

Trace
Notes on adaptive reuse
N°5 Lived Interiors



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Preface

Interiors, Memories & Vernon Lee

K. Van Cleempoel

My earliest memories are of the living room in the house where I grew up, in the mid-seventies. I still picture the brown woolen cushions on the Danish chairs as the backdrop to a birthday party, and I remember how upset my mother was when my sister accidentally spilled lemonade on those valuable cushions. The tension of that moment, combined with the tactile atmosphere of the room, remains one of my earliest memories. What returns to me most vividly is not the precise sequence of events, but the sensory density of the interior: the roughness of the wool fabric, the muted colors of the furniture, the slightly formal arrangement of the room, and the emotional charge that suddenly attached itself to these objects. The room was not simply a container for family life; it actively shaped the emotional experience of the event. Even now, decades later, the memory survives less as narrative than as atmosphere.

This personal memory resurfaced unexpectedly when I read the abstracts for the *Lived Interiors* symposium, so carefully organized by the As Found research network. The symposium's reflections on interiors as lived, layered environments immediately resonated with my own experience of memory as inseparable from materiality, emotion, and domestic space. The "lived interiors" approach proposes that interiors are continuously rewritten through habitation, use, memory, and adaptation. Interiors become archives of emotional and social life.

This perspective shifts attention away from authenticity as the preservation of an original state. Rather than asking whether an interior remains historically pure, the lived interiors approach asks how spaces accumulate traces of occupation over time. Stains, worn fabrics, repaired furniture, changing arrangements, and even recurring family rituals become part of an interior's historical significance. History is therefore not only embedded in objects themselves, but also in the affective relations that develop around them.

Such reflections resonate strongly with the writings of Vernon Lee, whose work explored the profound emotional and psychological effects of environments and objects, long before phenomenology became fashionable. Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she was deeply interested in how spaces produce atmospheres that shape human feeling. For Lee, aesthetic experience was never detached or purely intellectual; it emerged through embodied perception and emotional response. Rooms, objects, textures, and architectural settings could evoke moods, memories, and forms of psychological resonance that exceeded rational explanation.

In *The Beautiful, An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913), she argued, among others, that the perception of space is never merely visual, but the outcome of bodily and mental habits. This insight remains extraordinarily useful for thinking about interiors because it suggests that spatial experience is embodied and affective rather than abstract. We do not simply observe interiors from a distance; we inhabit them physically and emotionally. The arrangement of furniture, the tactility of materials, the rhythm of movement through rooms, and the sensory atmosphere of domestic space all shape our orientation, comfort, and emotional disposition. This embodied dimension is closely related to one of Lee's key concepts: empathy or *Einfühlung*. Architectural and interior forms become emotionally charged when viewers project bodily sensations and emotional experiences into lines, proportions, rhythms, and enclosures. A room can therefore feel protective, oppressive, ceremonial, intimate, or fragile, not merely because of its function, but because spatial form itself produces emotional identification.

Seen from this perspective, the Danish chairs in my childhood living room were never neutral objects. Their carefully composed modernist design, their tactile wool upholstery, and their status within the

room all contributed to a particular emotional climate. The anxiety provoked by the spilled lemonade was not only about damage to furniture; it concerned the disruption of an atmosphere, a disturbance within a carefully maintained domestic order. The emotional intensity of the memory emerged from the intimate relationship between bodies, objects, and interior space.

The lived interiors approach similarly insists on the inseparability of spatial form and human experience. Historical interiors cannot be understood solely through inventories, photographs, or stylistic analysis. They must also be approached as spaces of attachment, conflict, intimacy, and repetition. A living room is never merely a designed composition; it is a stage upon which emotions unfold and sediment over time.

This also suggests a more dynamic understanding of heritage. If interiors are shaped by use and emotional habitation, then wear, adaptation, and imperfection should not necessarily be regarded as threats to authenticity. Instead, they may constitute the very evidence of life itself. The stain on a cushion, the fading of fabric through sunlight, or the rearrangement of furniture across generations can become meaningful historical traces. Such marks reveal not only how spaces looked, but how they were lived.

Perhaps this explains why certain interiors remain so powerfully present in memory long after we have left them behind. They survive not because we remember every detail accurately, but because they once organized our emotional worlds. Domestic interiors, especially childhood interiors, become intertwined with our earliest experiences of comfort, shame, security, aspiration, and conflict. They shape us quietly and persistently. As Vernon Lee understood so well, spaces are never inert backgrounds to human life. They are emotional and sensory companions that continue to inhabit us long after we have physically departed from them.

I wish you much pleasure in reading this new issue of *Trace* - Notes on Adaptive Reuse, and I warmly congratulate the editors, Bie Plevoets and Nusrat Ritu, on producing such a rich and elegant publication.

Editorial

Lived Interiors: Narratives and Memories

N. Ritu, B. Plevoets

The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. [...] It is the human being's first world.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1958

We have a body memory of spaces; the body knows and remembers. Architectural meaning derives from archaic memories and meanings that are awakened and touched by the building.

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 1996

Interiors occupy a unique space between permanence and change. They are at once ephemeral, adapting to the needs of their users, and enduring, carrying forward the traces of lives lived within them. As the layer of architecture most intimately experienced by the user, the lived interior accumulates and evolves over time, reflecting the interplay between designer, user, and usage. This makes lived interiors a rich reservoir of memory, reflecting the collective identities and authorship of both designers and users. As coined by Laurajane Smith in *Uses of Heritage* (2006)¹, “all heritage is intangible”, and intangible heritage is most shaped by shared memories and collective identities.

These accumulated memories and narratives manifest tangibly in the ‘soft layers’ of interiors—furniture, objects, and material patinas—and intangibly in the embedded practices and social rituals they

accommodate. Despite being charged with meaning, the inherent temporality and fragility of these layers make them challenging to preserve and carry forward in restorative practices, often leading to a loss of cultural depth and narrative resonance. In addition, the dynamic nature of lived interiors makes it harder to pinpoint which elements contribute to their heritage value and, therefore, to identify a specific historical period for their restoration.

The term “historical interior” often conjures the static image of a room belonging to a specific period, untouched by the passage of time. In contrast, a ‘lived interior’ embraces the continuous interaction between past and present, where each historical layer informs and enriches the current space. Lived interiors act as repositories of stories; they link past lives to the present, weaving a fabric of continuity that imbues the space with a sense of belonging.

¹ Laurajane Smith, “Heritage as a Cultural Process,” in *Uses of Heritage*, ed. Laurajane Smith (London: Routledge, 2006), 3.

This conceptual shift from the “historical interior” to the “lived interior” is synthesised from several theoretical streams. It draws from the phenomenology of architectural experience, which prioritises the embodied and sensory dimensions of space². Further, it borrows from theories that recognise the built environment as a product of ongoing, incremental change shaped by user action³ as well as the cultural experience value embedded within.⁴

The term “Lived Interior” is rooted in Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of space as a social product in *The Production of Space*⁵. It draws on Lefebvre’s spatial triad, particularly its third component—‘representational space’ or ‘lived space’—which is positioned as a complex terrain of inhabitants, overlaid with symbolism and non-verbal traditions. Adopting the notion of the “lived interior” signals a shift away from the objectivity of spatial form toward the more subjective, contradictory and often conflictual processes of spatial production. Thus, the lived interior is defined by the multiplicity of social meanings produced through daily practice and use. Echoing Lefebvre’s articulation of representational space, the lived interior operates as a medium for thought and action, allowing inhabitants to negotiate and assert control over their built environment. Within the context of this cahier, it is therefore approached as a carrier of memory, practice, and material culture—continuously shaped by time, user agency, and its broader sociopolitical conditions.⁶

Consequently, this cahier interrogates the multitude of meanings and associations of lived interiors: a dynamic term that encapsulates the essence of what it means to exist in an interior—to inhabit, leave traces, adapt, and be adapted to. It is a natural extension of the engaging and productive discussions—both poetic and practical—held during the *Lived Interiors* symposium in April 2025. The symposium was organised within the framework of the Read.Adapt.Reuse Scientific Research Network as an inaugural activity of its thematic track on Narratives. Established in 2025, the network builds upon the scientific collaborations established around the As Found colloquium that our faculty hosted in September 2024. Read.Adapt.Reuse brings together researchers who share an interest in innovative methods for reading and interpreting the cultural layers of the built environment and activating tangible and intangible traces of the past. Because the built environment is inherently interdisciplinary as a field, innovative and integrated approaches are needed for reading and transforming the existing architectural fabric, the ‘as found’. The network is structured around three thematic tracks: Narratives, chaired by the research group Trace at Hasselt University;

Design, chaired by Caroline Voet at KU Leuven; and Embodied Culture, chaired by Prof. dr; Stephanie Vande Voorde at Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB). The Narrative track aims to explore the meanings and stories embedded in the built environment, engaging not only with its material fabric but also with its intangible layers and rituals of inhabitation. The *Lived Interiors* symposium marked a first step in this direction by examining traces of informal, incremental reuse and adaptive practices. The theme of *Lived Interiors* emerged from the PhD research of Nusrat Ritu within the TRACE research group, which engages with such situated and incremental modes of reuse within lived interiors and explores alternative methodologies for interpreting them. From this starting point, the symposium discussions unfolded around related themes of remembrance, rebuilding, activation, and resonance in the reuse of interiors. In this cahier, these reflections are brought into dialogue with the outcomes of student work produced within the International Master of Interior Architecture Adaptive Reuse during the academic year 2025-2026.

Building on these discussions, the cahier centres on a key question: how can memories—personal and collective—embedded in lived interiors help us understand their historical and cultural value? Equally important, it asks how such memories might be preserved, represented, and activated through contemporary design. The opening text is a transcript of the symposium’s keynote lecture delivered by Susanne Pietsch. It presents a personal and reflective account, in which Pietsch revisits her parental home as both stage and archive, reconstructing it through models, drawings, photographs, and conversations. By tracing the house’s continuous transformations and its sensory imprint, she reveals how memory resides not only in material traces but also in lived experience, gestures, and everyday practices. The transcription foregrounds the house as an evolving organism—an open constellation of stories, spatial configurations, and embodied recollections—demonstrating how memory can be reactivated through processes of translation, reconstruction, and attentive observation.

The other contributions hinge on three key areas of inquiry, developed during and after the symposium. The first area, *Reading and Representation*, gathers works that seek to decipher and articulate the narratives embedded within interiors, exploring the tools and methodologies through which these often elusive qualities can be captured and communicated.

The paper *LIVE AND/OR LIVED-IN: Interior as a Realm in Between Certainty and Ambiguity* by Kana

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (London: Academy Editions, 1996); Juhani Pallasmaa, “Space, Place, Memory, and Imagination: The Temporal Dimension of Existential Space,” in *Spatial Recall: Memory and the Construction of Place*, ed. Marc Treib (New York: Routledge, 2009), 188-201.

³ Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They’re Built* (New York: Viking, 1994); Smith, “Heritage as a Cultural Process, centred”

⁴ Ellen S. Klingenberg, “Conservation of Cultural Memories in Interiors: A Challenge for New Use” (paper presented at the IE International Conference 2012—Reinventing Architecture and Interiors: The Past, the Present and the Future, Ravensbourne, London, March 28–29, 2012)

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 39-46

⁶ Nusrat Ritu et al., “Reading the Vernacular Interior: A Pattern Language for Reuse,” *Interiority* 9, no. 1 (2026): 5-28

Arioka reads the lived interior through the work of the architectural critic and photographer Koji Taki. Through an exploration of representation across media—particularly photography and language—Arioka demonstrates how the lived dimension of architecture can be revealed precisely through abstraction, rather than direct depiction. By destabilising the opposition between the tangible and the immaterial, the paper proposes reading the interior as an ambiguous realm shaped by bodily experience and interpretation, thereby expanding the tools and frameworks through which lived space can be understood and represented.

Nicoletta Grillo and Saidja Heynickx position the “drawing-collage” as a tactical and intermedial mode of representation, combining freehand perspective with the physical assemblage of photographic fragments. Developed within the *Tactics* seminar, this hybrid approach fosters a slow, reflective process in which drawing becomes a site of thinking rather than mere depiction. Through strategies such as white space, fragmentation, and constellation, the drawing-collage engages both material and immaterial aspects of the lived interior, allowing meaning to emerge through juxtaposition and the viewer’s imagination. Representation thus operates as a critical tool to read and project the layered condition of built heritage.

The second area, *Activating Memory*, focuses on the ways in which traces of past inhabitation—whether material, oral, or archival—can be preserved and mobilised within contemporary design practices. The contributions brought together here investigate how such fragments can be reactivated to establish meaningful continuities between past and present. Stefan Gzyl’s contribution examines how memory can be activated through practices of caretaking that emerge amid migration, vacancy, and systemic collapse. Focusing on the figure of the collector in Caracas, the paper follows the rescue, preservation, and recirculation of left-behind books as a way of safeguarding fragments of individual patrimonies and reassembling them into a form of collective memory. What comes into view is not preservation as suspension but a transformative, open-ended practice in which domestic space is continually reprogrammed to accommodate accumulation, selection, and care. In this way, the house becomes both repository and instrument, showing how traces of past inhabitation can be mobilised within new spatial and societal constellations. Nusrat Ritu’s contribution approaches memory as something embedded not only in material remnants, but in recurring patterns of use, negotiation, and cultural meaning. Through the case of Harat-al-Aqr, the paper shows how the quarter’s revival has been driven

by small-scale, bottom-up acts of reuse that reactivate inherited spatial logics rather than overwrite them. Reframing Christopher Alexander’s pattern language as an analytical tool, Ritu identifies the lived interior through interconnected layers of reuse action, community habit, and cultural driver. Memory thus appears as an active and collective structure—carried by walls, streets, and shared ways of navigating space—and continuously renewed through everyday practice.

The third area, *Designing with Memory*, shifts the focus toward the projective dimension of interior practice, examining how designers can engage memory as a living and evolving condition. The works included in this section explore strategies for accommodating user appropriation, layering temporalities, and fostering dynamic relationships between people, materials, and context. This is articulated through the contribution by Zeynep Selvi, who explores how memory can actively inform design through the acts of reading and translation. Taking the Şile House as a case study, she shows how a vernacular dwelling can be approached as a palimpsest of memory, heritage, and space, whose accumulated traces offer cues for contemporary adaptive reuse. Rather than treating the past as something to be preserved unchanged, the paper proposes translation as a careful, craft-based process through which lived knowledge is carried forward into new design decisions. In doing so, it frames the vernacular interior as a living resource for practice, capable of accommodating continuity, reinterpretation, and future inhabitation. A second contribution by Kana Arioka, *Place for Life – Translating Intangible Heritage into Adaptive Re-use Scenarios*, reflects on a design studio developed together with Hanne Eckelmans, building upon a prior study on the intangible heritage of the Bruges Beguinage. Grounded in the five anchors that define the site’s “soul,” the studio approached adaptive reuse as a process of gentle transition, asking how qualities such as communal living, stillness, spirituality, and self-sufficiency can be spatially reinterpreted. Through analytical work and design exercises, students translated these intangible values into concrete interventions, proposing new forms of dwelling, production, and ritual. Rather than fixing the Beguinage in a singular historical image, the projects demonstrate how design can engage memory as an evolving condition, enabling the continuation and transformation of its lived heritage.

Taken together, these three strands position the lived interior not as a fixed artifact, but as an ongoing process—one that is read, activated, and continuously reimagined through design.

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The House as Stage and Archive

S. Pietsch



[1] *Pouring of the floor slab, 1971.*
Photo: Antje Pietsch.

Introduction

In the early 1970s, my parents, an architect and an office assistant, moved from northern to southern Germany because they liked the region and could imagine building a life there. After a short time in a small rented flat, they bought a plot of land in a nearby village and designed and built the house I grew up in, as well as their office.

I now live a day's journey away, and it is unlikely that I will ever move back. In order to give the houses a place in my present life, I decided to reconstruct them as large-scale models. Looking into what was needed to make these models, I began to unpack the context in which the houses had been designed, built, and adapted over time. I also came to understand them as case studies that speak of a particular moment and of overarching themes in architecture and society.

As an architect and educator, I'm interested in how spatial questions can be made tangible and in research understood as a creative practice. I therefore approached this exploration in the first instance through the tools familiar to me as a designer: models and drawings, with the intention of achieving a kind of translation that allowed new meanings to emerge, for myself and perhaps also for others.

My sources are the buildings themselves, photographs and documents from their construction and transformations, and conversations with my mother, who recalls details not recorded anywhere else. I have spent much of my life in these houses, and they are deeply familiar to me. Yet I have never looked at them in this way before: a form of close observation that is only possible at a distance.

After moving south, my father first worked for a timber construction company that produced customised prefabricated wooden houses, which he designed and drafted. My parents had no significant financial means, but they were able to secure a small loan and negotiate terms with the owner of the company for their own self-designed building package.

When I discovered the slides of the building process, I was moved to see my parents so young, with their future ahead of them, which is now my past. I was also struck by how modern this method of construction appeared against the backdrop of the scene, and given the current renaissance of prefabricated timber construction, it seemed quite forward-looking.

The story of the interior, the subject of this approach, also begins here. Not only because the photographs from that time first sparked my interest in the study, but also because I believe that many of the buildings' spatial qualities were already inscribed in the very act of building.

Enclosing a Piece of the World

The writer and ceramicist Edmund de Waal has described his pots as contained spaces, each vessel understood as a breath.¹ There is a kind of reverence in this, a sense of responsibility in giving form to a piece of the world, enclosing it as a space, and in doing so, withdrawing it from the world. But it also carries a tender note, one about the intimate relationship between maker and object. For me, something similar applies to architecture. The images of my parents clearing the ground for their house convey this dual meaning to me – the care and, at the same time, the taking possession of a piece of land.

With the help of friends and family, they carried out a lot of the work themselves. Mainly to save money, but also to take ownership of the process and shape it according to their ideas. Their engagement with the site, the tools and the materials, their physical energy, their conversations and thoughts while working, all became part of the emerging building.

And with the pouring of the concrete slab, a piece of earth was sealed and connected to the community's infrastructure. It was also the moment when the house first manifested its presence in space and revealed the outline of its future interior [1].

The images also captured another transition: a typological shift of the village since the 1950s. For centuries, it had been determined by agriculture, but with technological progress and increasing mobility, it began to change shape. The farmers' children took up other occupations and commuted to the city. Farm buildings were demolished, and arable land was sold to newcomers. The first new family names appeared. The construction method of the house was also part of this shift. It was the product of an innovative carpenter who embraced the trend towards prefabrication and offered his clients customised building kits.

The prefab panels came with all the conduits, cables, and connection points integrated, and with that, the idea of the life already inscribed in the outer structure [2]. The entire kit was assembled in

¹ Edmund de Waal, *You Take an Object from Your Pocket*, essay, Edmund de Waal, 2014, <https://www.edmunddewaal.com/essays/you-take-an-object-from-your-pocket> (accessed September 18, 2025)



[2] *Assembly of the prefab kit, 1971.*
Photo: Peter Pietsch.



[3] *1:25 model of the house and the office, 2024.*
Tolga Koloğlu, Susanne Pietsch.

a single day. When my mother went to the butcher that morning to order the roast chicken for the topping-out ceremony, he stepped out onto the street to look, astonished—for at that point, there was still no trace of the house.

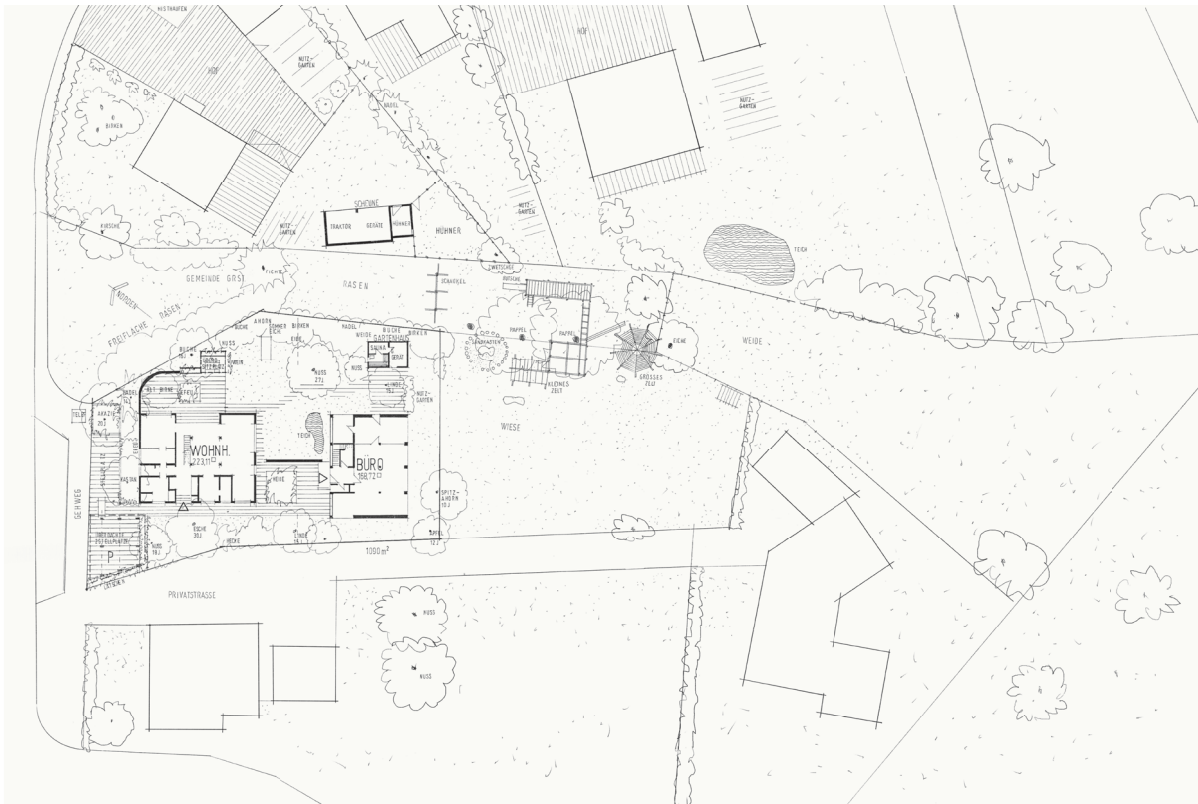
My friend and collaborator Tolga Koloğlu and I recreated the process in the model at 1:25 scale [3]. Since the company archive no longer exists, we derived the elements and the sequence of construction from the photographs. The company itself is still in operation today, producing high-quality bespoke wooden floors and interior elements, with timber sourced from the region. The original concept of offering an affordable self-build system was abandoned in the early 1980s, when rising interest rates made building increasingly unaffordable.

After completion, my parents bought another plot behind the house, where the previous owner had just demolished the barn of his parents' farm. On this plot, they built their architecture office, a concrete column structure with sand-lime block infill. In the meantime, my father had already left the timber company, but as a trained mason, this way of working was the obvious choice. The floor of that

building rests on the compacted rubble of the barn. Only the columns, slotted into individual concrete footings, puncture the grass. Even more elementary here, they demarcate the interior and anchor it to the earth.

A Field of Interwoven Spaces

Both the house and the office were defined by an internal grid that grouped smaller rooms around a more flexible area. This grid structured the space but did not necessarily prescribe a fixed sequence of activities. The floors of the areas considered comfortable, where one would sit, were carpeted, while the more functional ones were tiled. The same tiles were also used on the kitchen and bathroom worktops. The entire interior was in shades of beige and brown. Except for the doors, which were deep olive green in the house and bright orange in the office. The prefabricated elements of the house were clad inside and out. Almost all the walls were lined with wood, apart from a few sand-lime block elements: outside, on the gable ends, and inside, along the line dividing the more enclosed from the more open areas.



[4] *Drawing of the property, 1980.*
Peter Pietsch; supplemented with the wider territory, 2025.
Susanne Pietsch.



[5] The garden seen from the shrubs at the edge of the communal meadow, 1980. Photo: Peter Pietsch.

