

Between Imagination and Reality:

*Embodied Spatial Experiences in Special  
Architectural Environments*

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to exist again: the quest for immortality

Nowadays, abandoned and not usable structures could be again brought back to life through adaptive reuse while at the same time their historic value and resources are preserved. *“Such projects of reuse, born of common sense of economy, are referred to by many names today: refurbishment, renovation, rehabilitation, remodeling”*<sup>1</sup> says the architect and author Liliane Wong. For various reasons like land availability, historical importance or environmental concerns, many architects worldwide are using adaptive reuse as a solution to modern problems of the build environment.

Adaptive reuse of each space could give a new identity to the place and make the spatial experience to look totally different in the future. Brian Hutt, director of Denver’s Cushman and Wakefield Office says *“Adaptive reuse projects retain unique and authentic characteristics that cannot be manufactured in new construction. Successful implementation of adaptive reuse development, blends together modern technology with historic structures, creating an atmosphere and sense of place that is impossible to imitate.”*<sup>2</sup> Breathing new life into an old structure can do more than just give a building a whole new purpose. Probably, the architect or designer who takes the initiative to re-design a space is the person that could take those fragments of the past and revitalize them again by imagining how the space could be usable for others in the future.



Professional Cooking School in Ancient Slaughterhouse; Cadiz, Spain, photo via archdaily

<sup>1</sup> Liliane Wong, *Adaptive Reuse, Extending the lives of Buildings*, Birkhäuser Basel, 2017, p. 6

<sup>2</sup> <https://authenticiff.com/journal/repurposing-historic-gems-why-adaptive-reuse-matters>

In the present essay I will try to focus more on the part of the Architect on those examples of adaptive reuse regarding buildings that concern the smaller scale and the direct experience that a person acquires as he is experiencing the newly introduced architectural changes. Juhani Pallasmaa in his book *“Architecture and Empathy”* writes: *“When designing physical spaces, we are also designing, or implicitly specifying distinct experiences, emotions and mental states. In fact, as architects we are operating in the human brain and nervous system as much as in the world of matter and physical construction. I dare to make this statement as science has established that environments change our brains, and those changes in turn alter our behavior.”*<sup>1</sup> By focusing on the experience of the space rather than the form or function of the building, I think architects can impact people in profound and meaningful ways. These thoughts were wandering in my mind as I was in Dedel’s Museum in the center of The Hague, whereas I observed a huge interior with numerous fragments of the past to pose there and look at us, the visitors. But, when I entered inside the dining room, suddenly my feelings stopped in front of the big, empty, oval table in the middle of the room. I immediately felt the need of change in this room and the imminency of introducing something new.

Possibilities: Huis Dedel Dining Room example

Trying to think of some possible scenarios about the past at 18th and 19th century, memories are coming to life as the imagination unleashed in the room and suddenly people are start walking around the room. Sounds of spoons and forks are starting to clink, food is smelling beautifully and start to fill these wonderful porcelain dishes. Discussions between friends, folks, guests and even political figures of the past starting to pour wine in each other’s glasses and happy sometimes ominous voices can be heard. While just a bit further near the dominant fireplace serious voices discuss an issue while drinking brandy and admiring the fresh cut flowers that stand in the middle of the oval table. The viewer can observe the unique surrounding items and let his imagination create a story for each one. Especially in such an obscure room that natural light is coming from the windows and fall on the items, like the small hidden fountain or even the replica drawing on the ceiling, can make the imagination of the viewer go wild. A glorious past is hidden in this room, ideas, thoughts, frustrations, decisions, everything, good or bad. People interact together, talked, dined, drank wine, exchanged ideas, created something new. The space already has a strong scent and that is exactly what I want to keep for the flourishing of new experiences. What could give again this room’s past glory? The best way would be to revive along with other visitors a feast with food and wine, dancing and talking, writing a new story on a new canvas.

<sup>1</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, Harry Francis Mallgrave, Sarah Robinson, Vittorio Gallese, *Architecture and Empathy*, Tapio Wirkkala-Rut Bryk Foundation, 2015, p. 6



detail 1, Huis Dedel Dining Room, The Hague, 2020,  
photo by Georgina Pantazopoulou



detail 2, Huis Dedel Dining Room, The Hague, 2020,  
photo by Georgina Pantazopoulou



detail 3, Huis Dedel Dining Room, The Hague, 2020,  
photo by Georgina Pantazopoulou

As an architect, I immediately tried to think of the various possibilities of reuse considering this room as an example. Quite often, it is really difficult for an architect or a designer to intervene in a space by capturing the existing situation both with designs and by analyzing the atmospheres and experiences of the space than to create something new from the beginning. The question that needs to be asked is what actually interest the architect in each case, what is expressed from each space and what should its new identity be. Many times, it depends on the condition, the damages a building has and in some cases on the need to create something new in the available space.

