

UHASSELT

KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

| project |



Trace
heritage & adaptive reuse

| The ethical nature of architectural interventions in built heritage |

The adaptive reuse design paradox.

| From adaptive reuse to adaptive architecture | Conference | Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism, Carlton University, Ottawa, Canada | 20-22.05.2026 |
| dr. Chris Bessemans | prof. dr. Koenraad Van Cleempoel |

| I_prelude |

| Eileen Gray |

| I_prelude |

**To create
one must first question
everything.**

| Eileen Gray |

design

design

**what?
for
whom?
how?
why?**

design
responsibility
intelligence

design
responsibility
intelligence

critical
ethical
thinking

DESIGN
responsibility
intelligence

critical
ethical
thinking

technical &
creative skills

ethical awareness/resurgence in architecture



societal/ecological challenges

ethical awareness/resurgence in architecture



normative theory
applied ethics
scepticism

societal/ecological challenges

ethical awareness/resurgence in architecture



normative theory
applied ethics
scepticism

repository of meanings, valuable
enabling potential



societal/ecological challenges

adaptive reuse ≈ resignification

ethical awareness/resurgence in architecture



normative theory
applied ethics
scepticism

morally non-neutral
non-explicit
not scrutinised



repository of meanings, valuable
enabling potential

societal/ecological challenges

adaptive reuse \approx resignification



adaptive architecture

ethical awareness/resurgence in architecture

societal/ecological challenges



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adaptive reuse \approx resignification



repository of meanings, valuable
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adaptive architecture

ethical awareness/resurgence in architecture

societal/ecological challenges

adaptive reuse ≈ resignification

normative theory
applied ethics
scepticism

morally non-neutral
non-explicit
not scrutinised

repository of meanings, valuable
enabling potential

ethical underpinnings?

ethical framework that grounds & guides our
deliberative design decisions is what we should
reflect about in the first place.

substantial
ethical
understanding
of
adaptive
reuse
interventions

[1] analogy | memorial design paradox

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[1] analogy | memorial design paradox

substantial
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[2] adaptive reuse cases | explanatory examples

[1] analogy | memorial design paradox

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[2] adaptive reuse cases | explanatory examples



**[3]
the
adaptive
reuse
design
paradox**

| II_the_analogy |

The analogy:
morally understanding memorial design

memorial
architecture

≈

symbolic
restoration

**memorial
architecture**

≈

**symbolic
restoration**



acknowledgement of
significance of events
and/or persons

**memorial
architecture**

≈

**symbolic
restoration**



acknowledgement of
significance of events
and/or persons



*to guarantee continued
acknowledgement*

memorial must be
worthwhile

**memorial
architecture**

≈

**symbolic
restoration**



acknowledgement of
significance of events
and/or persons



*to guarantee continued
acknowledgement*

memorial must be
worthwhile



by design and/or
programme

memorial architecture \approx **symbolic restoration**

acknowledgement of
significance of events
and/or persons

*to guarantee continued
acknowledgement*

memorial must be
worthwhile

by design and/or
programme

primary commemorative function

secondary
function (e.g.
economic, tourist,
urban development,
aesthetic nature)

memorial architecture \approx **symbolic restoration**

acknowledgement of
significance of events
and/or persons

*to guarantee continued
acknowledgement*

memorial must be
worthwhile

by design and/or
programme

primary commemorative function

secondary
function (e.g.
economic, tourist,
urban development,
aesthetic nature)

enables/hampers primary
commemorative function

if too emphatic/
present
° criticism/
indignation
=> morally
backfire

memorial architecture \approx **symbolic restoration**

acknowledgement of significance of events and/or persons

to guarantee continued acknowledgement

memorial must be worthwhile

by design and/or programme

primary commemorative function

secondary function (e.g. economic, tourist, urban development, aesthetic nature)

enables/hampers primary commemorative function

if too emphatic/present
° criticism/indignation
=> morally backfire

importance of moral/symbolical justification/explication \approx ethical, critical thinking

memorial architecture \approx **symbolic restoration**

acknowledgement of significance of events and/or persons

apparent instrumentalisation of significant events/persons hampers/annuls primary commemorative function

to guarantee continued acknowledgement

secondary function (e.g. economic, tourist, urban development, aesthetic nature)

by design and/or programme

memorial must be worthwhile

enables/hampers primary commemorative function

if too emphatic/present
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importance of moral/symbolical justification/explication