Through its windows and doors, the interior engaged with its surroundings, finding echoes in exterior rooms enclosed by other built elements and by planting. The result was an interwoven sequence that extended as a porous field across interior and exterior, eventually dissolving into the vegetation. I remember the grass usually standing knee-high. Whether and when it should be mown was the subject of constant debate, one my father resolved by insisting that we shared this ground with other species. A drawing he made in the 1980s illustrates this notion of porosity and coexistence. He depicted all the walls, inside and out, as slabs in space, and the trees as integral parts of the constellation, almost like personified figures, each annotated with notes on its species and age [4].

Despite the convention of orienting a house, ours opened to the north-east, towards a communal meadow on the grounds of the former village manor, land that would never be designated for development. This 'borrowed landscape' extended the spatial experience far beyond the property's boundaries.

Between neighbouring plots, there were no fences, only shrubs, hedges and trees, permeable boundaries. We children, moved naturally through them. For the adults, there were certain unwritten rules: calling out before entering and knowing the times of day when you would be welcome [5].

At the end of the communal meadow, all the neighbours together built a playground. It was the children's domain, a kind of village of its own. Parents rarely interfered there; at most, they would call from their balconies or back doors when it was time for bed, prompting loud negotiations across the distance to win a few more minutes.

If the parents gathered there, it was in the evening. One of my earliest memories is of waking up at night, not finding my parents in the house, and crawling into my sleeping bag across the meadow to the large wooden tipi, where I looked into the surprised faces of the adults who had gathered there around the campfire. Although it was pitch dark and the way there was quite long, I cannot recall feeling any panic or fear. Rather, it was a kind of trustful expansion into the space. The territory led me out: from my room into the house, into the garden, to the playground, and later into the village and beyond.²

The permeability also extended to the everyday activities in the houses. Work and private life overlapped. From the kitchen, one could signal visitors on their way to the office; contractors came round the back and appeared at the garden table; client meetings took place at weekends; and office days were skipped for skiing when there was fresh snow. Large recurring events at the office, the "Bauherrentreffen", were a mix of project presentations, social get-togethers, and exhibitions, which I remember with both excitement and unease. It was a delicate balance of radical openness and the constant negotiation of boundaries.

Biography of an Interior

I understand my parents' houses as evolving organisms. Over the decades, they were constantly altered and adapted to new stages of life, particular events, or spontaneous ideas. It felt self-evident that the interiors could be shaped according to one's own needs. In my memory, the houses were many houses. Bachelard writes that all the houses we once inhabited continue to live on within us.³ Yet when

² This notion resonates with the exchange I had with Giovanni Stoppoloni about his graduation project *Preggio Territorial School* (TU Delft, 2025), which Olga Ioannou, Mauro Parravicini and I mentored. The idea of the territory and its pedagogical capacity was a central theme in his project and our conversations.

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 56.



[6] *Different eras of the house, excerpt of a series, 2025.*
Susanne Pletsch.

I reconstructed earlier versions, I found that each had partly overwritten the others, and that what I remember are conglomerates of elements from different phases.

From the surviving receipts for purchases and commissions, and from sketches and photographs, I attempt to distil the various moments in the life of the houses and to depict them in drawings that trace their transformations and the movements of interior elements and furniture [6]:

1973 The main house is complete, and we move in. I have just been born, the office is under construction, and my parents work from home. Most of the furnishings came from their old flat. A romantic atmosphere, inspired by Scandinavian influences. The rooms are sparse, the wood pale. At this stage, the house is more an illustration of its concept. Simple and still somewhat raw.

1977 The office is in use. The corner, once a home office, is now my play area, and my activities spill into the space. A large open shelf between the dining and living spaces holds glasses and crockery for spontaneous occasions. Large pots of houseplants stand in front of the windows, the props of daily life scattered around, almost more important than the furniture itself.

1982 The attic is converted; the private rooms move upstairs. The kitchen is renovated: the wood-clad cabinets give way to shelves with large white sliding doors. The glass façade to the terrace is extended. A new generation of furniture arrives, influenced by visits to the Milan fair. My parents' professional environment has changed: projects and expectations are growing. With our move upstairs, the rooms on the ground floor become representative – organised, tidy, easy to maintain.

1987 The attic of the office is converted, and my grandmother comes to live with us. The outdoor areas are remodelled to make the garden more accessible. The economic situation deteriorates. In a precarious phase, the office moves into my large upstairs room in the house, and I return downstairs. The buildings become a buffer, absorbing economic fluctuations.

1992 Better times return. I move out to study. The now honey-toned wood contrasts with the bold colours of my father's paintings. Bottle-green three-legged chairs and a cobalt-blue piano extend the palette. The carpenter we worked with is asked to saw the square dining table into two triangles, which are reassembled into a rhombus. A large studio window is cut into the roof, and a void is opened in the ceiling above the dining area. The diagonal, introduced in the early 1980s through the renewal of the timber cladding, is now reflected more widely in the spatial language. The house enters its post-modern phase.

2002 After their retirement, my parents begin to travel. The house turns into a base for their journeys and grows increasingly private. The interior is valued more for its comfort than for its appearance. Climate plays a greater role: doors are kept closed against heat or cold, and additional partition doors are installed to block draughts.

2012 After my father's death, the house remains as it was at that time. It enters a state of stillness. It seems necessary to leave things as they are; the renunciation of new stories is a sign of respect for the shared life and the past. For my mother, the house becomes both a ward and, at times, a burden. Only slowly does a certain lightness return.

2023 The next major event is my mother's decision to sell the former office to friends, who turn it into their home. The change of ownership brings legal requirements for energy efficiency – insulation, solar panels – leading to a complete reassessment of the envelope. Elements are doubled, reinforced, replaced. The modest building is almost pushed to its limit. Yet the spatial configuration changes very little. It is a legible structure, and the new owners allow themselves to be guided by it. Its true durability seems to lie less in the performance of its parts than in its spatial conception.

What might have felt like an intrusion develops into a sense of ease. As new owners move in, the congruence between the building and the arc of our family's life softens, and a new dimension unfolds. It is old and young at once. New stories emerge, stories we no longer need to concern ourselves with.

The Sensory Imprint of the House

The houses were the place of my childhood. They shaped my ideas of space, life and culture. They have also probably shaped the perspectives I bring to my work as an architect and teacher today.

The village where I grew up was unspectacular. Not much happened. I was often alone, sitting, staring ... Events were things like: the cockchafters are back. The cherries are ripe. The neighbour starts his tractor for a ride around the village.

The interior of the main house was mostly my point of departure. I remember above all thresholds, edges, surfaces: steps to sit on, walls to lean against, corners to turn. I remember textures, smells, sounds: the cold tiled floor and the spot warmed by heating pipes [7]; the timber cladding with knots and patterns where, lying in bed, you could find little figures and faces; the snapping sound of the terrace door on the way to the office; the warm doormat in the evening sun; the stifling heat and dusty smell beneath the roof of the garden shed, where we had our hideout [8].

With the other children, routines were simple but consistent, too: badminton tournaments that lasted all summer, whittling bows and arrows, sitting by the fire and still smelling of smoke the next morning. We shared the unspoken knowledge about which apples tasted best and how to run barefoot without tearing our feet.

The houses, their upkeep and alterations were also an opportunity for practical training – apparently part of my parents' educational philosophy. It was

important to become familiar with materials and develop manual skills. I was expected to try everything at least once – laying tiles, fixing timber boarding, pruning trees, scything the grass. They seemed convinced that this would help me master practical challenges and navigate life independently.

Part of this idea was to cultivate an awareness of the energy and value invested in actions and things. Especially in the early years, objects and resources were used with great frugality. New furniture did not replace the old, but was given a new role, contributing to a gradual densification of the interior. The original interior cladding of the main house was reused for the garden shed. Curtains were turned into cushions, and the leftover fabric was made into carnival costumes.

What has perhaps stayed with me most is the immediacy of the things around me, the possibility of grasping them physically and taking them in with time and through direct encounter. And with it, a sense of care and responsibility.

In our teaching, we ask students to reconstruct fragments of cities, buildings or rooms in detail using models. This requires intense attention, not only to form and construction, but also to the cultural

and social conditions inscribed in them. We hope that from this, an understanding and an empathy for the complexity of the situations may arise: their materiality, their origins, the effort, the circumstances, and the people involved in their making, which, perhaps, is the actual idea of sustainability.

What I describe here feels deeply personal, yet I am certain that I share these sensations, experiences and memories with those who grew up in a similar moment. We were born into a time when awareness of the limits to growth was emerging, yet our upbringing was still driven by the post-war spirit of a generation that had often owned little, carried an ingrained sense of scarcity and economy, while also feeling a strong need to materialise themselves and to give their ideas a spatial presence.

As for the houses, I am beginning to understand that what I first perceived as irreplaceable and fragile – something that could only be preserved or lost as a whole – instead reveals itself as a layered and open constellation. Some aspects are situated in place, others persist as knowledge, others again as stories or as sensory codes that unfold when prompted. All of these can, in turn, enter into new relationships – a web of things, far more amorphous and extending well beyond the houses themselves.



[7] *Listening to a story on record, 1978.*
Photo: Peter Pietsch.



[8] *In front of the garden shed, the playground in the back, 1982.*
Photo: Peter Pietsch.

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LIVE AND/OR LIVED-IN
Interior as a Realm in Between
Certainty and Ambiguity
K. Arioka



[1] Taki's photographs of the House in Uehara
by Kazuo Shinohara.

Prologue

The theme of this Cahier explores the dynamic concept of 'lived' interiors, including the relationship between the immaterial world perceived and remembered through the body's spatial awareness, and the static, tangible world of materialised architectural space. This relationship has been explored by a philosopher whose unique perspectives have not only shaped this discourse but continue to exert a profound influence on the Japanese architectural scene.

Koji Taki (1928–2011) was a critic whose discourse spanned diverse fields from art, design, urbanism, and architecture to theatre, sport, and literature. And the "world" that lay at the heart of the common theme of intellectual inquiry he sought to discern was something that emerged as if unexpectedly leaking out from within cities, photographs, architecture, and all manner of human endeavour.¹ Viewed from this perspective, architecture for Taki constituted one source of philosophical thought, being "*the spatial embodiment of human existence*"². In his essay "*The Language of the House*"³, Taki conceives of the house as a universe of meaning, positing two poles within it. One is where meaning or concept is explicit, as in a folk house, for instance, a language that narrates the story of a world constructed by the kind of conceptual ideology. The other is a language that emerges as humans inhabit the house to constitute it, and the house constitutes humans' lives. He then states that modern architecture (as discussed in the 1970s) tends to neutralise the first kind of language – ideology – into the second kind.

Taki takes a transdisciplinary approach to architecture, which he describes as "*the spatial embodiment of human existence*", revealing its profound connection to everyday life. His primary mediums are photography and, ultimately, language itself. He began his career as a critic through photographic theory and, at one point, also pursued a career as an architectural photographer. Taki's photographs, taken with a 35mm camera without a tripod and lacking spatial edges, evoked a sense of capturing something transcending reality, representing a completely different approach to architectural photography at the time. These Modernists distinguish between architectural space as art and the experiential reality of built space. Ironically, however, through the very medium of photography—which disseminates artistically valuable architecture to the world—Taki expressed architecture as another language; the complex text that encompasses space and time.

This paper attempts to decipher the essential nature of immaterial space, revealed through various media, in contrast to the material space woven by architecture itself. In other words, it seeks to approach the essence of 'lived' interior, an unexpected dimension of daily existence that occurs adjacent to the body. This exploration is pursued through a dialogue with Taki's work and thoughts, as well as that of architects who appear to have been influenced by him.

Interlude: Photography

Following his 1960s activities, in which he employed photography as an antithesis to the verisimilitude of "reality", Koji Taki photographed the architectural works of Japanese architects such as Kazuo Shinohara, Kazunari Sakamoto, and Toyo Ito during the 1970s. The works of Kazuo Shinohara, regarded alongside Arata Isozaki as a leader in post-Metabolism Japanese architecture and exerting a profound influence on residential design, particularly from the 1970s onwards, were a primary subject of Taki's photography.

Moreover, Shinohara clearly grasped the image of architecture conveyed through media such as photographs and drawings, which existed on a distinct plane from the physical architectural works he created. He regarded the visualisation of architectural works through media as the very completion of the architecture itself. Shinohara's assertion that "a house is a work of art" thus represented an aesthetic controlled across multiple dimensions. Furthermore, Taki's photographs being adopted as architectural imagery also originated from his exchange with Shinohara.

*"The existence of the space called a house is today guaranteed only by its deeper engagement with the diverse emotional movements of people. Furthermore, to put it even more bluntly, it should be noted that in its relationship to human life, it is more total than any other art. I even think it is an intense art that encompasses all of life."*⁴

The architect's role is to bring materialised works of construction into the world, literally providing space. In contrast, those like Taki who cast their gaze upon architectural space through media such as photography and criticism, seeking to discern its ambiguous and elusive "world", do so against a backdrop where the true nature of architecture—both tangible and intangible—is only revealed when one suggests a particular way of viewing the materialised form. The "architecture" Taki contemplated

¹ Ryūta Imafuku, "The Houses Are All Gone Under the Sea," in *Searching for the Language of a House*, ed. Tamami Iinuma (Tokyo: House of Architecture, 2020).

² Koji Taki, *Architect Kazuo Shinohara* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2007).

³ Koji Taki, "The Language of the House", in *Searching for the Language of a House*, ed. Tamami Iinuma (House of Architecture, 2020).

⁴ Kazuo Shinohara, *Jyutaku-ron* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun Publishing, 1970).



[2] Taki's photographs of the House in Uehara by Kazuo Shinohara.

was a transdisciplinary entity rooted in human existence. And therein lay architecture's profound connection to everyday life.

The above text by Kazuo Shinohara reveals that, for him, his architecture was never perceived as abstract art. Conversely, Koji Taki, author of *The Lived-in House*⁵ (1976), produced architectural photographs that extracted space in a highly abstract manner, a style unimaginable from his prose. What can be said here is that, at the very least, their thinking was by no means polarised. This can be inferred from Taki's text at the beginning of this paper, which interprets modern architecture through the two languages of the house. Taki subsequently devoted himself to writing, declared his departure from his own photography, and ceased taking photographs altogether.

Interlude: Language

Abstraction is not an act of distancing oneself from reality, but rather an act of extracting essence. In other words, although the medium shifted from

photography to writing, Taki's expressive technique remained an act of scooping up the ambiguous and inscrutable "world" as something essential.

*"Whether it be 'language' or 'photography,' all expressive activity ultimately involves striving to discover what true existence is, while passing through the veil of uncertain phenomena with one's own body. To distill it further, it connects to the endeavor to find new structures beyond the ones we routinely encounter in our daily lives. (...) The act of expression is such a transition: from the world of visible things, the elements constituting daily life, the things we perceive as reality—from this world that seems so certain—to a world to which our own bodies could not yet adapt."*⁶

Within this framework, Koji Taki's work *The Lived-in House* is revisited. The influence of Koji Taki—an architecturally expressive figure who employed photography and language as his medium—on Japanese architects during the transition from Modernism to the contemporary era is immeasurable. Furthermore, the interpretation of *The Lived-in House* undoubtedly continues to deepen our

⁵ Koji Taki, *The Lived-in House* (Tokyo: Tabata-shoten, 1976).

⁶ Koji Taki, *Selected Essays on Photography*, Iwanami Gendai Bunko (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003).

understanding of architecture within our society. This is because it seems that there has never been an era quite like the present, in which the very foundations of architecture are being so thoroughly re-examined. Moreover, it is undeniable that contemporary architectural discourse appears to lack discussion concerning the second of his propositions: the search for expressive methods for a world that is “*the spatial embodiment of human existence*”.

“...the ‘house’ is a metaphor that resurrects what we cannot necessarily depict as a conscious statement, and it is constructed as a text encompassing ‘space’ and ‘time’. If we take a look at ‘the Lived-in House’, we find an ‘event’ (or a human action) emerging at the centre of the house, and the behaviour of ‘things’ that keeps appearing and disappearing are related to this event, and only the ‘places’ (topos) for them emerge in a sequence.”⁷

Taki says: “Boundaries exist as concepts, but the germ of our ‘home’ lies not in the spaces at the edges, but in our gestures”. The place without boundaries here, the accumulation of spaces used by the human body, is an ambiguous realm, yet it constitutes the core of “home”. The ambiguous realm is a complex text that encompasses ‘space’ and ‘time’, and therefore, the conceptualisation of a boundary condition or limit seems futile in the face of liminal conditions constantly in flux.

When the first edition of *The Lived-in House* was published, it sparked considerable debate about its content. To put it simply and conclude upfront: this is not a treatise on architecture. *The Lived-in House* conceives of the ‘house’ not merely as a vessel for habitation, but as a composite text woven with human time and space, excavating the converging currents of human thought and imagination within it. Regardless of whether this work constitutes architectural theory, it had a wide-ranging impact on prominent architects of the time.

The recognisable characteristic aspects of the above analysis can be discerned in Toyo Ito’s works. Toyo Ito first met Koji Taki in June 1976 (three months before the first edition of *The Lived-in House* was published) at an open house for Kazuo Shinohara’s ‘House in Uehara’.⁸ This period coincided with the completion of Kazunari Sakamoto’s ‘Machiya House in Daita’,⁹ and the three of them frequently stayed up all night discussing architecture. Ito stated as follows:

“One day, I was surprised to receive the book ‘The Lived-in House’ directly from Taki. My mind was completely occupied with contemplating abstract spaces in modern architecture, and ‘The Lived-in House’ felt almost entirely disconnected from everyday design practice. At the time, strongly influenced by Shinohara’s work, I believed that my task was to conceive abstract spaces stripped of any sense of daily life. ... So when ‘The Lived-in House’ suddenly appeared during that period, it was shocking. Here, everything is depicted in stark contrast: the house as a trace of human activity versus the house as a work of art, as we architects tend to conceive it.”¹⁰

Taki situates the work of architects as such:

“Houses that have been lived in belong entirely to the world of the mundane. They do not demonstrate a free will seeking to transcend reality, but rather constitute reality itself. They are largely formulaic. An irreparable rift exists between these mundane houses and the architect’s work.”¹¹

Interlude: Dialogue

Indeed, Ito himself states that White U (1976)¹² underwent a transformation in its very architecture through Taki’s act of photographing it. Regarding this house, originally intended for limited-time occupation by Ito’s sister while mourning her late husband, the architect himself spoke of a methodology rooted in profoundly internal and conceptual thought. Through Taki’s photographic expression, architecture appears to possess a certain buoyancy in its existence, as if imbued with the very process of human habitation itself. The imagery of White U would not have emerged without the intervention of Taki’s new perspective. And perhaps it was the very existence of this house—abandoned and dismantled after a certain period of habitation—that emerged for Taki as an entity radiating an intense light.

The series of Taki’s photographs of White U shows an example of a case where photographic representation does not merely document but actively produces a new architectural meaning; evidence that ‘lived-ness’ can paradoxically emerge through abstraction rather than in opposition to it. Indeed, Taki’s thought, whatever mediums he may use, destabilises binary oppositions and embraces the coexistence of two languages.

⁷ Taki, *The Lived-in House*, 12.

⁸ Kazuo Shinohara and Houses and Drawings Editorial Committee, *Kazuo Shinohara: Houses and Drawings* (Tokyo: Shokokusha Publishing, 2008), 94–97.

⁹ Akio Nagashima, *Koji Taki and Architecture* (Tokyo: Kenchiku to Nichijo, 2013), 186–89.

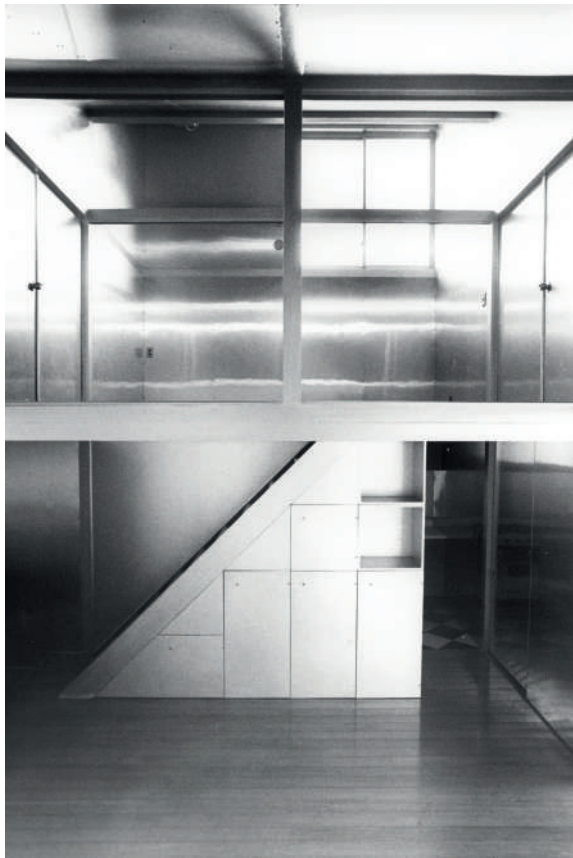
¹⁰ Nagashima, *Koji Taki and Architecture*, 28.

¹¹ Taki, *The Lived-in House*, 12.

¹² Toyo Ito, *Toyo Ito 1971–2001* (Tokyo: TOTO Publishing, 2013), 50.



[3-4] Taki's photographs of White U by Toyo Ito.



[5-6] Taki's photograph of Ginsha
by Hironori Shirasawa.

Regarding the 'Minna-no-ie' project, initiated by Toyo Ito and others in the disaster-affected areas following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, to create small-scale gathering places for people, Taki states the following:

*"The question for 'Minna-no-ie' project is whether we can recreate a 'lived-in house'. This is because, even though the people in the disaster-affected areas lost places to be together, they are not simply seeking a house where they can physically gather. They are seeking a house that restores their lost history and the memory of their place – in other words, the regeneration of a 'lived-in house'."*¹³

Significantly, Ito operates here as a critical hinge figure who embodies the very tension this paper addresses: on one side, the house as a work of art; on the other, the house as an ambiguous realm that constitutes the core of "home".

Even today, *The Lived-in House* continues to be read and influences Japanese architects across generations (unfortunately, no translation has yet been published). Needless to say, this is a testament to the complexity of the architect's vocation and stems from an enduring fascination with the endless dialogue between the intangible human activities and chains of memory, and the tangible, materialised architecture. Itsuko Hasegawa, a later-generation architect, reflects on how this book was perceived:

*"For the generation of architects like Shinohara and Isozaki, who argued that the architect's role is to create spaces as art detached from life and daily existence, 'The Lived-in House' was unacceptable. In contrast, our younger generation was drawn to the ideas in 'The Lived-in House'. By valuing the details of food, clothing and shelter that enrich life, and seeking directions that support and invigorate our vital activities, a new era of architecture emerged. Looking back, Taki was a figure who constantly opened new eyes for the younger generation, leading the next generation."*¹⁴

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the rather peculiar trajectory of the book *The Lived-in House*. In other words, it aims to provide an opportunity to reflect on the dialogue this book has engaged in with various architects, endowed with the vocation of creating architectural space, and what opportunities for reflection it has afforded architects since it left the author's hands and began its journey as an independent entity; at least, that is how it seems to me. To put it more specifically, this endeavour aims to substantiate the argument that approaching

'lived' interiors—the space where, as Taki describes, 'event', 'things' and 'places' are interwoven— as a "universe of meaning" oscillating between the realm of certainty and ambiguity is the very act of probing the essence of architecture.

Epilogue

Finally, I wish to note that Taki, having endured illness in his later years, was compelled to leave his own residence, Ginsha.¹⁵ Moreover, through the demolition of this house—said to be Taki's final photographic medium—he himself experienced the disappearance of a dwelling.

