DECONSTRUCTING BINARIES

Demolition and the limits of reuse

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Contemporary architectural practice – in Western Europe at least – is by necessity moving away from previously dominant, *tabula rasa* models of demolition and reconstruction, towards approaches based on the care, repair and transformation of existing buildings. At present, the renovation and adaptation of existing buildings represents approximately 50% of all construction activity in the EU,[1] and renovation rates are expected to at least double by 2030.[2] In this transition, it is important not to fall into the trap of viewing practices of adaptive reuse through the reductive lens of a preservation/demolition binary. If anything, reuse projects call precisely such 'either/or' binary oppositions into question, deconstructing absolute dualities like past/future, old/new, and finished/open-ended to create spaces characterised by hybridity and ambiguity.

Drawing on research currently being undertaken as part of the PhD project *Adapt, Reuse*,[3] this paper argues that the preservation/demolition binary represents a false dichotomy that hinders creative reuse by unnecessarily limiting the options available to practitioners. Combining first-hand experience, conversations with practitioners, and critical analysis of selected built projects, it investigates the work of a number of practices whose creative demolitions trace and identify the limits of reuse in order to test how they might be pushed further.

1 The Architects' Council of Europe, "The Architectural Profession in Europe 2022 Sector Study," (Brussels, 2023): 28.

2 European Commission, "Renovation Wave: doubling the renovation rate to cut emissions, boost recovery and reduce energy poverty," EC Press Release (14 October 2020).

3 For more information see www.adaptreuse.org.

The *Adapt, Reuse* project aims to promote, encourage and support adaptive reuse as a transdisciplinary cultural practice through the development of a conceptual framework and theoretical foundation. Transdisciplinarity is distinct from interdisciplinarity in that it doesn't just position itself between different disciplines, but is concerned with intellectual frameworks that go *beyond* disciplinary perspectives. My research therefore doesn't limit itself to architecture but looks to a range of other disciplines for inspiration and guidance, in keeping with Sally Stone's definition of adaptive reuse as a practice which "draws upon a collage of different sources, many beyond pure architecture, including installation art, fine art, curation, interior design, and urban design."[4]

Transdisciplinary research brings together different systems of knowledge in an integrative approach that aims to impact society beyond academia.[5] In this respect, my research aims to challenge what philosopher Dieter Lesage refers to as traditionally-accepted "heteronomic academic standards" by embracing a more pluralist concept of research, one in which strict conformity to generic scientific criteria is not deemed necessary for the research to be considered valid.[6] One of the main goals in developing *Adapt, Reuse* as an open-access web platform was to bypass the gatekeeping tendency of academic publication by making the research findings available to a wider audience. In an effort to remain accessible to non-academic

4 Sally Stone, "Notes towards a definition of Adaptive Reuse," *Architecture*, Vol. 3 (2023): 477.

5 My M. Sellberg et al, "Towards a Caring Transdisciplinary Research Practice: Navigating Science, Society and Self," *Ecosystems and People* 17, 1 (2021): 292.

6 Dieter Lesage, "Who's Afraid of Artistic Research? On measuring artistic research output," *Art & Research*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2009): 1.

audiences (which includes most practitioners of adaptive reuse, a key target group), an overly academic style of writing has been avoided. Deliberately positioning itself between practice and research, my PhD aims to engage not only with practical, technical and material concerns – the actual physics and tectonics of reusing existing buildings – but also the intangible aspects encompassing the cultural, social and related contexts that influence and shape every architectural act.

With a view to questioning and expanding accepted definitions of heritage, *Adapt, Reuse* places particular focus on the reuse of unspectacular, everyday buildings ordinarily not deemed to possess any architectural or cultural value. None of the buildings presented in this paper are listed or protected monuments, but have been chosen to represent a wide range of typologies and periods spanning from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. Each project introduces a lemma in the form of an action – stripping back; opening up; removing and replacing; breaking through. These lemmas represent design decisions at the scale of the architectural intervention rather than at the scale of the entire project, embodying approaches, attitudes or gestures that foreground the role of demolition and deconstruction in adaptive reuse.

