

THE ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF BUILDINGS: REMEMBRANCE OR OBLIVION? Stella MARIS CASAL*, Argentine / Argentina

The aim of this short presentation is to introduce a few points of reflection and debate when adapting old buildings to new uses, focusing on what regards cultural and architectural criteria. Considerations are mostly based on industrial heritage conversion because functional architecture, due to its particular qualities, goes through this kind of processes more frequently and with more critical proposals.

When a building or a site loses its original function, it is possible to save it from abandonment or demolition by adapting it to a new use. This is a current practice world wide, particularly in the case of remarkable architecture that remains in good conditions, where spaces are flexible and the settlement is of special interest, as it is the case of many industrial settlements.

Monuments, from the most important to the humblest ones, are included on the list of these adaptive re-use actions. Any intervention needs a previous evaluation, and, particularly in these cases, not only a fitted diagnosis and appraisal but also a well-conceived programme and high-quality design skills are requested to assure a successful result.

Concerning the new function and following the criterion that the best use for a building is that for which it was created, when, due to different reasons, it becomes obsolete, it is clear that if the new programme is very similar to the original one, that conversion has more chances of success with less intervention. On the contrary, if the programme is very different, a more severe intervention on the building's general structure will be needed and the result could then be quite critical for the preservation and enhancement of its identity.

With regard to design, decisions resulting in creative details that differ from the original in terms of harmony should be privileged, thus making clearly legible the existing architecture being enhanced and the part of the new proposal that is enhancing it, while allowing for the new function. A solid design training, common sense, sensitivity, creativity, inspiration and, above all, respect for the old are a must for the professional -individual or team- in charge of the project.

In exceptional cases, it is possible to transform a monumental building into a museum of itself, preserving almost all its features, *except its real life*. However, most of our built heritage must be adapted to assure its conservation and undergo a renovation based on parameters that save its material values with more or less success in order to host a new function, *which keeps it alive*. Mummification or change? Conversion and dilemma come along.

While conversion is considered by experts as just one of the means to preserve our built heritage, it is perceived as good business by private investors, who have quickly understood the added economical value of prestige among the public.

Still, the intangible dimension of built heritage is seldom fully understood (by investors and architects alike) so as to include it into the "*spirit*" of the new function as an important aspect of the proposal. Particularly in the case of industrial buildings, prestige and value are frequently associated with the materiality of built heritage, but seldom with its very essence.

Industrial/functional buildings are, by definition, "*specific function-holders*", each space specially designed to host specific machinery, process, activity, etc. (Fig. 1). Still, when they lose their original function, most of them also prove to be solid, have flexible spatial qualities and be of expressive interest. If the settlement has some potential for development, there is an attractive conversion business in sight. For the investor, these obvious qualities are enough, and it is the professional's responsibility to make the best of the adapting process for the client, but also for the building and the site, and last but not least, for the community.

In that sense, it is not enough to carry out historical research and a careful survey and appraisal of architectural qualities and technical conditions. As mentioned above, the intangible dimension of the building and its environment must be carefully considered. Common, well-intentioned practice understands that as keeping some references, such as the name, leaving and even exhibiting some original pieces, pictures, etc.

It is not enough to keep the original denomination. Sometimes the adaptive re-use is so contradictory to the original one, that the name becomes an "*exotic*" or inappropriate denomination. Needless to say, efforts must be made in order to keep the original name *as well*. (Fig. 2)

It is not enough to keep part of the original infrastructure (machinery, etc.) or exhibiting old pictures of its active past. It might turn out to be capricious if they are not part of the whole conversion discourse, and might soon be removed as disturbing objects. Again, of course, efforts must be made in order to keep those relics and testimonies *as well*.

