

Infected Interiors: Remodelling Contaminated Buildings

Graeme Brooker, Manchester Metropolitan University, U.K.

Abstract: *Remodelling existing buildings is the process of significantly changing a host building or structure to accommodate new use. It differs to practices such as preservation and conservation in that it is the process of substantially altering an existing building. Remodelling could be described as a process that encourages a continuous approach to the adaptation of an enclosure or a site. The transformation of an existing structure is a procedure that initially consists of reading the site: a course of action that ensures solid or concealed matter such as the structure or the narrative of the building can be exposed and then developed as potential generators for the modification process - a course of action that Rodolfo Machado describes as: '... a process of providing a balance between the past and the future' (Machado, 1976, p. 27).*

This is a paper about the transformation of existing buildings where the history or narrative of the place that is to be reused is complicated by political, ideological, or an odious previous function. A site or building is described as contaminated when its past is dominated by a previous use that is disagreeable or objectionable. The edification or censorship of these infections is a complex matter for the designer to consider in the remodelling process. This paper examines three case studies where the designer has analysed and used the contamination of the building as a generator for remodelling. It suggests that there are three general approaches when using contamination as a starting point when significantly altering the interiors of infected existing buildings.

Keywords: *remodelling, contamination, interior architecture.*

Introduction

The name of a city's streets and squares, the gaps in its very plan and physical form, its local monuments and celebrations, remain as traces and ruins of their former selves. They are tokens or hieroglyphs from the past to be literally re-read, re-analysed, and reworked over time (Boyer, 1994, p. 332).

Remodelling existing buildings is a process that advocates a continuous approach to the adaptation of a place. The transformation of an existing building is a procedure that initially consists of reading the place. This is a course of action that involves the study of structural and physical elements and also the analysis of concealed matter such as memories, values, narratives and traditions. The reading of the host ensures that site-specific conditions can

be exposed and then used as potential generators of ideas for the modification process. In the essay 'Old Buildings as Palimpsest' Rodolfo Machado likens this process to uncovering or exposing layers of history in order to design new interior space. He suggests that:

Remodelling is a process of providing a balance between the past and the future. In the process of remodelling the past takes on a greater significance because it, itself, is the material to be altered and reshaped. The past provides the already written, the marked 'canvas' on which each successive remodelling will find its own place. Thus the past becomes a 'package of sense' of built up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed or suppressed (refused) (Machado, 1976, p. 27).

What might happen if the history or narrative of the existing building that is to be remodelled is tainted by its former function or by its past associations? This is a paper that examines the remodelling of existing buildings that are contaminated. Contamination is used to describe a variety of possible infections of a host building. This paper suggests that there are three types of contamination. Firstly a host building could be politically or ideologically contaminated and is therefore subjugated by its past. This type of infection consists of a host that is dominated by the propagandistic role that it once contained and subsequently is therefore corrupted by the associations and memories of its previous purpose. A second type of contamination may involve a building that was designed to house an unpleasant function. This infection is due to the specificity of its previous use; a former life that consists of an unwholesome past. Finally a building could be perceived as infected due to the institution that it houses and the political or corporate connections that this establishment has come to represent. This type of contamination could be described as an infection of both the building and the institution that it houses. The censorship or re-edification of these contaminations is a complex matter for consideration in the design and remodelling process. As Machado suggests:

When the alterations in the building's content are of such a type that the buildings original or latest function is changed; then the building is refunctionalized, a different story is born, a new plot is composed out of the old words, a new interpretation has taken place (Machado, 1976, p. 27).

This paper will explore three examples of the remodelling of contaminated buildings.

Strategies for re-use

Site conditioned / determined. Here the sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process to begin with an intimate hands-on reading of the site... (Irwin in Stiles & Sels, 1996, p. 573).

Reading a building or place ensures that site-specific adaptation strategies can be used to either emphasise or suppress the memory of the place. As well as examining three types of contaminated building this paper will suggest that there are three strategies or approaches available when remodelling existing buildings or contaminated sites. These are intervention, insertion and installation.