STRIPPING BACK
TO INVESTIGATE AND EXPOSE
Southover House, Lewes, UK, by Material Cultures

This project involved the transformation of council offices

dating from the 1930s into a gallery and cultural space for arts charity the Charleston Trust (Fig. 1). Originally planned to be a wholesale refurbishment of the entire building, due to uncertainties connected to the budget and the fact that the charity were initially given only a 5 year lease from Lewes District Council, the client and architect together agreed on a smaller scale renovation. Project architect Summer Islam from Material Cultures explains that "essentially, we had to go back to our original proposal and rethink it, in terms of how it is possible to achieve the same spatial outcomes without doing all of the previously planned building fabric work, and that meant thinking, 'Okay, we're not going to line out all the galleries. We're just going to strip them back'."[7]

The building had undergone a previous refurbishment in two stages between 2011 and 2013. The first of these was geared towards improving the thermal and energy performance of the existing building fabric, replacing single paned windows with double glazed units, installing new insulation and roof-mounted solar panels as a source of renewable energy. The second stage involved a very corporate fit out of the public reception and office spaces, in the form of acoustic baffles, suspended ceilings, glass partitions, and other office furniture, all in a cacophony of lime green, hot pink and bright orange plastics (Fig. 2). Unfortunately, this meant that the spaces were completely unsuitable – not just spatially, but also aesthetically – for the new client's use as a gallery and exhibition space.

7 This and all subsequent quotes relating to the Southover House project are taken from a conversation between the author and Summer Islam, director at Material Cultures, on March 28 2024

Fig. 1: Ground floor entrance hall at Southover House, now Charleston in Lewes. Photograph by Henry Woide. Courtesy of Material Cultures.

Fig. 2: The same ground floor entrance hall as it looked in 2022 before the most recent renovation. Photograph by Material Cultures

Fig. 3: 1939 archive view of entrance hall. Source: East Sussex and Brighton and Hove Record Office at The Keep, reference C/A/5/40.

Fig. 4: Same view of the entrance hall after the recent renovation. Photograph by Henry Woide. Courtesy of Material Cultures.

In addition, the architects had no original plans or measured survey to work from, so until they removed these layers of finishings, they could have no idea of the condition (and sometimes even form or size) of the building underneath. Islam recalls that this lack of certainty made the process quite stressful. "We would only be able to find out what the walls would be like, and make a final decision on the floor finishes, once we had stripped out. There was a very low suspended ceiling, and because we couldn't see the actual ceiling, we didn't know what the real height was. We also didn't know where the services ran, or what

technical equipment there was in each space." As it turns out, through this stripping back, they found many surprises, some of which were fortuitous. For example, exposing the original ceiling in the stairwells unearthed a series of glass block floors aligned vertically on every storey all the way up through the building. This lightwell had originally brought daylight into the centre of the building from roof lights above, but had at some point been covered over. It can be seen in an archive photograph dating to when the building was first constructed (Fig. 3), which also shows the original chequered black and white linoleum floor rediscovered under layers of carpet (Fig. 4).

Stripping back not only revealed the original structure of the building, it also brought to light the various ad hoc interventions that had been made during the building's lifetime by various inhabitants. "We found a bunch of different unexpected openings," recounts Islam, "the smashing through of some of the brickwork arches which had been done historically, I think possibly even in that refurbishment a decade ago, because it was a pre-existing cable tray that we then re-appropriated (Fig. 5). It's my favourite bit, and we didn't design it. But I fought very hard to keep that moment."

Rather than try to restore the building to some imagined ideal state or cover up these often messy interim solutions, the architects left visible the traces of each phase of the building's history without prioritising any over the others. "It was just a kind of balancing act," says Islam. "In the end, sometimes our advocacy for a certain thing being retained was supported by the fact that it was definitely the

Fig. 5: Cable tray running straight through an existing brick arch, uncovered during the stripping back of Southover House. Photograph by Henry Woide. Courtesy of Material Cultures.

cheapest thing to do." According to her, the clients "were generally really open to a kind of raw aesthetic", partly because they knew it would not necessarily always remain like that. "It gave the project a certain freedom… we were enabled to kind of move through things, to be like, 'This isn't final, don't worry about it. In the long term, it might not look like this, but let's just do it for now'." This quality of unfinishedness was even leveraged as a strategy to raise funds and support for a possible next phase, by highlighting the potential of the building while simultaneously emphasising that it is very much still a work in progress.