ethical, critical thinking

memorial design paradox

| III_the_explanatory_example(s) |

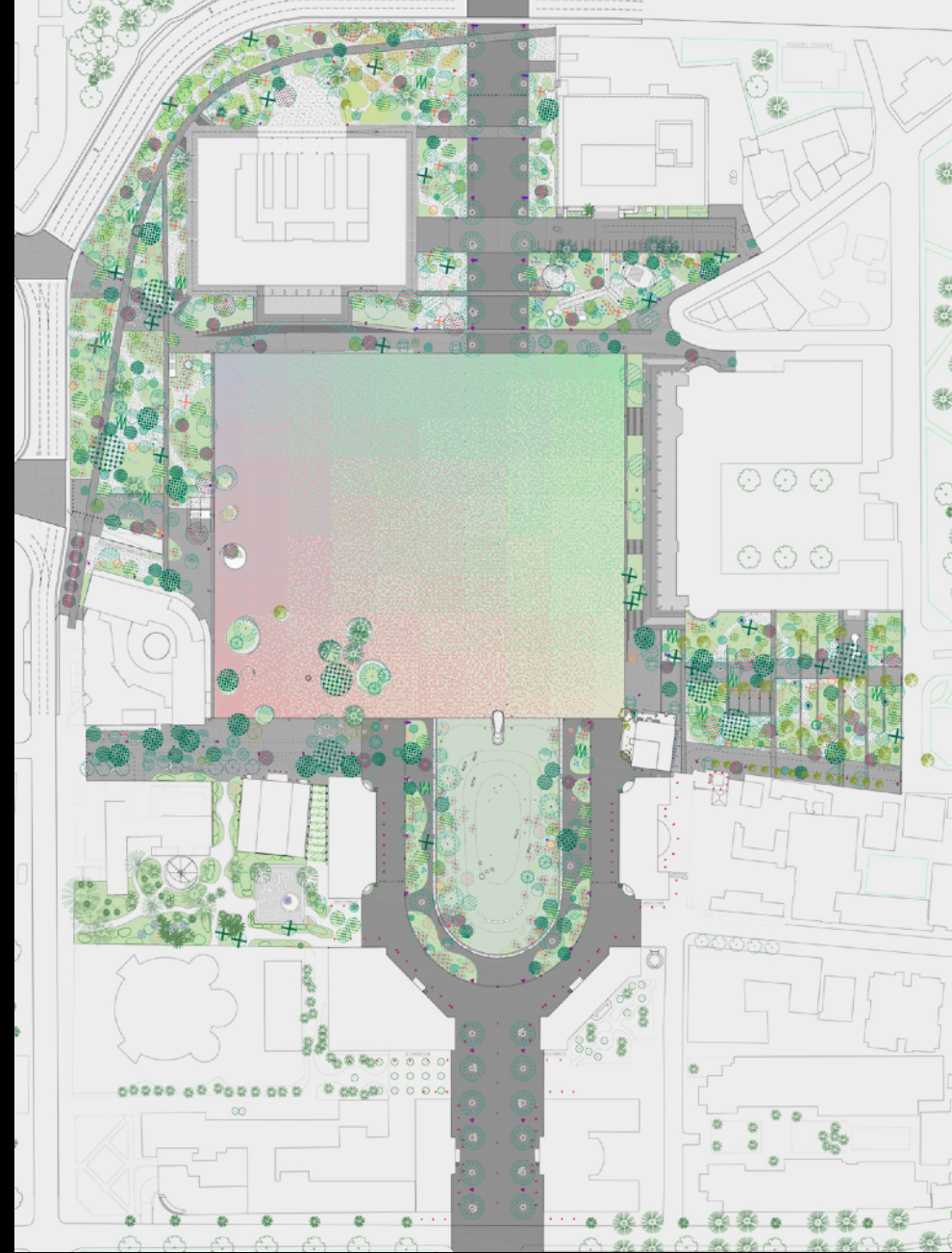
Skanderbeg square

| Tirana | Albania | 51N4E | 2010-2017 |

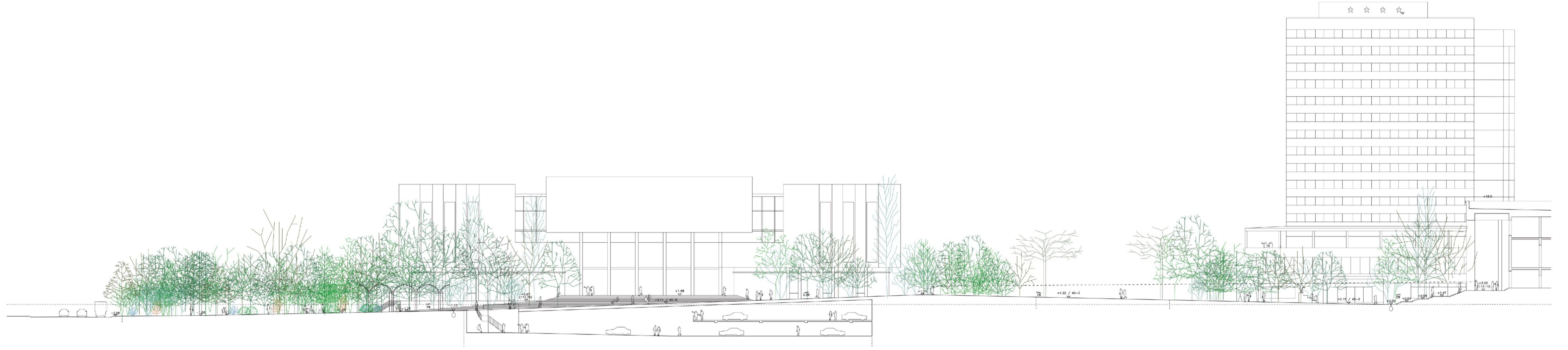
<https://visualhistory.livejournal.com/2064173.html>



use by courtesy of 51N4E.

