

ACKNOWLEDGING THE INFORMAL IN ADAPTIVE REUSE - EVALUATING THE DESIGNER'S ROLE IN USER-LED ADAPTATIONS

Nusrat Kamal Ritu, Bie Plevoets, Asli Cicek
Hasselt University, Belgium

Long before architectural practitioners of the 20th century coined a term for the reuse of historic buildings, adaptive reuse existed as a natural course of action as the most rational way to continue building across civilizations. When a building is abandoned for long enough in an urban setting, it becomes a canvas for public use as they see fit. This occurs in the form of urban squatters, informal marketplaces, or abandoned castles serving as elaborate labyrinths for neighborhood children. Yet when evaluating the historic value of structures from the lens of a practitioner, the spontaneous use value of such projects is often sidelined. Such unplanned and informal reuse of buildings persists not only within the context of Europe but also beyond, especially in regions where heritage buildings receive less nuanced attention than in the West. Often, such public appropriation and continuous adaptation of historic buildings have prevented them from falling into severe disrepair and ensured their survival through time. This contribution aims to explore the theme of unplanned adaptive reuse and its continued relevance in architectural heritage by presenting the Ruplal mansion in Old Dhaka as a case study. Located in old Dhaka, the Ruplal House is one of the countless mansions that are symbolic of the city's colonial history. Built in the 1820s, the mansion served as residences, ballrooms, and a hub for several other cultural activities. Following the independence of Bengal, it evolved as an informal residential and commercial complex featuring one of the biggest spice and vegetable markets in the city, while also accommodating urban squatters. Today, while countless other colonial buildings have already faced demolition, the Ruplal house's survival is owed to its informal occupation. A key concern when addressing such a phenomenon is that of authorship. If a historic building can belong to its users without formal mediation, at what point does a legislative body need to intervene to formalize the "As Used"? The role of a designer in such cases becomes especially nuanced, where one must intervene just enough to sustain the characteristic chaos and informality of such adaptations. The designer's role thus becomes to enable a framework that sustains such reuse. By analyzing the case study of the Ruplal house and its user-led appropriation which has often been portrayed as problematic, this paper takes a different perspective on the topic of unplanned adaptations and their acknowledgment in the field of adaptive reuse.

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- [2] Sadiqur Rahman. "Ruplal House: From viceroy's ball to disputed property." The Business Standard Accessed September 27, 2022. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/ruplal-house-viceroys-ball-disputed-property-440566>
- [3] Nayeem Shah. "Ruplal House: The magnificent past of farashganj". Offroad Bangladesh. Accessed September 28, 2022. <http://offroadbangladesh.com/places/ruplal-house-farashganj/>

Nusrat Kamal Ritu is a PhD student at FacARK of UHasselt. Her research explores the rejuvenation of historic interiors through adaptive reuse across three different contexts - Flanders, Muscat and Dhaka. She completed her masters in Interior Architecture from UHasselt in June 2022. Prior to this, she graduated from the German University of Technology in Oman (Affiliated with RWTH Aachen) with a BSc in Urban Planning and Architectural Design in 2018. Following her graduation, she worked as a teaching assistant at the same university. She also worked as a graphic designer and events coordinator at a professional conference organizer. As a Bangladeshi born and brought up in the Sultanate of Oman, her personal background has played a significant part in choosing her research topic.

Aslı Çiçek obtained her masters in architecture and design from the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. During and after her studies she worked for architectural offices in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. In Belgium she worked as project architect for Gigantes Zenghelis Architects and Robbrecht en Daem architecten before founding her practice in 2015 in Brussels. Currently she is associate professor at UHasselt, FacARK and guest professor at Ghent University, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning. She has been a tutor in several design ateliers at the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture. She has published various articles on architecture and art, was the co-editor of the 11th Flemish Architectural Review and is a member of the editorial board of OASE Journal for Architecture.

Bie Plevoets studied Interior Architecture in Hasselt and Conservation of Monuments and Sites at the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation in Leuven. She obtained a PhD on adaptive reuse, approached from an interior perspective. Her research focuses on adaptive reuse theory. She is currently an assistant professor in the research group Trace and a senior postdoctoral fellow of the FWO Flanders, working on a project entitled 'Reusing the Ruin: Building upon the fragmentary fabric'. She is the author of the book 'Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline', co-authored by Koenraad Van Cleempoel (Routledge, 2019) and teaches the Theory Module in the International Master Adaptive Reuse.



Fig. 1&2, Ruplal Mansion of old Dhaka with its grounds encroached by squatter settlements – Rajib Dhar, The Business Standard