In the ultimate sense, that lived space continues to dwell within the human mind as a chain of experiential memory, even without its physical existence. For Taki, the "house" - here synonymous with 'lived' interiors - is a complex weave of experiences and events, suggesting something that emerges precisely at the moment architecture vanishes.¹⁶ The anecdote about the Tanikawa House (1974 by Kazuo Shinohara, which could be described as a rejection of the house itself, offers valuable insight into this iconic architectural work by Shinohara.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, this house is one of the subjects of Taki's most well-known photographs.

The Tanikawa House was built in the summer retreat of Kita-Karuizawa as a villa for the poet Shuntarō Tanikawa and his mother. Shuntarō Tanikawa is known for initially commissioning this building by sending Shinohara an obscure poem. That poem bore two titles: *Winter House, or Pioneer's Hut* (a dwelling) and *Summer Space, or Pantheist's Church* (need not be a dwelling). Yet, Tanikawa never spent a single night in this supreme architecture. The poet, who "wanted a ground for living" and never even expected functional elements from this house, could be said to have been in a beautiful complicity with the architect,¹⁸ yet he never lived in this house.

The peculiar earthen-floored space, with its raw earth exposed, embodies nature as fiction. The architect's realisation of the ruinous through this dwelling, coupled with the client-poet Tanikawa's inability to accept this house and its existence, suggests that this architecture could never have become a context that weaves the organic time of life and death.

Subsequently, the house passed to another owner. The current owner, with roots in the arts, reportedly spends every weekend at the Tanikawa house.

¹³ Nagashima, *Koji Taki and Architecture*, 29.

¹⁴ Nagashima, *Koji Taki and Architecture*, 45.

¹⁵ *Shinkenichiku* (Tokyo: Shinkenichiku-sha, December 1979), 219.

¹⁶ Imafuku, "The Houses Are All Gone Under the Sea," 52.

¹⁷ Shinohara and Editorial Committee, *Kazuo Shinohara*, 82–85.

¹⁸ Shinichi Okuyama, *The Poet of Space: Kazuo Shinohara* (Tokyo: Shokokusha, 2025), 223.



[7-8] Taki's photographs of Tanikawa House
by Kazuo Shinohara.

He dedicates time to confronting this architectural work, wrestling with how one might truly 'inhabit' this place. On a desk visible through the window lay a book titled *Living One's Own Time*.¹⁹

In contemporary society, where we recognise "the loss of community, the fragmentation of individuals, and the severing of communication",²⁰ the work *The Lived-in House* is to be reconsidered as an endeavour to deeply explore the world that becomes our "ground for living".

The creator who seeks to design the profound, silent presence of a house that embraces human life knows that the house possesses another language. Perhaps the very attempt to express this language is the process by which architecture transforms into space itself. It is precisely this attitude of deeply exploring the medium and methods of expression that constitutes the essential role of architectural practice.

¹⁹ Kunitake Sasō, *Living One's Own Time* (Tokyo: Asama-sha, 2023)

²⁰ Taki, *The Lived-in House*, 228.

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[1] Shinohara, Kazuo. House in Uehara. Tokyo, 1976 ©Taki, Koji

[2] Shinohara, Kazuo. House in Uehara. Tokyo, 1976 ©Taki, Koji

[3] Ito, Toyo. White U. Tokyo, 1976 ©Taki, Koji

[4] Ito, Toyo. White U. Tokyo, 1976 ©Taki, Koji

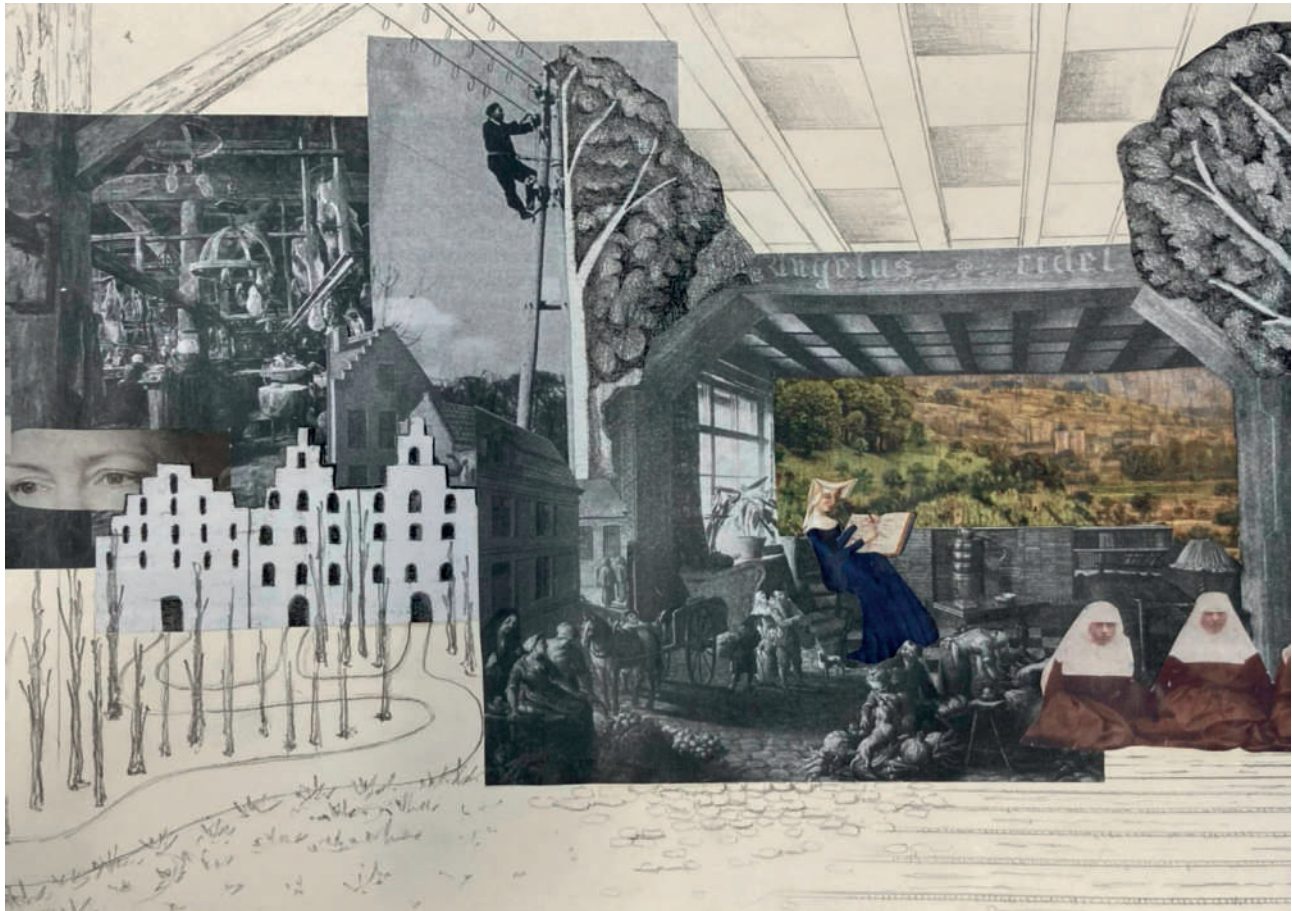
[5] Shirasawa, Hironori. Ginsha. Kanagawa, 1979 ©Taki, Koji

[6] Shirasawa, Hironori. Ginsha. Kanagawa, 1979 ©Taki, Koji

[7] Shinohara, Kazuo. Tanikawa House. Gunma, 1974 ©Taki, Koji

[8] Shinohara, Kazuo. Tanikawa House. Gunma, 1974 ©Taki, Koji

Approaches to Adaptive Reuse through the "Drawing-Collage" Representation Tactics as Learning Tools for Architecture *N. Grillo, S. Heynickx*



[1] Detail view of drawing-collages by Maria Nefeli Xourafi, 2025.

New Visions for an Old World: Visualizing the Adaptive Reuse of a Built Heritage

The seminar *Tactics*, held in the spring semester of the academic year 2024-2025¹ at Hasselt University within the international Master of Interior Architecture, presented various representation techniques for engaging with built heritage and critically envisioning its possible transformations, with a focus on the former Beguinage of Bruges.

Founded in the 13th century, the Bruges Beguinage was a space for a community of unmarried religious women, known as beguines. It is currently a protected ensemble with high historical and archaeological value in the fabric of Bruges, which is already a UNESCO World Heritage city.

The basic spatial concept is a constellation of small houses arranged around a main garden with trees, along with additional smaller gardens and units, and a church. It was technically renovated in 2002 and is still partly inhabited by a group of nuns, while discussions on possible future transformations for this heritage are ongoing.² Students were invited to work on adaptive reuse design projects. Building on this context, this article aims to examine the potential contributions of employing the representational technique of “drawing-collage” as a teaching tool for adaptive reuse of architecture. We define the “drawing-collage” as a hybrid that merges hand-drawn perspective views with photographic collage.



[2] Beguinage in Bruges: courtyard and street with, among others, houses no. 4 (17th-century pointed gable) and no. 6 (front), 1929.

The methodology of freehand architectural drawing has consistently formed the core of the seminar *Tactics* within the mentioned master's program.³ Focusing on this seemingly “outdated” approach allows students to analyze and explore possible design scenarios through making and dialogue, engaging in a slow-paced working method that fosters reflection. Within this framework, the process itself—and the discussions surrounding intermediate results—are considered as significant as the final outcome. Drawing functions as a medium, a vehicle for thought and communication throughout the process.⁴ The additional layer of working with physically printed images and photographs—to be cut, glued, and recombined—further expanded this reflective framework based on the analog tactility of making.

The drawing-collage situates itself within both historical and contemporary practices of collage in architecture. The use of collage in architectural representation emerged in the late nineteenth century, initially through the application of graphic elements and drawings onto photographic supports to exploit their potential for realism. During the early decades of the twentieth century, this approach developed further, intersecting with the emerging practices of collage within art and generating distinct representational strategies and cultural intentions.⁵ It remained tightly connected to the imaginary of Modernism, as in the city designs and interiors projects of Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier.⁶ Collage was later increasingly used to transcend reality and convey a specific critical “discourse” on contemporary society,⁷ as in the radical architectural work of the 1970s of Archigram or Superstudio, whose utopian images also brought forward a contestation of contemporary society. In the 1980s, notable examples included those of architects such as Jean Nouvel and OMA/Rem Koolhaas, who employed collages to convey the narratives of their projects as visual stories. In the 21st century, it is still used by studios such as Dogma, Point Supreme, and Fala Atelier, often with specific underlying conceptual intentions.

In Dogma's case, for example, their collages reflect a deliberate design approach based on representational economy and formal simplicity. Their central-perspective images seek to abstract architecture rather than exploit illusions of realism, with representation techniques aligned with their design agenda—particularly regarding domestic space as a site of both “productive and reproductive labor” and “beyond rigid definitions of ... family living.”⁸ In an image such as *Like a Rolling Stone* (2016), the dimension of the inhabited interior space clearly emerges through the presence of generic, non-descriptive

¹ The seminar was closely coordinated with the Design Studio, addressing the same site. It comprised 2 hours of student contact over a 12-week semester (4.5 ECTS).

² We refer to the official document by the city of Bruges with a detailed vision based on profound research, inventarisation and heritage evaluation, consolidated in a long term maintenance plan (2017-2041): “Brugge - Begijnhof,” *Onroerend Erfgoed*,

accessed October 31, 2025, <https://plannen.onroerenderfgoed.be/plannen/265>.

³ At the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University an online learning platform: www.sketchatlas.org was developed with tutorials for the step by step learning trajectory for the skill of freehand architectural drawing. This platform was also available to all the students of the seminar to improve their drawing skills and to

start from a common ground (technical construction of a sketch, terminology and possible variations of style).

⁴ Sophia Psarra, “Drawing in Process: The Role of Drawing in the Development of Architectural Concepts” (paper presented at *TRACEY: Drawing Across Boundaries Symposium*, Loughborough University, September 1998), accessed October 29, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/9637164/Drawing_in_Process_The_



[3] Superstudio, *Positano*, from *Il monumento continuo* series, 1969–70. Collage, photographic print, and graphite on tracing paper and paper mounted under mat, 45.5 × 54 cm.



[4] Dogma, *Lateral view*, from *Like a Rolling Stone*, 2016.

Role_of_Drawing_in_the_Development_of_Architectural_Concepts.

- ⁵ Martino Stierli, *Montage and the Metropolis: Architecture, Modernity, and the Representation of Space*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018.
- ⁶ For the brief historical overview we trace here and below, we follow Anna Rossellini, "Epicentri Concettuali del Collage Digitale a Vocazione Teorica." *Piano B. Arti e Culture Visive* 4, no. 2 (2019): 80–103. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2531-9876/11023>.

⁷ Beatrice Lampariello, "The 'Discorso per Immagini' of Superstudio: From Continuous Monument to Supersurface, 1968–1971." *ArchHistor* 3, no. 5 (2016): 106–37. <https://doi.org/10.14633/AHR028>.

- ⁸ Pier Vittorio Aureli, Martino Tattara, "Paint a Vulgar Picture: On the Relationship Between Images and Projects in Our Work." *Piano B. Arti e Culture Visive* 4, no. 2 (2019): 43. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2531-9876/10857>.

Three Threads of Tactics for the Making of Drawing-Collages

a. White Space and Lines

In *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Rudolf Arnheim (1974) argues that spatial relationships and the placement of empty areas specifically shape a composition's perceptual dynamics. Arnheim notes that the eye always seeks equilibrium; thus, the placement of white space directly contributes to the viewer's sense of balance and stability. In collages and drawings, where layering and juxtaposition are central, the position of white space, for example, also creates rhythm and depth, guiding the viewer's attention. To stimulate and to build up a common ground of references, we showed the students canonical examples of collage work where white space is used in a structured way, such as the pavilion of Sverre Fehn in 1958 for the Brussels World Expo¹⁰ and a one-point perspective room with a view by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe. In an interior perspective of the *Resor House Project* (ca. 1937–41), a minimal collage reflects Mies van der Rohe's poetic approach to composing space. Within a large white space, we see only the pencil lines of the floor and ceiling horizons, with two slender pillars framing a wide window. In this opening, a photographic image of the exterior landscape is inserted. The appearance of this view beyond the glass seems to blur the boundary between interior and exterior, while the drawing conveys both the structural clarity of his design and the integration of the architecture within its contextual setting.¹¹

everyday objects—a rucksack, books, boxes. As in other of their collages, these objects serve as material traces of potential interior life without imposing predetermined functions or explicit assumptions about the inhabitant's age, sex, or financial means.⁹ The presence of a human figure glimpsed from a window toward the exterior suggests the existence of a balcony, while the figure itself remains unidentifiable.

During the seminar, students were presented with a series of collage examples from both art and architecture. They were then required to create four pencil-drawn line perspectives of the beguineage spaces and enrich them with image elements from any sources they chose. These were means to create strategic images for their individual projects. Key thematic tactics explored in the course included reflections on material and immaterial aspects, particularly: (a) the use of white space as a space to be completed with the imagination; (b) the assemblage of fragments and their potential relations to societal and historical dimensions of the sites considered; (c) the tactile activity involved in the making process as a reflective space and a resistance to the digital takeover in architectural representation. The concepts discussed in class served as a starting point for students to create different drawing-collages, with particular attention given to lived interiors. Below, we will first present considerations on the three tactics, then discuss the results of some students' work.



[5] Sverre Fehn, *Norwegian Pavilion for the World Exposition in Brussels (Interior Perspective)*, ca. 1957. Collage on board, 46.4 × 86.3 cm.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45. The image, shown in fig. 4, is part of a project for boarding houses in London developed in the framework of the exhibition 'Home Economics' at the British Pavilion at the 2016 Venice International Architecture Biennale. It shows the interior view of sofas and work tables integrated into the facade. See Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, "Living / Working: Trois projets pour repenser le logement contemporain", *espazium*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.espazium.ch/fr/actualites/living-working>.

¹⁰ See Sverre Fehn, *Norwegian Pavilion for the World Exposition in Brussels (Interior Perspective)*, ca. 1957, collage on board, height 464 mm × width 863 mm, NMK.2008.0734.009.001, Architecture Collections, Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design, Oslo, accessed October 30, 2025, <https://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/collection/object/NMK.2008.0734.009.001>.

¹¹ See Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Resor House Project, Jackson Hole, Wyoming (Interior Perspective of Living Room [View through North Glass Wall])*, ca. 1937–41, pencil and photograph on illustration board, The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 30, 2025, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/748>.



[6] Mimmo Rotella, *Collage su tela [Collage on canvas]*, 1956, 60 x 80 cm. Detail view of the work.

As the Gestalt theory suggests, the human perceptual system naturally seeks to organize visual stimuli into coherent wholes; the location of white space can frame, separate, or connect visual elements even if they are only shown partly.¹² The brain makes a whole with the amount of information that is provided. This theory not only focuses on the technical conditions of the drawing or collage, such as the position of elements and the proportions or forms of objects within the drawing and drawing spaces, but also on the relationship between these two spaces. Building on the accepted notion of Gestalt as a foundation for collage, Roy Behrens's work adds an additional layer to this field. He identifies the combination of simultaneous imagery, the idea of closure, and an action of comparison and contrast as the keystones of collage. The mind not only completes images but also compares and contrasts them to establish meaning.¹³ A well-known example is the projections of two slides next to each other in the context of teaching. Therefore, we asked students to use the white space not only as a compositional element but also as a strategic one, encouraging them to dare to leave out direct meaning and allow the viewer's imagination to complete the empty space.

In addition, we stipulated that the composition of a collage had to be combined with a line drawing from the start or during image creation. Often, adding a drawn element allows the whole to be placed in a completely different context. A notable example

is the work of the illustrator Saul Steinberg, who was also trained as an architect at the Politecnico di Milano, completing his degree in 1940.¹⁴ Some of his playful work starts with found images, which are then supplemented with line drawings. The line drawing is not always filled in with color, but always links the elements together. Perspective or depth is created by the drawing activity and the deliberate association with other meanings.¹⁵ In creating architectural representation imagery (renders), the architect often starts with a line drawing and then adds color and texture to surfaces by digitally layering or incorporating cutouts of people and objects.

b. Fragments, Assemblages, and Constellations

The concept of fragments is inherent to the adaptive reuse of built heritage. Fred Scott points out that, in the architect's discourse on adaptive reuse, there is always a process of combining existing and new elements. He calls it "the intended and the existing" and makes the comparison with the known concept of collage as a method for the architect to deal with these two components.¹⁶

Old buildings are always a recombination of fragments from different epochs, similar to living "chimerical" creatures composed of diverse bodily parts that dynamically change and evolve over time: a window frame, a piece of stone, and especially

¹² Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

¹³ Roy R. Behrens, "Pandemic Images and Gestalt Theory: Introspective Musings About a Series of Digital Art-works". *Faculty Publications* 6663 (2021). <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/facpub/6663>.

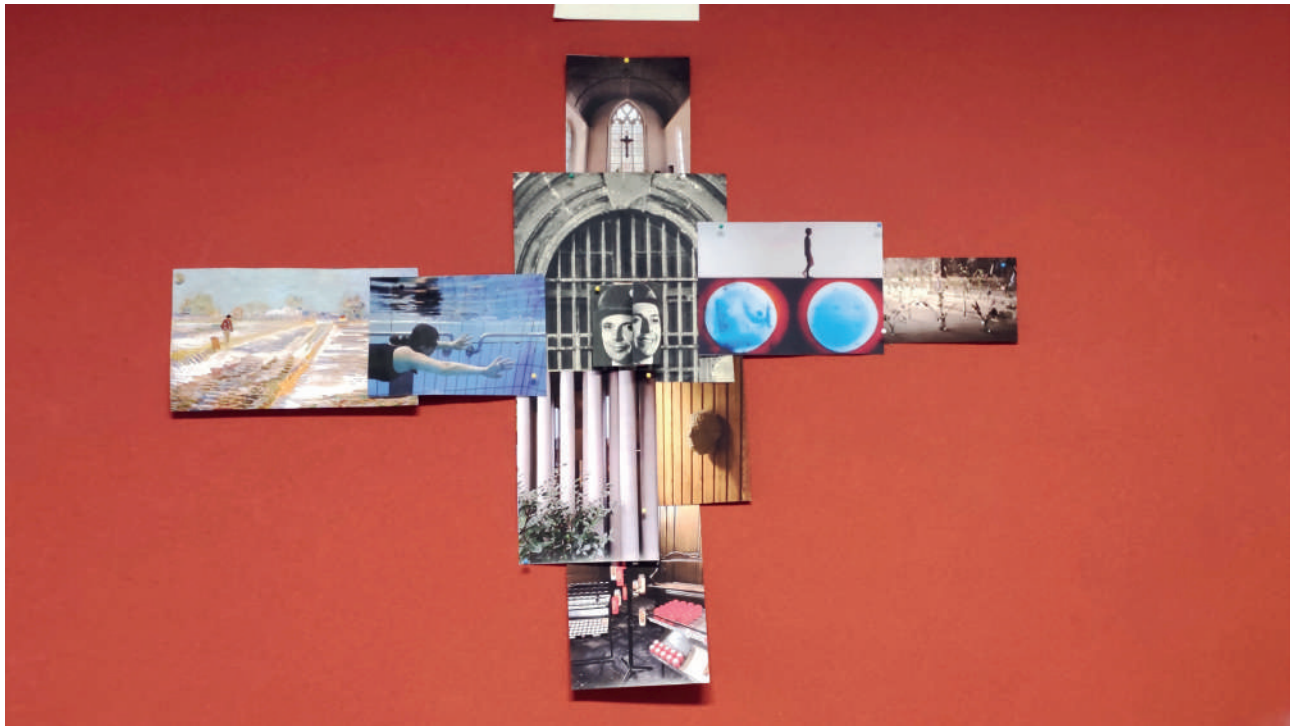
¹⁴ Cassandra Cozza, ed., *La Milano di Saul Steinberg*, in *Territorio* 76, no. 1 (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016), 84–87, <https://doi.org/10.3280/TR2016-076012>

¹⁵ On the work of Saul Steinberg and the use of line with collage, see Anne Montfort-Tanguy and Valérie Loth, eds. *Saul Steinberg: Between the Lines*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Books, 2022.

¹⁶ Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 137.



[7-8] Students working during the “constellation” workshop.



[9] A final assemblage of chosen images by a group of students during the “constellation” workshop.

furniture may well change within an architectural body while it remains one “organism”.¹⁷ Likewise, collages are made of fragments from different sources that come together in a visual montage. Thus, the drawing-collage’s representational tool links back to the very fragmented nature of heritage buildings. As such, it allows for the incorporation of elements from the material and immaterial history of the buildings as lived interiors: for example, by

employing materials physically taken from the sites, using old photographs, showing former users, etc. The material connection with the places represented emerges in historical examples of artistic collage—such as in the works of Jacques Villeglé and Mimmo Rotella [6], through the use of materials drawn from everyday life or fragments of paper torn from street posters—which were presented to the students.¹⁸

¹⁷ The concept of “chimerical architecture” was developed in an M.A. thesis written at the end of the same master’s program by student Maria Nefeli Xourafi, supervised by Nicoletta Grillo and titled “Chimerical Architecture: Recombining Fragments through a Word-and-Image Narrative at the Academie Beeldende Kunsten Anderlecht”. <https://documentserver.uhasselt.be/handle/1942/47228>

¹⁸ On material connections in relation to Jacques Villeglé, see Etgar Yuval. “Border Control: Testing the Limits of Collage.” In *Vitamin C+: Collage in Contemporary Art*, edited by Rebecca Morrill, 10–17. London: Phaidon Press, 2023.