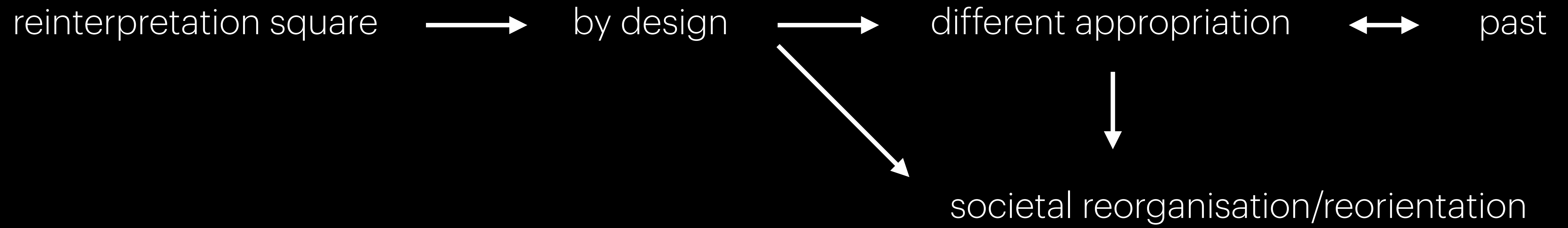


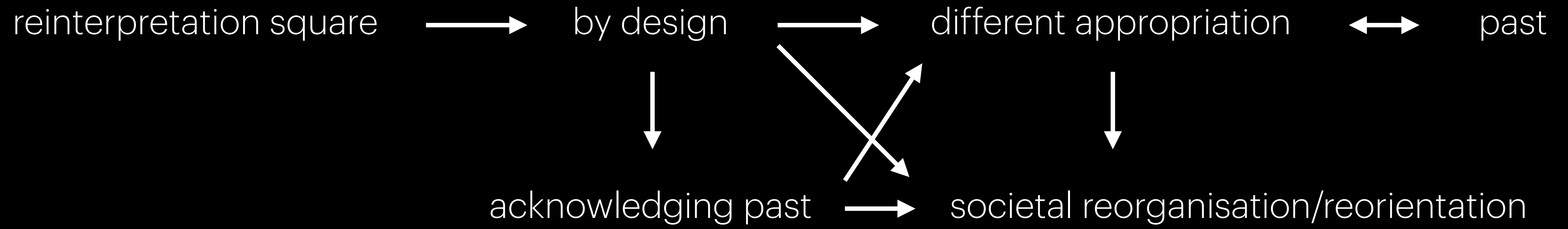
© Filip Dujardin | use by courtesy of 51N4E.

