



[193.190.2.241] Project MUSE (2025-07-13 16:50 GMT)



Figure 1. As Found Exhibition. Flanders Architecture Institute in De Singel. Photo: Stijn Bollaert.

Experimental Preservation as a Social Practice

Special Issue As Found International Colloquium

The work of architects nowadays increasingly consists of intervening in already existing buildings and urban landscapes. Compared to demolition and new construction, undeniably adapting the existing has major ecological, economic, cultural and social benefits. The separation of architectural design and restoration is no longer valid today. The two have found new ways to interweave into each other, going beyond the conventional categorization of old versus new. A more experimental approach in which the narratives and traces found in the existing are the inspiration for contemporary interventions. This changing approach to the built environment—the “heritage” in the broadest sense—has been extensively addressed in architectural and academic research. Fred Scott’s seminal monograph *On Altering Architecture* and the volume *Experimental Preservation*, edited by Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Langdalen, and Thordis Arrhenius are just a few examples.¹ Additionally, architectural schools give increasing attention in their curricula to assignments concerning densification, redevelopment, renovation and reallocation, with some schools even offering specialized programs on the subject.

This special issue results from the project As Found, organized by the Flanders Architectural Institute in collaboration with the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University (Belgium) from September 2023 until March 2024. The project focused on the relationship between architectural design and heritage preservation and included an exhibition, the publication of a catalog, an international colloquium, and an educational project with an exhibition, lectures, and workshops. The start coincided with the Festival of Architecture and Open Monument Day and emphasized the potential of the overlap between architecture and heritage preservation, and the experiments that can emerge from challenging the principles and protocols of both disciplines. The exhibition and catalog highlighted spatial strategies and design attitudes.² We defined seven experimental approaches—ensemble, void, reconfiguration, inside out, traces, mirror, and nuance—which we illustrated with a project in Belgium and a set of reference projects that position the experiment in historical and international discourse. With this special issue, we want to reflect on the As Found project from a social point of view, as this aspect

Figure 2. Book cover of exhibition catalogue.



somehow remained underexposed in the catalog and conference proceedings but showed to be key in the experimental development of many of the examples and discussions that were presented. Hence, this special issue complements the existing output of the As Found project.

The social act of preserving and transforming the as found can be manifested in various ways. First of all, the practices of architecture and preservation draw on the interaction and collaboration of various agents, like civil servants, architects, users, constructors, crafts(wo)men, etc. It is precisely in the exchange between these different actors that innovative practices emerge. This is also demonstrated in some of the examples that were shown in the exhibition. The experimental approach for Chapex by architects Jan de Vylder and Inge Vinck and AgWA, which included a selective demolition of some building components, could only be realized because of the visionary approach of the city architect of Charleroi who initiated and led the competition and project execution. For the Predikheren library in Mechelen, for example, the innovative restoration concept that preserved the appearance of the building in its ruinous condition, treating all historic layers as of equal importance and consolidating them as found, could only be realized through

As Found

International colloquium on adaptive reuse

5-7 September 2023
📍 Hasselt & Antwerp, Belgium
vai.be/asfound

REGISTRATION IS OPEN



Vlaamse
overheid

fwo

Research Foundation
Flanders
Opening new horizons



IMAGE: Castelvecchio Museum Verona by architect Carlo Scarpa (cc) presso Archivio Paolo Monti

Figure 3. As Found poster: international colloquium on adaptive reuse.

an intense collaboration between Korteknie Stuhlmacher Architecten as designer, Callebaut Architecten as a specialist in restoration, and a team of skilled craftspeople working on site. Equally, in the city hall in Mortsel, the architectural detailing as designed by Eagles of Architecture could not be done without the engagement of skilled craftspeople on the site.

Second, actions and engagements by social groups and organizations can steer experimental preservation. Bottom-up initiatives to reuse abandoned buildings frequently operate outside the institutionalized modes of practice.³ Interventions in the existing building or site can occur in the form of spontaneous appropriations by users and, in some cases, by designers, as opposed to being cautiously determined by experts. As stated by Scott, spontaneous user-led adaptations are free of censure and beyond the reach of the critical—hence, they leave more room for experimentation.⁴ In the exhibition, this was apparent in the youth house, Malibran, by Carton 123 is located in Brussels. The program and design of the space

were molded via conversations with the youngsters of the neighborhood who were already using the unbuilt plot as an informal meeting space.