In the class, the idea of working with fragments was further explored in a practical workshop with images titled “Constellations”, which was organized at the end of the semester, before the final delivery of the students’ drawing-collages. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin, an epistemology of the constellation explored the possibility of the combination of fragments to reveal new meanings that are not visible when looking at single fragments by themselves.¹⁹ Through processes of juxtaposition, new figurative constructs emerge, much as stars linked by imaginary lines render constellations perceptible. A constellation of fragments is, therefore, an interpretive human construct, like the mythological figures that become visible as a grouping of stars. The introduction to the constellation workshop also reflected on the historical form of the cabinet of curiosities as a collection of different *naturalia* and *artificialia* fragments,²⁰ and referenced the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne by Aby Warburg as an assemblage of visual pieces.²¹

During the workshop, a large number of images were laid out on a table. These images, sourced from a variety of materials, including old architecture magazines, reproductions of artworks, and advertising folders, were collected and selected by both teachers and students. The workshop proceeded in a collective group setting. After choosing two starting images, a student had to replace one of them with another image and explain why the new selection was a better match. Then the next student

would do the same, replacing one of the two images, and the next student would do the same, until the circle was complete. Connections were made based on form, color, and meaning. Throughout the process, students’ combinations were discussed collectively at the table, with students reflecting and elaborating on their spontaneous choices. Next, they were asked to work in small groups of three or four students to arrange these images into new spatial constellations and pin the resulting selection on the wall. The reasoning behind these assemblages was again discussed jointly, fostering a collaborative reflection on the visual relationships. For example, a cross-shaped assemblage [9] embodied two dimensions: horizontal linearity, representing the directional flow of space, and vertical linearity, experienced as an “upward ascent.” The vertical dimension was linked to the architectural spatiality of sacred buildings, leaning on reflections on spirituality inspired by the context of the very Bruges beunage.

The workshop highlighted that the “paper page” itself may be understood as a spatial medium. Working tactically with images on a physical platform—for example, laying them out on a table, arranging, rearranging, and composing them physically—differs fundamentally from managing digital image collections. This process requires students to organize ideas spatially, thereby translating conceptual intentions into spatial relations through images.



[10] Installation view of *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) by Camille Henrot. Single-channel video, color, sound, 13:07.

¹⁹ Nicoletta Grillo, “Constellations,” in *Photography and Invisible Borders: Spaces of Imagination between Switzerland and Italy*, 102–25 (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

²⁰ An introduction to the wunderkammer and its categories was presented to the students following Horst Bredekamp, “The Historical Chain,” in *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995), 11–36.

²¹ See “Bilderatlas Mnemosyne,” Warburg Institute, <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/library-collections/warburg-institute-archive/bilderatlas-mnemosyne>.

Tactile Making and Medium Obsolescence

In the 13-minute video *Grosse Fatigue* (2013), artist Camille Henrot presents a meditation on the transmission of knowledge through a reflection on the origin of the universe and creation myths [10].²² A layering of windows on a computer desktop displays images of objects from museum collections juxtaposed with everyday footage and materials from internet sources, in a dynamic montage that becomes a sort of “video collage.” The visual is complemented with a spoken-word poem. Henrot seems to use the display of a computer desktop, with different windows popping up and accumulating one after the other, as a metaphor for reflecting on contemporary information overload. The title *Grosse Fatigue* (which can be translated as Big Fatigue or Deep Exhaustion), therefore, also refers to our bulimic experience of consuming images and knowledge in the internet era. An extract from the video was shown in a class of the seminar *Tactics* to trigger a debate on the omnipresence of digital creation in contemporary architectural practice, and the overwhelming amount of hyperrealistic renderings that result. Often, these maintain a simple descriptive quality of the architectural projects they represent. In this framework, many architects seem to have been rediscovering older representational tools as alternatives that can better incorporate the conceptual layers of their projects, as in the case of Dogma already mentioned (cfr. Section 1), or convey the atmospheric quality of the lived space.

As a response to the discussed digital tiredness, we have invited students to work solely by hand.²³ Pencil drawing is naturally a thinking tool for all architects. At the same time, handwork is closely tied to the origins of collage, which emerged as an analog and physical technique. The tactility of their making remains perceptible in the appearances of the early collages, where the borders of cut or thorn images often have a specific legible thickness. Working with these methodologies can appear nostalgic, if not even updated, for contemporary representations, yet they offer some specific creative opportunities. For example, a piece of text cut out from a newspaper can become a texture in a collage, a sort of alternative hatching, where the emergence of a few legible words can link to societal elements connected to the project context. Such an approach can be translated to other architectural outputs, such as maquettes. This occurred in the master’s program when a student applied collage as a texture in design studio maquettes, despite it being a different course from the drawing-collage *Tactics* seminar.

In *Reinventing the Medium* (1999), Rosalind Krauss offers a clear perspective on the use of techniques

that appear out of time, superseded by contemporary technology. Reflecting on the relationship between obsolescence and the possibilities that arise from being outdated, she assigns a decisive role to obsolescence in rethinking a medium.²⁴ Krauss states that what is technologically outdated creates an external position vis-à-vis the continuity of the technological system, thereby intensifying perceptual experience and making possible a form of redemption inscribed within the medium itself. Obsolescence can thus be understood in two ways: not only as an evocation of past temporalities, but also as an act of resistance and rupture against the relentless acceleration of progress. In both instances, a technique, or a medium, precisely because it is obsolete, breaks free from its purely instrumental or commodified function, thereby uncovering or inventing new communication potentials.

3. Examples from Students’ Works

In this section, we present selected final students’ works from the seminar *Tactics* and how they relate to the three tactics presented. While students were developing their design projects for the Bruges Beguinage in another course—the master’s design studio—the *Tactics* seminar focused exclusively on representation through drawing-collages, with an assignment requiring each student to make at least four collages. We highlight here only some elements related to the three discussed tactics, inviting the reader to make further connections as they see the images in the following pages.

In Daphne Nadine Evangelista’s project [11], openness is proposed as a strategy for repurposing the Beguinage’s architecture. Beguines are not typically associated with the transparent, open-glass architecture of the twentieth century. Small windows, a hidden existence, and an introverted attitude are, after all, at odds with the concept of transparency. Yet the collage depicts a single Beguine looking through a giant outdoor screen, not at the real green space, but at a painted landscape of greenery and sky. The image is intentionally unrealistic, using the painting’s landscape qualities to convey the character of the new spatial setting. The white space of the building interior contrasts with the exterior, suggesting the interior-exterior relation as a central element of the project.

Collages often communicate through a palette of colors and material choices linked to reality. But there is another possibility: deliberately introducing an absurd reality in which the surreal element conveys a message. The idea of placing a giraffe, an exotic animal that certainly does not occur in

²² The video was produced during a residency of the artist at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., by working into their archive collections. See Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013, The Museum of Modern Art, accessed October 29, 2025. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/175938>

²³ In the field of alternative pedagogical strategies of image making and participation, collage can be a stimulating strategy, we refer to: Simmons, Nicola, and Shauna Daley. “The Art of Thinking: Using Collage to Stimulate Scholarly Work”. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 4, no 1 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-reaeca.2013.1.2>.

²⁴ Krauss, Rosalind. “Reinventing the Medium.” *Angelus Novus* 25, no. 2 (1991): 289–305.

Bruges, here in an interior view [12] is a move of this kind. The green cloud on the animal's head could be a nod to the work of Magritte, or at least be interpreted as such. Another parallel can be drawn with the representation of Rem Koolhaas' Villa Dall'Ava in Paris in 1991, where a giraffe was literally brought to the site for a photo reportage to emphasize the thin column structure and the confrontation of the villa with the domestic urban fabric of the 19th century.²⁵ Here, the animal emerges in the white corridor space—emphasising its double height—central to Daria Palermo's design intervention.

Aimi Hayashi's drawing [13] uses pencil contours filled with fragments from brochures, advertisements, and newspapers to depict the Bruges Beguinage layout. The site features a variety of small buildings surrounding a large, open green space. The accommodation, as well as ancillary functions, are clustered in house volumes with complex roof structures. The collage traces a conceptual path between building sections, marked by stepping stones. A Beguine—recognizable by her cloak and hood—is also present in the drawing. The shape of the hood is so strong that even the letters and numbers in the collage do not detract from it. Different colors and fragments of a Dutch text situate the scene within the city. The source images used in the collages suggest the life of the interior and exterior spaces after adaptive reuse: Aimi Hayashi envisioned various common functions for the buildings around the theme of food, such as cooking, gardening, or eating and conversing around a table. These actions and atmospheres are suggested by objects, figures, and textures shown in the collage, presented in fragments brought together.

Repurposing can be considered at multiple scales, including the route through the city and the entrance into the Beguinage. Entering unfolds in steps, through gates, passageways, walls, and demarcated zones, with the interior experience integrated into the visitor's sequence. In [14], the relationships between the interior and exterior are presented in an associative panorama made by Maria Nefeli Xourafi. The elements literally interlock, creating a flow of images with rich detail. There is much to see and discover, including fragments of paintings, interior elements, and façade structures. A movable red piece of paper with a peephole can be displaced to mark the viewing area: one discovers the world piece by piece, yet one also gains an understanding of the entire panorama. Wooden paneling in the existing interiors doubles as furniture, complemented by pencil lines that capture spatial lines without filling in all details. It is precisely the confrontation between the drawing and the photograph that highlights the paneling's quality. Xourafi

envisioned the repurposing of the Beguinage as a series of small cabinets that could be opened and closed, dispersed along a pathway throughout the entire site. Her choice of images suggests these different enclosed atmospheres and spaces for peeping through, while we perceive a movement of the lived interiors from the past to the future: from a beguine sewing while sitting by a window where light enters the room, to a person watching a TV screen inserted in a cabinet while sitting on a sofa chair.

In a one-point perspective drawing by Marie Bill [16], pencil lines delineate a portico, while certain areas are filled with image elements. The outside environment appears through a wall opening. Part of a tree trunk is visible on the ground floor, while the crown of the tree appears on the upper floor. There are no human figures in this drawing; only the indication of a door—again a white area—on the right-hand side gives a sense of the size of the space. The ceiling and balustrade are not materialized but remain white. The pencil lines outline the essence: beams, railing bars, and the guiding lines of the floor tiles. The essence of the perspective seems to be a focused connection with nature and a palette of materials that seamlessly connect the inside and outside. The handcrafted nature of this image is evident through the deliberate use of torn paper, which contributes to the wall texture and reminds us of the tactile act of both making the collage and building a wall. The filling of the wall becomes a combination of texture and text, and may even suggest a certain roughness in the wall finishing. At the same time, the white grid superimposed on the floor clearly denotes the typical Beguinage tiles.

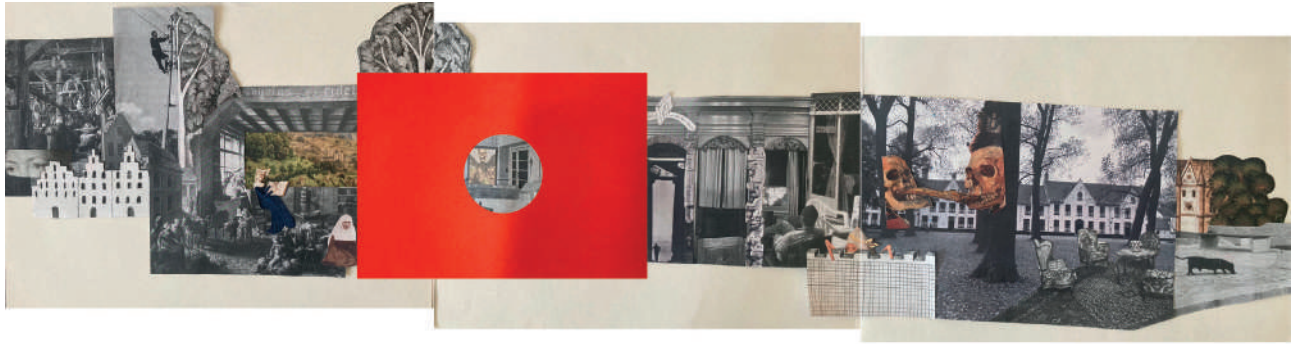
²⁵ For more information on the video and the stills of the real giraffe in Paris by photographer Hans Werlemann see "ARCH+ features STOA: Expanded Photography – The Work of Hans Werlemann," *ARCH+*, December 2, 2020, <https://archplus.net/de/archplus-features-stoa-expanded-photography-the-work-of-hans-werlemann/>.



[11] From the inside to the outside: drawing collage
by Daphne Nadine Evangelista, 2025.



[12] A surreal element: drawing-collage
by Daria Palermo, 2025.



[14] A panoramic drawing-collage
by Maria Nefeli Xourafi, 2025.



[15] Detail view of drawing-collages
by Maria Nefeli Xourafi, 2025.



[16] From the inside to the outside: drawing collage
by Marie Bill, 2025.

4. Conclusions

By presenting and discussing these outcomes, the article demonstrates how drawing-collages can stimulate students' critical reflection and serve as a site for design intentions to emerge in an associative process of the imagination. The panoramic strip developed by Maria Nefeli Xourafi [14], for instance, not only represented a pathway through the site but also enacted that experience through its elongated format. In this way, the paper became a design space, and the act of composing the collage became an architectural operation in its own right.

The tension in the representation of architecture and solutions to a question, namely the adaptive reuse process of a listed heritage building complex, can benefit from the associative quality of the collage and the confrontation of abstract and corporeal realities through the maker's viewpoint within the perspectives in a very early phase. Projects in an adaptive reuse context often have a lengthy thought process and eventual execution. The student works presented in this paper, drawn from a single semester exercise, are not comparable to the complete work produced by professional teams and offices in practice. Technical complexity and bureaucratic regulations, as well as engagement with multiple stakeholders and frequently changing programmatic constraints, are not yet the primary focus. Nevertheless, this limitation is productive rather than reductive. By temporarily suspending such complexities, the drawing-collage functions as a site where initial design intentions can emerge, allowing students to articulate an architectural "core" idea before confronting the full weight of practice, through selective focus.

The paper discussed three tactics that enable this selective focus: first, white space can serve as an open space to be filled with the mind; second, bringing together different image fragments can help to make new meaning emerge; third, the tactical process of making can foster the creation of a slower and more reflective practice compared to the fast pace of the hyper-production of digital images. While these specific tactics were identified, it became clear through the students' examples that no single tactic operates in isolation. Effective drawing-collages rely on a combination of them, and possibly more. There is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between a specific tactic and a specific representational outcome. Instead, the tactics overlap and reinforce one another, enabling multiple readings and interpretations to coexist within a single image.

Finally, the concept of the "drawing-collage" opens up pathways for further research and pedagogical development. The drawing-collage is an intermedial object, and one possible direction is to extend further this intermedia dimension. One possibility would be to translate the "drawing-collage" methodology into animations or video works that may still retain a manual or tactile character. Another possible trajectory concerns three-dimensional interpretations, for example, through the development of "collage-maquettes." Exploring what a "collage-maquette" might entail could further expand the role of collage as a conceptual and material bridge between representation and spatial design.

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- [2] Guido Gezelle Archives. *Beguinage in Brugges showing 17th century pointed gable*, 1929. Photograph. City Library of Bruges, item nr. 9250 F. <https://brugge.bibliotheek.be/catalogus?q=Begijnhof+te+Brugge+binnentuin>.
- [3] Superstudio. *Positano*, from the *Il monumento continuo* series, 1969–70. Collage, photographic print, and graphite on tracing paper and paper mounted under mat, 45.5 × 54 cm. Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, inv. AM 2000-2-140. Photo: Centre Pompidou. <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/cn7K7yj>.
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The collector:
Pursuing Books in the Fallout of Collapse
S. Gzyl.



[1] Interior of the bookstore that accompanies Museo del Libro Venezolano. Photo by author, 2024.

Introduction

For the last twenty-five years, Venezuela has been immersed in a conflict characterized by political turmoil, economic instability, and the breakdown of services and infrastructure. The rapid deterioration of living conditions since 2014 has triggered an unprecedented migratory crisis; nearly eight million people—more than a quarter of the country's population—have left in the last decade.¹ In some residential areas of Caracas, the country's capital and largest city, an estimated 50% of apartments and houses are vacant or underutilized.² Despite this overwhelming vacancy, large-scale migration has not resulted in a landscape of abandonment and ruin. Instead, migrants' decision to hold on to their local patrimonies has set in motion *caretaking practices* that maintain, repair, salvage, or transform their left-behind possessions.

This article is part of an ongoing doctoral investigation that examines these emerging practices in relation to emigration and generalized breakdown. Caretaking offers a unique entry point into the architectural and urban implications of outward migration, challenging assumptions that this phenomenon inevitably results in urban decline. More broadly, the ways in which migrants' patrimonies are locally used and reinvented allow examining societal collapse under a new light, not as a devastating event or a final condition but rather as a protracted and uneven trajectory of decline, marked by accelerations and decelerations, booms and busts of economic activity, and the reorganization of resources and population. In examining the evolving Venezuelan situation, the research shifts the attention away from a search for causes—what, when, or how things failed—and refrains from making recommendations for returning to a lost state of normalcy. Instead, it emphasizes the daily experience of collapse, framing it as a lived reality that shapes routines, relationships, and future outlooks. This focus contributes to a growing body of scholarship broadly organized around the theme of “broken world thinking”,³ a framework that considers breakdown as a “generative and productive”⁴ state, in which repair and maintenance come to the fore as strategies for the creative adaptation of our material world. The capacity of these practices to “bridge” between past, present, and future, accounting “for the durability of the old, but also [for] the appearance of the new”⁵ is a fitting image for caretaking, which operates creatively upon the material residues of emigration and collapse, at once sensible to the histories they contain and to their possibilities for spatial and societal reinvention. In this sense, caretaking touches upon central concerns of adaptive reuse; namely, the interweaving of past, present, and future,⁶ a mode of

spatial intervention that entails a careful balance between remains and what is erased, between memory and oblivion.⁷

This contribution to the discussion on “Lived Interiors” examines one specific object of care amid the many left behind by Venezuelan emigrants: books. It follows the daily routines of Ignacio Alvarado, a businessman-turned-book collector who has assembled a vast archive of secondhand volumes, transforming an existing house into a safe haven for the preservation and recirculation of books, a repository of collective memory whose success as a commercial and cultural endeavor also relies on the inventive reprogramming of domestic space. The article begins with an outline of caretaking and a brief description of the research methodology. It narrates the collector's story as one of many “episodes” of caretaking encountered during fieldwork. Finally, it reflects on the architectural implications and possibilities of collecting and caretaking as spatial practices.

Alvarado's work as a collector and caretaker of collective memory must be considered not only against emigration but also amid the dismantling of Venezuela's public libraries and archives, which has entailed the destruction of its infrastructure and contents, including the selective elimination of tens of thousands of books, the methodical deletion of records containing names associated to historical events of the recent past, the chronic disrepair of mechanical equipment necessary for archival preservation, the inappropriate storage of photographs and microfilm, the flooding of deposits, and the meagre salaries of qualified staff. This destruction extends beyond the National Library to other institutions, exemplified in the burning of the library of *Universidad de Oriente* in 2020—a deathblow to years of pillage and destruction of its physical infrastructure—the ideological takeover of state editorials and public funding institutions, the closure and confiscation of newspapers and their archives, the control over paper imports for book- and press-printing, the departure of international publishers, and the bankruptcy of local editorials and booksellers. This destruction, which has been widely documented, amounts to a systematic attack on the preservation of collective memory as well as on the production of knowledge and information that are eventually incorporated into it.⁸ In this context of loss, Ignacio Alvarado is not alone; his work is part of a growing network of secondhand sellers and collectors who collaborate to safeguard books and compile various private archives.

¹ Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, “Home,” R4V, 2024, <https://www.r4v.info/>.

² This number was reported by the Urban Planning Office of the municipality of Chacao, one of Caracas' five municipalities. It coincides with estimates provided by apartments caretakers interviewed for this research.

³ Steven Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, MIT Press, ed. Tarleton Gillespie et al. (Cambridge, 2014).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 223

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bie Plevoets and Koenraad van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage. Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (Routledge, 2019), 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸ For the elimination of books, see: Laura Helena Castillo, “La Destrucción de La Cultura,” Siete Días, *El Nacional* (Caracas), March 20, 2009; Isaac González Mendoza, “Soledad y abandono: una visita a la Biblioteca Nacional,” *El Nacional*, August 19, 2021. For the disrepair of the Library's infrastructure, see: <https://www.elnacional.com/2021/08/soledad-y-abandono>

The emergence of caretaking.

Caretaking is a unifying term for a number of practices that operate upon the material residues of emigration. Caretakers engage with left-behind spaces and objects in creative ways, extending their lives and opening them to new uses while navigating Venezuela's economic precarity, infrastructural breakdown, and political uncertainty.

Like emigration, caretaking is a socially trans-versal phenomenon. It is part of the socio-economic ecosystem that has emerged amid collapse, where solidarity and trust-based practices thrive in the absence of legal frameworks of employment and in the muddy intersections of the formal and informal economies. For caretakers, managing migrants' patrimonies is often an opportunity for personal reinvention, in which professional expertise or personal connections are oriented towards new goals. As practice and value, caretaking draws from the work of Virginia Held on the ethics of care.⁹ For Held, caretaking is *relational*: it creates new connections between individuals and around a specific object of care. Second, caretakers act on behalf of others, creating *dependencies* between individuals. Third, in the absence of legal frameworks that protect private property and regulate employment, *trust* plays a crucial role in the evolving relationships of caretaking. Lastly, caretaking is *transformative*¹⁰ in a dual sense: it can potentially shape a new understanding of the world, and it opens material residues to creative reinvention. Caretaking creates value; it challenges our understanding of preservation as mere suspension in time, and folds migrants' patrimonies back into the dynamics of everyday life, where they are intertwined with economic needs and fears of loss, with the precarity of local living conditions, the evasion of fiscal controls, and the economic opportunities opened by local consumption and social trends. Caretaking imbues mundane actions like watering plants, cleaning houses, or collecting books with a symbolic meaning. Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift's question of what we maintain when we maintain something, "is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some 'larger' entity?"¹¹ is one that caretaking poses to society at large, understanding "we" as the collective reliance on the work of the caretaker and "order" as a permanently unsettled category.

In a context of migration, infrastructural failure, and economic precarity, the caretaker is a figure through which to think of collapse anew; it allows us to conceptualize collapse as an interstitial space in which appearance and disappearance, endurance and transformation, memory and loss, are in

constant tension. Caretaking occupies and qualifies this threshold, privileging constant transformation over definitive configuration.

Field method: a routine of fragmentary exposure

Caretaking is simultaneously generalized and invisible; it is a widespread practice that, like emigration itself, spans every socio-economic segment and covers a broad territory. However, due to the inward nature of the domestic world it looks over, caretaking remains largely hidden from view and absent from the city's visible transformations. Studying caretaking required a singular fieldwork method that involved observing caretakers' daily routines and documenting the material conditions their work produced. This method, defined as a *routine of fragmentary exposure*, was perfected during field trips to Caracas between 2022 and 2024.

As a routine, it relied on the systematic encounter with research participants and the spaces and objects they cared for, a process that gradually eroded the layers of protection surrounding caretaking practices, allowing access to personal spaces and stories. Nevertheless, this slow, incremental approach to caretaking failed to reveal any sense of totality or final classification. Each visit captured a snapshot of a temporary arrangement and a shifting material condition. Rather than stabilizing the field, graduality made visible how caretaking persistently reconfigured migrants' left-behind spaces and objects. In this sense, the fieldwork exposed not only the vastness and diversity of material remnants but also the impossibility of constructing a complete picture of this residual world, an accumulation of fragments and partial views. It also exposed how these remnants were embedded in different value systems and followed independent trajectories after emigration. In this sense, a book could be a symbolic anchor to the homeland, an object to be maintained, or a treasure to be rescued, depending on when it was encountered.

Documenting these encounters entailed *pursuing* caretakers, accompanying them, but also tracing their procedures and the outcome of their work. This relied on photography, sketches, field notes, and semi-structured interviews, a combination of methods that constantly shifted the attention between individuals' actions and the spaces they acted upon. This routine produced its own form of accumulation, a collection of clearly outlined and independent "episodes" that construct a fragmentary image of collapse and caretaking. Episodes emerge

no-una-visita-a-la-biblioteca-nacional/; For the state of bookstores and editorials, see Isaac González Mendoza, "Día del Libro en Venezuela: resistir en la época más oscura," *El Nacional*, April 24, 2025, <https://www.elnacional.com/2025/04/dia-del-libro-en-venezuela-resistir-en-la-epoca-mas-oscura/>; For the destruction of university campuses, see Fabiola Ferrero, *The Wells Run Dry* (Reliefs Editions, 2022).