The old, frozen dining room tells a story through the ravages of time, the faded colors, the surfaces. They are around and they help us in a narrative explanation. Few months ago, I read the book of Leonard Koren “Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers”, about the “Wabi-Sabi”, the traditional Japanese aesthetics whereas the world view is centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection, this quote: *“They are made of materials that are visibly vulnerable to the effects of weathering and human treatment. They record the sun, wind, rain, heat, and cold in a language of discoloration, rust, tarnish, strain, warping, shrinking, shriveling, and cracking. ... they still possess an undiminished poise and strength of character.”*<sup>1</sup> Here, Leonard Koren wrote this book which helped bring the Japanese concept of “Wabi-Sabi” into western aesthetic theory. Inspired by this, my thoughts are that the wear and tear of time always interferes in all buildings and because of this they finally acquire their own personal history that makes them unique.

Undertaking the reuse of such a building, and specifically an old dining room that is now inside a museum, before any design idea I think of the actual experience that one could experience as a visitor in the future, while keeping these fragments of the past that make it special and unique. As an architect I always try to imagine the final spatial experience one gets and taking it into account before start planning anything. The spatial experiences will obviously be special and unique for everyone in the end. It always depends on previous memories and different stimulations that each one has. *No wonder Semir Zeki, a British neurobiologist, suggests the possibility of a theory of aesthetics that is biologically based.*<sup>2</sup> If someone enters the Huis Dedel dining room for a few minutes, this would create a short-memory of its spatial experience. He stands up, observes around, might touch something before arrives on the table together with others and exactly that spatial experience would be the common denominator of the all visitors in that room. Alain de Botton in his book *The Architecture of Happiness*, 2008, writes: *“our sensitivity to our surroundings may be traced back to a troubling feature of human psychology: to the way harbor within us many different selves, not all of which feel equally like ‘us’, so much so that in certain moods, we can complain of having come adrift from what we judge to be our true selves.”*<sup>3</sup> Definitely, the truth behind the mutual spatial experiences differs between each other, but the issue that I am interested more in that project is the silver lining between the memory elements through a number of human experiences in the same place and time when they are all together for the same reason.

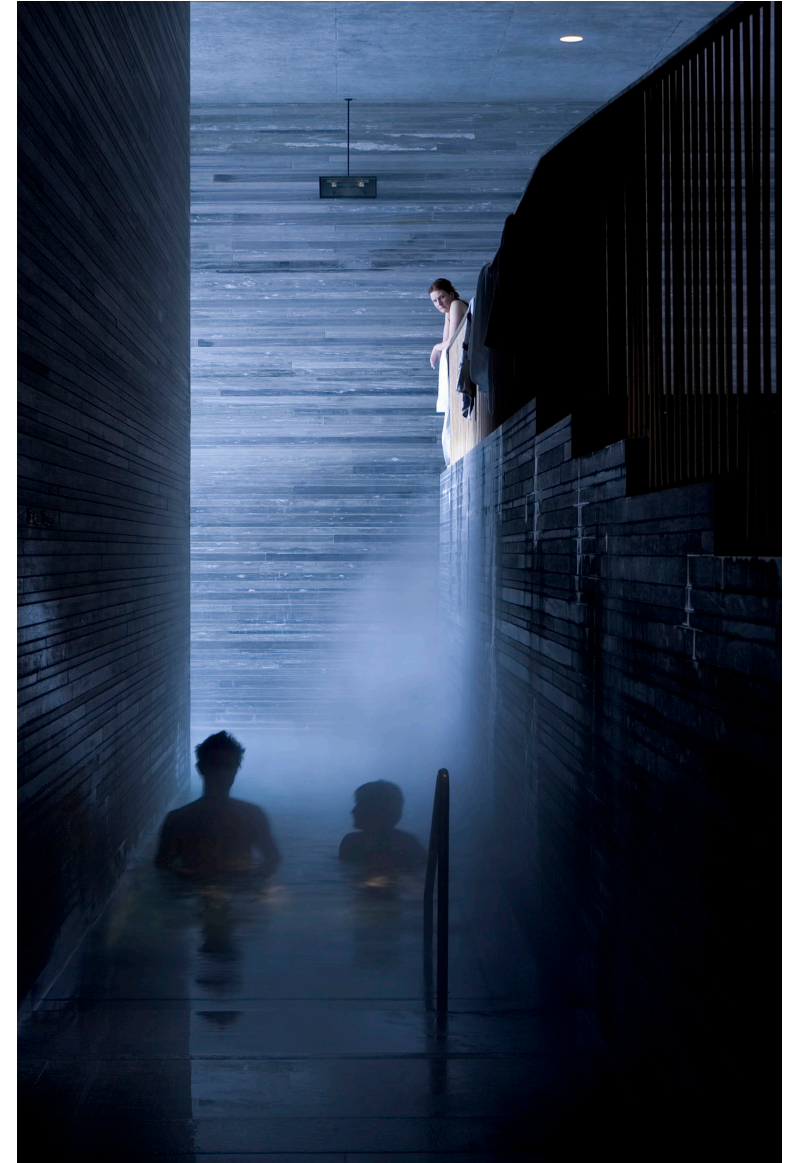
<sup>1</sup> Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, Imperfect Publishing Point Reyes, 2008, p. 62