Intervention is a process that activates the potential or repressed meaning of a specific place through a process of uncovering, clarification and interpretation. Intervention can be destructive as much as it can be constructive. When a contaminated building is intervened upon it is usually a process of clarifying or translating the infection, a surgical procedure using robust measures to stitch together the old with the new use.

Insertion is a process that establishes an intense relationship between the original building and its adaptation and yet allows the character of each to exist in a strong independent manner. When new elements are inserted alongside old buildings the contrast between the previous use and the new function could be described as a process of 'cleaning' or 'healing' contaminated spaces.

Installation heightens the awareness of an existing building and successfully combines the new and old without compromising or interfering with each other. Installation can be used to make a short sharp shocking statement in the form of a powerful comment on the contamination of a host space.

The visible presence of even a troubled past can be a valuable tool in the transformation of an existing building. Rather than act as a constraining factor it can be an instrument of liberation creating buildings that consist of a composite of meaning and consequence; a complexity that is impossible to replicate in a new building.

Infected interiors: Case Study 1

In 1933 Nuremberg, Germany, was officially designated the 'City of Congresses', a privilege that entitled the city to host the greatest gatherings of the National Socialist Party. The German architect Albert Speer was responsible for the planning and development of a series of 'set piece' structures to host the party gatherings. There was a stadium designed to hold four hundred thousand people, parade grounds, zeppelin fields, halls, barracks and other structures to house these spectacular shows. The site was linked to the centre of the town by an avenue two kilometres long. At the centre of the master plan was the enormous Kongresshalle designed by Ludwig Ruff and his son Franz. It was a massive horseshoe shaped auditorium intended to house fifty thousand party officials. Measuring more than two

hundred and seventy five metres wide by two hundred and sixty five deep, the colossal size and shape was meant to form a monumental backdrop for the huge rallies that were to be held there.

The hall was never completed and the project was abandoned in 1943. Raw materials were diverted to other projects as was the slave labour used to build it. Its massive size and weight ensured that from the start of its construction it suffered from structural problems caused by the marshy ground that it was built upon. No structural solution for the roof ever existed and it was never covered over leaving it open to the elements and further erosion. The building has been vacant since 1945. A number of different uses were considered, some more ludicrous than others; a sports stadium, rehearsal rooms for the Nuremberg Orchestra, an exhibition and trade fair site and even a shopping centre. It was declared a national monument in 1973.

In 1998 the Austrian architect Gunther Domenig won the competition to remodel the Kongresshalle to accommodate the National Socialist Documentation Centre. The centre was designed to contain exhibitions, lecture rooms, film studios and workshops, the purpose of which were to provide a documentation of the history of the Third Reich.

Domenig made a direct statement of intent which symbolised the new use and which directly counter-pointed the contaminated history and old associations connected to the building. The building's previous function, a monument to Nazi ideology and propaganda, provided a site-specific narrative that could be used as a generator for the proposed reconfiguration. Domenig intervened upon the building by incising a dynamic diagonal directly against the grain of the original orthogonal building. The shard slices through the building, opening it up with surgical precision. It begins as an entrance in the most northerly corner of the structure (Figure 1), cuts through the rooms and the courtyard and emerges into the massive open space in the centre of the horseshoe building (Figure 2). This blade like element lacerates the space to create a circulation route through the building linking the exhibition spaces together, a viral-like occupation of the massive structure.