⁹ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 32.

¹¹ Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, "Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (2007): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075954>.

from a process of reflection and classification of the fieldwork, relying on testimonies, journal entries, drawings, and photography for interpretation rather than documentation. Episodes actively integrate visual material with the text and employ a narrative style that places the reader close to the lived experience.

What follows is an abridged version of one of these many episodes.

The collector

We are in a large room filled with books [1]. Rows of heavy-duty shelves create long, narrow aisles, barely wide enough for walking, which are stacked from floor to ceiling with books so tightly pressed together that it is difficult to remove one. The top of the shelves is precariously held together with cut-out sections of the same L-shaped profiles used to build the stacks, constructing a single interconnected structure. In the middle of the room, a gap in the shelves creates a transversal passage; beyond it, the aisle spacing is even narrower, a necessary misalignment to make room for more shelves. The floor is poured granite with a rhomboid pattern, typical of Caracas's mid-century residential architecture. However, in the middle of the room, its color changes from white to black, the transition mediated by the remains of a demolished wall. By their location in the house, we can infer that these joined rooms were once a living room and a dining room. At the far end, a large window faces a front garden planted with grass and sparse plants. All these lingering traces of domesticity go almost unnoticed amid the books. There are more than 100.000 of them, arranged on shelves, piled in corners, and stored in boxes, waiting to be displayed or discarded. This massive inventory was assembled from donations and liquidations of personal libraries.

The house was built in 1955 and was used as a residence for many years. Then it became a kindergarten before being converted to its current use. Its materiality, domestic exterior, and spatial structure remain largely intact, but internally it has been fragmented into spatially and economically independent units: in the back of the house, what used to be the kitchen is now a beauty salon with a separate entrance. In the front, a former study has been converted into a separate store where books—the surplus of the surplus—are liquidated for two to five dollars apiece. Upstairs, the bedrooms have been converted into rental spaces: one for coworking, another for a swimsuit boutique, and a third for small gatherings. A fourth bedroom is being renovated to accommodate an exhibition space; it will house

carefully curated displays of rare books and first editions. The income generated by this operation supports the project taking shape in the basement, where a light- and humidity-controlled space houses over 3,000 books that comprise the collection of *Museo del Libro Venezolano* (Venezuelan Book Museum). The Museum is neither a private collection destined for personal use, nor a public one, institutionally managed or universally accessible; instead, it falls in the ambiguous territory of individual enterprises taking over the state's functions of custody of national documentary heritage. This overlap of roles exposes simultaneous trajectories of dismantling and reassembly of the country's collective memory, where the systematic undoing of public institutions is partially countered by individual initiatives whose aim is not to reinstate books into the state's sphere but to guard them in an ambiguous space in which they can be both protected from it and claimed as a collective heritage.

When I visit the house in July 2023, Ignacio Alvarado, the museum's founder, is walking in with a stack of books. An elderly neighbor has recently died, and he was asked to visit his house and take whatever books he found valuable. Our conversation begins haphazardly as he organizes the proceeds of his foray. Then, he offers to walk back to the house where he "rescued" the books.

Minutes later, we are in a large house looked after by a middle-aged man, who is overseeing its closure after the owner's passing. The house is not yet on the market, but its contents are for sale. The man tries to lure us into buying furniture; he offers a piano and proudly notes its German origin. The expansive living room is already halfway dismantled; the remaining furniture is grouped close together in the center of the space. The paint is peeling off the walls, and mold stains have spread through the ceiling. Next to the living room, behind a closed door, is the library. Unlike the rest of the house, this room is neatly preserved. Dark wooden bookshelves line three walls and are filled with carefully organized volumes. There is a large desk, facing chairs, the national flag, family portraits, and a photo with Pope John Paul II. "I walk into these houses every day. There's always a good library,"¹² Ignacio remarks. "This is part of my routine. I visit one or two houses a week. I have become incredibly selective and only rescue books for the museum. Thousands of books are being lost."

¹² Personal communication. July 18, 2023

Pursuing books in Caracas

This fervor for “rescuing” books, for preserving fragments of individual libraries and turning them into collective memory—and the marked feelings of impotence and loss that surround this action—are inscribed within a genre of behaviors immanent to the crisis. In her examination of the ongoing and profound reconfiguration of Venezuelan society, anthropologist Paula Vázquez Lezama has argued that the collapse of *Chavismo*¹³ and its economic model has turned Venezuelans into collectors who gather, trade, or accumulate goods for future use at an enormous personal cost. Drawing from Walter Benjamin, Vázquez suggests that collecting is the manifestation of a failed project of modernity as it subverts established mechanisms of consumption and takes place amid the ruins of infrastructures and institutions consolidated during the democratic period (of which the National Library is an example).¹⁴ However, as Susan Buck-Morss reminds us in her analysis of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin does not regard historical material simply as “failure”, but rather as the incarnation of a tension

between “extinction” and “creative potential”.¹⁵ Acknowledging this tension is crucial for understanding the collector’s work as a form of care-taking. Operating amid institutional decimation, emigration, and economic precarity, the collector selectively gathers from an increasing availability of left-behind material, rescuing individual patrimonies from the brink of oblivion. At the same time, as he takes over the functions of a negligent state and reinstates books into the realm of collective memory, he turns collecting into a “transformative” act that transcends the individual sphere. Benjamin’s reflections on book collecting further illuminate this duality.

In *Unpacking my Library*, Benjamin is concerned with various aspects of collecting books. First, with the different ways of acquiring the items that make up a collection, and with how acquisition turns the collection into an index of places visited and a record of previous ownerships. “How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books!”¹⁶ exclaims Benjamin of collecting as a mode of engaging with the world.



[2] A locked room preserves books and family memories inside a migrant’s apartment. Photo by author. 2022.

¹³ Broadly, *Chavismo* refers to the political movement that has governed in Venezuela since 1998, when Hugo Chávez came to power.

¹⁴ Paula Vázquez Lezama, “Cuando Se Consume El Cuerpo Del Pueblo. La Incertidumbre Como Política de Supervivencia En Venezuela,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 85, no. 266 (2019): 104, 106. <https://doi.org/10.5195/reviberoamer.2019.7726>.

¹⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press, 1989), 66.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting,” in *Illuminations*, 3rd ed., ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (Penguin Random House, 2015), 64.



[3] This apartment was rented, but the owner's library remained on display. Photo by author. 2022.

However, Benjamin is also preoccupied with what the collection makes possible, specifically with how things brought together by a combination of intention and luck constitute a means “to renew the old world”.¹⁷ This renewal is, for him, a “balancing act”¹⁸ between retaining the object’s history—its previous ownership, date, and mode of acquisition—and placing it in the context of the collection; an operation of simultaneous preservation and detachment that creates a new order out of disorder.¹⁹

As it did for Benjamin in his travels, pursuing books in Caracas reveals something of this city as well; it reconstructs the routines and fallouts of departure; it speaks of the dispersion that follows emigration and death, overlapping it with the systematic dismantling of public archives, the bankruptcy of the editorial world, and the devastation of the public cultural apparatus. It exposes the trajectories of books stored in boxes or lining shelves of migrants’ empty homes, whose preservation includes collateral processes of decay, destruction, and recycling.

In Caracas, books are a recurrent feature in left-behind apartments. In some instances, they are haphazardly shelved in rooms that have been turned

into storage spaces [2]. In other cases, migrants’ personal libraries are openly displayed, extending the owners’ presence or used by temporary tenants [3]. In these circumstances, books remain inaccessible to the collector, whose duties commence *after* closure. Always on call, the collector is prompted into action at a stage of departure when books are ready to be separated from the domestic sphere and released from their role as personal possessions.

Of the different ways listed by Benjamin for assembling a collection—borrowing, stealing, purchasing, inheriting—rescuing books from abandoned libraries constitutes not only a methodological innovation but also initiates a conversion that can insert them into the category of public heritage. However, our collector does not complete this transition; instead, he (with)holds his collection in preservation chambers, reading rooms, and glass casings, as if embargoed for an unspecified time. In this sense, we are before a collector who performs a different kind of “balancing act”, one whose task consists in accumulating not only for himself but also for abstract others—and for an indeterminate future—yet also a collector whose labor transcends personal gratification and is assumed as a social responsibility.

¹⁷ Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 63.

¹⁸ Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 62.

¹⁹ Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 62; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 207.

As the proceeds of Ignacio's forays find their way to the vault in his basement, to the cramped shelves of the secondhand bookstore, or to the clearance bookstore, they subordinate architecture to one objective: allowing the collector to collect. Spatially, this entails making room for the collection's perpetual expansion. Thus, we can interpret the house's constant transformation—the incessant addition of shelves and narrowing of aisles, the reprogramming of rooms, the invention of informal sources of income—as means to ensure the “persistence of incompleteness”²⁰ that defines any collection. However, as this sense of incompleteness haunts the collector and drives the urge to collect, the limited availability of space demands his increasing discrimination. Herein lies a paradox: as one collection is assembled at the expense of many others, the Museum is also an index of extinction, constantly confronting the collector, and us, with all the books for which there is no room.

Conclusion

The material residues of emigration, the lingering stuff of disappearing life-worlds that collect histories and are the center of new discourses, are one instance in which the continuities and ruptures between past, present, and future acquire a tangible dimension. Caretaking practices like collecting left-behind books and adapting houses to sell and preserve them bring these tensions to the surface without resolving them. In this sense, caretaking's concern with ongoing processes of spatial adaptation amid an evolving crisis aligns with a focus on adaptive reuse as a “process” that is not only extended over time, but one that results from a “personal relationship” at an “intimate scale” with heritage. However, the open-endedness of caretaking is also at odds with the notion of “project” as a realm of professional expertise culminating in the delivery of a finished product. The territory where caretaking thrives is also the space where architecture stalls. This observation, at a moment when environmental degradation and demographic decline call for a profound revision of architecture's role, is not an indictment of the architectural project but rather an aspiration to reorganize it around new problems, expanding architecture's methodological repertoire and its capacity to bridge across the concrete and the speculative.

²⁰ Beatriz Sarlo, “La Persistencia En Lo Incompleto,” in *Walter Benjamin: El Coleccionismo*, ed. Beatriz Sarlo (Ediciones Godot, 2022), 10.

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A Pattern Language for Lived Reuse: Notes from Harat-al-Aqr, Oman

N. Ritu



Introduction

This cahier's theme emerged from my research on the concept of the Lived Interior, a term that materialised when studying adaptive reuse in interiors, particularly in the case study of Harat-al-Aqr, Oman. Interiors are typically dynamic, temporal, and ever-changing, tying their reuse fundamentally to their "livedness" and their users — an angle that is frequently overlooked in the traditional interior reuse discourse.¹ This is especially true for interiors that have undergone incremental adaptations, often shaped by changing inhabitants and overlapping timelines, without formal designerly intervention. The identity of such interiors stems as much from immaterial patterns of behaviour, use, and relationships as from spatial configurations and their tangible parts.² Their continuous use, born from an innate adaptability to the lives they contain, expresses an unwritten contract between people and their built environment.

It is this ongoing contract that the term 'Lived Interior' describes. Moving beyond formal constraints of age or aesthetics, the concept draws on Henri Lefebvre's argument in *The Production of Space* (1991) that space is fundamentally a social product.³ Unlike the 'conceived space' of planners — often tied to a Western, bourgeois notion of the interior as a domestic envelope⁴ — Lefebvre's 'lived space' is the complex, storied terrain of its inhabitants, overlaid with symbolism. Defined by the multiplicity of social meanings born from daily practice, a lived interior functions as a 'representational space': an active tool for thought and action that enables inhabitants to assert control over their world. It is a dynamic repository of memory and material culture, continuously remade by user agency.

This paper presents Harat-al-Aqr, a historical city quarter in Nizwa, Oman, as an example of a lived interior. The case of Harat-al-Aqr confronts vernacular reuse with external designerly vision, planning hierarchies, and conflicting authorship. It also challenges traditional meanings associated with the term 'interiors' and, by extension, the conventional scope of interior reuse. Despite its story, livedness, and all the inherent qualities that make it an exemplary case for discussing interior reuse, it soon became clear that traditional adaptive reuse⁶ theory could not adequately describe Harat-al-Aqr's reuse. This was because prevailing models in adaptive reuse theory most often operate from a designer-centric perspective, focusing primarily on formal interventions by architect(s) and often undermining the intuitive use patterns, lived experiences, and accu-

mulated memories contributed by more incremental, bottom-up approaches. Meanwhile, spearheaded by its residents through countless small, incremental acts, the value of Harat-al-Aqr's reuse lies not in its individual architectural components, but in the lived quality that endures across timelines. Such an example of reuse, closely tied with a palimpsest of actions, habits and cultural norms, warranted a methodological reinvention—a way to read the essence of the quarter's revival through the patterns of behaviour that underpin it. This search led to a re-reading of Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*.⁷

Originally conceived as a generative tool for design, Alexander's Pattern Language systematises the humane, iterative aspects of traditional placemaking into a replicable Problem-Solution format. This research reframes that structure as an analytical lens: a human-centred vocabulary for documenting the socio-spatial phenomena driving vernacular adaptation. By applying this framework to the lived interior of Harat-al-Aqr, we gain a refreshing insight into adaptive reuse—one that decenters the designer, foregrounds user agency, and honours the logic of an urban fabric formed incrementally.

To demonstrate this potential, this essay explores three patterns from a larger atlas developed through the research. Selected to illustrate the framework's organisation and relational logic, these examples serve as a testament to the pattern language's value as an analytical tool for reading a lived interior.

Misunderstanding the Pattern as a Tool

Alexander's pattern language has long been a subject of both fascination and criticism. Emerging amidst the thriving post-war counter-culture, his work aligned with the rising critique of high modernism voiced by contemporaries such as the Smithsons (1957), Banham (1969), Pallasmaa (1994, 1996), and Frampton (1983). Reacting against the rigid, top-down orthodoxy of CIAM and the placelessness of the International Style, Alexander sought to reverse the making of architecture into an act of collaboration and care. To achieve this, he proposed a formulaic guide to design spanning towns, buildings, and construction.

While his intention to offer an alternative to modernist governance was noble, his proposal to codify the design process met significant resistance. Criticisms focused on the supposed limitation of creativity, insufficient scientific backing, and ambiguous definitions of critical elements like "forces."⁸ Furthermore, his dogmatic, prescriptive tone⁹ and

¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (London: Academy Editions, 1996).

² Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, and the Ordering of Space* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

⁴ Charles Rice, "Rethinking Histories of the Interior", *The Journal of Architecture* 9, no. 3 (2004), 278.

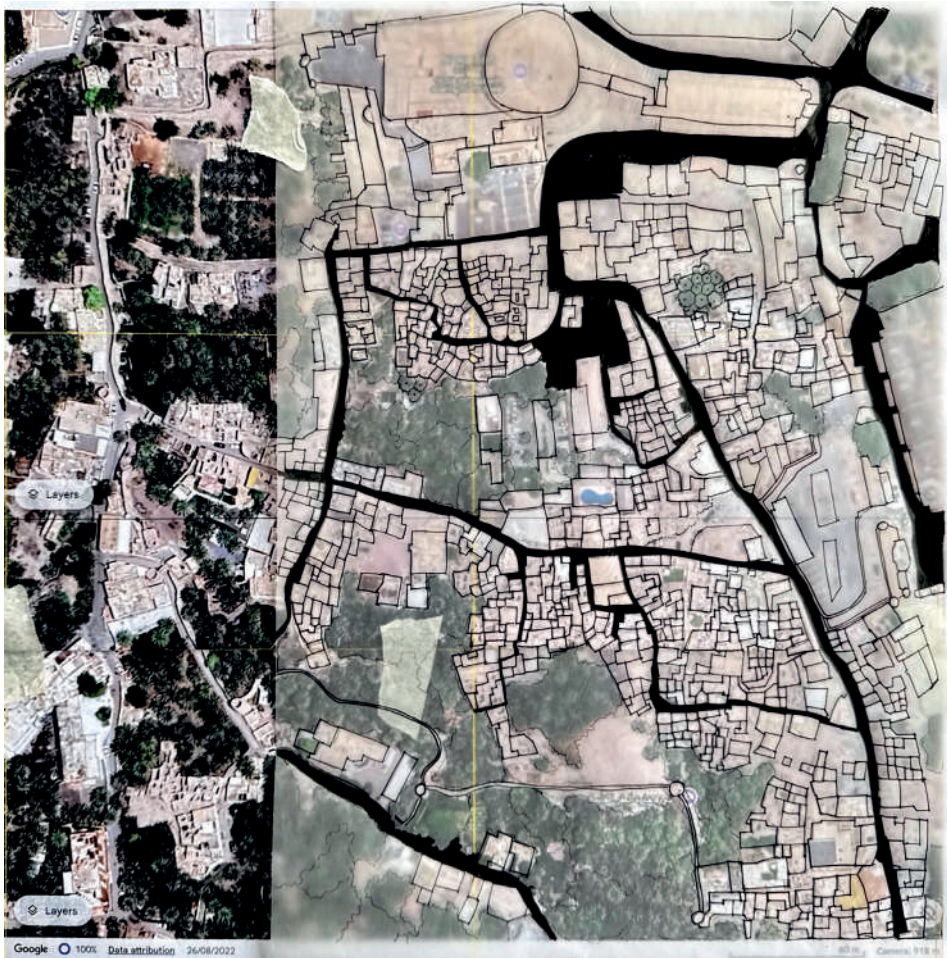
⁵ Here, Tony Kauppila's concept of interiors and interiority is adopted, as he defines interiors as "not merely the inside of the exterior, but as the interiority, the space emerging from bottom-up?" in "What if Interiors", *Interiors* 8, no. 1–2 (2017): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2017.1324553>.

⁶ By "traditional adaptive reuse theory," I am referring to the lineage of strategy-based, designer-focused approaches. See, for example, Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone, *Re-readings 2* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2018); Johannes Cramer and Stefan Breiting, *Architecture in Existing Fabric* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007); Bie Plevoets and Koernraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2019); and the more recent compendiums

failure to acknowledge alternative social realities suggest that many of the criticisms originate not just in his method, but in Alexander's idiosyncratic ontology and epistemology.¹⁰

However, to dismiss the work for its prescriptive failures is to overlook its profound observational strengths. The idea of patterns as a tool that captures spatial practices, relationships, and uses—fluidly and non-hierarchically—is of great value. Alexander himself uses the terminology flexibly, switching between spatial, relationship, and use patterns. In doing so, he underscores the intangible, often overlooked layers where life unfolds and architecture is truly animated. By granting these categories equal weight, he moves the discussion away from a singular designerly vision and elevates other dimensions to equal footing.

Such a perspective is particularly instrumental in discussions of interior reuse. This retelling aligns with Alexander's own wish for his *Pattern Language*. Despite its perception as a prescriptive approach to design, Alexander clearly articulates his proposal as "A Pattern Language"¹¹, one of many possibilities to be added to, edited, and utilised as a proper tool—and that is how this research adopts it. Finally, it is worth noting that while the overarching research, like the original language, relies on the interconnectedness of multiple patterns, the scope of this essay limits us to three. However, these patterns have been selected to demonstrate a clear, sequential relationship, hinting at the potential of the larger network.



[1] The urban morphology of Harat-al-Aqr.

by Floris Alkemade et al., eds., *Rewriting Architecture* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021) and Sofie De Caigny et al., *As Found* (Antwerp: Flemish Architecture Institute, 2023).

⁷ Christopher Alexander, et al., *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸ References include Michael W. Mehaffy et al., *A New Pattern Language for Growing Regions: Places, Networks, Processes*

(Portland: Sustasis Press, 2020); Geoffrey Broadbent, "Pattern Language," *Design Studies* 1, no. 4 (1980): 252; Kim Dovey, "The Pattern Language and Its Enemies," *Design Studies* 11, no. 1 (1990); Jean-Pierre Protzen, "The Poverty of the Pattern Language," *Design Studies* 1, no. 5 (1980).

⁹ Ian F. King, "Christopher Alexander and Contemporary Architecture," special issue, *A+U: Architecture and Urbanism*,

no. 275 (August 1993); Wendy Kohn, "The Lost Prophet of Architecture," *Wilson Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002); Ritu Bhatt, "Christopher Alexander's Pattern Language: An Alternative Exploration of Space-Making Practices," *The Journal of Architecture* 15, no. 6 (2010)

¹⁰ Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Searching for Theory in Christopher Alexander's Intellectual Roots," *Architectural Science Review* 44, no. 4 (2001)

The Lore of Harat-al-Aqr

The proposal to explore the lived reuse of the case of Harat-al-Aqr through the lens of the pattern language framework first requires an overview of the advent of reuse in the quarter. Located in the landlocked city of Nizwa, nestled between the mountains and the desert, the city's introverted location is reflected in the historical town's architecture, resulting in an inward-looking city core where all forms coalesce to form the Harat-al-Aqr. While the initial idea was to focus the research on specific interiors of the quarter, it soon became clear that the entire quarter functions as a single, indivisible unit of lived-in interiors that cannot be understood in isolation.

As with many traditional settlements in the Gulf, the oil boom of the 1970s and subsequent modernisation led to a mass migration of residents from the dense, historic mudbrick core to newer parts of the city. What was once the vibrant heart of Nizwa slowly fell into disrepair, the abandoned dwellings becoming hubs for illicit activities and subject to urban decay.¹² Early, top-down government attempts at heritage restoration in nearby towns often resulted in sterile, museum-like environments that, although perfectly restored, felt emotionally vacant and were ultimately rejected by the local communities. The revival of Harat-al-Aqr, however, took a more grassroots approach. In the mid-2010s, a few community investors with deep familial roots in the area began purchasing and restoring individual dwellings, transforming them into small guesthouses and cafes to host local visitors and tourists drawn to the nearby fort. This soon created a domino effect, sparked by the quarter's latent potential, where decaying homes were restored to host new functions. Where restoration was impossible because the decay had already progressed too far, buildings were demolished and reconstructed using readily available materials (often hollow blocks and cement), which were then plastered with a traditional earth-and-clay plaster mix. This earthen plaster lends its earthy brown colour to all of the buildings in Al-Aqr, regardless of whether they are new or old. This process was, and remains, incremental, pragmatic, and deeply personal. Rather than restoring the quarter to a fixed historical state, the community sought to bring it back to life by weaving new commercial and social life into its ancient fabric through small-scale eateries, inns, and *dukkans*¹³, a process that has even led to some original resident groups finding their way back to their ancestral homes. The bottom-up approach driving this initiative was especially possible due to close ties across several generations, forming a close-knit community where discussions, idea exchanges, and permission-

seeking became simple and easy. This initial layer of organic reuse has since been augmented by state-led restoration of specific aspects of the quarter, such as the city wall and the ancient mosque, as well as the introduction of certain zoning measures primarily catering to heritage tourism. As a result, growing attention from residents, planners, and investors has created evident friction in Harat-al-Aqr's revival. This tension manifests in how the quarter is being physically transformed, who it serves, and its struggle to negotiate a complex identity—as an active neighbourhood, a convivial heritage destination, and a crucible for a new vernacular. It is the negotiation of this very process of organic, continuous becoming with external hierarchies that makes Harat-al-Aqr a prime example of a Lived Interior.¹⁴

A Vocabulary for Lived Interiors: Reading the Patterns of Harat-al-Aqr

To decode the richness of the Harat's reuse, this article reframes Alexander's prescriptive design guide into an analytical lens, providing a grammar for reading the recurring socio-spatial relationships that constitute its lived experience. By replacing Alexander's "Problem-Solution" format with an interpretive "Observation-Inherent logic" framework, this essay articulates the inherent, tacit intelligence of the community's actions and gives them a voice. The "Observation" documents a phenomenon in the field, while the "Inherent Logic", as the name suggests, articulates its underlying logic. This method of reading is grounded in extensive fieldwork done by the author in July 2023 and 2024. The patterns elaborated below were documented through site visits that included photo documentation, conversations with residents and local visitors, on-site sketching, and the practice of Site Writing (Rendell, 2010)¹⁵. Several of these site visits were conducted in collaboration with first- and second-year master's students of the German University of Technology in Oman. The students engaged with the quarter through their own observations, conversations, and documentation, eventually synthesising their findings into an atlas of patterns—a collaborative effort that contributed to the research presented in this work.¹⁶

While these fieldwork methods have yielded a multitude of patterns to explore in the context of my PhD research, this essay introduces three exemplary patterns derived from Harat-al-Aqr. Each corresponds to a distinct, hierarchical layer of the lived interior, beginning with (i) a tangible Reuse Action, the physical act of making; moving to (ii) a collective Community Habit, the social agreement that gives it life; and concluding with (iii) a deep-seated Cultural Driver that provides its underlying meaning.