Architecture acquires with time immaterial values linked to unexpected social references. It represents not only the historical testimony (Fig. 3). Many different bonds can be established through time or even in a short period of time, between a place or a building and a society: the small factory that offered their first job to neighbourhood youngsters, the prestigious laboratory that sponsored the school's sports team, the market that used to organise the town's spring dance, the warehouse that children explored on holidays looking for ghosts, etc. Even if that bond is relevant only for a minority, it is worthy of attention. Each case is unique and only one rule can be applied to them all: *to pay tribute to those messages that constitute the intangible values of our heritage.*

When the message is forgotten or shadowed by revitalisation works, can we say it is "giving a new cycle of life" to those monuments? What happens when the message has changed through time, or comes from a misunderstanding? What should the professional attitude be? And even more challenging, how to make materially visible those intangible messages? I am afraid we still have more questions than certainties. There are no recipes. Each case must be thoroughly assessed and from that appraisal a creative response must derive in order to enhance the material and intangible values of the building and its environment.

The Nara Conference on Authenticity¹ clearly stated that *"all cultures and societies are rooted in the particular forms and means of tangible and intangible expression which constitute their heritage, and these should be respected"*. When referring to the parameters that must be taken into account with regard to authenticity, it mentions *"form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors"*.

Spirit and feeling is what makes the buildings a living part of our environment. It is interesting to point out that when J. M. Richards wrote his pioneering essay on the re-discovery of the values of industrial buildings², he also referred to the *"enterprising spirit"* they express. The more we know about this immaterial essence of architecture, the more we will be prepared to give a fitted response to the challenge of keeping monuments alive and lively with respectful conversions that rescue their past and assure them a promising future.

Reference to illustrations

1. Alpargatas, Buenos Aires. Textile factory hall during productive times: designed to host that specific function and its machinery, the space is flexible enough to host different activities. (Photo: AGN)

2. Abasto Shopping (former Mercado de Abasto), Buenos Aires. Although the name and exterior image were preserved, the conversion of the interior leaves little room to appreciate the true atmosphere and architectural qualities of this remarkable building (Photos: Stella Maris Casal)
3. Corner of Callao Ave. and Sarmiento St., Buenos Aires. This general store building dating from 1912 went through several adaptive re-uses throughout the XX. century, each one with its own name: Casa Mousson, Bazaar Dos Mundos, Fundación Banco Patricios among the most known. Although the name changed, the building remained as a landmark for BA citizens. Keeping its dignity and spirit, it is currently waiting for a new cycle of life. (Photos: old, AGN, current state, Stella Maris Casal)
4. The Familistere at Guise, and a group of proud workers, expression of the spirit and the intangible message of functional buildings. (Reproduced from the cover of "Jean Baptiste Andre Godin, 1817-1888". Bruxelles, AAM Editors, 1980. Colour drawing by Sefik Birkiye)

ABSTRACT

When a building or a site loses its original function, it can be rescued them from abandonment or demolition by adapting them to a new use, specially if their architecture is remarkable and remains in good condition, the areas are flexible and/or the settlement is of special interest. Monuments, from the most important to the humblest ones, are on top of the list of these adaptive re-use policies. Some of them are transformed into museums of themselves, but most of them suffer a renovation based on parameters that preserve their material values with more or less success in order to host a new function. Still, their intangible dimension is seldom fully understood so as to include it into the "spirit" of the new function. If their message is forgotten or shadowed by the revitalisation work, can we call it "giving a new cycle of life" to those monuments?

The aim of my proposal is to introduce these points of debate when adapting industrial heritage buildings to new uses, focusing on what concerns cultural and architectural criteria.

*Stella MARIS CASAL

Architect, expert in conservation of buildings. Private practice, teaching and research activities focused on the adaptive re-use of buildings. Professor at the University of Buenos Aires and University of Belgrano and guest lecturer in universities of Argentina and abroad. Regional editor for Argentina of The Journal of Architecture (RIBA, London, UK). Member of ICOMOS and DOCOMOMO. Secretary of TICCIH's Argentine working party.

¹ Nara Conference on Authenticity, Japan, UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOMOS, 1994. Edited by Knut Einar Larsen. (Articles 7 and 13)

² J. M. Richards, "The functional tradition as shown in early industrial buildings". The Architectural Review, July 1957

**THE ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF BUILDINGS:
REMEMBRANCE OR OBLIVION?
Stella MARIS CASAL*, Argentine / Argentina**