The contaminated history of the old building is directly counter pointed by the placement of the new element. This is a bold statement on the history of the building and its relationship with the new function. The blade of steel and glass pierces the heavy masonry of the fabric of the Kongresshalle. The point of the shard opens out to form an entrance point for the archive. Inside it links a series of rooms which were originally intended as the meeting chambers and offices of the party. They are now the exhibition spaces and the documentation

archive. The 130 metres by 1.8 metre wide corridor is inclined, and it rises through the space until it shoots out of the back of the building into the main arena of what was intended to be the covered main hall. Here the objective of the original architects becomes apparent, as the enormity of the hall impresses itself upon the viewer. Domenig's intentions were to counteract, heighten and expose the existing building:

I used oblique lines against the existing symmetry and its ideological significance. To contrast the heaviness of the concrete, brick and granite I turned to lighter materials: glass, steel and aluminium. The historic walls are left in their original state without ever being touched by the new work (Domenig, 2002, p. 28).



Figure 1: View from exterior as the shard emerges to form the new entrance.
(Photography: Author)

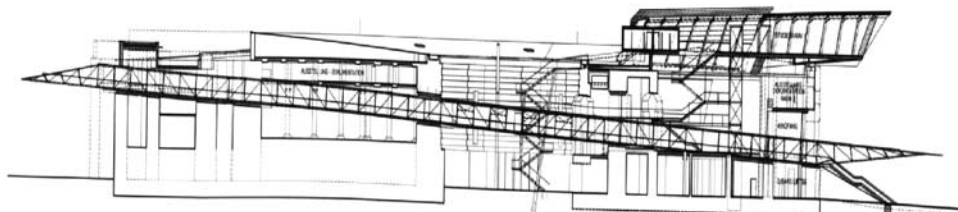


Figure 2: Section through the building.
(Image supplied courtesy of Gunther Domenig Architects)

The scale and the orthogonal geometry of the existing building were extremely significant; Domenig undermines these with a direct and dynamic slice through the very body of the structure. This is a very symbolic event in a notorious building. In this building Domenig uses the strategy of Intervention in order to activate the potential or repressed meaning of a specific place. The architectural response draws all its cues from the existing building. Domenig regards the building as a narrative, as a story to be discovered and retold through a process of uncovering, clarification and interpretation.

The original building provides the impetus for change; Domenig's localised and highly specific reading of the place dictates the appropriate moves. The modifications to the Kongresshalle act in an extremely intrusive manner with the new elements imposing themselves directly upon the existing structure. The new circulation slices through the building and out of the front and back of the host. The new elements relate completely to the original building as they are inspired by it, but the language used is usually completely at odds with the host. This approach could be described as analogous; the creation of a new design that has connections with the past but is endowed with new meaning, both forcefully implied and suggestive. Ignasi De Sola Morales describes this type of process as an analogical procedure. He states:

... the analogical procedure is not based on the visible synchronism of interdependent forms, but on the association made by the observer over the course of time. By this means situations of affinity are produced and, thanks to the connotative capacity of the languages evoked in the intervention, relations or links are established between the historic building – real and/or imaginary – and the elements of design that serve to make the building effectively dependent (Ignasi De Sola-Morales, 1985, p. 42).

The distinctive qualities of the building are explored, the story is read, and it is altered, reshaped and retold and often irretrievably changed. New or hidden meanings are revealed; the building becomes endowed with significance often greater than the value of the new use. In this instance intervention is used as a strategy that reactivates the narrative of the contaminated place.

Infected interiors: Case Study 2

A simple resolution to the reuse of a difficult site, one that is contaminated by its former unwholesome function, is complete demolition. Yet the contrast between a previous use of a building, the role it was specifically designed for, and a proposed new function can provide a powerful counterpoint between old and new and the stimulus for radical change. Sometimes

from such adversity comes an interesting contrast between past and future uses, a contrast that is impossible to recreate in a new building.

The old slaughterhouse in the centre of Landau was once a notable landmark celebrated for its vast size and operational prowess. The main buildings date from the late nineteenth century and were constructed mostly of sandstone and brick. The site was once the home for the rearing, holding and then slaughtering of thousands of livestock per day. This gruesome process took place in and around the main halls of the abattoir – two large adjacent sandstone buildings. The costly renovation and improvements demanded by the European Union regulations of 1989, combined with the lack of maintenance, meant that it was cheaper and easier to build a new abattoir elsewhere and shut the complex down. The building was then left to its fate, falling into ruin and dereliction.