OPENING UP
TO CONNECT TO DAYLIGHT & THE SURROUNDINGS

House in Laveu, Liège, by Simon Pirlot Architecte in collaboration with Luc Nelles Architectes

The most remarkable feature of this 3-storey terraced house, built in 1890 in the Laveu neighbourhood of Liège, is that behind the very modest street façade, the narrow 4.5m wide plot extends back 80 metres to the former slag-heap behind, with a height difference of 9 metres between the highest point of the garden and the street (Fig. 6). When the architect (who was also the client and for the most part, the builder) bought the property, a series of poorly built lean-to constructions – dark, damp, dismal – had been built in a haphazard manner to extend the house, but the pre-existing outbuildings, originally a gunsmith's workshop and a stable "for one horse and one donkey", were completely abandoned and overgrown, making the majority of the rear garden inaccessible. The main house had been divided into two apartments: a one-bedroom apartment occupied the ground floor and the adjoining annex, with a second one-bedroom duplex on the two upper floors (Fig. 7). None of the dwellings complied with hygiene, insulation or fire standards. "Looking back at the state of the place, I don't know how I managed to see the potential," Pirlot recalls, "but somehow I did!"[8]

"The main idea of the project," he explains, "was to extend the house into the plot at the rear, contextualising it by connecting it to the garden and surroundings, at the same

8 This and all subsequent quotes relating to the Laveu project are taken from a conversation between the author and architect Simon Pirlot on May 5 2024

Fig. 6: Section of the existing house and garden as found. Courtesy of Simon Pirlot Architecte.

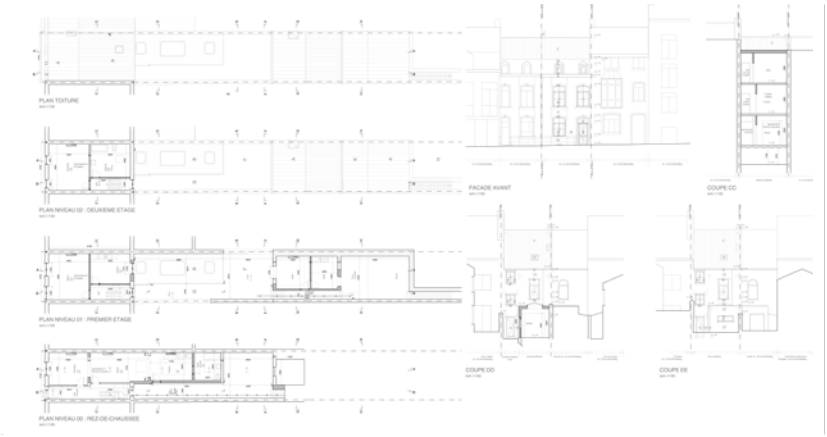

Fig. 7: Plans, cross sections and elevations of the existing house before the transformation. Courtesy of Simon Pirlot Architecte.

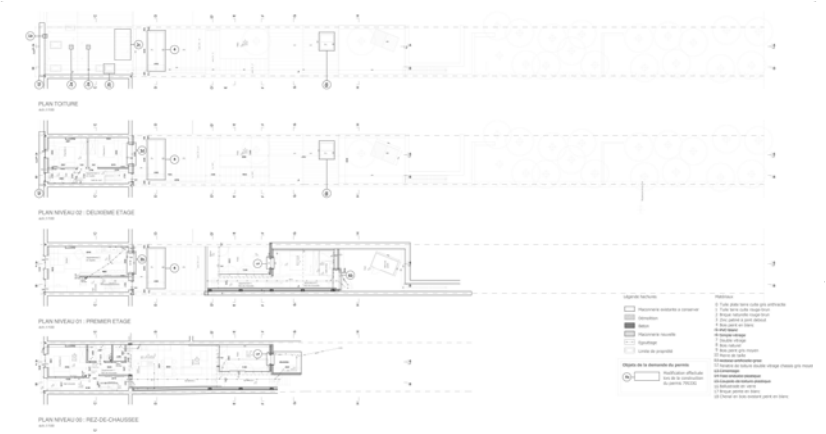

Fig. 8: Comparative plans of the house after transformation. Courtesy of Simon Pirlot Architecte.

Fig. 9: Interior of the former gunsmith's atelier during renovation into a maisonette. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 10: New exterior courtyard created by removing the dilapidated roof of the former stable. Photograph by the author.

time opening it up to bring in light and air." This involved demolishing the ad hoc extensions that had been added over time, extending the original annex, renovating the existing outer buildings and connecting this sequence of spaces via a series of patios, courtyards and passages (Fig. 8). Care was taken to ensure that the existing built fabric was brought up to and above current standards for energy, insulation and acoustics. The high-ceilinged former gunsmith's atelier is now a maisonette, studio or workspace (Fig. 9), connected to the ground floor of the main house by a glazed gallery. The roof of the dilapidated stable at the rear of the atelier was removed to create a bright, ventilated courtyard space (Fig. 10), forming an additional outdoor room from which a repaired staircase leads up to the now accessible garden and the forest beyond. All of the bricks from the demolished elements were cleaned by

Fig. 11: Bricks reclaimed and hand-cleaned on site, then used to repair damaged sections of the existing outbuildings. Courtesy of Simon Pirlot Architecte.