Michael J. Dawes and Michael J. Ostwald, "Christopher Alexander's A Pattern Language: Analysing, Mapping and Classifying the Critical Response," *City, Territory and Architecture* 4, no. 17 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40410-017-0073-1>.

¹¹ Alexander et al., *A Pattern Language*.

¹² Naima Benkari, *Community-led Initiatives for the Rehabilitation and Management of Vernacular Settlements in Oman: A*

Phenomenon in the Making, *Built Heritage* 5, no. 1 (2021): 21, accessed August 21, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-021-00039-5>, the buildings in Al-Aqr, whether

¹³ Small neighbourhood shops.

¹⁴ Nusrat Ritu, Asli Cicek, and Bie Plevoets, "Reading the Vernacular Interior: A Pattern Language for Reuse," *Intertority* 9, no. 1 (2026): 5-28.

¹⁵ Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010). Rendell's concept of Site-Writing argues for embracing subjectivity and the author's own positionality as being crucial for capturing the lived realities of a place.



[2] Living Walls as a playground.

These distinctions are fundamentally different from Alexander's categorization of patterns according to the scale of Towns, Buildings, and Construction; however, documenting reuse in an incremental setting necessitated a language that incorporates social habits, motivations, and belief systems, proving that reuse is not a stand alone, physical phenomenon but rather a holistic process that is as concerned with social and cultural aspects as the physical output. By journeying from the physical to the social to the cultural, we begin to build a more holistic and sensitive understanding of how a lived interior is truly made.

1 Reuse Action - Living Walls

Observation In historic settlements undergoing continuity or reuse, walls often present a fundamental paradox. Built to define, separate, and protect, they establish the collective interiority of a community; yet, when left inert amidst urban growth, they risk becoming elements of division rather than connection. The reuse of Harat-al-Aqr navigates a counter-logic, in which one of the most significant reuse actions has been the deliberate transformation of these vertical surfaces, at both the urban and building scales, into Living Walls.

This did not come about as a single, design gesture, but an accumulation of countless small, purposeful interventions. The ancient city wall, for instance, has been repurposed into a walkway that connects and gives a vantage point over the neighbourhood. From this elevated path, one can observe the array of active roofs where domestic life rises, and the vibrant street life below spills outward. The walkway itself is not uniform; in some stretches, it is little more than a path. In others, it becomes a walking gallery for local art, an informal threshold to a rooftop cafe, or an archive of information about history and craftsmanship.

Similarly, the individual walls of repurposed dwellings are imbued with new life. Crumbling ruins, rather than being cleared, are left to animate the quarter, their decay underscoring the settlement's age and continuity. Elsewhere, ancient walls are integrated into new cafes or inns, their niches still serving as built-in storage for pots, plates, or display items from yesteryear. Solid, anonymous facades are punctuated with new windows for street-level visual communication, allowing the wall to function as a porous, social interface between intimate interiors and the public life of the alley. Embedded within this pattern is the additional logic of using doors as archives. The intricately carved wooden doors of the

quarter—repositories of family history and status—are salvaged from decaying homes and reinstalled in new contexts. Whether functioning as entrances to inns or as decorative features, they carry their stories within them as tangible fragments of collective memory.

Inherent logic This tangible act of repurposing inert elements in the built environment reveals the principle of activation, where a wall becomes a living social edge; a medium for connection and communication. It is stitched with gates, windows, and passages that guide and enrich daily life.

The decision to make these alterations is often pragmatic, providing a business with an entrance or a shortcut, but the cumulative effect is transformative. The community, through these small acts, reclaims the quarter's vertical surfaces as programmable and social. However, this activation is rarely seamless. Often, new concrete lintels are inserted into old mudbrick, creating a visible material overlap that tells a story of both continuity and change. By imbuing these once-inert surfaces with function, narrative, and memory, the community has turned an element of separation into catalysts for social encounter.

Interestingly, this pattern expands the architectural definition of the wall, allowing it to function simultaneously as room, furniture, and archive. The city wall, thickened by its defensive role, transcends its function as a barrier to become a publicly accessible interior in its own right. It envelops pedestrians, creating varying levels of enclosure through compression and release, while serving as a linear playground for children and an archive of craftsmanship through its exposed materiality. Similarly, the remnant walls of former dwellings act as backdrops and urban furniture, giving the quarter a sense of scale and place without enclosing a specific function. Together, these vertical surfaces expand our understanding of a wall to be a monument, a collective identifier, and an inhabited space.

2 Community Habit - The Street as a Negotiated Place

Observation The alleys of Harat-al-Aqr are governed by a community habit of constant negotiation, fluctuating between thoroughfares for vehicles and pedestrians, and as places for momentary exchanges and catch-up conversations among inhabitants.

Throughout the year, these alleys provide a transparent stage for life in the quarter. During the

¹⁶ The diagrams used in this essay to represent each of the three patterns have been drawn by the master studio students of GUTech during their analysis phase of the site. The patterns mentioned here, too, were derived and formulated together with the students. Their detailed descriptions and "inherent logic" however, have been elaborated by the author.



[3] "Interior" streets as a shared space between visitors, inhabitants, and vehicles.

scorching heat of the day when tourists are few, the alleys serve as a shared stage dominated by local life: the occasional resident's car easing its way through, scooters zipping on errands, and children's impromptu games. In the winter months, these same alleys witness an overlap of their inhabitants' everyday lives—men rushing to workplaces, adjacent agricultural lands, mosques, or the nearby souk; children running errands on bicycles or returning from school; local women glimpsed mostly through doors left ajar. Simultaneously, visitors explore the quarter under the winter sun—both local and foreign—photographing the old structures and indulging in local cuisine. Having observed the patterns of behaviour and rush hours in Harat-al-Aqr, the residents do not restrict motorised traffic in the quarter during the day. However, as dusk falls, a tacit agreement descends upon the quarter where the main gates close to external motorised traffic.

With a rise in visitor numbers during the cooler evenings in both summer and winter, this is a pragmatic choice to ensure safety and livability in the quarter's narrow alleys. By restricting tourist vehicles and allowing resident vehicular access only as necessary, the alleys remain pedestrian-friendly zones that encourage chance conversations and vibrant commerce among residents and visitors in the ambient glow of cafes and shops around. Often, the alleys themselves facilitate the exchange of goods and services; small-business kiosks serve customers gathering for snacks; young musicians gather against the inert walls of dilapidated houses, their music carried by the wind, while eclectic street vendors engage passing crowds. Meanwhile, the paths simultaneously accommodate bicycles and golf carts ferrying visitors on tours. The decorations throughout the quarter also change with the seasons. National days bring red, white, and green bunting borrowed from the Omani flag, while the alleys are decorated with moons and stars during Ramadan and Eid. Meanwhile, *Qaranqasho*¹⁷ fills the alleys with lanterns, balloons and posters, engaging swarms of happy children. Thus, these ordinary circulation spaces become signifiers of life as inhabitants turn them into witnesses of their lives passing by.

Inherent logic This pattern exemplifies a community habit in which the use of space is negotiated over time through a collective understanding of priority. Unlike many residential streets that rely on spatial separation between users, these alleys are organized through everyday practices of yielding, awareness, and mutual adjustment. This unspoken social agreement also makes the Living Walls viable as social interfaces, allowing cafes to spill out and giving residents a sense of ownership over the

space outside their doors. The alley functions as a temporary extension of the private living sphere and a shared realm for all users—notably, it is the only space in the quarter that requires no contract for spending money.

The materiality of these paths reflects the volume of traffic and social status they host. The primary streets leading up to popular attractions have been transitioned from asphalt to stone tiles over the last two years. In contrast, the secondary alleys leading to dwellings remain informal, composed of sand and small stones. In the innermost alleys, where visitors rarely venture, the materiality becomes quite personal. Here, construction and maintenance workers of the quarter—often the migrant inhabitants of Al-Aqr—living on either side of those alleys often place old carpets or rugs on the ground. Initially, these provide a private space for long phone calls home, offering a necessary private retreat from their shared living quarters. As time passes and these carpets collect dust, their function shifts from a seat to a visual demarcation of space, defining where the alley becomes an extension of their domestic sphere.

It is this habit of constant, informal choreography—learned and practised by all members of the community—that gives the quarter its sense of life.

3 Cultural Driver - Navigating by Memory

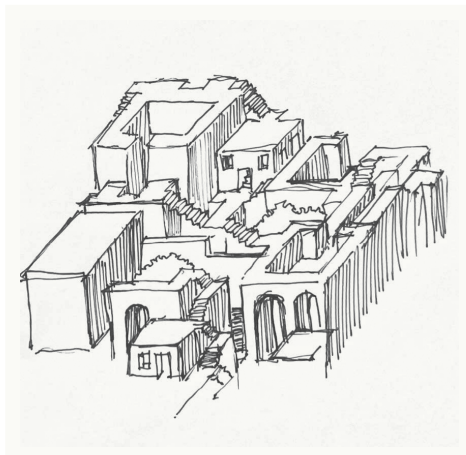
Observation The tight, maze-like layout of the alleys is a defining, ancient characteristic of Harat-al-Aqr. The quarter's dwellings grew incrementally to accommodate growing families and their needs, resulting in an urban layout featuring an agglomeration of dwellings with winding alleys snaking between them.¹⁸ Even as the years passed and modern interventions introduced new materials, the restored, renovated, or reconstructed buildings followed more or less the same footprint. This meant that the overall configuration of the alleys and their experience remained quite similar despite the years between and the changes in architecture over time. To an outsider, the winding, narrow paths, often leading to sudden dead-ends or unexpected openings, can feel disorienting and inaccessible. For a resident, however, this intricate network is hardly a source of confusion; rather, it emphasises their sense of identity and security as they navigate through an internal, shared, and embedded map of personal stories, family thresholds, and shared landmarks. This concept of navigating a city through one's memory has been discussed in seminal texts by Christian Norberg-Schulz (1979)¹⁹ and Kevin Lynch (1960)²⁰, elaborating on the

¹⁷ A traditional Omani children's celebration held on the 14th night of Ramadan, marking the halfway point of the holy month. Children dress in traditional clothes, sing, and go door-to-door collecting sweets and nuts as a way of rewarding them for early fasting.

¹⁸ Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, "Diversity in Unity: An Analysis of the Settlement Structure of Harat Al- Aqr, Nizwā (Oman)," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 35 (2005): 22

¹⁹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli (1979)

²⁰ Kevin Lynch, "Legibility," in *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 3–5.



[4] Overlapping materiality, structures and timelines in Harat-al-Aqr.

relationship between a city's morphology, the human experience, and the psychological realm of the city.

Historically, the alleys' configuration and their qualities were shared public knowledge; men and women knew exactly which alley to gather in after specific prayers, identifying spaces by the nearest canal, mosque, or gate. This stands true today as well, where, while a visitor might hesitate or rely on digital maps, an inhabitant moves with an instinctive cadence that feels like second nature. This is perhaps the easiest way to distinguish between visitors and inhabitants. This evokes the "invisible cities" described by Italo Calvino²¹, where the city is not made of space, but of the relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past. Where the Harat's labyrinthine network prompts a feeling of being lost to a stranger, to an inhabitant, this quality nurtures the feeling of belonging, familiarity, and being "at home".

Inherent logic This pattern reveals the deep-seated relationship between spatial complexity and a sense of belonging for Harat-al-Aqr's residents. The inherent logic is that a space known intimately only to the insider fosters a sense of community, privacy, and security. The labyrinth cannot be viewed as a design flaw that needs to be rationalised or made more efficient to accommodate the Harat's new identity; instead, it serves as a cultural tool that filters the outside world and reinforces a shared identity for those who hold the key to its navigation. The streets, as described in the previous pattern, are negotiated with such care and intimacy precisely because, rather than being perceived as a public thoroughfare, the street functions as a series of semi-private, protected interiorities. In this context, the alleys behave like rooms within a larger, communal home. The close-knit cluster of homes and labyrinthine alleys creates an introverted fabric that shapes specific community habits; these habits, in turn, provide the social framework necessary for physical reuse to be meaningful and sustainable over time.

Conclusion

The intertwined logic of reuse presented above demonstrates that a lived interior cannot arise from a single blueprint or overarching strategy. Instead, its making involves a layered interplay of actions, habits, and culture. While the tangible reuse action of Living Walls provides the physical stage, it is brought to life by the Community Habit of treating the Streets as a Negotiated Place and sustained by the Cultural Driver of Navigating by

Memory. This interdependence implies that each layer enables, informs, and gives meaning to the others, with critical implications for practice. It suggests a fundamental shift in the designer's role from that of an author to an attentive reader of a place's existing life, thereby shifting the primary task from imposing a preconceived strategy to understanding the place's anatomy first. It is here that the specific value of the proposed Pattern Language framework lies. It borrows from and overlaps with existing modes and theoretical discourses, such as Jane Rendell's site-writing²² methodology as an observational technique, and the conceptions of place by Italo Calvino²³, Kevin Lynch²⁴, and Norberg-Schulz²⁵ as amalgams of current relationships and past memories. However, while methodologies like site-writing offer a useful tool for capturing the subjective atmosphere of a place, the Pattern Language framework discussed here synthesises these ephemeral, qualitative insights into a coherent, communicable structure. It acts as a bridge between the ethnographic and the architectural, thus moving beyond observational descriptions to articulating why it works spatially and socially. This framework also accommodates the idiosyncrasies of the bottom-up reuse through patterns that prioritise the continuity of life and capture the "messier" incremental evolution of a reuse environment that a top-down strategic masterplan would likely erase. The pattern language framework validates these informal adaptations as a sophisticated, responsive system.

The vocabulary of patterns derived from Harat-al-Aqr acts as a relational grammar, much like Alexander's network system²⁶. As part of my ongoing research, this essay first aims to recognise the limitations of our current theoretical discourse and second to explore new ways of reading and engaging with the dynamic processes, relationships, and logics embedded in lived interiors. This framework does not seek to reinvent the wheel of site analysis, but to add a necessary layer of legibility to the documentation of the intangible. It aims to offer a reproducible methodology for packaging, combining, and objectively comparing subjective observations across different sites.

The pattern language of lived reuse cannot be observed superficially; it is essential to develop a thorough understanding of how the built environment and its use patterns interconnect, so that any documentation or designerly decisions truly honour the 'lived quality' of these spaces and keep their stories alive.

²¹ Italo Calvino, "Cities and Memory 3," in *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1974), 10

²² Jane Rendell, *Site Writing*.

²³ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*.

²⁴ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of a City*.

²⁵ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*.

²⁶ Alexander et al., *A Pattern Language*.



[5] Showing the combination of existing building ruins against new additions (staircase in concrete).

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The Şile House
Reading and Translating Memory,
Heritage, and Space
Z. Selvi.



[1] Panoramic view from the backyard of the Şile House.

“The repair of wooden houses never truly ends. Houses live and age together with us. What turns a place into a home are the memories it holds. As long as the house remains standing, our past continues to live on.”

Reha Günay, *Şile'deki Ev*, 2021, p.155 (translation from Turkish by author)

“[...] there is no place without memory; no memory without place; and since there is no architecture that is not engaged with place, neither is there architecture that is not engaged with memory.”

Jeff Malpas, *Building Memory*, 2013, p.12

Introduction

At the edge of a cliff overlooking the Black Sea in Şile, Istanbul, Türkiye, stands a family house that has been shaped by over a century of life [1]. Carefully documented by Reha Günay, it offers an entry point into the study of lived interiors.¹

Located in the small coastal town, this modest family dwelling that has lived through seasons, generations, and transformations [2-3]. For Reha Günay wears many hats, as a Turkish architect, writer, professor of conservation and restoration, architectural photographer, ... this house was never simply a shelter. It is a companion that aged alongside him, a place where generations gathered, and a project he would later document with meticulous care in his book *Şile'deki Ev* (The House in Şile) published in 2021.² Within its thick garden walls, wooden stairs, and hand-crafted textiles lie traces of memory and identity that blur the boundary between personal and collective heritage.

It is this layered quality, the house as a palimpsest of life lived, that makes the Şile House a compelling point of departure. Engaging with such interiors requires a methodology attentive to both lived experience and spatial transformation. In this paper, reading and translation are employed as complementary modes of inquiry. To ‘read’ is to uncover layers of memory, identity, and spatial practice; to ‘translate’ is to express them through drawing, writing, and design thinking, without reducing the interior to nostalgia.³

In the case of the Şile House, these modes are inseparable from Günay’s dual position as both inhabitant and architect. His long-term, attentive

engagement with the house exemplifies what Fred Scott describes as translation through sympathy: not a literal transfer from past to present, but a careful act of assimilation grounded in craft and understanding.⁴ Translation, in this sense, is not about reproducing what was, but about working through the existing with skill, restraint, and care. As Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel argue, such an approach situates adaptive reuse within the realm of craftsmanship and meaning, where traces of the past are neither frozen nor erased, but actively worked with.⁵

Following Günay’s process, this paper reads the Şile House as a living house in which memory, heritage, and space are continuously shaped through time, use, and material presence. These three dimensions function as conceptual lenses through which the lived interior can be approached in complementary registers: memory grounding lived experience, heritage situating it within cultural continuity, and space articulating its material and spatial configuration. The paper further explores how such readings can be translated into contemporary practices of adaptive reuse, not by romanticizing the past, but by uncovering principles of the vernacular interior that remain responsive to continuity and change.⁶

Reading

When talking about the term *vernacular* in the architectural world, one immediately relates to the short but powerful definition by Bernard Rudofsky; *Architecture without architects*. In his influential exhibition and book with the same title from 1964, he emphasized the spontaneous wisdom of traditional building practices.⁷ While Rudofsky foregrounded

¹ Reha Günay, *Şile'deki Ev* (YEM Yayın, 2021).

² Günay, *Şile'deki Ev*, 115.

³ Giovanni Galli, “Nostalgia, Architecture, Ruins, and Their Preservation,” *Change Over Time* 3, no. 1 (2013): 12-26. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cot.2013.0001>.

⁴ Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (Routledge, 2008), 79-81.

⁵ Bie Plevoets and Koenraad van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (Routledge, 2019), 101-102.

⁶ Mete Turan, ed., *Vernacular Architecture: Paradigms of Environmental Response* (Routledge, 1990), 11-12.

⁷ Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (Doubleday, 1965).

exterior forms, cases of vernacular construction and their environmental logic, the nuanced interior dimension remained underexplored. Yet it is through lived interiors that the full cultural depth of vernacular environments becomes apparent. As architect and researcher Mete Turan also touches this subject multiple times in his book *Vernacular Architecture: Paradigms of Environmental Response* from the Ethnoscapes series: “the diversity and intricacy of social relations create vernacular architecture’s complexity”.⁸

Amos Rapoport’s (also influential) *House Form and Culture* demonstrates that the form of the house is above all a cultural phenomenon shaped by values, rituals, and social structures rather than being determined solely by climate or physical conditions.⁹ This perspective underlines the importance of reading vernacular interiors as cultural texts, while still attending to the influence of topography, available materials, craftsmanship, and other contextual factors. Thus, it is important to recognize that vernacular architecture and interiors are not primitive,

spontaneous, or undeveloped simply because their makers lacked formal training. Rather, they embody a knowledge rooted in tradition and lived experience, refined through the challenges of time, and offering a spatial language that can be read as deeply as any academically designed work.

Within the theoretical discourse on vernacular architecture, Christopher Alexander’s *A Pattern Language* extended the conversation by proposing a taxonomy of spatial patterns, many of which resonate strongly with vernacular interiors: family of entrances (102), sitting circle (185), courtyards which live (115), communal eating (147), the fire (181),... These patterns, grounded in everyday life, form an architectural lexicon shaped by ritual and memory.¹⁰ They suggest that vernacular interiors can be read not merely as material assemblages but as cultural texts, embodying the practices and values of those who inhabit them. However, rather than applying Alexander’s taxonomy as a prescriptive starting point for design, we might approach it in reverse: by delving into the built environment and



[2] The Şile House in 1978, Şile, Istanbul, Türkiye.



[3] The Şile House in 1984, Şile, Istanbul, Türkiye.

⁸ Turan, *Vernacular Architecture*, 11.

⁹ Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Prentice-Hall, 1969), 46-47.

¹⁰ Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King and Shlomo Angel, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

its interiors to uncover patterns and principles that have emerged through use, adaptation, and change over time. In this way, the vernacular can be read as a living archive of spatial practices, one that reveals how human needs, rituals, and identities continuously inscribe themselves into space.

Seen through this lens, the Şile House is especially compelling: a house continuously reshaped by vernacular practices across generations, yet also carefully altered by the attentive eye of Reha Günay, who stands at once as architect and inhabitant. It is in this duality, between inherited tradition and reflective design, that the house becomes more than an ethnographic artifact: it emerges as a living site where memory and design intersect.

The Şile House

Built around 1900, the Şile House remained in the Günay family for generations. Günay remembers how it first belonged to his grandparents, then to his parents, and then finally to him, where he spent every summer from the age of ten. Those visits formed a reservoir of impressions: the towering trees and the nearby sea, the presence of family, endless games and adventures. Most of all, it was the house itself that offered a world of discoveries like a half-finished model airplane, the delight of sleeping on a floor bed, the sense of freedom in a life lived close to nature.¹¹

It could be argued that these impressions endured because the house was deeply rooted in its vernacular setting. Its location by the Black Sea and its architectural character allowed inhabitants, neighbours, and visitors to live in harmony with the landscape, climate, and community. As Kenneth Frampton argued in *Towards a Critical Regionalism*, architecture attains meaning when universal modern impulses are tempered by the specificity of place, its topography, light, and materiality producing what he calls a “place-conscious poetic” rather than placeless uniformity.¹² The Şile House exemplifies this rootedness: it fostered a lived connection between environment and memory that made it more than a backdrop to childhood experiences, but an active medium of them.

Over time, the house absorbed layers of personal and collective memory: photographs on the doorstep, neighbours visiting the garden, seasonal rhythms of planting and harvest, and gatherings around food. So when Günay later undertook its restoration—spanning nearly a decade, often limited to summer months—it became not only a conservation project but a living experiment in adaptive

reuse. His approach demonstrates how narratives and stories can guide design decisions, helping to determine what to preserve, what to remove, what to adapt, and what to introduce anew.

The following sections: Memory, Heritage, and Space, trace how the Şile House embodies the qualities of a vernacular house, revealing lessons for adaptive reuse today.

Memory

The Şile House is saturated with more than one hundred years’ worth of memories. Family photographs span decades: Günay’s grandfather as a young man in front of the doorway [4]; the whole family gathered with Günay as an infant on his grandfather’s lap before the same threshold [5] and the same door that still welcomes guests today. Neighbours chatting outside their homes, later sunken below the rising street levels; the gradual rise of modern buildings that obstructed the view of the lighthouse; lighthouse keeper Ahmet Remzi walking to the mosque in his later years. These stories are inscribed not only in photographs but also in the very fabric of the house: the wooden stairs worn smooth by generations of footsteps, the garden trees planted and remembered by his mother even in old age and dementia, and the persistent view of the lighthouse, which peaks through buildings, that once anchored childhood games.

