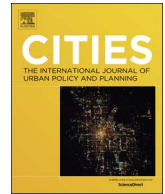




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# Community initiatives as a catalyst for regeneration of heritage sites: Vernacular transformation and its influence on the formal adaptive reuse practice

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, the adaptive reuse of buildings—transforming them to meet new functional and aesthetic needs and requirements—has become a highly specialized domain within architectural and conservation practice, and is becoming a field of scholarly study in its own right. However, in juxtaposition with this highly specialized practice, people reuse and adapt all sorts of buildings in spontaneous and informal ways in a process we call “vernacular adaptation.” This paper investigates such vernacular adaptation of built heritage, along with its specific characteristics, opportunities, and threats as well as its influence on more formal adaptive reuse practice. As methodology, we examine relevant literature to review historical and contemporary examples of vernacular adaptation and reuse. In conclusion, we present the vernacular approach as a valuable alternative to the “formal” or specialized, top-down method to managing existing built environment, especially for buildings and sites that possess compelling social value. Moreover, our study indicates that in practice, the division between the vernacular and the formal is not rigid, elaborating on the possibilities and risks of joined initiatives between local communities and private or public developers.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the adaptive reuse of buildings—transforming them to meet new functional and aesthetic needs and requirements—has become a highly specialized domain within architectural and conservation practice, and is becoming a field of scholarly study in its own right. However, in juxtaposition with this highly specialized practice, people reuse all sorts of buildings in spontaneous and informal ways in a process we call “vernacular adaptation.” This paper investigates such vernacular adaptation of the built heritage, along with its specific characteristics, opportunities, and threats; its influence on the more formal adaptive reuse practice is also examined.

First, we present a brief overview of the evolution of adaptive reuse as a professional and academic discipline, and point to the position of vernacular transformation within this evolution. Second, we elaborate on the characteristics and opportunities of vernacular adaptive reuse projects, focusing in particular on the role of community initiatives in the regeneration process for which we rely on examples from relevant literature. Third, we investigate how the vernacular adaptive reuse processes may influence the formal adaptive reuse practice in relation to gentrification and heritage-place-making. Finally, we describe how

the vernacular can be orchestrated, discussing the pros and cons. As a methodology, we draw on relevant literature to review studies and examples of vernacular adaptation and reuse, which are pertinent to support the argument.

Community-initiatives have been analyzed in the context of spontaneous redesigning of public spaces. However, their impact on the regeneration of buildings and sites has not yet received adequate attention in scholarly studies. Moreover, the influence of community-initiatives on the formal practice of planning, architecture, and conservation remains under-examined. Therefore, this study aims to understand the potential of the vernacular approach as an alternative to or complementing the “formal” or specialized, top-down method to managing existing built environment.

## 2. The vernacular process of adaptive reuse: conceptualization

## 2.1. Adaptive reuse: the evolution of a discipline

Spontaneous or user-led intervention with regard to building reuse has existed throughout all of history. In the past, reuse and alteration of an existing building was generally cheaper and easier than the

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construction of a new one, so the motivation behind this was mainly practical and economical. Historical features of the building were preserved, adapted, or removed without question, as the building was considered a material resource. Traces of such spontaneous interventions can still be found in the contemporary urban fabric, our historical building stock, and interior spaces. Examples include the historical center of Split that contains traces of the Ancient palace of Diocletian and the Piazza del Anfiteatro in Lucca where local people constructed their houses within the contours of the former amphitheater (Pérez de Arce, 1978; Powell, 1999; Rossi, 1982). Many of these historical examples of transformation are user-led: the building is changed in order to fit new needs or requirements.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, the notion of “heritage” was introduced and the existing building fabric was seen as a container of material and immaterial values (see, among others, Choay, 1992; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2013; Powell, 1999; Scott, 2008). Instead of a user-led transformation, the approach used in a great deal of the historical building stock became heritage-led, which implied “restoration” (Viollet-le-Duc, 1967 [1854]) or “conservation” (Morris, 1877). As such, during the course of the twentieth century, working with existing buildings became a prerogative for archaeologists, historians, and heritage-trained engineers and architects, while modern architects focused their practice on new construction.

However, from the 1970s onwards, the fields of architecture and heritage conservation both showed increased interest in adapting and reusing historical buildings for new programs. There were multiple reasons behind this shift, including (1) the fact that the increasing density of the built fabric limits the possibility for new construction; (2) the widening scope of heritage conservation boards and increased number and variety of listed buildings and sites makes it impossible to conserve all heritage assets in a strictly restorative manner, extracting them from an active societal life; (3) the current need for sustainable development patterns rejects large-scale demolition in favor of transforming what is already there, securing a more sustainable building fabric in both ecological and socio-cultural terms; and (4) today's economic climate, which significantly prohibits governments from funding heritage conservation and instead draws on heritage as a valuable resource for society, as it can generate added value in touristic, cultural, social, and economic senses (see e.g., CHCFE Consortium, 2015). Thus, adaptive reuse has become a field of practice in its own right, which is highly specialized and interdisciplinary—involving experts from all kinds of domains such as archaeologists, historians, conservationists, urban planners, engineers, architects, and interior designers (Brooker & Stone, 2004; Bullen & Love, 2010; Cramer & Breitling, 2007; Douglas, 2006).