Fig. 12: View of the new exterior patio created in the space bounded by the extended annexe, the new glazed gallery, and the former atelier, now a maisonette. Photograph by the author.

hand on site and used to repair the walls of the outbuilding (Fig.11), part of which collapsed due to damage caused to the mortar joints by the ivy that had enveloped it for decades. "Not a single brick was discarded," says Pirlot, "every one of them found a new use elsewhere on the site."

In order to maximise daylight without compromising the neighbouring properties' access to light, restricting their views or causing problems of overlooking, the roof of the existing annex and its extension span between the existing party walls without raising them (Figs. 13, 14). By simply spanning from wall to wall without intermediate supports, an open and flexible living space is created on the ground floor, lit from above by generous skylights. A small south/southwest facing patio is created in the

Fig. 13: View of the annexe during construction, showing the excavation of the future living space between the two party walls. Photo courtesy of Simon Pirlot Architecte.

Fig. 14: The same view of the newly reconstructed and extended annexe, showing the roof spanning from party wall to party wall. Photograph by Jeremy Piret. Courtesy of Simon Pirlot Architecte.

outdoor space framed by the annex, the glazed gallery and the maisonette, further increasing access to light and fresh air (Fig. 12).

One of the architect's main aims was to create a house "able to adapt to the different stages of life, stages in which spatial needs change. From two apartments, it can easily be transformed into a 3 or 4 bedroom single-family home. And vice versa, from a single-family home, it can easily be transformed back into two apartments. Also, if the mobility of the occupants requires, the ground floor spaces can be adapted to accommodate the less able-bodied, allowing the occupants to remain in their home for as long as possible." This strategy has already proven successful in practice – after the project's completion in 2014, it func-

tioned as a single-family home for 2 adults and 3 children. In 2019, it was adapted into its current configuration of two 2 bedroom apartments.

REMOVING & REPLACING
TO GAIN SPACE AND LIGHT
Arlon-Trier/EQ, Brussels, Belgium, by ATAMA (formerly TRANS), Bureau Bouwtechniek, Captif, CES, Daidalos Peutz and Util

Referred to colloquially as the SECO building after its previous occupant and displaying a distinctive S-shape in plan, this building forms the centrepiece of a brutalist architectural ensemble located between Rue d'Arlon/Aarlenstraat and Trierstraat/Rue de Trèves in Brussels' European Quarter. Designed by Jean Verschuere and completed in 1970, the three office buildings were connected physically at underground level and visually through their material uniformity and rhythmic façades composed of repetitive, prefabricated concrete elements (Fig. 15).

In 2020, the new owners of the building, developers BPI and AG Real Estate, invited the team of the Brussels Bouwmeester Maitre Architecte (BMA) along with representatives of other regional administrations to a site visit, where an analysis of the building's challenges was presented. Issues included restricted floor to ceiling heights; a building depth of 18m resulting in limited penetration of natural light; an oversized central supporting structure that seriously encroached on the available interior space (Fig. 16); high energy consumption; lack of a thermal

Fig. 15: Current exterior view of the former SECO building, part of an ensemble situated between Rue d'Arlon/Aarlenstraat and Trierstraat/Rue de Trèves in the European Quarter of Brussels. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 16: Current interior view of a typical floor level, showing how much space is taken up by the central core and awkwardly-placed structural columns, reducing the useable floor area. Photograph by the author.

break between the uninsulated load bearing façade and the floorplates, which had themselves begun to sag. Several potential scenarios for redevelopment were presented, ranging from total demolition and reconstruction, to conversion into housing, to retaining the building's current function but adapting it to modern-day requirements. While the developers were clearly leaning towards the first option, a consensus could not be reached on whether to keep or demolish the building, with the heritage authorities insisting it should be retained.[9]

After being commissioned to conduct an in-depth study, engineering consultancy Bureau Bouwtechniek determined that with some intelligent interventions it would be technically feasible to convert the building into offices compliant with contemporary standards. Together with BMA, the clients launched a competition brief to renovate and adapt the building, "paying particular attention to the wellbeing of the users and to the characteristics of the

