

Repurpose or Rewrite?

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Abstract

"If a man was able to live in the memories, he would not have to create spaces in the name of these memories. Memory is a constant and current problem; one that connects us with the eternal present, while history only represents the past". History is not always pleasant, nor is it dead. When we are faced with old structures and historic buildings we always think of "preservation", but what if we don't want to preserve those values? Architecture holds meaning, and so does the site. history is not beautiful and we cannot gloss over it. The point is, when we are dealing with old architecture, we don't always have to preserve it for what it was. We not only have to be sensitive, but also be able to see the flaws. The city is a funny thing, we claim it to be so new and fresh while pockets of it still exist exactly the way they used to a hundred years ago. Afterall, architecture does carry memory. Building on old structures not only requires the architect to be sensitive to the structure, but also to the ideology. Anger is a valid emotion, even for architecture. Why make ruins of places which have lost their meaning when we can choose to tell a story through them?

Keywords –

Historic Architecture, Reclamation, Remodeling, Eclectic historicist style, Elite architecture, Vernacular architecture

"If a man was able to live in the memories, he would not have to create spaces in the name of these memories. Memory is a constant and current problem; one that connects us with the eternal present, while history only represents the past" [1]

Architecture is closely related to memory; we craft spaces which remind us of things we want to remember. But what about those memories which we want to forget. How do we face the difficult questions - are we to gloss over memories, carefully hide and push the anger under the rug?

History is not always pleasant, nor is it dead. When we are faced with old structures and historic buildings we always think of "preservation", but what if we don't want to preserve those values? Architecture holds meaning, and so does the site. Sometimes demolition is the answer while other times, propping up with an exoskeleton of scaffolding is.

But sometimes, very rarely, we need a visual reminder of reclamation, a reminder of anger and change.

In Dresden, the government shut down their military museum, unsure about how to come to terms with their tainted history. [2] The building began its life as an armoury, before becoming the Saxon Army Museum, followed by a stint as a Nazi military museum, then a Soviet and East German Museum. In 2011, Libeskind's intervention broke the opaque and rigid classical building from within. His parents were Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust in a Soviet labour camp and later moved to the United States [3]. For him, to build this museum, was a part of reclaiming history. The building speaks for itself now- a shard of glass, a wedge sticking out of the façade (and the city's history) and pointing to the site of the bombing to the west of the city. It provides a place



fig.1: Source: Photograph by DAPD
The tip of the Libeskind wedge points toward Ostragehege stadium in the west of the city, where Allied planes dropped target indicators on February 13, 1945 at the start of the aerial bombardment which killed more than 35,000 people;



fig2:Source: www.archello.com
Roof extension of law firm Schuppich, Sporn, Winischhofer was built by finding a loophole in the codes- classifying architecture as art in a society averse to change [6]



fig3: Source: Author

Concept Models made using plaster and mesh to study the relationship and contrast between solid and void (and heat of exothermic reaction of the plaster and the coldness of the metal mesh)



fig 4: Source: Author

This explores the ghost of movement of a school of fish. The school usually moves in a toroid as a collective but also within the toroid the fish live, die and breed, and all the memories of those lives are left behind (transparent to translucent to opaque)

to reflect and understand the wrongs. It is a place which tells it like it is: history is not beautiful and we cannot gloss over it. And most of all, it provides a place to be angry and confront emotions.

But is history always preserved in museums? What about the buildings that we inhabit every day? They have memories and narratives locked in them too. In 1980, Coop Himmelblau remodelled the rooftop of the law firm 'Schuppich, Sporn, Winischhofer' in Vienna. This firm was housed in a historic building in Ringstrasse, Vienna. From the 1860s to 1890s, many large public buildings were erected along the Ringstrasse in an eclectic historicist style, sometimes called Ringstraßenstil ("Ring Road style"). They were a pastiche of idealized versions of historical architectural styles of Classical, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture[4], but built for modern usage. The rooftop of the law firm followed none of the rules of this elite architecture.

The law firm bridges the gap between the old and new Vienna and stands for change[5]. Perched on the roof like a parasite, the architecture is a visible reminder of how we take control of the historic narrative.

