

The spirit of place and the new uses

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Abstract. What happens with the spirit of place of a building that becomes functionally obsolete but is worth reconvertng? It is a challenge in our current preservation practice to develop sustainable and creative strategies to rescue old buildings. Experts tend to concentrate on the theoretical, technical and management solutions. The intangible aspects that sustain the identity of the material structure are usually known but seldom taken into account, let alone enhanced, when the revitalisation programme is carried out. The aim of this paper is to propose a few items to which the intervention programme should pay attention in order to add to the whole revitalisation of both, material and intangible values of a building.

Concerning spirits and facts

We all know what happens when a building loses its function: abandonment, decay, oblivion, lost. We can also understand the reasons for this process: the original use for which it was designed is no more necessary or allowed, the structure becomes obsolete and might even threaten collapsing but its restoration represents an investment not affordable or justified by the owners, the neighbourhood changes and pushes the moving of the activity to another area, society evolves. The cause-effect in this process is well known by experts and ordinary people. Last but not least, the effect will most likely affect its surrounding area, the most important the building, the bigger the effect of its decay in the area. This can eventually (seldom) be controlled if the building is recognisable as part of the towns' built heritage and both community and authorities

are aware of the impact in the environment and have the right tools and the prevent the lost. When it happens, adapting the buildings to new uses is a frequent practice in order to preserve it. Still, it is usually difficult to foresee the impact of the conversion in the building and its environment when it goes through a change of use. Whether the rehabilitation carried out in the building becomes a successful enhancement or a failure from the economic point of view, the result can hardly be guaranteed in terms of rescuing its spirit and its cultural message. A few cases might help us to open the discussion:

An industrial building settled in a central neighbourhood in town becomes functionally obsolete. It starts to decay and its maintenance and functioning becomes economically unsustainable. Instead of facing the reactivation the owners decide either to stop producing or to move somewhere else. The surrounding area, which had always kept a close interaction with the factory, goes through deterioration, too. The remarkable relic remains as a testimony of better times. After a period of neglecting and oblivion, a renovation public or private policy is carried out. The building is reconverted. Following the impulse given by the new activity, the area changes too. The impact is evident. What of the original *working area* spirit is left?

A remarkable and luxurious academic building is built in a residential area for an aristocratic family. When the original owners pass away it is inherited by too many descendants. For decades it is part timed among the many relatives but it starts to deteriorate due to the high costs of maintenance and it is put on sale. A private investor adapts it to host a sophisticate five star hotel with commercial facilities. Great business and the quiet area becomes lively and active. What of the original *residential ambiance* spirit is left?

A prison in town is moved to the outskirts. For many years the frightening complex remains void and abandoned while its imposing silhouette recalls the inhabitants painful and dark memories. Following the new and globally extent tourist tendencies that privilege “exceptional” experiences, the original building is reconverted into a fashionable thematic hotel. Is people really willing to rescue the very *freedomless* spirit of the place?

Old spirit, new uses: the case of Buenos Aires 20th century heritage

The first two situations briefly introduced above refer to present Buenos Aires experiences with regard to the adaptation of early 20th century buildings to new uses. Although the first case, that of the industrial heritage, can be explained by several examples, two might be worth mentioning here to outline opposite attitudes towards the taking into consideration and the enhancement of the buildings' spirit: the Abasto supply market (1889-93, the older iron structure building, and 1934, by Del Pini, Sulcic & Bes, engineers & architects, the concrete vaults sector) and the Dall'Acqua textile factory (1894, by Luis Comastri, architect),.

In the case of the Abasto market, the impact of the conversion from being the central supply market in town to the Abasto Shopping mall, in 1998, (*Figure 1*), was going to produced a highly controversial impact both in the building and the area. Even when it was adapted to a similar commercial activity, and with minor interventions in the exterior facades, no trace of the original function and space remains, just the name of the building was preserved. Every effort was focused in rescuing a partial aspect of its history, that is the relation of the building and the neighbourhood with the tango culture. That policy produced a highly appealing tourist attraction, a successful commercial investment, a quite pleasant shopping promenade and at the same time, a completely out of control real state boom in the surrounding area. The traffic chaos increased, the environmental standards decayed. The former inhabitants, the ones that kept a close bound with the building's history, were pushed away because they could no longer afford the steadily increasing rents and were replaced by "newcomers", eventual visitors and tourists. The building's remarkable structure remains, though concealed behind a new and sound commercial equipment and image. Its name has become an economic value based on the new development better than on its cultural signification. The area is reactivated and lively, but following all this uncontrolled development, the spirit of both the building and the neighbourhood is lost.



Figure 1. Abasto Shopping Mall, formerly the Abasto market (Photo: Stella Maris Casal)

The Dall’Aqua textile factory reconversion into modern dwellings, the so-called “Lofts de Darwin”, in 1990, (*Figure 2*), on the other hand, was carried out in a way that produced a more controlled and beneficial effect. The brief included the challenging adaptation of free plans formerly conceived to host open working spaces to living flexible units, and it was solved by developing a sensitive though not minimal intervention. This conversion had also its impact in the area, but unlike in the former case, it did not produce a damaging effect in its character. The neighbourhood has kept its suburban quiet ambiance and at the same time started a slow but steadily positive reactivation, with new investments but with several original owners making efforts to improve their houses, too. Still, even when the sound and charming presence of the brick facades recall the industrial origin of the building and its familiar presence in the townscape is preserved, it is not clear whether the building is for most of the new inhabitants in the area a reference of the past working spirit of the neighbourhood or just another old building in town with a new use.