9 Ben Dirickx, "SECO: Gaining by Maintaining," in *The Architecture of Reuse in Brussels* (BMA, 2024), 30.

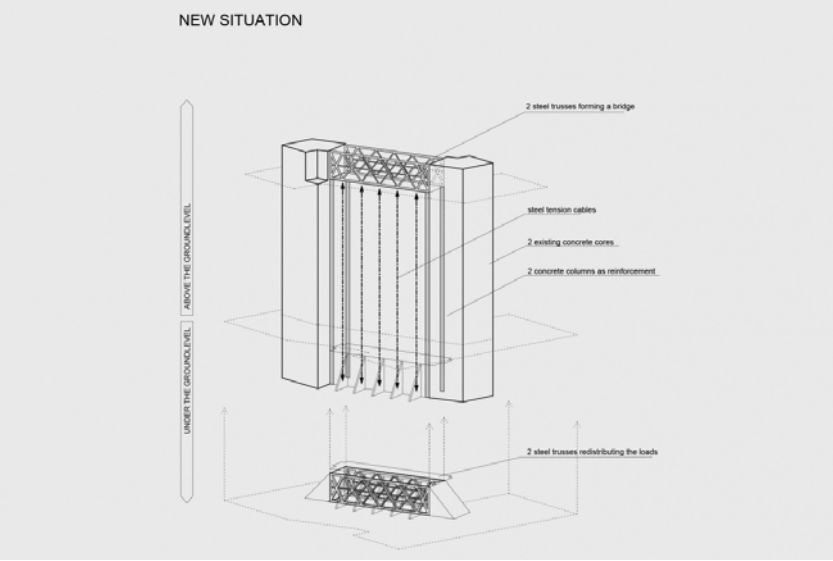

Fig. 17: Technical drawing showing the proposed new structural system of floor plates suspended from two steel trusses in the new roof. Image: UTIL structural engineering.

existing architecture."[10]

The winning team, composed of ATAMA, Captif, CES, Daidalos Peutz and Util, proposed a daring act of deconstruction that removes the entire internal structure of the building but keeps the existing floorplates and the exterior shell of the building intact. In their ingenious solution, the existing oversized and irregularly placed columns in the central area are replaced by a structural system in which the existing floors are suspended by cables from two truss girders located in a new crown added to the roof of the building (Fig. 17). According to the project team, "This results in improved spatiality, more light, and greater flexibility in the office floors."[11]

10 BMA, [CALL FOR PROJECT DESIGNERS] RE-USE FOR A SEVENTIES BUILDING, published November 27 2020

11 http://util.be/en/selection/trans-architectuur-stedenbouw/renovation-of-the-arlon-trier-office-building-brussels?origin=architects

Daylight is brought into the newly column-free space of the basement by two light wells that connect to the building's ventilation, allowing for the technical equipment to be moved underground and enabling the roof to become an accessible outdoor space. The interior of the block is opened up to form a new public connection between Rue d'Arlon/Aarlenstraat and Trierstraat/Rue de Trèves.

BREAKING THROUGH
TO EXCAVATE AND GAIN HEIGHT
Atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar, Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium, by Ouest architecture

The Atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar (ATJV) has occupied its current site in Louvain-la-Neuve since 1979, in a building that was originally designed to house a university restaurant but was transformed by architect Jean Potvin to accommodate the theatre. Since the stage had to be fitted into the available space, it took on an atypical diamond shape, meaning the backstage area was extremely limited with no clearance on either side to accommodate wings. Restricted overhead clearance also meant that there was no space for a fly or theatrical rigging system and very little room to manoeuvre in terms of scenery and stage sets: these ideally require 12m free height, while at ATJV only 9m was available (Fig. 18). Many of the seats did not directly face the stage but were positioned at an angle, with columns blocking the line of sight. Spectators in the balconies were seated behind glass screens, further impeding the view and widening the gap between the stage and the audience.

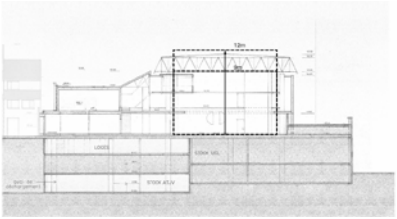

Fig. 18: Section drawing highlighting the existing 9m clearance above the stage at ATJV compared to the required 12m clearance which would extend beyond the current *gabarit*. Courtesy of Ouest architecture.

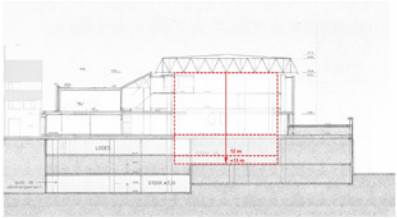

Fig. 19: Section drawing highlighting the 13m clearance achieved above the new lowered stage at ATJV compared to the required 12m clearance, staying below the current *gabarit*. Courtesy of Ouest architecture.

Fig. 20: Archive photo showing the construction of Louvain-la-Neuve on the concrete slab or *dalle*.
Source: Archives de l'Université catholique de Louvain.

