse theory were distinguished: typological approach, technical approach, programmatic approach, and strategic approach. We noted, however, that there is a fifth approach that received little attention so far and that builds further on the building's soft values, its interior qualities; we call this the 'interior approach'. As part of the interior approach towards adaptive reuse we described three strategies for that involve copying as a method for adaptive reuse. We introduced three concepts from Renaissance art theory into the theory of adaptive reuse: *translatio*, *imitatio*, and *aemulatio*; each of these concepts describes a particular relationship between the copy and the model which we recognized in selected examples from contemporary adaptive reuse practice. Moreover, we elaborated further on three concepts that are at the core of conservation and architectural theory today by looking at them from an interior perspective: sustainability, authenticity, and *genius loci*.

Next, we focused on retail-reuse in particular. We firstly explained the legal framework for protection and safeguarding of immovable

heritage in Flanders, focussing on two aspects that are important in relation to our study: adaptive reuse, and protection and reuse of historic interiors. Secondly, we outlined the opportunities and threats for the retail-reuse for both parties (retail sector and heritage sector) on the basis of the typology of the host space, relying on literature and case studies. Some building typologies turned out to be more suitable for retail-reuse than others. Industrial buildings and buildings that initially designed for retail seemed most suitable; town houses and public and semi-public buildings are suitable, but under very specific conditions, and military and religious buildings are in general not suitable to be reused for retail, although some good examples do exist that deal with the particular challenges of this typology in relation to retail-reuse.

To conclude, we presented a concept for the measures that we believe could and should be taken by the Flemish government to stimulate reuse of (protected) historic buildings by the retail sector and to improve the overall quality of such projects from the point of view of both the heritage and retail sector. The proposed measures include policy measures, and in a limited extent also legal measures.

A first important measure would be to formulate transparent criteria based on which proposals for restoration, renovation and adaptive reuse of protected buildings and sites are evaluated by the agency immovable heritage. Instead of the current rigid approach that only seem to evaluate how the existing heritage values and elements are respected by the new proposal, we believe a more dynamic evaluation that also takes into account the relationship between the old and the new might be beneficial towards adaptive reuse. On the

one hand, broadening the criteria might open up opportunities for programmes that demand very specific requirements such as retail, or care; on the other hand, it might increase the overall quality of adaptive reuse projects. The preservation or construction of a *genius loci* should be the overall goal of the evaluation system. We have formulated a set of parameters that can help (interior) architects, conservators and other stakeholders involved in adaptive reuse projects to unravel the sensitive quality of the *genius loci*.

Particularly for adaptive reuse into retail, we believe that developing a standard for good practice can help to make protected historic buildings more attractive for retailers, to increase the success rate of retail-reuse projects, and to improve the overall quality of retail-reuse projects. Such standard may include specific legal issues, an overview of the opportunities and threats towards retail-reuse in relation to distinct architectural typologies, an illustration of the evaluation criteria used by the agency immovable heritage to evaluate proposals for adaptive reuse, and examples of good and bad practice.



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