Third, experimental preservation can have a strong social impact by uncovering forgotten or suppressed meanings and narratives of our built environment. Which relics of the past are considered heritage, and which stories to tell are dominated by the “authorized heritage discourse”?⁵ Experimental preservation, contrarily, often applies to buildings that are not protected. Such polyphonous reading of what we consider as our heritage can contribute to a more inclusive society. The open-air depot of the Art in the City collection of Antwerp illustrates how a recontextualization can alter the meaning of architectural and urban fragments. The scenography by Aslı Çiçek, developed in dialogue with the curator of the collection, Samuel Saelemakers, creates new relationships between statues following their removal from the public domain. Some of the statues are related to the country’s colonial history, which is questioned and commented on via the stenographic setting. The social importance of heritage and the potential impact became apparent in the transformation of Het Steen, often considered the oldest building in the city with a clear symbolic value. The recent renovation and extension by noAarchitects, aiming to make the building public accessible as an entrance point to the city, received harsh criticism by the general public shortly after the façades of the extension were revealed.

With this special issue, we want to continue this exploration of the potential of existing buildings and sites to generate a social impact in terms of spatial production and collective memory. These can be approached from different angles, such as architectural practice, discourse and pedagogy. The colloquium, from which this issue results, brought together people from different backgrounds, including academics, practitioners, artists, and interdisciplinary teams. It was a conscious decision to address these diverse branches of the discipline in the scope and call for abstracts, as we believe that the experiments in adaptive reuse benefit from these mixed and multifocal approaches. This is also reflected in our selection of contributions to this issue, which resulted in a set of articles, varying in length and style—moving from essayistic to academic—and from text-based to image-based contributions. We welcomed exploratory and experimental writings as well as fully developed research papers.

We open the issue with a transcript of Markus Berger’s talk entitled “*As Found 02*”: *A Call for Actions Towards Sustainable Design Futures*, which was one of the keynote lectures of the colloquium.⁶ Berger challenges the deep-rooted values of modern architecture, emphasizing the urgent need to address



Figure 4. Postcard showing the Baron Dhanis Monument in the public space in Antwerp.

pressing global crises such as environmental degradation and social inequality. He urges for a radical shift in architectural education toward pluralistic approaches that acknowledge diverse cultural, environmental, and social contexts. Via examples from his own artistic practice in furniture repair, he encourages designers to question capitalist notions of consumption and beauty and embrace imperfection, flexibility, and minimal intervention in their work. Berger challenges designers to rethink their role in shaping the built environment and optimistically calls for collective action to build better worlds for future generations. Paul Baboulet and Luc Landauer continue the reflection on repair as a way to address environmental challenges, focusing on the potential impact of this paradigm shift on architectural education. Drawing on Marvin Trachtenberg's concept of "Building-in-Time," they challenge the traditional view of architecture's relationship with space by advocating for a temporal perspective, where architecture adapts and evolves over time. This more modest approach to architecture highlights the importance of maintenance as an integrated aspect of the design process and concept.

The next two papers focus on bottom-up and informal practices of preservation and reuse. Jiayi Wang reflects on the dynamic and informal interaction between occupants and architectural heritage within the context of Suzhou's old residences, with a specific focus on Mr. Shen's House as a case study. Through field research, the author examines the value of Do-It-Yourself and ad hoc modifications in vernacular architecture, accentuating the pivotal role of everyday life in

shaping adaptive reuse practices. Drawing upon concepts of aesthetics, fluid authorship, and spatial appropriation, the paper advocates for a reevaluation of the designer's role as a mediator rather than merely a problem. Miray Kısaer Koca, Pınar Gökçınar Balkan, Pınar Aykaç, Sibel Yıldırım Esen, and Neriman Şahin Güçhan meticulously studied the transformation of Pilavoglu Han, a sixteenth-century Ottoman commercial building in Ankara, Turkey, amidst the evolving landscape of heritage preservation and tourism. While many historic sites undergo top-down transformations driven by public or private interests, Pilavoglu Han stands out as a case of self-organized adaptation by the local community, including independent artists, craftspeople, and inhabitants. The article examines the community's strategies for adaptation, including economic, social, spatial, and functional aspects, and proposes collaborative conservation strategies involving the community and heritage professionals.

The contributions by Francesca Murialdo and by Elke Couchez and Luna Nobile discuss how reuse and participatory methods for working with the existing have found an entry into architectural education. Murialdo advocates for designers as mediators to empower communities in (re)using spaces. In an educational experiment called The Kilburn Lab, students in interior architecture interacted with inhabitants of this multicultural and gentrifying neighborhood in London. By envisioning possible futures for existing buildings in dialogue with the community, adaptive reuse can become a response to broader social issues, such as community identity, memory preservation, and the revitalization of urban spaces. Couchez and Nobile examine the role of reading as a method for urban reuse, drawing from historical perspectives at the International Laboratory of Architecture & Urban Design (ILAUD), founded by Giancarlo De Carlo in 1976. ILAUD emphasized understanding urban fabric beyond monument preservation, advocating for a dialogue between history and user needs. Couchez and Nobile frame these post-war education practices in a discourse on “re-everything” and illustrate the contemporary relevancy of these educational methods through the example of Studio 3 at Umeå School of Architecture. Tomas Ooms, Tim Vanhooren, Harold Fallon, Benoît Vandenbulcke, and Benoît Burquel present a project from their practice: the feasibility study for the renovation of a post-war housing block in Ghent, owned by a large number of private proprietors, many of which living there. Their approach shows the necessity to align architectural strategies with the socioeconomic conditions of the inhabitants. An experimental approach that challenges current regulations, practices, and policies urges itself in order to develop a socially and economically feasible renovation strategy.