Fig. 21: Cutting through the *dalle* below Louvain-la-Neuve to excavate the new space for Atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar. Photograph by Corentin Haubruge. Courtesy of Ouest architecture.

These problems were compounded by the poor condition of the building fabric, which had gradually deteriorated over the years since construction. By the 2010s, the roof was in such a bad state that rainwater entered the foyer and theatre during heavy rain, and had to be collected in buckets.[12] Following a campaign led by the theatre directors and local politicians, in 2016 the *cellule.archi* of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles launched a competition for the renovation of the theatre. The brief called for the

12 Jean-Philippe de Vogelaere, "Louvain-la-Neuve: le «Jean Vilar» dans de sales draps," Le Soir, March 17, 2016, https://www.lesoir.be/art/1153524/article/actualite/regions/brabant-wallon/2016-03-17/louvain-neuve-jean-vilar-dans-sales-draps

complete renovation of the premises to improve conditions on a technical and scenographic level and offer better comfort to the spectators.[13]

Louvain-la-Neuve is a post-1968, postmodernist utopian city built on a huge concrete plinth known as the *dalle* (Fig. 20), designed to keep cars and technical installations out of sight underground while freeing up the streets above for pedestrians and cyclists. This *dalle* is two storeys in height, constructed on thick concrete columns following an 8 metre grid that supports slabs of 45cm thickness. Ouest architecture's winning proposal takes advantage of the specificity of the location to respond to the demands of the programme, at the same time seizing the possibility "to tell the story of the city, showing visitors and passers-by that under the cobblestones beneath your feet, there are not only cars and technical installations, but also bustling life."[14] According to practice partner Stéphane Damsin, "this was an opportunity to try to push the envelope and see not only how we can renovate, how we can transform this building, this city, this architecture that is a little dated, but also what qualitative things we can do that respect the existing architectural language, in an approach of palimpsest rather than of tabula rasa."

Rather than building upwards to gain the required extra height, the architects had the simple yet brilliant idea to break through the concrete *dalle* upon which the theatre

13 "Louvain-la- Neuve, Restructuration et extension de l'atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar," last modified February 15, 2017, https://cellule.archi/marches/restructuration-et-extension-de-latelier-theatre-jean-vilar

14 ENSAP Lille, "Conférence de Ouest - Architectes, Bruxelles - 16/03/2023," March 16, 2023, 1:14:29, https://vimeo.com/813206833

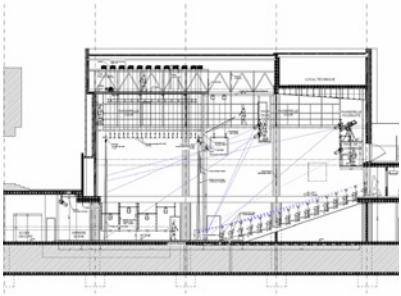

Fig. 22: Section drawing showing the new stage set up including tiered seating, technical and projection spaces, backstage area and clearance for rigging and scenery. Courtesy of Ouest architecture.

Fig. 23: Interior of the new theatre hall, showing the tiered seating and steps extending below the cut-through and polished edge of the former ground floor plate and concrete *dalle* structure. Photo by the author.

was constructed and instead excavate *downwards* (Fig. 19). Not only did this allow them to achieve a free height of 13m, one metre more than was asked for, it also meant that the *gabarit* or roofline of the existing building was respected (Figs. 18, 19). The stage moves down one level, becoming a more typical rectangular shape, while the extra height also provides ample room for sets and backstage areas, as well as new tiered seating which directly faces the stage and strengthens contact between the performers and the audience (Figs. 22, 23). A carefully placed window opens onto the street, revealing the underground level and giving passers-by a glimpse of this otherwise hidden part of the city beneath the *dalle*.

CONCLUSION

The four projects presented reveal how targeted approaches of partial demolition and deconstruction offer a way to transgress both physical and nonmaterial limits by permitting the investigation, unlocking, resetting and reusing of spaces without resorting to wholesale demo-

lition. Determining how these cases might contribute to the development of a theoretical framework for adaptive reuse requires some further reflection not just on the successes of each, but also the questions, paradoxes, and contradictions they give rise to.