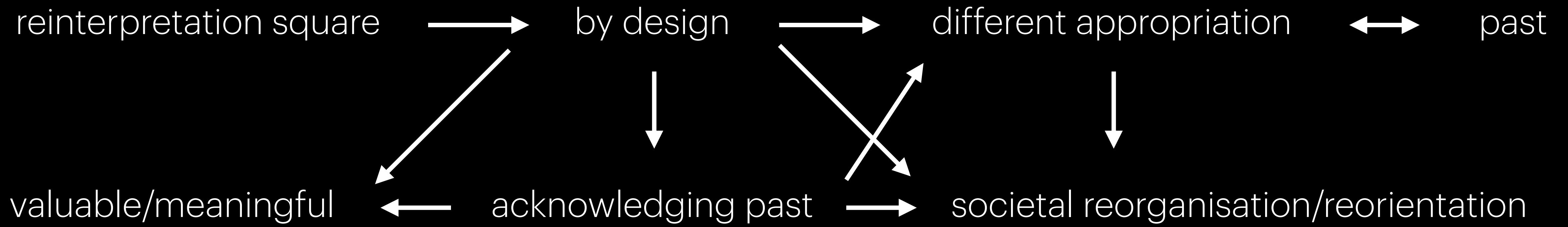


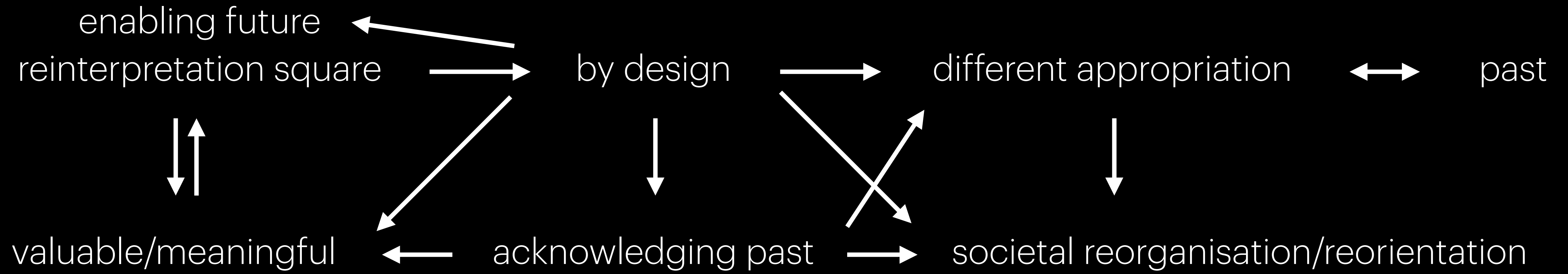
reinterpretation square → by design

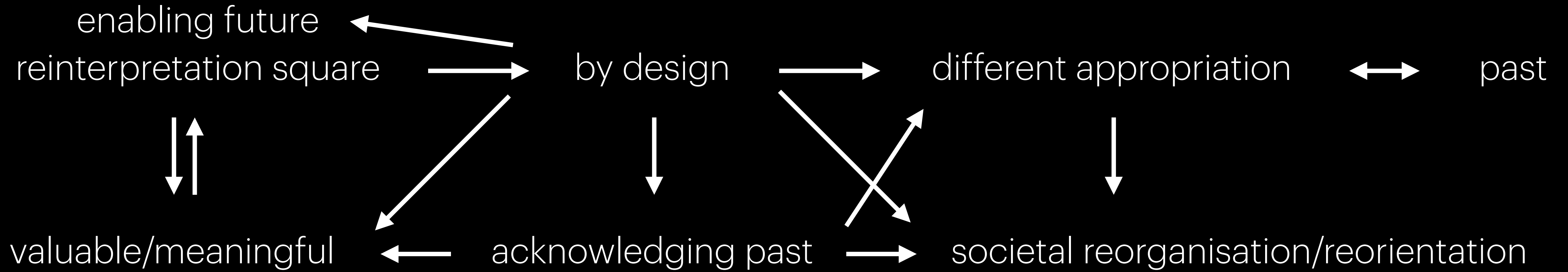
reinterpretation square → by design → different appropriation ↔ past



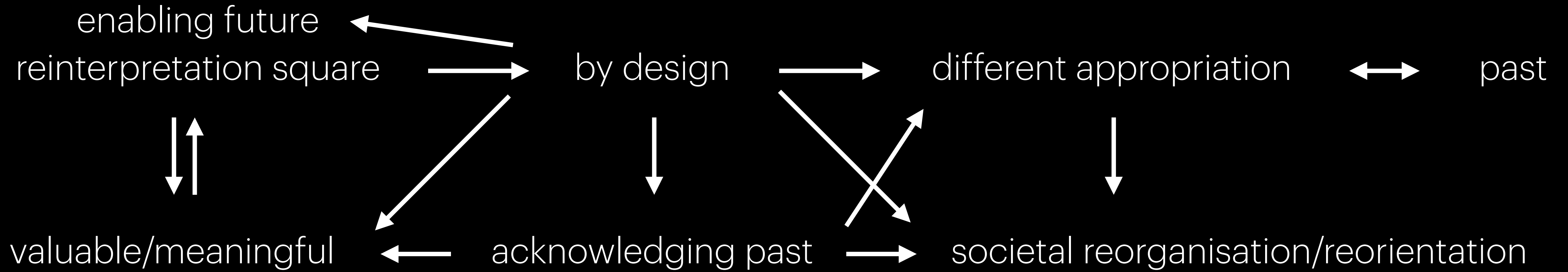








**moral & symbolical dimension
explicitly present
in deliberative design process
& justification**



**moral & symbolical dimension
explicitly present
in deliberative design process
& justification**

+ approbative attitude/judgement/reception +

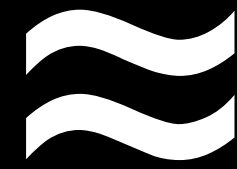
| III_the_explanatory_example(s) |

Indian Residential Schools

| Canada | 1890-1970 |

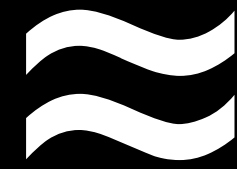
These schools were not actually meant to educate the children but
“to break their link to their culture and identity”.