Figure 2. Lofts de Darwin, formerly the Casa Dall’Acqua textile factory
(Photo: Stella Maris Casal)

The second situation mentioned, that of the academic architectural heritage, can be exemplified by several show cases. The two examples that follow are both leading to the same concerning result: the spirit of the place is gone. Far from being the exceptions, they represent most usual and concerning situation to be found. The first in chronological order is that of the so called Palacio Alzaga Unzué (1916/19, by Roberto Prentice, architect), currently the Buenos Aires Four Seasons hotel (*Figure 3*). While the original house, formerly the urban residence of an aristocratic family built according to the Beaux Arts rules, was kept and reconverted in luxury suites, the magnificent garden that was a valuable part of the ensemble disappeared to give room to the hotel tower. The message of the architectural heritage somehow remains, since the intervention aimed at rescuing its original spaces, but the natural heritage that was framing and enhancing the whole disappeared and thus the cultural message is now incomplete, part of its spirit has vanished.



Figure 3. Buenos Aires Four Seasons Hotel, formerly the Palacio Alzaga Unzué residence (Photo: Fernando Couturier)

The next example is the recently finished rehabilitation of the Palacio Duhau (1934, by León Dourge, architect), another aristocratic urban residence, to host a classy five star hotel in town, the Park Hyatt (*Figure 4*). This impressive building, which is part of one of the more consolidated academic street-lines of Buenos Aires, also lost its remarkable backyard garden in order to build a new residential tower for the hotel. Thus, and like in the former case, only part of the cultural message was kept. But while the adapting of the Alzaga Unzué residence, surrounded by an already strongly modified environment, produced little change in the area urban rhythm, in this case, the new use is starting a steadily increasing though subtle modification of the area's quiet life. Too early still to assert whether this change will dangerously affect its residential spirit, but timely enough to realise that the lost of the garden has unfortunately and definitively made the house spirits move away, beyond all the campaigns and efforts made by experts and the community to prevent it.



Figure 4. The Buenos Aires Park Hyatt hotel, formerly the Palacio Duhau residence (Photo: María Juárez)

The third case, that of the jail, cannot be exemplified in Buenos Aires -yet-, but does have a referent in the Ushuaia prison, in the southern edge of Argentina and it is a practice that can be found in several countries around the world. Part of the original complex remains as a museum and part hosts hotel facilities. The question here has more to do with philosophical matters than with a preservation practice: is the possibility of sleeping in a jail for a couple of nights rescuing the very spirit of the place? What is the aim at that? Isn't it a quite frivolous reference and a poor memorial to what lack of freedom and social concept of punishment to crime means?

The present challenges

It is evident the in each of the situations briefly and basically described below the impact of the intervention is changing the perception of the original architectural character and the relation with the environment as well. The key question is whether this perception

can be preserved, shaped, and eventually improved by the adaptive re-use action in order to enhance the spirit of the place or it should be considered as an issue out of the control of the professionals involved.

A positive answer seems mandatory: the enhancement of the spirit of the place must be part and a conscious consequence of the rehabilitation plan. Still, how can the spirit of the place be enhanced when its *raison d'être* has disappeared? On the other hand, if the spirit of the place is genuine and strongly settled, how can a rehabilitation plan modify it or make it vanish? Was it a genuine intangible spirit? And furthermore, have architects and preservationists, trained to work on the tangible, the necessary tools to work on the preservation of the intangible?

To develop the right tools for a preservation plan that conserves the spirit of the place demands a critic approach to the evaluation of what has been done so far. Why did the former examples failed in doing so? It is clear that each time a rehabilitation plan is carried out, experts aim at doing their best to give it a new cycle of life, investors are looking forward to obtaining a good profit and authorities are expecting and requesting an improvement in the environmental standards and community welfare. All parts involved are looking forward to obtaining the best, but are they consciously doing their best to enlighten the message that the site is preserving in its intangible essence? To present, results show a quite flexible position in which the spirit of the place is seldom part of the determining issues, let alone part of the previous survey and diagnose. Particularly in the case of the buildings that adapt to new uses, a deeper effort should be done in order to foresee the impact of the new function in the “behaviour” of building with regard to its original character and that of its environment.

The adaptive re-use of existent buildings has been a permanent attitude all along the history of architecture. In what particularly concerns functional buildings, they suggest many possibilities for new uses. They offer flexible large open spaces, are solidly built, supported by a structurally resistant grid of columns and beams. Functional buildings have also a strong character which, unlike in the case of academic architecture, is seldom completely appreciated. They deserve from us a particular attention in order to prevent that the conversion could destroy their very essence. In both cases, the unity of the original idea to its settlement and the philosophy laying beneath its design are intangible values to be taken into account.

Since the economic argument for rehabilitation or adaptive re-use is powerful, the concept that the success of the intervention will be inevitably linked to the rescuing of the whole message of the site must be introduced. This does not necessarily demands more investments, cares and efforts than the enhancement of the material architectural values and significance of the original buildings. The rescue of their image and original architectural values is already and often used as a marketing tool and economic surplus, but the effect of the new programme on the building and the environment do not seem to be part of the design parameters. On this particular point there is still a long way ahead.

Rescuing the spirit of a place which goes through rehabilitation is a challenging task. It needs that professionals involved are more aware of the intangible message that lies beneath the material message. They should be ready to react with sensitivity, and also with creativity to enhance the hidden cultural references. Successful results will not be a problem of major or minor architectural resources, but plainly of a good architectural brief and proposal, based on a deep knowledge of the theoretical background with regard to preserving the spirit of the place. The preservation of our architectural heritage is certainly not a task just for architects but a multidisciplinary activity, but it is the architect who finally has to translate into concrete material actions the ideas for the rehabilitation and thus preserve and enlighten the intangible message of our built heritage.