In the case of Southover House, valid questions could asked about the decision to strip out interior fittings and furnishings that had only been installed less than a decade earlier. The architects are aware of this – as Summer Islam stated earlier, this was part of the reason they tried to retain as much of the existing fabric as the client's requirements and expectations would permit. In fact, the decision to leave the interiors in a raw, stripped back state was a conscious reaction against exactly the type of overly prescriptive fit-outs they found in the office spaces at Southover House, which through their specificity did not easily lend themselves to alternative uses. According to Islam, "usually on refurbishment projects, you might strip back, but then cover up again… each time it sort of gets smoothed over and polished, and there's a kind of finality to that."[15] This finality is exactly what Material Cultures intended to avoid, instead seeing their work as "part of a process."

While Southover House represented something of a light touch in that it involved no structural interventions, with the building itself left more or less intact, the project for Atelier Théâtre Jean Vilar was much more drastic in terms of demolition – in fact, both the client and architect have

15 Quote taken from a conversation between the author and Summer Islam, director at Material Cultures, on March 28 2024

referred to it as a "rebuilding" rather than reuse, although in reality it could arguably be seen as both. Since above ground, the only original elements left standing were the roof structure and two walls, the project does raise legitimate questions regarding how much original fabric can be demolished and removed before a building ceases to be a project of reuse but in essence represents a new construction.

Others have been critical of the fact that the project dared to pierce the *dalle* of Louvain-la-Neuve, suggesting that this represented an "iconoclastic act" and that "The 'reappropriation' of the building is sometimes done to the detriment of material integrity, in a subtle play between permanence and disappearance."[16] While this latter statement is no doubt true, focusing on material integrity above all else can be equally problematic, since it potentially precludes taking action that might otherwise allow the building to evolve and remain relevant while keeping its core integrity and character intact. Recognising this conundrum, the Brussels heritage authority urban.brussels has recently begun to embrace "evolving preservation practices: the preservation efforts aimed at maintaining the aesthetics of the appearance rather than the historical integrity of the materials."[17]

Reflecting on the case of ATJV, it is quite clear that through their intervention in the *dalle*, Ouest's aim is to engage with and celebrate the architectonic specificity of Louvain-la-Neuve's most distinctive urban feature, rather

16 "L'insoutenable légèreté de la matière," in *Kaléidoscope*, (UCLouvain, 2023), 5.

17 Harry Lelièvre, "Current Policy on Young Heritage. Strategies and Instruments to safeguard Young Heritage (1975-2000) in Brussels," in *International Symposium on Young Heritage (1975-2000). Book of Abstracts*, eds. M. Parein and S. Van de Voorde (VUB, 2024), 57.

than disregard or turn their back on it in the way other recent cultural projects have done (sorry, Tintin). Retaining the function of the theatre on the same site means it remains physically, socially and culturally anchored to the original core of the town, and also avoids the development of an entirely new theatre building previously earmarked for a nearby car park site, along with all the negative material, emissions and environmental consequences that would have involved.

In light of the deepening and cross-cutting climate, biodiversity, and resource crises faced by contemporary society, such localised acts of demolition can play a positive role in maintaining, transforming and extending the life of existing buildings. For this reason, despite the title of their oft-cited manifesto, *Ne jamais démolir,*[18] architects Lacaton & Vassal do not rule out targeted operations of demolition, insisting on the contrary that nothing should prevent the architect from "'doing just what is needed'. In other words, what is essential for the project."[19]

Determining exactly what is needed most often relies not on one single, overarching strategy, but on a whole series of decisions linked to specific architectural interventions or gestures that combine to realise the project. Like all architecture, projects of adaptive reuse are dictated and shaped by an array of limiting factors. Some – such as financial or legislative constraints – fluctuate over time and can therefore be more easily navigated. Others are

18 Lacaton & Vassal, *Etudes urbaines* (Lacaton & Vassal, 2018), 4. [https:/www.lacatonvassal.com/data/documents/20181212-165645LV_BookFchA4_EtudesUrbaines.pdf]

19 Enrique Walker, "Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal in conversation with Enrique Walker," in *Lacaton & Vassal: free space, transformation, habiter*, eds. Fundación ICO / Puentes editores (Fundación ICO, 2021), 31.

more structural: for example, the buildings currently most threatened with destruction are those built during the last 50 years, since neoliberal maximisation of profit at any cost has seen floor areas and ceiling heights become much less generous and therefore less easily adaptable.

In this respect, Brussels Bouwmeester Maitre Architecte Kristiaan Borret is correct when he refers to the Arlon-Trier/EQ project as "a game-changer in the real-estate market."[20] Up until recently, it was taken for granted that there was no other future for 'banal' office buildings of this type, viewed as lacking any sort of heritage, urbanistic or ecological value, other than complete demolition and reconstruction. The refusal of the design team to accept this state of affairs is what makes their proposal so radical and exciting. While the project has already won a Renolab.b award, recognising exemplary projects for the sustainable and circular renovation of Brussels' built heritage, it is hard at this stage to judge how successful this adaptation will prove to be, since works are only due to commence in September 2024.