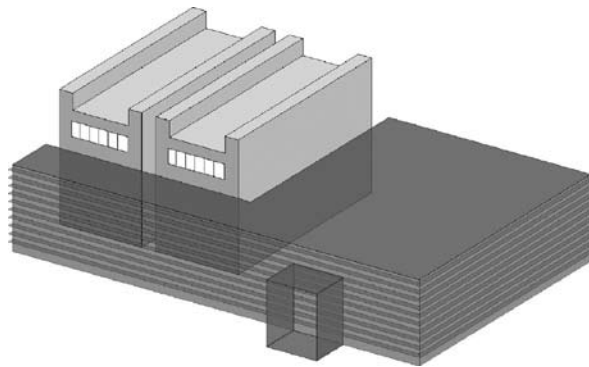
In 1999, the town council organised a design competition and Lamott Architect's winning submission proposed a mixed-use urban arrangement that included a new town square, the first phase of which was the construction of the public library. Lamott's strategy was to remove any late additions and unworthy buildings from the site and then work with what remained. The listed buildings, the two halls, were too small to accommodate the requirements of a modern library and were deemed structurally unable to support the addition of any new mezzanine floors. Therefore the solution was for the old halls to be wrapped by a contrasting new structure, which would organize the building and provide the necessary extra space and the environmental control for the library.

The old slaughterhouse buildings were treated as found objects on the site (Figure 3). The new modern surrounding building unifies the both old and new. It is constructed from a steel frame that supports a glass curtain wall and positioned in front of these, on all sides are fixed large-scale laminated plywood louvres. These brise-soleil cover only the top three quarters of the building accentuating the horizontal emphasis of the whole composition. At ground level the front and the adjacent walls of the original buildings have been removed. This promotes transparency, eases movement and provides a much greater area for the storage of the 75,000 books. The retained sidewalls act as a baffle separating the noisy and hectic entrance and cafe areas in the new areas from the quiet reading rooms in the old.

The old abattoir buildings have been 'repaired' by the new insertion. The previously contaminated buildings have been cleansed of most of their old associations and now host the book stacks and quiet reading rooms of the library. Insertion is a practice that establishes an intense relationship between the original building and the remodelling and yet allows the

character of each to exist in an incredibly strong and independent manner. The mass, volumes and composition of the sandstone halls are still intact but the previous unpleasant uses of the space are now dramatically different. Instead of the unwholesome rendering of livestock, the halls house quiet study and contemplation amongst the shelves of books and magazines.

Insertion concerns the introduction of a new element into, between or beside an existing structure. The inserted object can often be seen as independent and confrontational, a single large powerful element that establishes surprising dialogues between itself and the existing structure or volume. It is at its best when the clearest possible distinction between the crisp new contemporary work and the crumbling remains of the existing is established and therefore the style, the language, the materials and the character of each are different. In and around the halls the new light glass and steel structure contrasts their mass by wrapping and covering the old halls whilst still allowing the tops of the buildings to peek out above the low two storey façade (Figure 4).



*Figure 3: Landau Library the old sandstone halls are wrapped by the new library functions.
(Drawing by Wen Wei Chen, student MA Interior Design MMU)*



*Figure 4: Landau Library front façade and halls.
(Photography: Author)*

Although the insertion is independent, particular qualities are derived from the original building. This is inevitable because the insertion always has a direct architectural relationship with the absolute physical properties of the existing space. It is built to fit. The scale and the dimensions of the reading rooms, the proportions, the rhythm and the structural composition of the existing building influence the design of the new library wrapping the old halls. As Phillipe Robert states in *Adaptations. New Uses For Old Buildings*:

Out of the encounter between old envelope and new requirements and means, a unique object will be born – one which is no mere juxtaposition, but a synthesis from the point of view of both construction and architecture (Robert, 1989, p. 8).