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meaning-laden, difficult/contested (heritage) sites

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“to break their link to their culture and identity”.



meaning-laden, difficult/contested (heritage) sites



What to do with these school buildings?

St. Michael's
1929-1974
+ 2015

doubtful uses
not acknowledging
history

failed (no funding)
repurposing
closure 2012

(ritually)
demolished
2015

neglect/
demolition
aura
of irrelevance



Kamloops

unmarked
burial sites?

memorial

plan:
healing center

re-use ≈
symbolic
restoration



Stay & Play Packages

Spring Swing

LEARN MORE

St. Eugene

site long

neglected;

dilapidation

run by

indigenous

community

repurposed

symbolic

restoration

tension

ethical

concerns?

deliberative

design

process

**architect's
responsibility**

deliberative
design
process

architect's
responsibility

respecting values, meanings,
acknowledging significance
reinterpretation, revitalization,
emergence, potential

precariously balancing

deliberative
design
process

architect's
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≈ [IV] **adaptive reuse design paradox**

adaptive
reuse design



symbolic (&
moral) dimension

**adaptive
reuse design**

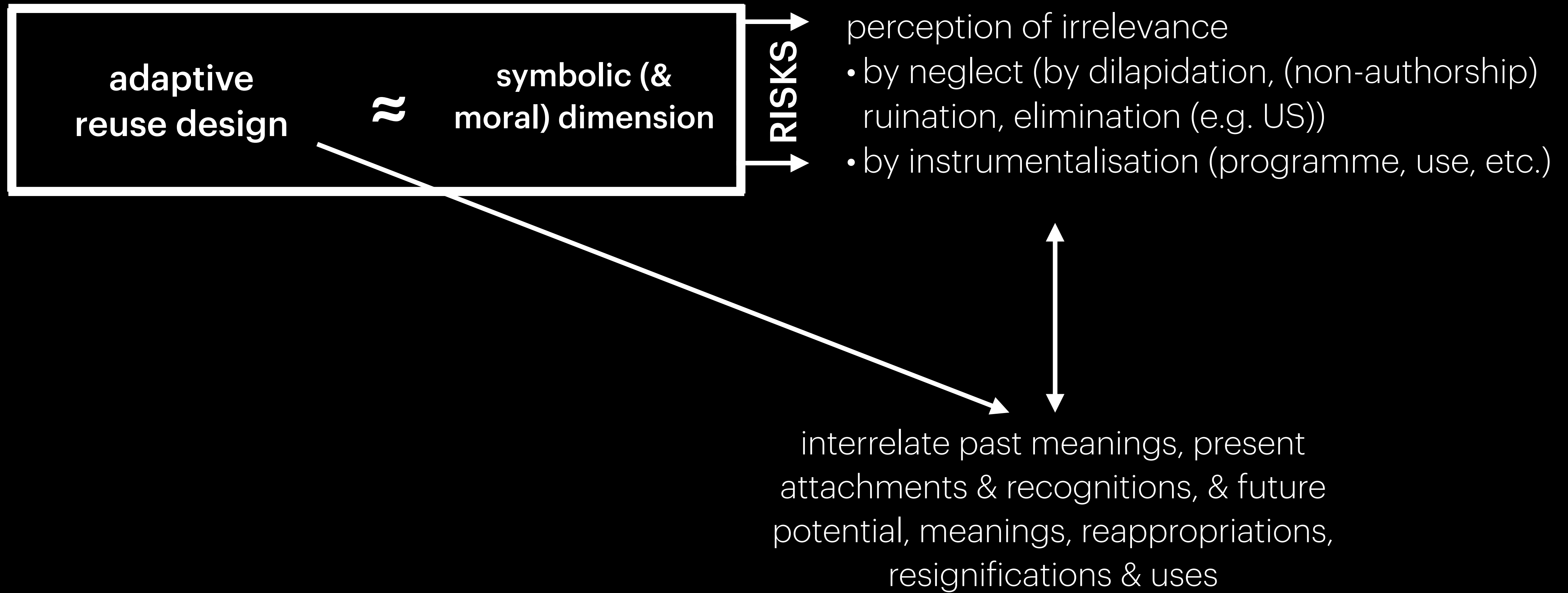
≈

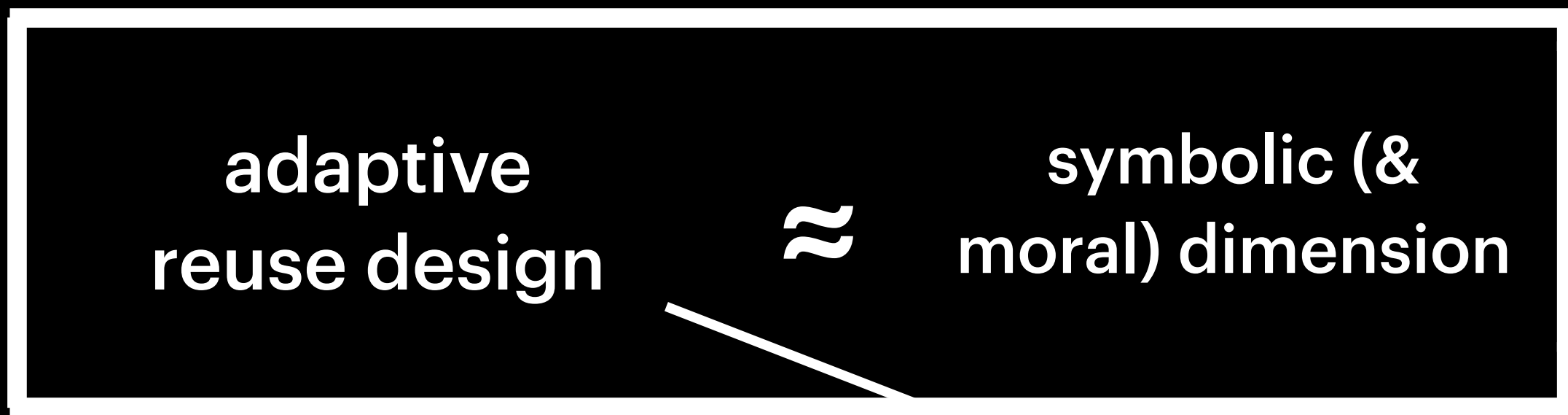
**symbolic (&
moral) dimension**

RISKS

perception of irrelevance

- by neglect (by dilapidation, (non-authorship) ruination, elimination (e.g. US))
- by instrumentalisation (programme, use, etc.)





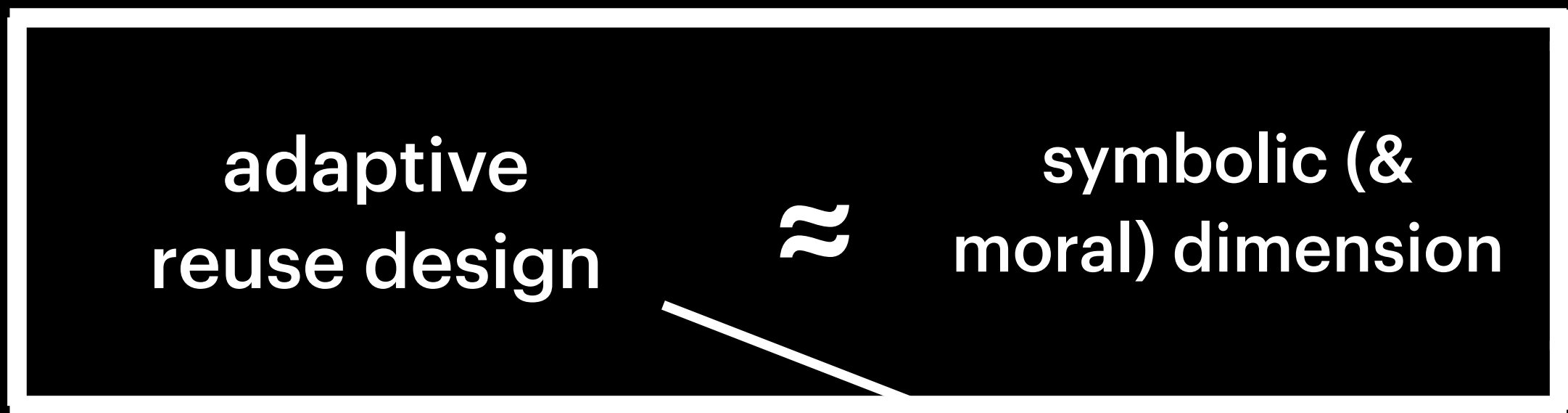
RISKS

- perception of irrelevance
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precarious balance between existent meanings/values and those entitled to unfold & flourish

by design and programme/function/(re-)use

interrelate past meanings, present attachments & recognitions, & future potential, meanings, reappropriations, resignifications & uses