Figure 5. Fragments of the Baron Dhanis Monuments in confrontation with the statue of Madonna and child as part of the KIS depot in Middelheim Park. Project by Aslı Çiçek. Photo: Tom Cornille.

Koenraad Van Cleempoel elaborates on postwar adaptive reuse practice via two projects by Lina Bo Bardi: SESC Pompeia in San Paulo and Solar de Unhão in Salvador. The paper illustrates how Bo Bardi pioneered in working with difficult heritage and incorporating narratives of minorities or (formerly) suppressed social groups. In SESC Pompeia, she did so via careful observation of informal uses of the host space prior to conversion; in Solar de Unhão via a sensitive analysis and integration of crafts. Although Bo Bardi herself did not frame her approach in postcolonial discourse, her work is highly relevant and exemplary in contemporary discourse on this subject. Linked to this, we present an artistic contribution by Collectif Faire-part, which includes the poem by Marie Paul Mugeni, Rob Jacobs, and Lili Angelou and stills from their film *Speech for a Melting Statue*. As many other European countries Belgium also has a difficult history. Its colonial regime in Congo ended in 1960, yet the traces of this history remain visible in the daily life through monuments, placards, street names, and statues, without a critical rereading of this contested past. The film *Speech for a Melting Statue* questions the place of colonial statues in contemporary cityscapes and proposes a new approach in remembering our shared histories. It is also a plea for generating new narratives for our shared future. With a dialogue between the Congolese capital Kinshasa and the Belgian capital Brussels, the film makes us rethink the physical materiality of power, and the ways it can be altered through art and architecture.

The various challenges of today require various approaches in dealing with the existing. We consider As Found as

a design approach in reading not only the material but at the same time the immaterial conditions, such as memory, social and cultural values and conflicted histories. In this way, we hope to contribute to the school of thinkers and practitioners in exploring the potentials of these immaterial values and strengthening the social engagement of architecture in adaptive reuse.

Biographies

Bie Plevoets studied Interior Architecture in Hasselt and Conservation of Monuments and Sites in Leuven and obtained a PhD on adaptive reuse at Hasselt University in 2014. She is currently an assistant professor in the research group Trace (UHasselt). Her research focuses on adaptive reuse theory and various conceptual strategies to intervene in the existing fabric. Plevoets is the author of the book *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (with Koenraad Van Cleempoel; Routledge, 2019) and has published multiple articles in esteemed academic journals like *The Journal of Architecture*, *Interiors*, and *Journal of Architectural Conservation*.

Hülya Ertas is coordinator of exhibitions and publications at the Flanders Architecture Institute. She graduated from Istanbul Technical University (Department of Architecture) in 2005, completing her master's degree in architecture at the same school in 2011. From 2004 to 2020 she worked at the monthly *XXI Architecture and Design Magazine*, becoming its editor-in-chief in 2013. She completed her PhD at the Faculty of Architecture Sint-Lucas, Brussels, KU Leuven in 2024. Ertas curates exhibitions, edits books, writes articles, and does research. Her main focus is on architecture's societal and political role and critical reading of socio-spatial practices.

Sofie De Caigny is president of the Commission for the Quality of the Built Environment and Cultural Heritage for the city of Rotterdam, and guest professor at the Faculty of Design Sciences of the University of Antwerp. She directed the Flanders Architecture Institute (2018–24) and was secretary general of the International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM) (2014–22). She holds a PhD in architectural history (KU Leuven, 2007) and writes about contemporary architecture in Belgium. She has curated various exhibitions (e.g., *Maatwerk* at Deutsches Architekturmuseum, 2016). De Caigny was the commissioner of the Belgian Pavilion for the 2021 Architecture Biennale in Venice. She is Honorary Fellow of the RIBA in 2024.

Notes

¹ Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008); Jorge Otero-Pailos, Erik Langdalen, and Thordis Arrhenius, eds., *Experimental Preservation* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

² Sofie De Caigny, Hülya Ertas, and Bie Plevoets, eds. *As Found. Experiments in Preservation* (Antwerp: Flanders Architecture Institute, 2023).

³ Otero-Pailos et al., *Experimental Preservation*, 11.

⁴ Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, 38.

⁵ Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶ The other two keynotes were by An Lacaton (Lacaton & Vassal architects) and Thordis Arrhenius. The lecture by An Lacaton is recorded and the audio is available on the YouTube channel of the Flanders Architecture Institute: <https://www.youtube.com/@vlaamsarchitectuurinstituut5253>.