Günay recalls how the garden trees specifically shaped his childhood, their shade providing the setting for play and the continuity of memory. This personal dimension of cultural memory also informed his conservation approach: he continued the life of the garden, reusing stones found on site to create a passage that leads the visitor toward the view of the Black Sea. These memories are cultural not only because they belong to Günay, but because they echo broader traditions: the garden as a space of gathering and play, trees as anchors of domestic courtyards, and the reuse of found materials as a vernacular practice of continuity. In this sense, it is striking how the same materials do not only carry the weight of old memories but also generate new narratives, allowing tradition to evolve while remaining rooted in place.

Memory is clearly not static here; it evolves. Günay kept a diary or memory book in which visitors could leave their notes and recollections. The house became a site of gatherings where former visitors were invited back to share their memories, weaving new layers into its narrative. In organizing such events, one senses a careful attention to memory, both

¹¹ Günay, *Şile’deki Ev*, 11.

¹² Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Bay Press, 1983), 26-27.

¹³ Günay, *Şile’deki Ev*, 121.



[4] Günay's grandfather as a young man in front of the doorway.



[5] Family picture with Günay as an infant on his grandfather's lap before the same threshold.

personal and collective. These exchanges not only preserved individual recollections but also allowed them to intersect, reshaping how the house was remembered. Photographs of his mother on the stairs in her 60s or in the garden in her 90s, traces of furniture, rituals and traditions in the house, and the changing environment of the garden and surrounding topography all testify to how memories were continuously reinforced, transformed and transmitted. As Sarah Dillon has argued in her study of the palimpsest in 2013, memory is layered rather than erased, each inscription leaving its trace on the next.¹⁴ In this way, the Şile House itself becomes a palimpsest of lived space.

This resonates with Adam Caruso's reflections in *The Feeling of Things*, where architecture is understood as carrying the accumulated presence of those who inhabit it.¹⁵ Every surface, from the polished stairs to the worn threshold, registers time and use. Similarly, Edward Hollis's *The Memory Palace*

reminds us that buildings act as repositories of stories, where recollections are assembled into new constellations of meaning.¹⁶ The memory book and the gatherings transformed the Şile House into precisely such a memory palace, extending its narrative beyond its walls.

In this sense, the Şile House also ties into Gaston Bachelard's insight in *The Poetics of Space* that the houses we are born in are inscribed in us as organic habits, reflexes and memories embodied in space.¹⁷ As the house aged with its inhabitants, their lives continued to echo in its rooms and gardens. Memory thus becomes both a mode of preservation and a catalyst for adaptation. This is also what Ellen S. Klingenberg underlines in her discussion of *The Conservation of Cultural Memories in Interiors* preservation is not only a matter of material surfaces, but of sustaining the intangible cultural layers that emerge from atmosphere, use, and the relationship between objects and space. She warns

¹⁴ Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁵ Adam Caruso, *The Feeling of Things* (Ediciones Poligrafa, 2008).

¹⁶ Edward Hollis, *The Memory Palace: A Book of Lost Interiors* (Counterpoint LLC, 2015).

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas with Mark Z. Danielewski and Richard Kearney (Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 36.

that if function changes without attention to these immaterial values, the cultural memory of a place can be erased even when the material fabric remains.¹⁸ The Şile House makes this evident, for its conservation demonstrates how memory, both tangible and intangible, can actively guide design decisions.

Yet memory is fragile. The raised roads that left neighbouring houses sunken below street level signal the vulnerability of lived heritage in the face of modernization. Günay's documentation highlights this tension: memory as resilience, but also as endangered trace.

Heritage

If memory gives the Şile House continuity, heritage provides its foundations, both tangible and intangible. In the context of vernacular dwellings, heritage cannot be reduced to mere preservation of form: it exists in the interplay of tradition, traditionalism, and modernity. As Gül Asatekin and Aydan Balamir have argued, the Anatolian house tradition is the product of long cultural diffusion, layered with exchanges across regions and epochs.¹⁹ Yet in the twentieth century, the pressure of modernization and the rise of what they term "vernacular modernism" often disrupted this continuity, eroding place-specific qualities. What emerges is the recognition that tradition itself is not static. Following Jean-Paul Bourdier, tradition should be read as a dynamic and interpretive process, in which dwellings and settlements embody not fixed archetypes but accumulated practices that are constantly renegotiated.²⁰ This understanding resonates with the *Nara Document on Authenticity*, which reframes authenticity not as fidelity to an original state or form, but as a culturally embedded judgment grounded in materials, techniques, use, and lived meaning. Authenticity, in this sense, is not fixed but continuously produced through practice and interpretation.²¹

Inside the Şile House, this interplay of continuity and change becomes visible in the material artifacts of daily life. Old vases, broken handmade ceramics, chests, pillowcases, kilims, and quilts (some more than a century old) still preserve their vivid colors, natural dyes, and symbolic motifs. These textiles are not only aesthetic objects or artifacts but also cultural scripts, sources of lived authenticity grounded in material practice, use, and continuity through patterns that encode certain attention to detail and craft. They exemplify Laurajane Smith's argument that heritage is not simply about the conservation

of things but about the "uses of heritage," the active cultural work of creating and re-creating identity.²² By living with these fabrics, Günay's family sustained not only material artifacts but also the narratives and rituals they carried.

Traditional craftsmanship offers one of the most tangible embodiments of intangible cultural heritage.²³ The architect himself went on a long search to neighbouring towns to look for artisans and craftsmen. He set up a small workshop in the garden where local artisans were invited to repair, adapt and reproduce timber elements of the house. This was not just conservation; it was the reactivation of vernacular know-how in contemporary practice, where authenticity emerged through making rather than replication. The architect and artisans worked side by side, solving problems and answering questions collaboratively on the spot. Decisions were not made by "the architect" alone but emerged from dialogue with the craftsmen and the inhabitants. This recalls Bozkurt Güvenç's observation that vernacular architecture relied on craftsmen who, familiar with both construction and cultural tradition, worked with locally available materials and labour. Such practices achieved a high degree of integrity with nature and the built environment, even if they sometimes struggled to accommodate rapidly changing family structures, such as the shift from multigenerational living to seasonal or part-time use.²⁴ Günay's decision to reactivate local craft knowledge in the Şile House follows this paradigm, where heritage is sustained not by monumental preservation but by surviving skills embedded in community practice.

The conservation of the Şile House re-staged the dialectic between tradition and modernity. Ottoman ornamented beams were set alongside a Japanese-inspired deck, a gesture shaped by Günay's experience as a former fellow of the Japan Foundation. These juxtapositions respected inherited forms while also opening them to reinterpretation. The design combined the Turkish cultural ritual of sitting on the floor in the sofa (hall) [6] with the openness of the Japanese deck, extending the interior toward a pergola decorated with early Ottoman carvings and leading further a trellised walk into the garden and workshop [7].²⁵

Such gestures can be read as acts of "critical traditionalism": a refusal to treat tradition as either untouchable or obsolete, but as a medium through which cultural continuity and cross-cultural dialogue can be negotiated.²⁶

¹⁸ Ellen S. Klingenberg, "Conservation of Cultural Memories in Interiors: A Challenge for New Use" (paper presented at the IE International Conference, Reinventing Architecture and Interiors: The Past, the Present and the Future, Ravensbourne, UK, 2012), accessed September 20, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/1754315/Conservation_of_Cultural_Memories_in_Interiors.

¹⁹ Gül Asatekin and Aydan Balamir, "Varieties of Tradition and Traditionalism," in *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (IASTE, 1990), 61-70.
²⁰ Jean-Paul Bourdier, Nezar Alsayyad, International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments, eds., *Dwellings, Settlements, and Tradition: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (University Press of America, 1989).

²¹ UNESCO, ICCROM, and ICOMOS, *The Nara Document On Authenticity*, adopted at the Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention, Nara, Japan, November 1-6, 1994.

²² Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2009).

²³ "Traditional Craftsmanship," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/traditional-craftsmanship-00057>.



[6] Sofa (hall) on the ground floor.

This reactivation of heritage also speaks to ecological concerns. As Willi Weber and Simos Yannas emphasize in *Lessons from Vernacular Architecture*, vernacular forms provide sustainable design strategies by working with climate rather than against it.²⁷ The Şile House demonstrates this principle: inherited materials, artisanal skills, and furniture traditions were not discarded but mobilized as living resources. An example of this would be the chest made out of Cypress wood (reinforced with iron strips), known for its scent that deters moths and unwanted insects, allowing for traditional design with carvings to last a century.²⁸ They offered not only symbolic value but also technical intelligence, ensuring that adaptation was culturally meaningful and environmentally responsive.

Space

Beyond memory and heritage, the spatial qualities of the Şile House reveal vernacular wisdom adapted to context. Techniques such as straw-mud plaster and wattle-and-daub enabled the walls to “breathe” with the harsh coastal seasons, embodying an ecological intelligence often overlooked in modern construction. As Doğan Kuban and later Önder Küçükerman have noted, the Turkish house evolved precisely through such responsiveness to topography, climate, and everyday life, its identity rooted in adaptability rather than fixed form.²⁹ In the context of today’s ecological and social crises, the 2021 Biennale publication *Expansions: How Will We Live*



[7] The Turkish sofa opening to the Japanese deck and pergola with Early Ottoman carvings.

Together? reiterates this lesson by arguing that contemporary forms of dwelling must be rethought through collective responsibility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and attentiveness to lived realities. As articulated by editor Hashim Sarkis, architecture today no longer operates in isolation but expands its scope by engaging other disciplines and social actors in order to address complex and intertwined challenges.³⁰

Minimal interventions characterized Günay’s conservation: deformations were left intact, the topography respected. This approach resisted the urge to perfect or sanitize, instead embracing what Fred Scott calls the “altered” condition of architecture, where the traces of time and use become integral to the work.³¹ The house was thus allowed to remain a palimpsest, layered rather than erased.

The “Turkish Room,” an experimental continuity of tradition as Günay calls it, is a lived reinterpretation of vernacular refined culture, where material and

²⁴ Turan, *Vernacular Architecture*, 290-291.

²⁵ Günay, *Şile’deki Ev*, 27.

²⁶ Bourdier et al., *Dwellings, Settlements, and Tradition*.

²⁷ Willi Weber and Simos Yannas, eds., *Lessons from Vernacular Architecture* (Routledge, 2014).

²⁸ Günay, *Şile’deki Ev*, 81.

²⁹ Önder Küçükerman, *Turkish House: In Search of Spatial Identity*, trans. Tamer Çelensü and Adair Mill (Touring and Automobile Association of Turkey, 1996), 197-204.

³⁰ Hashim Sarkis and Ala Tannir, eds., *Expansions* (Silvana Editoriale, 2021).

³¹ Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, 152-153.

ritual practices converge in forms that are anything but primitive, embodying a refinement shaped by region and history [8-9]. Furnished with a built-in *sedir* (sofa/seating), a carved hearth, traditional cabinets, and a *sini* (low table) for shared meals, the room embodies communal rituals largely absent from contemporary domestic life. Günay designed the ceiling height to be perceived from the floor, designing it for those seated on the *sedir* or directly on the carpet. Within this space, visitors experience traditional practices firsthand: serving treats on the *sini*, warming around the hearth, or sitting in candlelight without electricity. The room is both a homage to the past and a proposition for the future, offering children and younger generations an embodied encounter with tradition.³²

This spatial pedagogy extended into Günay's documentation. He produced drawings, photographed spaces over time and artisans at work, and narrated how infrastructural change threatened the house's delicate setting. He recalled his shock in 1981 when returning to find the garden wall demolished and the road raised by thirty centimetres: "Raising the roads is a major issue for all traditional settlements... In front of the house there remained a 2.5-meter garden... it protected the house from noise, trash, and curious eyes."³³ The loss of this buffer exposed the house to the street, a vivid example of how modern interventions erode vernacular spatial logic.

Thus the spatial narrative also confronts challenges. The "sunken heritage" issue, roads being elevated above house level, leading to water infiltration and decay, underscores the precariousness of vernacular settlements amid infrastructural change. As Scott reminds us, space is never fixed but always altered by time, yet modernization often accelerates this erosion.³⁴ The Şile House embodies both the resilience and the vulnerability of lived spaces, offering a metaphor for the broader dilemmas of adaptive reuse.

Translation

While the previous sections focused on reading the Şile House through the lenses of memory, heritage, and space, this section examines how these readings are translated into architectural and methodological acts within Reha Günay's personal project. Translation is understood here as a mediating practice: a carrying-over of lived, embodied knowledge into other forms of architectural thinking. In this process, translation unfolds through writing, craftsmanship and design thinking.

Memory is primarily translated through writing. *Şile'deki Ev* does not function as a linear documentation of a house, but as a carefully composed narrative in which recollections, photographs, and voices are assembled. In line with Jeff Malpas's argument that memory and place are mutually constitutive—that "there is no memory without place, and no place without memory"—Günay's writing operates as a spatial practice rather than a purely temporal one. The inclusion of old photographs, descriptions of gatherings, anecdotes linked to objects and interiors, and especially the memory book extends personal remembrance into a shared, collective register. Writing thus orders memory without fixing it, allowing multiple temporalities to coexist. Rather than preserving memory as a closed archive, Günay's narrative keeps it open, enabling past experiences to inform present interpretation and future understanding of the house.

Heritage, by contrast, is translated through craftsmanship and making. Günay's search for local craftsmen and the establishment of a small workshop in the garden created a space where inherited techniques could be reactivated rather than merely conserved. A telling example is the reuse of tow extracted from old pillows found in the house, which was incorporated into wall mortar alongside straw and mud. This gesture translates domestic residue, material saturated with everyday life, into a construction logic that is both technically effective and symbolically charged. Heritage here is sustained through action and experimentation, not replication: skills, materials, and tacit knowledge are carried forward by being put back to work within contemporary conditions.³⁶

Space is translated through design thinking, with drawing functioning as an interpretive mediator. Günay's plans, section, and axonometric drawing [10] do not simply document the house but allow interior rooms, garden structures, circulation paths, and topography to be read simultaneously, revealing spatial relationships that guide design decisions.³⁷ Within this framework, the reconfiguration of the sofa as a place of gathering that opens toward the garden translates Anatolian and Ottoman traditions of floor-based communal living into dialogue with Japanese notions of openness, threshold, and seasonal continuity between inside and outside. These influences are not synthesized into a unified language but remain legible through juxtaposition, shaping intermediate spaces that extend domestic life outward. The garden further reinforces this spatial translation: stones uncovered during excavation

³² Günay, *Şile'deki Ev*, 58.

³³ Günay, *Şile'deki Ev*, 29-32.

³⁴ Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, 152-153.

³⁵ Jeff Malpas, "Building Memory," *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* 13 (2012): <https://doi.org/10.24135/ijara.v0i0.433>.

³⁶ Scott, *On Altering Architecture*, 153.

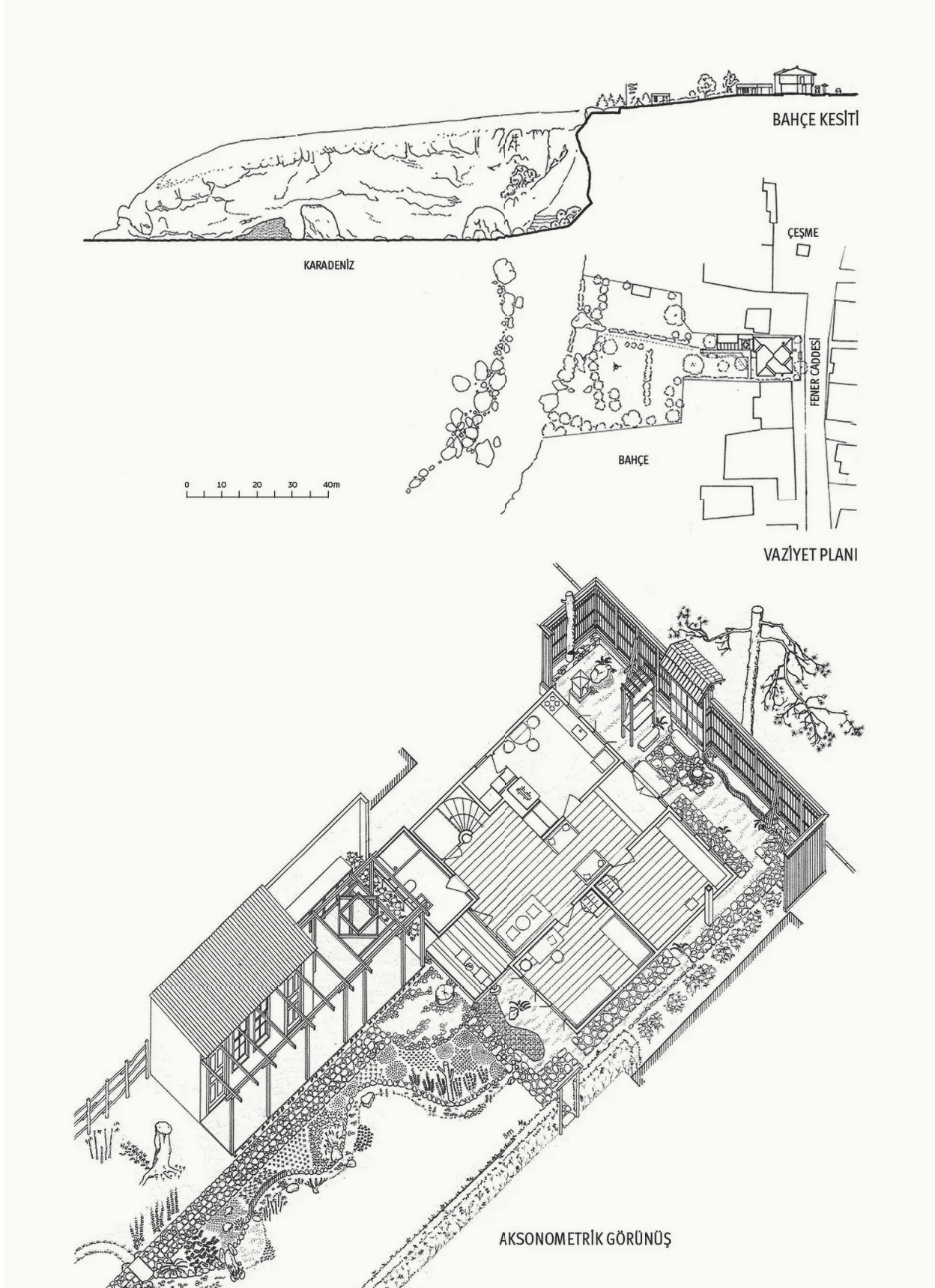
³⁷ Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism," 26-27.



[8] The sedir (sofa) in the Turkish Room.



[9] Built-in traditional cabinets around the hearth in the Turkish Room.



[10] Section, site plan and axonometry of the Şile House.

were reused to form paths and trellised routes, structuring movement and scenography through memory and use rather than imposed geometry.

Together, these acts demonstrate that translation in the Şile House is neither symbolic nor nostalgic. Writing carries memory forward as a shared narrative, craftsmanship reactivates heritage through material practice, and design thinking translates spatial knowledge into lived form. Through this layered process, the house remains a living interior—continuously adapted, yet deeply rooted in its accumulated traces.

Conclusion

The Şile House exemplifies how lived interiors can hold continuity and transformation at once. Its layers of memory, heritage, and space demonstrate that the domestic interior is not a static backdrop but an active medium of cultural inscription. Reading these layers through photographs, objects, craftsmanship, and spatial practices reveals a design vocabulary rooted in everyday life. Translating them means carrying this vocabulary into new contexts, not as nostalgia, but as a living resource for adaptive reuse.

This paper argues that such a process of reading and translation offers more than an interpretive framework for a single case: it constitutes a methodological stance for engaging vernacular interiors in adaptive reuse. From Günay's approach, a broader methodological proposition emerges. Slowness resists the rush of modernization, allowing the house to age and change in step with its inhabitants; memory becomes a guide for decision-making; and material literacy offers ecological intelligence grounded in craft and use. Rather than applying predefined typologies, this case suggests beginning from lived interiors to uncover patterns shaped through time and practice, and only then translating them into design decisions.³⁸ In this sense, vernacular houses need not be treated as frozen artifacts or technical problems of conservation, but as cultural texts whose continued relevance depends on attentive reading and thoughtful transformation. While rooted in a specific place on the edge of the Black Sea, the Şile House speaks to wider questions of how we inhabit, adapt, and give meaning to spaces today without erasing their layered histories.

³⁸ Alexander et al., *A Pattern Language*.

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- [7] The Turkish sofa opening to the Japanese deck and pergola with Early Ottoman carvings. Source: *Şile'deki Ev (2021)* by Reha Günay
- [8] The sedir (sofa) in the Turkish Room. Source: *Şile'deki Ev (2021)* by Reha Günay
- [9] Built-in traditional cabinets around the hearth in the Turkish Room. Source: *Şile'deki Ev (2021)* by Reha Günay
- [10] Section, site plan and axonometry of the Şile House. Source: *Şile'deki Ev (2021)* by Reha Günay

Place for Life Translating Intangible Heritage into Adaptive Reuse Scenarios *K. Arioka.*



Morning at House 44 begins with the crackle of fire in the kitchen, as sunlight spills through the skylight, warming the rammed earth floor.



You wander to the food hub, once a quiet monastery, now alive with a shared kitchen, farmers' markets, a heart of the community.



With the arrival of summer, you decide to bring the kitchen to the sunroom in house 54 which can move effortlessly.



You decide to visit the community garden. You walk along the path, taking in the sights and sounds of nature.



Through the garden, you pause to greet the growing vegetables, Tender leaves whispering stories of patience and care.



The farm path stretches before you, dappled with sunlight, A meandering ribbon inviting a peaceful stroll.



On your way home, you stop by the food hub's courtyard for a cooking event, a perfect chance to connect with locals, sharing good food.



At House 52 with golden glow of summer, it is a time for dinner. The kitchen blurring the lines between the indoors and the courtyard.



As night falls, House 44 prepares for rest. The bedroom stays warm by the gentle heat from the kitchen's fire—a final embrace before dreams.

Ritual of Eating by Aimi Hayashi.

During the autumn semester of 2024, students of the international Master of Interior Architecture Adaptive Reuse worked on a design studio project titled 'Place for Life in Intangible Heritage', using the Beguinage in Bruges as its site, being tutored by Hanne Eckelmans and Kana Arioka. Dating back to the 13th century, the Beguinage constitutes an enclosed urban ensemble of beguine houses and convents arranged around a communal garden and a church. It functioned as a town within a town, created by the Beguines - a community of unmarried women who sought a self-sufficient way of living with a spiritual anchoring, yet without taking religious vows like nuns. The combination of this distinctive form of communal living and a typology that perfectly supported this lifestyle led to the inclusion of thirteen beguinages, including the one in Bruges, on the World Heritage List in 1998.¹

By 1927, the Beguine community in Bruges had greatly diminished in number and was transformed into a Benedictine order. Several houses were altered and expanded into a convent, which was inhabited by a small number of sisters until 2024. The remaining Beguine houses were rented out to female residents, who formed a community together with the sisters. Living in community around a spiritual core defines the site's intangible heritage. The secluded and tranquil character, however, is increasingly threatened by the large number of tourists visiting the site.

Now owned by the city, the Beguinage is entering a period in which its future role is being reconsidered, particularly in relation to the preservation of its intangible heritage. UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage provides a framework for ensuring the continuity of living heritage, such as craftsmanship, traditions, and rituals passed down from generation to generation.²

The city commissioned a master plan, which was under development during the design studio. Developed by Barbara Van der Wee Architects and SumProject+SumResearch, this masterplan seeks to ensure the continuity of the site's historical integrity and cultural value as a place for living for a community of women. The Beguinage is a unified entity in which distinctive intangible elements are deeply interconnected. Isolating any single element as the defining feature would undermine the tradition's richness and diversity and diminish the spirit of the place. In accordance with the World Heritage guiding principles, the site must maintain its unity and integrity, and its outstanding universal value must not be compromised through development or neglect.³

Against this backdrop, the City of Bruges, in collaboration with KADOC, has formulated five anchors that together shape the soul of the place and could be used to develop scenario's for the future use of the Beguinage:⁴

1. A safe refuge for women
2. Tranquillity and a unique rhythm
3. Compassion and solidarity
4. Craftsmanship and entrepreneurship
5. Spirituality and ritual

For the design assignment, these anchors defined the scenarios for the adaptive reuse of the beguinage. Adaptive reuse - the practice of altering existing buildings for a new or a continued use⁵ - is here understood not as a means of radical transformation or rupture with history, but as a process of gentle transition from one epoch to another.⁶ Accordingly, the design studio challenged students not merely to engage with nostalgic interpretations of the site, but to explore ways to regenerate it as a site for communal living that meets contemporary needs, drawing inspiration from the Beguine's original self-sufficient lifestyle while carefully preserving its most characteristic intangible heritage: its stillness.