That being said, it cannot be overlooked that the redevelopment of the former SECO building necessitated the eviction of a collective of non-profit organisations, NGOs, civic associations and other small agencies and businesses who had temporarily occupied the building during the competition, design and building permit stages. This is unfortunately typical of the rather cynical exploitation

20 BPI Real Estate and AG Real Estate press release, "The Arlon-Trier building in Brussels European district given a sustainable future," last modified June 11 2021, https://bpi-realestate.com/en/press/the-arlon-trier-building-in-brussels-european-district-given-a-sustainable-future/

of precarious actors in contracts of temporary occupation and meanwhile use that often accompany projects of renovation and adaptive reuse. The building owners have their property looked after and are even paid rent by those taking care of it, all while spending little or no money on the refurbishment or maintenance of the building. When the building is finally renovated, the meanwhile tenants are usually unable to return due to vastly increased rental charges, a reminder of the uncomfortable truth that, whether intentionally or otherwise, projects of adaptive reuse can often act as vectors of gentrification.

It also begs the question, given these associations were able to function perfectly well in the existing spaces 'as found' without the need for additional works, if such expensive and resource-intensive renovations of current office spaces are justifiable or even necessary. This would also seem to implicate evolving standards, such as the new EU taxonomy, as one of the drivers of endless cycles of renovation and refurbishment, drawing attention once again to the more problematic side of norms and regulations. At the same time, the new-found prestige with which developers now associate renovations of 'iconic' and 'distinctive' late 20th century architecture points to a creeping financialisation of adaptive reuse.

In examining how the practitioners in each of these examples address a number of seemingly contradictory challenges, this paper has attempted to trace a path towards a new perspective for adaptive reuse theories and practices. While my PhD originally set out to establish a conceptual

framework for adaptive reuse, as the research has progressed, it has gradually become apparent that the best way to achieve this might *not* be through the development of some grand, overarching theory. As Dinah Casson points out in her foreword to Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone's *Rereadings 2*, in reuse projects "no circumstances are ever the same, particularly at this level of complexity involving time, place, context, use, history," meaning "the strategies to approach them – the tactics – are understandably similar, but nonetheless site and culture specific, and cannot be universal."[21]

With this in mind, the project takes inspiration from what queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and anthropologist Kathleen Stewart term *weak theory*.[22] As opposed to 'strong' theory, which aims to be broadly or even universally applicable through reducing and ordering complex phenomena and contexts to clear and simple principles, 'weak' theory refers to theories whose applicability is *local* rather than universal. Weak theories are site-specific: they do not set out to explain everything, which enables them to be more effective by engaging directly with a particular situation to which they are more sensitively focused, mirroring how "adaptive reuse responds to the situation to which it is directly connected."[23]

21 Dinah Casson, "Foreword," in *Re-readings 2: Interior Architecture and the Design Principles of Remodelling Existing Buildings*, ed. Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone (RIBA Publishing, 2018), iv/v.

22 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2003): 123-151.
Kathleen Stewart, "Weak Theory in an Unfinished World," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45(1) (2008): 71-82.

23 Sally Stone, "Notes towards a definition of Adaptive Reuse," *Architecture*, Vol. 3 (2023): 479.

Taken out of context, each of the lemmas explored in this paper might seem to represent rather generic strategies for dealing with existing buildings. Their transformative power is only realised once they are enacted by the architects involved as a response to the particular challenges at hand. Through careful observation, these practitioners have created meaningful interventions of a certain architectural quality in buildings that weren't previously seen to possess any established interest or value. By engaging with the specificities of each site, they expose the demolition/preservation binary as a construct, combining operations of subtraction and addition to open up previously unforeseen possibilities: carving out a void to create a brighter, airier living space; releasing an overly prescriptive interior from its straitjacket to invite multiple forms of inhabitation; cutting a hole to activate an underutilised subterranean space; substituting a cumbersome structural system to drastically free up a cluttered interior.

Viewed through the lens of weak theory, the most instructive takeaway that can be learned from these lemmas is the way in which they *nuance* in each particular space and time. Rather than representing a set of ready-made, replicable actions to be blindly copied, their generative, creative potential relies in each case on a thorough reading and understanding of the site and context. Nuancing differently across different space-times, the consequences and potentiality of these actions are dependent not only on where, when, why, and how they are brought into play, but also on the skill and expertise of the reuse practitioners who employ them.

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