Closer home in Calcutta, the capital of British India, the streets are cluttered with colonial architecture. The obvious answer to use these buildings is to convert them into museums-static mausoleums of objects that serve no one in particular. But in Calcutta, we make history our own. Colonial does not remain foreign; it becomes a part of the city and therefore ours to reinvent by right. Victoria Memorial is not just a museum of British Military power but has installations of 19th century vernacular architecture. The white neoclassical monument now contains the green shutter windows, 'cheats' and models of people inhabiting these

spaces, people who look like us. Outside in the park and in the open spaces, debates about democracy [7] are held, authors come and do readings and people voice their opinions without fear.

The point is, when we are dealing with old architecture, we don't always have to preserve it for what it was. We not only have to be sensitive, but also be able to see the flaws. In my third semester for the Architectural Design studio, I had designed a pavilion of solitude in the heart of Bangalore, that is, MG Road. The site was layered with changing identity. Having once been a part of the Cantonment, it has retained its elitism in the palimpsest of the streetscape. It is a commercial hub today, streets glimmering in shop-banner glow. Before the demolition of the boulevard for the Metro construction, the place was a celebration of solitude; a place to be a part of the city as an observer. MG road now needs a new symbol to be reclaimed as a place for the people. The pavilion is called the Urban Beanstalk and hangs parasitically in the "niche" of Barton Centre, the tallest building in its skyline. The terraces of all the high rises on MG Road either belong to offices or to restaurants. We cannot access the view from above without spending money. This pavilion reclaims this public space, reinvents the capitalist notions of it and makes it accessible to one and all. It is a vertical street and is appropriated to various functions every year just like we appropriate streets. There is no set "function" to it except a café. It links two sides of the road - the built and the unbuilt, the concrete and bougainvillea.

From a height of 36m, we can finally see the city and when we do, we notice parts of it that haven't changed at all. The city is a funny thing, we claim it to be so new and fresh while pockets of it still exist exactly the way they used to a hundred years ago. The

wall of Barton Centre has a mural of a man on an elephant with a chhatri but parts of it are falling off like a cruel metaphor for democracy. During the span of the pavilion, people would come in and paint and reclaim space more personally- a new take on Graffiti inspired by the obliteration room of Yayoi Kusama. Graffiti, originally a subversive artform, is now a symbol for elitism, in and around this road. Famous non-Indian Graffiti artists are invited to paint the arterial road of this city but why are they claiming the space which belongs to strongly to its residents?

The idea of parasite was important in the next project too- the redesigning the Basavanagudi Police Station. This one particular police station was a part of the city's first ever stations, built under the British rule. But a police station is always associated with fear and anger, no matter its history. Police brutality is rampant in India, especially when the police is a body that is meant to protect the people. Why is it that we invest so much power in them? Does protecting the law automatically lead to the police being above the law or the people? Does this come from them occupying the same buildings as the British police? After all, architecture does carry memory. In this design, the dome (the British part of the station) was broken and so was the newer 2004 intervention, but not completely. The new structure splits the older building from within- the way the parasite breaks rocks into soil.

It then gives away the space to the people- a café, a library, a crèche and a space for police admin-work. But the police station is still a refuge. The older part of the station is converted into an emergency FIR area instead of the women's police station (which was a positive change we now need to outgrow from) and there is still an area for the police department on the ground floor for the same reason. The space is now much more accessible through the use of ramps and textures using mycelium (a constant reminder of change), yet the dimensions of the dome are what dictate the size of the struts.

The adjoining park which had to close at 8 pm for safety issues can be open longer as the police station provides a visual connection using height and physically connects the park through the station for faster access. The design might look aggressive and it is- anger is a valid emotion when our democracy is being questioned.

When a government falls, the people take to the architecture. Why would destruction of something made of brick and stone mean so much if it did not represent what we stand for? Building on old structures not only requires the architect to be sensitive to the structure, but also to the ideology. It should set right the wrongs that were done by the people who built it, or at least attempt to. It is time we come to terms with the fact that a building is a piece of art and is never neutral. Anger is a valid emotion, even for architecture. Why make ruins of places which have lost their meaning when we can choose to tell a story through them?



fig 5: Source: Author

Urban Beanstalk: A parasitic pavilion on Barton Centre, Bangalore where the 'graffiti' relooks at the concept of vandalism and recognizes it as a way to reclaim public space



fig 6: Source: Author

Parasitic intervention to the Basavanagudi Police Station, Bangalore

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