When insertion is used as a strategy, it is necessary for the form of the old building to be sufficiently powerful in order to accommodate the addition of the new object so that it is not overawed. It is also important that the host building is relatively physically unaltered; that it retains its original integrity. Often it is necessary for the designer to do little more than address any structural or environmental problems although sometimes the complete restoration of the building to its original majesty may be required with the recognition of the distinction between the original building and the insertion being important. Equally, the new library must be sufficiently strong to sit easily within or around the old building, a counterpoint or balance must be realised. For a successful dialogue to be established the two components must be speaking with a similar magnitude of language. The new library and the old halls are both imbued with equal strength and qualities that creates a unique powerful contrast between the host and the new remodelling. The tension and the ambiguities in the relationship between the two can also strengthen and reinvigorate the existing building; it can be considered and examined in a new way; it is looked at afresh and it is almost as if new life has been drawn into it.

The insertion of the new library element not only provides a new 'clean' use for the old contaminated abattoir building but it also serves to heighten and intensify the host itself. The strong relationship of attracting opposites, each complementing and enhancing the other, generates a building of a new and greater worth.

Infected interiors: Case Study 3

The third type of contaminated site is less related to the past and more about the current or present use of a particular place. It is a site-specific response to a very particular institution or place that is still in use. It is an example of a site that becomes contaminated by its association with a particular institute and therefore tainted by its association with its present

function. It could be described as a status or identity contamination rather than the complete infection of the fabric of a building. It is a case study where the strategy of 'installation' is used to create a short sharp shocking statement; a probe that in the form of an invasive inhabitation provokes a commentary and response on the infected place.

In the late 1980's the New York based designers Diller and Scofidio were commissioned to make an installation in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) that would act primarily as an exhibition of their work. They decided to develop and then install a temporary exhibition called *Para-site* that on one hand acted as a descriptor for their practice but which also became a comment on the nature of the cultural role of the institution that was housing the installation.

Para-site is a site specific installation (which) takes up the theme of a filtered vision in the museum. As parasiting is by nature site-specific, a closer reading of the organism is unavoidable (Diller + Scofidio, 1994, p. 163).

A reading of the host site and more importantly the institution as it currently operated allowed them to create an installation that acted as a filter or a prism through which they could reflect on the role of the host.

As a didactic construct the museum narrative (the permanent collection) is determined by the rigid categories of modernist aesthetics and its chronology is modelled on the paradigm of the textbook. It is a complex economic construct – an institution which outbid other museums and private collectors in the seventy million dollar acquisition of a Van Gogh still-life on the one hand, and sold its air-rights to a fifty two storey condominium in order to fund its renovation on the other (Diller + Scofidio, 1994, p. 163).

The contradictory position of the host institution was not lost on the designers. On the one hand it tries to establish a domain in which art can be viewed and appreciated whilst simultaneously it has created one of the largest art retail spaces in Manhattan. Therefore this reading of the institution allowed the designers to respond in two ways. First of all they developed a strategy for reuse; an approach based on the reading of the host, and then they created an installation that contaminates the building. *Para-site* inhabited the interior of the gallery spaces; it occupied the stairs, the entrance lobby and resided within the galleries like an awkward unwanted guest. It was an infection of an already contaminated institution; its function was to serve as an indicator of the corrupted site.

'Para-site' inhabited the formal spaces such as the galleries, but its raw material, its contents, are derived from the institutions interstitial areas such as elevators, entrances and circulation routes. Cameras were positioned above the revolving door to the museum capturing people coming into the space. CCTV cameras monitored the escalators moving visitors between the different floors of the galleries and the sculpture court was filled by a series of convex security mirrors. These sites were chosen because they were the locations of the architectural elements of 'commerce and consumptive space'. The escalators, revolving doors, corridors and shop spaces are the standard elements of shopping malls and convenience stores; they are considered to be the design language of the retail park. Diller and Scofidio suggest that these were the sites of the infections, places where the language of commerce had been absorbed into this cultural institution and had then become standard features of the museum experience. *Para-site* was installed to comment on this infection of the institution by monitoring and recording these specific locations.