This paper explores how younger generations can develop an understanding of the attitude of reuse—an approach that is increasingly indispensable in architectural practice today and in the future⁷—and how they express this understanding spatially through design. To gain an in-depth understanding of the site, students worked in groups to analyse various aspects, including the urban context, historical evolution, functions, and the structural, material and decorative characteristics of each building. In parallel with this analytic work, students undertook a small, individual design exercise—the Windowscape⁸—to prevent them from remaining too long in an analytical phase without daring to intervene in the fabric. In the next step, students developed a masterplan for the regeneration of the site and a design strategy for one of the houses.⁹ In what follows, a selection of student projects is presented.

Windowscape

Windows serve as the physical medium connecting interior and exterior spaces, yet their function cannot be fully articulated without imagining the specific activities that unfold within that particular place. Windows have always been an ideal subject for

¹ Suzanne van Aerschot et al., *Flemish Beguinages: World Heritage* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2001), 45.

² Sophia Labadi, *UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, and Outstanding Universal Value: Value-Based Analyses of the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 45–47.

³ Francesco Francioni and Federico Lenzerini, eds., *The 1972 World Heritage Convention: A Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 112.

⁴ Iris Steen et al., *Begijnhof Brugge – Immaterieel erfgoed in kaart gebracht voor de opmaak van een masterplan voor de site* (Bruges: Stad Brugge, 2024), 39–40.



[1] *Hear how silence whispers a story, a name.* Poem by Peter Verhelst on the wall of the inner garden of the beguinage.



[2] Sisters in the beguinage anno 1964.

sparking the imagination: what activities might the inhabitants have engaged in around them, seeking the light streaming through or the view beyond?

Among the students' proposals was a prayer space with natural light filtering through cross-shaped slits; others designed hinges inspired by Beguinage craftsmanship, creating windows that rotate vertically to connect indoors and outdoors. Some proposed window-side spaces where diverse window functions enable reading or prayer. Others conceived windows as substantial cabinets that open outward, symbolically allowing access to the enclosed Beguinage world from the outside.

Resourceful Productivity and Environmental Innovation

The Beguines were originally founded as a solitary organisation for women. At that time, they were not only permitted to engage in secular activities but were encouraged to earn their own living. Consequently, from the 18th to the 19th century, many lace-makers resided within the Beguinages. Moreover, the Beguinages derived income from extensive lands and were largely self-sufficient, owing to their own farms and various crafts (breweries, mills, wine presses, etc.).¹⁰ Remarkably, the craftsmanship of the Beguines utilised locally sourced natural

⁵ Bie Plevoets and Francesca Lanz, "Adaptive Reuse," in *Elgar Encyclopedia in Urban and Regional Planning and Design*, ed. Kristof Van Assche, Raoul Beunen, and Martijn Duineveld (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 9.

⁶ Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2019), 54

⁷ Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Lara Almarcegui, *A Moratorium on New Construction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025), 22.

⁸ Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kajjima, *WindowScape: Window Behaviorology* (Tokyo: Film Art, 2010), 142

⁹ Lorenzo De Chiffre et al., eds., *Reuse in Teaching: The Future of the Architectural Design Studio* (Zurich: Triest Verlag, 2025), 45.

¹⁰ Steen et al., *Begijnhof Brugge*, 24.

resources. In other words, the heightened awareness of resources prevalent today was already taken for granted back then. Here, we gained significant insights not only into the utilisation of resource materials, but also into resourceful activities – that is, the very essence of human daily endeavour itself. This perspective was indispensable when envisioning the future of this site. Consequently, the studio engaged in discussions regarding the potential for specific productive activities within the five master-plan anchors from the City of Bruges, working on proposals for spaces dedicated to particular activities.

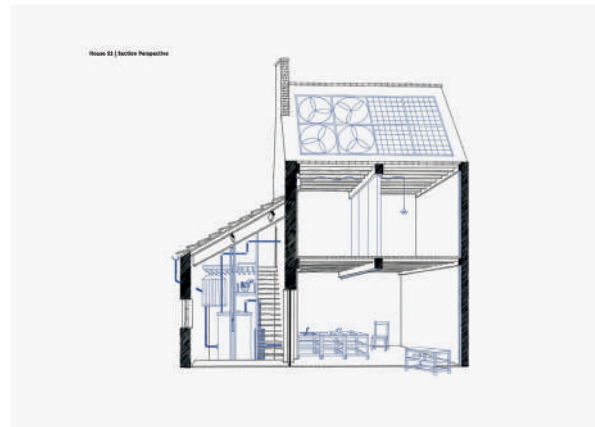
Furthermore, we set ourselves the challenge of conceptualising environmental innovation. The secular nature of the original Beguinage meant it was not an isolated religious facility detached from its surroundings or the city. Thus, by proposing spaces where environment and architecture merge, we envisaged this as a new way of living – a novel form of inheriting intangible cultural heritage. By incorporating at least one of the five key elements of the built environment – thermal comfort, air, light, sound and water – essential for creating spaces where people can live comfortably and healthily, even small-scale projects within the Beguinage can hint at the future vision for the city. Naturally, these two perspectives are interrelated, and through this interrelation, we were able to delve deeper into the content of the planning concept.

With this perspective, the students drew up master plans and finally tackled individual projects: Place for Life in Intangible Heritage. What is presented here is only a small part of the results achieved within the limited timeframe of one semester. Freedom was granted regarding the scale of proposals. Maria-Nefeli Xourafi rediscovered the Beguinage architecture from previously inaccessible boundaries and proposed new experiential routes through the space. This proposal questioned the potential for a new architectural ensemble, mindful of the balance between public and private space. Aimi Hayashi successfully presented a future vision for the Beguinage by focusing on ‘eating’ – one of our daily rituals – and visualising the human activities involved through an innovative, resourceful approach. Marie Bill focused on the Beguinage’s closed residential typology, proposing a living space that maximised the potential by sequentially connecting it to the rich natural environment within the site.

Food is a form of care. You can show your care for others by cooking together, and eating together is a way of being cared for. In this project, the Beguinage is seen as a place where people celebrate the ritual of eating. A case study of two houses, House 44 and House 52, has been conducted, and a foodscape



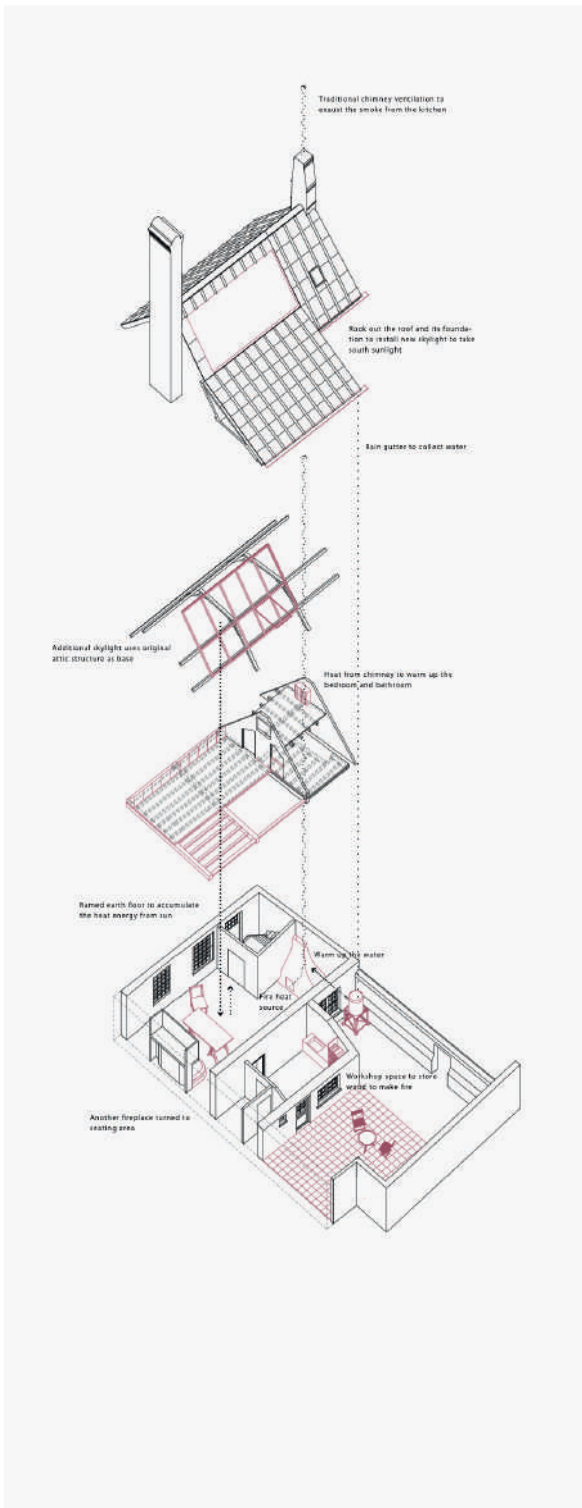
[3.1] Ritual of Eating — House 44, Section perspective.



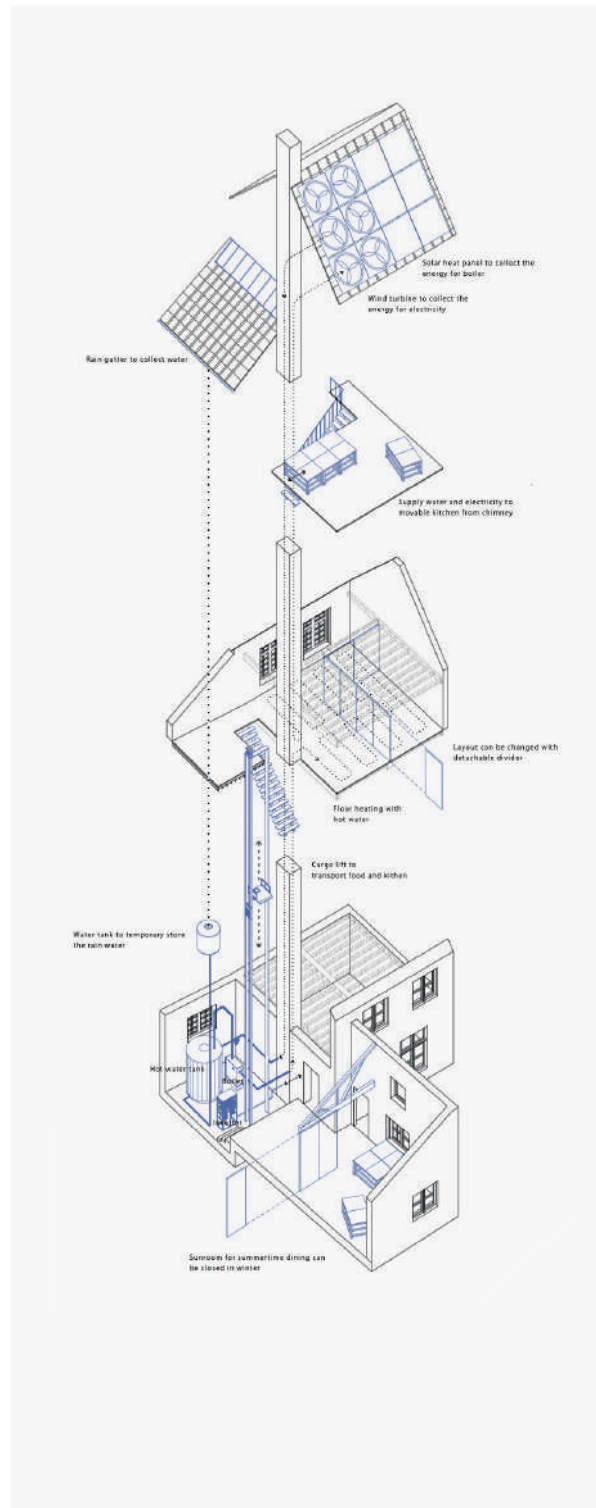
[3.2] Ritual of Eating — House 52, Section perspective.

has been created for each house, with a kitchen at its heart and a living system. House 44 is intended for short-term stays by individuals or couples, while House 52 is for families as a permanent residence. House 44 has a primitive kitchen where fire, rain-water and soil create a circulation system for the house. Guests have the opportunity to reconnect with the origins of eating. House 52 has a flexible kitchen that can be moved according to the seasons. The visible energy system also enables residents to embrace the power of nature. The monastery is set to transform into a local food hub in the master plan. It will provide future residents of the Beguinage with fresh products from the garden, just as a grandmistress cared for the beguines in their individual houses in the original Beguinage. By following this master plan and case study, the community can expand in the future. The ritual of eating carries the Beguinage heritage forward into the future: a life with a spirit of caring.

["Ritual of Eating" / Aimi Hayashi]



[3.3] Ritual of Eating — House 44. System axonometric.



[3.4] Ritual of Eating — House 52. System axonometric.

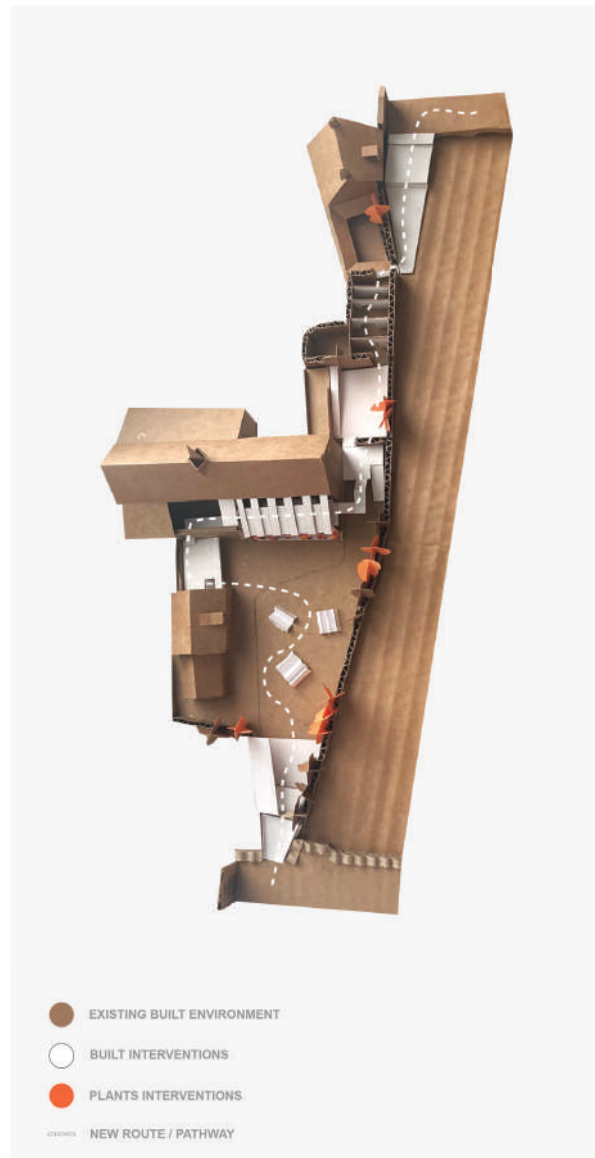
The project is guided by curiosity, inspired by the Beguinage, the Beguines, and the quiet, hidden stories and rituals that unfolded within its walls. Curiosity brings forgotten spaces to life, opening small doors and corners for those willing to explore, without disturbing the calm rhythms of daily life.

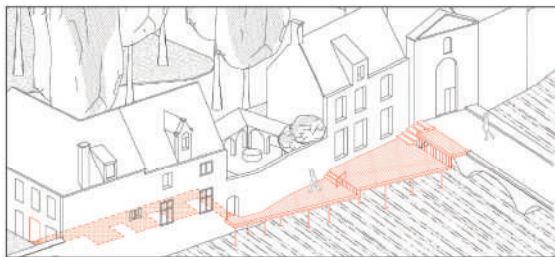
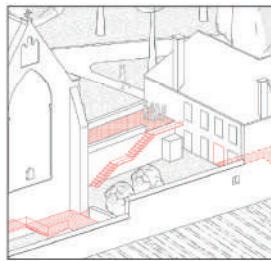
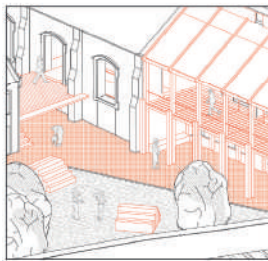
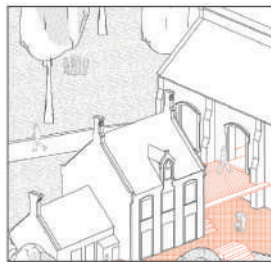
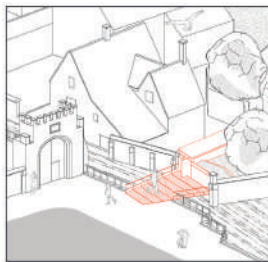
The aim is to restore a sense of locality and protect the neighbourhood's serene atmosphere while balancing the pressures of tourism. By reopening the gates to the main housing district, a protected, residential-like core is recreated. Alongside it, a more public path runs through the church's backyard and the city's front facade of the Beguinage, allowing visitors to move through the area without intruding on the privacy and daily rhythms of the complex.

Certain elements act as bridges between public and private spaces: the church, accessible from both the central yard and the backyard, balconies that frame views of the inner garden, and courtyards that open into small and larger glades, letting the sky into the heart of these backspaces and offering new ways to experience the existing structures.

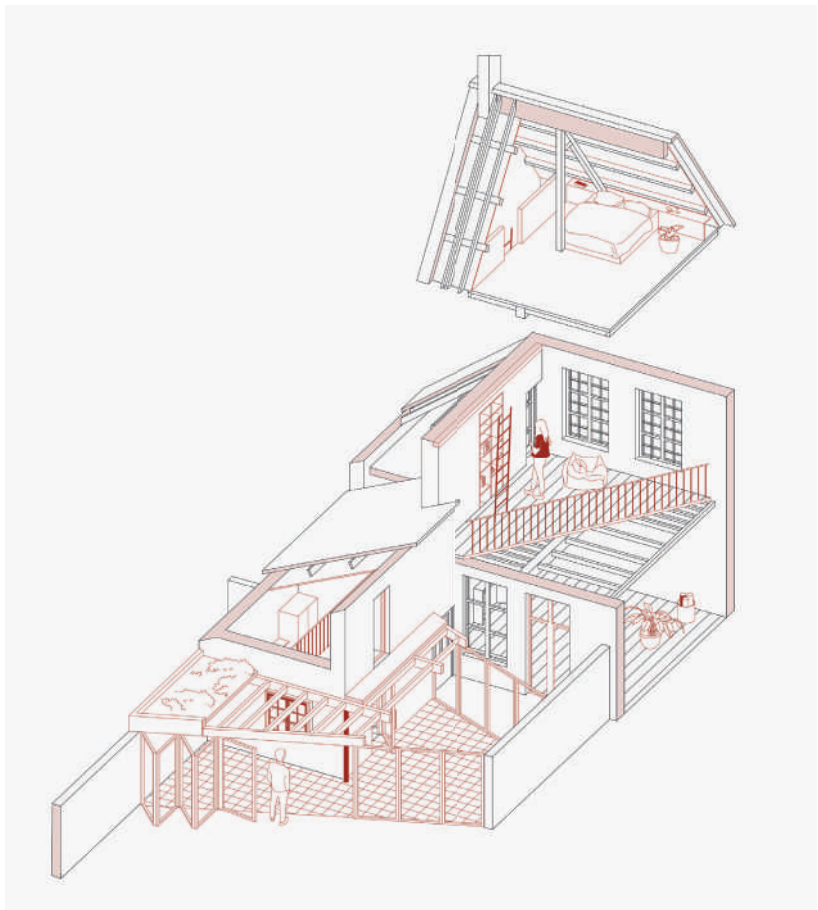
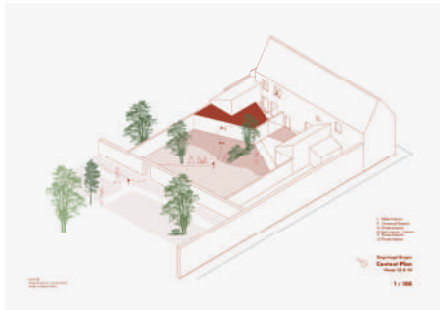
Small interventions in previously unused or "dead" spaces create an alternative path, offering varied spatial experiences. Openings of different sizes, multi-level views, and sequences of narrow and wide spaces form a subtle play of discovery. Curiosity becomes the guiding tool, revealing hidden layers of the Beguinage and preserving the calm, residential life of the complex.

["Curiosity killed the dead-spaces:
A Sequence of Interventions at the Beguinage
of Bruges" / Maria-Nefeli Xourafi]





[4] Curiosity killed the dead spaces by Maria-Nefeli Xourafi.



[5] House 52 by Marie Bill.

The project focuses on House N°52 in the Beguinage in Bruges, Belgium. The house is adopted to accommodate two people seeking a permanent retreat. It includes essential facilities: a kitchen, dining and living areas, a bedroom, a bathroom, a retreat space and outdoor green areas.

During the visit, it has been felt a sense of disorientation due to the enclosed interior, which felt disconnected from its broader surroundings. To reconnect the house with the site – while preserving the privacy and intimacy that define its interior and reflect the Beguines' way of life – a sequence of spatial zones has been introduced. These zones transition from public and communal to private, and from exterior to interior: Public Exterior, Communal Exterior, Private Exterior, Semi Interior-Exterior, Private Exterior and Private Interior. Each zone enriches the experience and strengthens the relationship between the inhabitants, their activities, the space and the site.

The extension plays a central role in this reconnection. It creates a dynamic interplay, allowing the enclosed interior to unfold into the garden. The kitchen's original exterior brick walls are preserved as interior features, enhancing the tactile experience of the space. The extension's trapezoidal form – inspired by Bruges' traditional pitched roofs – is reflected on the first floor, where the floor is cut diagonally and partially removed. Additional openings in floors and walls bring in natural light and establish visual and acoustic connections throughout the house.

Overall, the project is deeply embedded in its context and offers a site-specific solution. It redefines the house's relationship with the Beguinage, balancing privacy with connection to the environment. The result is a living and retreat experience that feels both intimate and integrated into its setting.

[“House 52” / Marie Bill]

As a concluding observation of the design studio, it is particularly noteworthy that many students took ‘home’ – the act of dwelling – as their theme. This stems from the essence of the Begijnhof as a place of communal living, reflecting how its “stillness” continues to embody the spirituality associated with “dwelling” even today. Furthermore, a common approach emerged: reinterpreting the meanings of living together and self-sufficiency through resourceful activity to make them relevant to contemporary society.

In architecture today, a design approach focused on how the field can contribute to society through sustainability and ecology is becoming increasingly prevalent. While this stance is, of course, essential, it carries the risk of undervaluing the historical role architecture has played as a human cultural activity and its inherent pursuit of spatial exploration. Approaching the design of the Beguinage in Bruges through the framework of Adaptive Reuse meant engaging with and reflecting upon the site's inherent potential: the essential human way of living. Learning from its history, discerning the essence that should be passed on to the future, and making this the foundation of the design approach was undoubtedly a novel discovery for many students. Yet it was not merely that; the exploration of spatial quality – the very reason architecture exists as architecture – was also an expression of an insatiable desire for architecture itself.

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Colofon

Trace

Notes on adaptive reuse

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