RISKS

- perception of irrelevance
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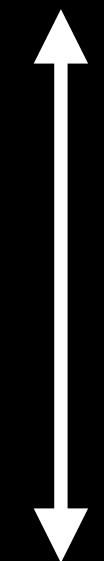
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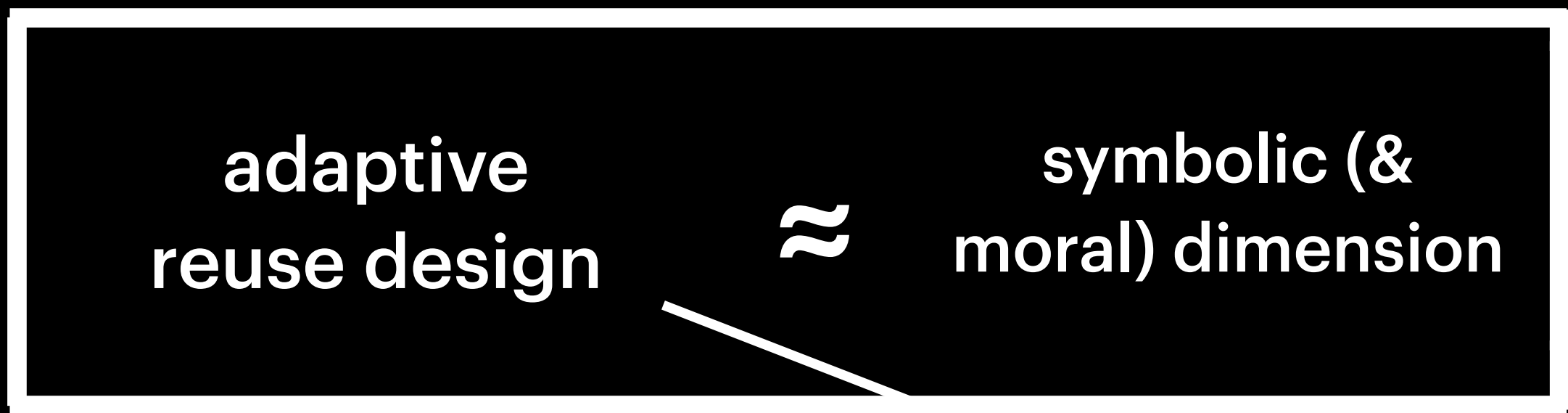
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design (deliberation) \approx judgement about significance



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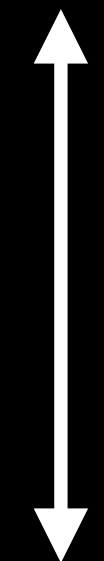
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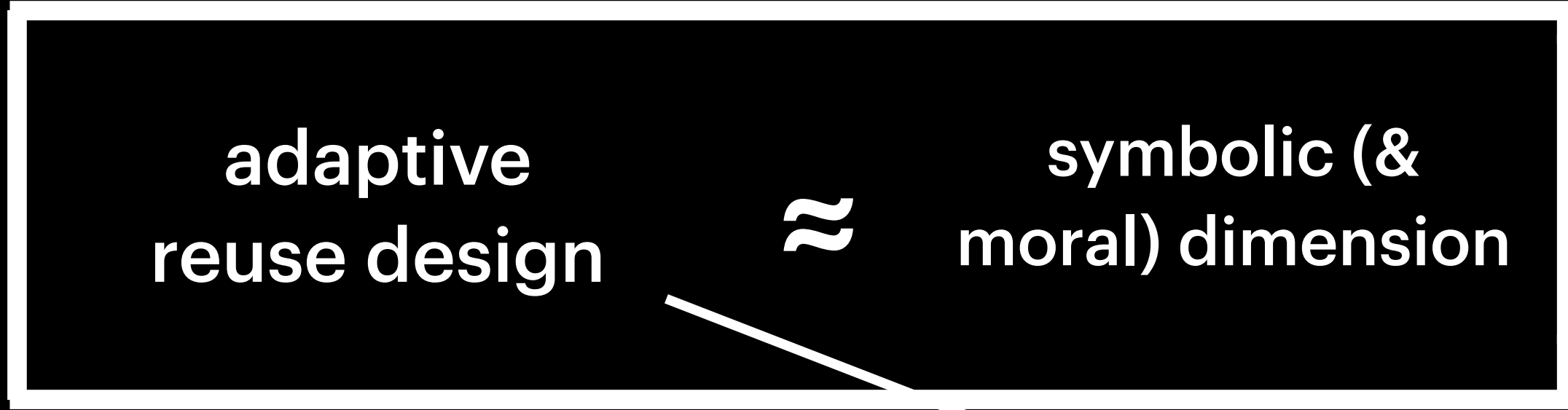
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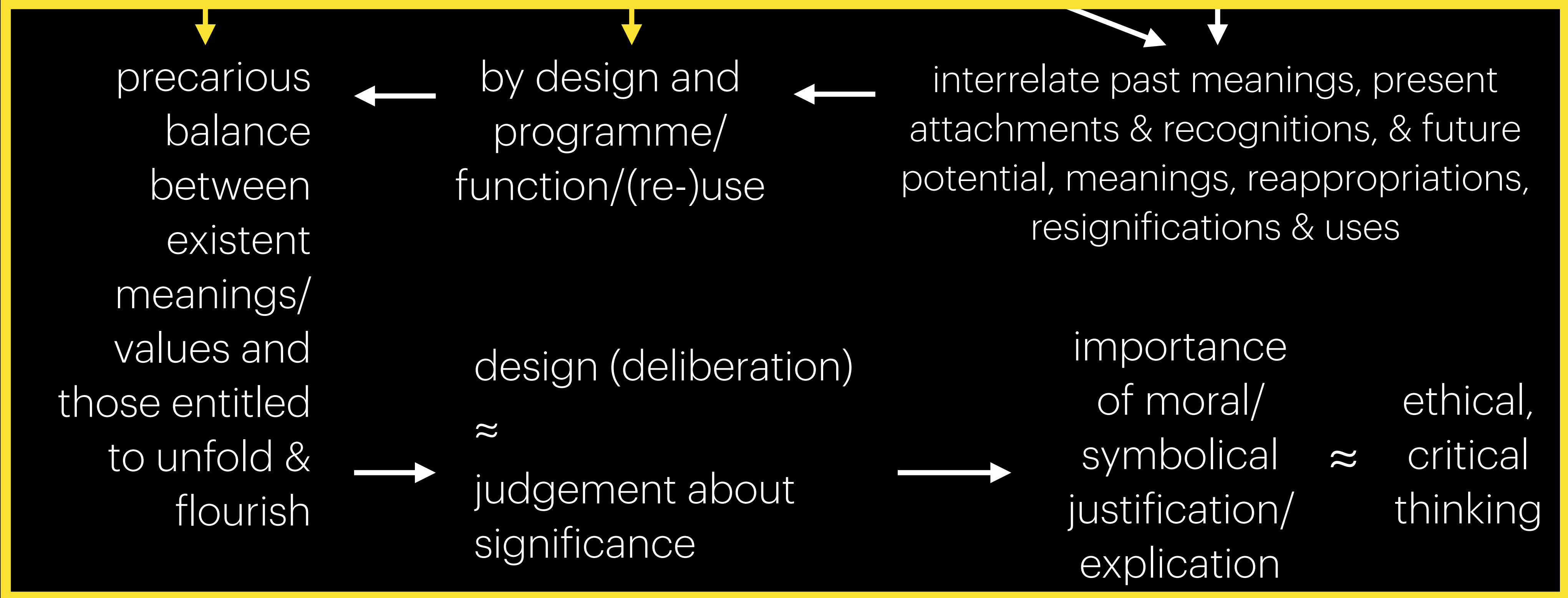
importance of moral/symbolical justification/explication \approx ethical, critical thinking