Diller and Scofidio suggest that the museum, in this case MoMA, is of an era which is defined by the supremacy of sight. All sorts of complex encoded constructs govern looking, in all of its complexities. *Para-site* is a reading of this situation. The strategically positioned cameras relay their views back to a series of monitors deployed throughout the museum galleries. The four revolving doors are fed into the first floor gallery where they are displayed on four monitors held by a timber and steel armature, a move that reinforces its invasive qualities (Figure 5). A chair is fixed to the skeleton that invites viewers to sit and monitor the other areas of the museum. The seat is embossed with a raised text that as the sitter stands up to leave is imprinted onto their rear, another invasive tactic.



Figure 5: *Para-site* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989.
(Image supplied courtesy of Diller + Scofidio Architects)

Live feeds of the elevators, escalators, doorways and garden relay the approaching viewers of the gallery back to the viewers of the gallery. This blurs the distinction between subject and object, viewer and viewed, content and the contents of the museum's collection. A surveillance mirror in the courtyard is wired to a camera that not only feeds back images of the reflection but also conversation into gallery one. Throughout the duration of the exhibition the parasite recorded and monitored the viewers and gallery goers, relaying them back to themselves in three zones of surveillance. It was assumed that most visitors went to see some art, some paintings maybe even shopping, conversely they became the exhibitions themselves a situation that obfuscated the normal rationale for visiting a gallery.

'Para-site' was designed to make a comment on the building that housed it. It was used as a filter, watching, relaying and conveying a reflection of the visitor and the museum back to itself (Diller + Scofidio, 1994, p. 163).

Conclusion

Moving beyond traditional conservation and preservation strategies and theories, designers can remodel existing buildings using a process that values unusual site-specific narratives and occurrences. These stories can provide a generator or rationale for the revisions or modifications to the building or site reuse. When remodelling contaminated buildings' unusual histories, uses or readings of identities can provoke the designer. This may influence their ideas and force them to confront difficult decisions, sometimes with a moral or political dimension, about the method and consequence of reuse. In an interview in 1992 Giancarlo De Carlo stated:

I believe a lot in the revelatory capacity of reading... if one is able to interpret the meaning of what is engraved, not only does one come to understand when this mark was made and what the motivation behind it was, but one also becomes conscious of how the various events that have left their mark have become layered, how they relate to one another and how, through time, they have set of other events and have woven together our history (Giancarlo De Carlo, 1992, p. 167).

Whatever shape or form a contamination has taken, during reuse the censorship or re-edification of these memories, values, and narratives is a complex matter for consideration in the design process. This leads to interior architecture and spaces that are a composite of meaning and memories; a complexity that is impossible to replicate in new build architecture.

References

- Boyer, M. C. (1994). *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press.
- Brooker, G. & Stone, S. (2004). *Rereadings: Interior Architecture and the Principles of Remodelling Existing Buildings*. London: RIBA Enterprises.
- De Carlo, G. (1992). *Giancarlo De Carlo*. Oxford: Butterworth Architecture.
- De Sola Morales, I. (1985). From contrast to analogy. *Milan: Lotus Magazine* 46.
- Diller, L. & Scofidio, R. (1994). *Flesh: Architectural Probes*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Domenig, G. (2002). Confronting the architecture of evil. *Milan: Domus* 847, April.
- Irwin, R. (1996). Being and circumstance: Notes towards a confidential art. In Stiles, K. & Sels, P. (Eds). *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*. California: Berkeley Press.
- Machado, R. (1976). Old buildings as palimpsest. *Stamford: Progressive Architecture*.
- Robert, P. (1989). *Adaptations. New Uses For Old Buildings*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.