## 2.2. The concept of “vernacular” in adaptive reuse theory

Some buildings, however, slipped away from the formal approaches and are used, reused, and adapted in a spontaneous, user-led, or “vernacular” way. The term vernacular is introduced in the context of building adaptation by Fred Scott (2008) in his book, *On altering architecture*, in the chapter entitled “the literate and the vernacular.” Elaborating on Boudon's sociological study of Le Corbusier's housing complex in Pessac (1972), Scott reflects on the status of the adaptations made by its inhabitants—replacement of the continuous horizontal windows with traditional rectangular windows, closing of porches and terraces to enlarge the interior space, or even the addition of inclining roofs—in light of the heritage value of this building complex. Scott raises the question—which of the houses are most authentic? The houses adapted by its inhabitants in a spontaneous and user-led way, or the houses that have been restored to their original state (Image 1)?

The adoption of the term vernacular in the context of the spontaneous, user-led transformations of existing historical buildings sheds new light on the discussion. Vernacular architecture has been perceived as an important aspect of our cultural heritage over the past several

decades, and the specific problems related to conservation of this type of heritage has become a field of study in its own right.<sup>1</sup> By applying the term vernacular to spontaneous, user-led transformations of a more “formal,” or in this case even iconic, heritage building such as those discussed by Le Corbusier, Scott implicitly attributes a heritage value to these spontaneous interventions. The adoption of the term vernacular by Scott fits within a recent tendency in vernacular heritage theory to broaden the interpretation of vernacular (Hourigan, 2015) from “*traditional buildings of the people, as opposed to the buildings of the elite and especially modern ones,*” to interventions performed at the site of shared meanings and created through use (Garfinkel, 2006/2007), including, for example, suburban houses, self-built “counter culture” architecture, and squatter settlements (Asquith & Vellinga, 2006). Beside Scott, also Mould (2014) has applied the term vernacular to speak about spontaneous and creative transformations of the urban fabric by its inhabitants, and elaborates on the relationship between the vernacular interventions versus the more formal urban planning strategies.

The tension between the use of heritage sites and their conservation is also discussed by Ioannis Poullos (2011). He criticizes management acts that remove or restrict the use and evolution of the site in favor of strict conservation of the original physical fabric, or presentation of the site for tourism. He supports the move beyond the traditional concept of heritage conservation that focuses on the protection of the physical remains at the expense of the continuity of the living tradition, which is embedded in the use, maintenance, and pragmatic user-led adaptation of the site. He elaborates on the above-mentioned example of the historical center of Split. In the sixth century, a group of refugees settled in the ruins of the ancient Diocletian Palace and started to recreate a settlement in, around, and on top of the ruins. The transformation took place gradually, based on the functional needs of the inhabitants, but also reflecting the social stratification of the inhabitants (Pérez de Arce, 1978). Today, the historical center of Split is a palimpsest, an interweaving of fabric from different periods, conserved and shaped through constant vernacular adaptation. Today the site is protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site; however, as with the housing complex in Pessac, tension arises here between the conservation of the material fabric and the continuity of the spontaneous use by its inhabitants. Poullos describes and criticizes the fact that conservation authorities today try to limit all new interventions and attempt to remove modern interventions in the ancient walls of the Diocletian Palace, and, as such, restrict the use of the site in favor of the preservation of its material remains.

## 3. Vernacular adaptive reuse projects: characteristics and qualities

### 3.1. The power of community initiatives

The reasons for the transformation of the Pessac houses and the ancient ruins in Split by its inhabitants were basically utilitarian; thus, researchers have been able to gain insight into the living conditions of the individuals and communities of the past. Apart from housing, however, derelict historical buildings and sites within the urban fabric have been reused in an informal, spontaneous way for artistic, cultural, or social activities, such as by squatting communities (Göbel, 2014; Pruijt, 2003; Shaw, 2005). Kunsthaus Tacheles in Berlin is one such example. The building was originally constructed in 1907 as a shopping arcade, but the project was not very successful and went bankrupt only six months after opening. In 1928, the building was used by AEG electric company, and after 1934, it was occupied by the Nazi's and used as offices. By the end of World War II, the building had suffered serious bomb damage. Nevertheless, after the war, parts of the building

<sup>1</sup> For example: The ICOMOS International Committee on Vernacular Architecture was founded in 1976.

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