RISKS

- perception of irrelevance
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- by instrumentalisation (programme, use, etc.)

past & contingent in need of acknowledgement
contingent & future in need of enabling its potential



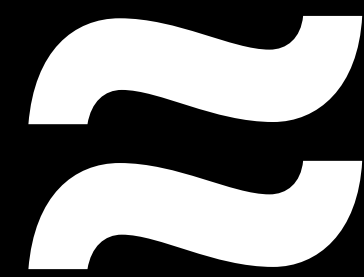
adaptive reuse design paradox

|V|

conclusion

**adaptive
reuse
decisions**

adaptive
reuse
decisions



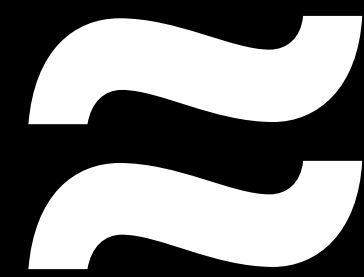
MORALLY

charged symbolic-
value-
meaning-laden

informed recognition
justified
symbolic

accountable explicit
explanation
justification

adaptive
reuse
decisions



MORALLY

charged

symbolic-
value-
meaning-laden

informed

recognition
justified
symbolic

accountable

explicit
explanation
justification

adaptive reuse = architectural design = invested with moral choice = agency/intention

Q1: sufficiently acknowledged in architectural theory, education & practice?

Q2: sufficient effort in supporting architects & students to think and envisage designs in substantially ethical & critical ways?

| Philippe D'Anjou |

| *Ethical design intelligence. The virtuous designer*, p. 155 |

What is problematic is that such [ethical] knowledge is not recognised, not consistently received, and not appropriately included in design education and beyond. Adding to this state of affairs, designers don't really understand that they need a contemplative disposition so as to adopt an ethical perspective on the practice.

| Philippe D'Anjou |

| *Ethical design intelligence. The virtuous designer, p. 155* |

thanks

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[More reading?]

Chris Bessemans, 'The memorial design paradox', *The Journal of Architecture*, 2025.

Chris Bessemans, Koenraad Van Cleempoel, 'Moral awareness and moral deliberation in architecture' [in review, *Architecture Philosophy*, special issue *Ethics in Architecture AIARG 2025 Conference*]

Chris Bessemans, Tine Vandendriesche, 'Ethics, architecture and prison design — a primer', *The Journal of Architecture*, 2024.

Chris Bessemans, Koenraad Van Cleempoel, 'Adaptive reuse: different functions, shifting meanings and moral aftershocks' [in review]