<sup>2</sup> Semir Zeki discusses the notion at length in his book *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, *Ideals of Home – Memory*, Vintage International, 2006, p. 106



*Under construction, Center of Vienna, 2019,  
Photo by Georgina Pantazopoulou*



*Peter Zumthor's Thermen Vals, Switzerland, 1996,  
photo via google-uploads*

The reasons why different people can be found in an area of architectural interest obviously vary. It could be that is just a visitor to a museum for an exhibition, a gathering, or just a party. In the example of Huis Dedel and specifically of the dining room, I as architect, could re-activate the use of the room and really invite some people who are interested in experiencing and sharing the spatial experience of this space by creating a dinner. The table invites the people to be again close to each other, to stay together, to eat, to drink, to dance, to communicate, to share their experiences, to release their bodies and minds again. This is a part of a story that belongs to the future. But, how could someone be there from the present?



Panigiri of Lagada, Ikaria,  
15/08/2017,  
photographer: Spyros  
Staveris



Central panel of  
Hieronymus Bosch,  
The Garden of Earthly  
Delights, 1490-1500.  
Image via Wikimedia  
Commons

Inspiring by Plato's Symposium, I am trying to imagine my own guests taking part in a banquet around the dining table and following a series of experiences from which new experiences will emerge from a previous one. In Plato's Symposium example, first of all the tenancies eat, drink the wine, seat comfortable and when they feel ready physically and mentality, the symposium starts. *"Socrates took his place on the couch, and supped with the rest; and then libations were offered, and after a hymn had been sung to the god, 20 and there had been the usual ceremonies, they were about to commence drinking"*<sup>1</sup> The question arises on what prompted all of them to take part on that symposium and share their current experiences? In contrast this with the case of Dedel's dining room, I would emphasize that the existed past (the history and our short-memory from our recent visit as students) is mixed with the present and like a semi-transparent veil spreads everywhere inside and drives the forgotten emotions beginning to move into a new, contemporary symposium which belongs to the future.

Symposium scene,  
banqueters playing the  
kottabos game while a  
girl plays the aulos. Attic  
red-figure bell-krater, ca.  
420 BC, Nikias Painter,  
Museo Arqueológico  
Nacional de España,  
Madrid, Spain



### conclusion

The example of the symposium and the sharing of different spatial experiences could be part of the redesign of the space. Architectural experiences are often stronger when you combine them with familiar things, such as eating, drinking and talking to a friend in a specific place. It is a process of appropriation of the place and this unquestionably makes each person to correlate the place with his own personal memories and become eager to create new ones there. And, as Pallasmaa says *"Existentially meaningful architectural images cannot be mere formal fabrications or inventions, as they are bound to echo our mental world, and artistic experiences are thus essentially exchange; we experience them as part of our life world and give them their meanings."*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, translated by Benjamin Jowett according the Greek edition Πλάτων, Συμπόσιον (ή περί Έρωτος) translated by Andreadi Electra, Αρχαία Ελληνική Γραμματεία, ΚΑΚΤΟΣ, 1992, p. 37

<sup>2</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, Harry Francis Mallgrave, Sarah Robinson, Vittorio Gallese, *Architecture and Empathy*, Tapio Wirkkala-Rut Bryk Foundation, 2015, p. 10

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4. **Leonard Koren**, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, Imperfect Publishing Point Reyes, 2008
5. Semir Zeki discusses the notion at length in his book *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
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Notes:



Thank You