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CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MEMORIES IN INTERIORS - A CHALLENGE FOR NEW USE

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Figure 1. Blue Interior, painting by Harriet Backer, 1883

How can cultural memory values be preserved when an interior is transformed for new use?

This question is relevant since not only buildings, but also interiors are being specified as heritage assets. How interiors and cultural memory values are defined when interiors are listed for conservation are questions that this paper will discuss.

Also discussed in this paper is the contradiction between the cultural memory value and use value when heritage interiors are adapted for new use.

INTRODUCTION

Many existing buildings carry historic and cultural values that are important to hand over to future generations, they are considered heritage assets and therefore alterations to them are restricted. However, it is an established policy that the best way to preserve heritage assets is to continue to use them. As a consequence, heritage buildings will change, either to new use or they will be adapted to modern requirements in a continued function. A building's structure and facades can preserve their historic value, even if the building's contents change radically. One example is a former electrical power plant building in Oslo, built around the turn of the last century - now being converted into the Norwegian Centre for Design and Architecture in 2004.



Figure 2. Interior of The Norwegian Centre for Design and Architecture, Oslo

The building's inside was stripped backⁱ to its original surfaces. The architectsⁱⁱ inserted new elements, including a new floor level, to accommodate for the new function, building upon the old structure in a way that respects the history of the building and its former function.ⁱⁱⁱ The success of this transformation was partly due to the fact that the original objects like machinery and furniture in the interior were not considered heritage assets.

A different situation arises when the full interior of a building is vital to its heritage value. The interior is the main conveyer of the use of a building. People's lives and work are mirrored in the way the interior is designed and detailed, and that is where the main heritage value of the interior lies. The cultural memory value of an interior lies not only in the material items and surfaces, but also in the history of people and events in that particular space.

LEGISLATION ON CONSERVATION OF INTERIORS

A heritage asset is protected by legislation. Legislation on conservation in Norway (and I believe also in Britain) considers the interior only as elements fixed to the building, including in some cases certain specified, large objects.^{iv, v, vi, vii} This notion of the interior is in opposition to the way we normally conceive the interior, namely as a totality, consisting of both fixed and movable objects in a space. An example of a heritage interior not in the legal meaning, is the home of the composer Edvard Grieg outside Bergen from around 1900 - now a museum and a centre for music. The movable elements can not have legal protection under the Conservation Act, except may be the composer's grand piano. One can imagine how little of the original atmosphere and culture that would be preserved if all movable furnishings were removed.



Figure 3. Edvard Grieg's home Troidhaugen

THE INTERIOR AS BOTH TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE ENTITY

Although the term 'interior' is not legally protected or defined as an entity, many interiors are considered of cultural memory value. The term 'interior' is frequently used by conservation authorities as well as by others dealing with conservation, but without defining the meaning of the terms *interior* or *cultural memory value*. I will try to come closer to those two terms.

Henri Lefebvre (1991) wrote of the Bauhaus movement's idea of art and architecture as a totality:

The Bauhaus people understood that things could not be created independently of each other in space, whether movable (furniture) or fixed (buildings), without taking into account their interrelationships and their relationship to the whole.^{viii}

One could say that an interior is the human environment within a building, consisting of a space limited by material elements like floor, ceiling and walls and containing fixed and movable furniture, fittings, textiles and decorations. The material existence of these elements is obvious. The relationship between the elements creates an atmosphere and tells a story of life and activities that took place in that space and represents an intangible aspect of the interior. To grasp the totality of an interior both material and immaterial aspects must be understood. Lefebvre pointed out that there exists an interrelationship between the elements in a space, and the elements relates also to the whole of that space. Understanding the interior implies taking into consideration *The art of relationship*,^{ix} a term used by Gordon Cullen (2010) when he describes:

[...] there is an art of relationship just as there is an art of architecture. Its purpose is to take all the elements that go to create the environment: buildings, trees, nature, [...] and to weave them together in such a way that drama is released.^x

I choose to use his expression to interpret the art of relationship as a relationship between furniture and other objects in the interior and the space surrounding them. In the same way as Cullen refers to an urban situation, the arrangement of furnishings in a room can be said to release drama. Culture can be said to be conveyed through relationship between things. A single piece taken out of context, or an interior space with no objects, cannot tell the full story of the interior as a cultural place. Gaston Bachelard (1964) wrote that "*Inhabited space transcends geometrical space*,"^{xi} - when he defined the relationship between habitation and house, the first as the immaterial experience and the second as the physical place and objects. He argues for a phenomenological view on interior space to allow a full experience of the term *interior*.

EXPERIENCING CULTURAL MEMORY VALUES

The term '*genius loci* ('*spirit of place*') was introduced by The Norwegian architect and theoretician Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) to describe the immateriality in the experience of architecture. The term could also apply to the interior as '*place*', to identify the immaterial values linked to the experience of meaning and activity of people in an interior. The experience of a place is hard to identify, but in some way it has to do with the experience of a relationship between elements in the interior.

How can one describe an experience? The Swedish architect Hans Lindqvist has suggested a *grammar of experience* in an essay where he stated:

An experience has always two sides - one material and one immaterial. An understanding of what the word experience means depends on an understanding of the interplay between these two sides.^{xii}

His definition can surely be debated, but it can be useful in this case. The change of an interior's materiality will influence not only material, but also immaterial values. Brooker & Stone (2004) points out the challenge for the designer when given the task to renew existing buildings^{xiii}:

The relationship between the existing and a new remodelling is dependent upon the cultural values attributed to an existing building.[...]

"*Change of use causes a massive change in the rituals of occupation*", as Fred Scott (2008) put it.^{xiv} Rituals of occupation are at risk of being lost unless both tangible and intangible aspects of the interior are considered important when changes are made to a heritage interior. As one Norwegian conservationist remarked on the intricacy of conservation of a retail interior: "*It is extremely difficult, because in reality it is the connection between the business and the interior that is of heritage value.*"^{xv}

The following example will illustrate that situation:

On one of Oslo's main street corners stands a typical commercial building from the late nineteenth century. From the 1870s the building housed a shop selling fine leatherwear, famous for its selection of exclusive and high quality goods, but also for its beautiful interior. The family shop existed until 1988, when the premises were taken over by others and the shop was closed down.



Figure 4. Shop interior 1897



Figure 5. Shop interior 1981



Figure 6. Shop interior 2010

In 1990 the shop interior was listed for conservation under the Conservation Act by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage. The listing included the shop interior, specified fixed furniture, all surfaces, fittings and furnishings.

A property developer had taken over the building and wanted to establish a pub on the premises, which was done with the consent of the conservation authorities.

The decorated shelves housing black textile covered boxes made for gloves and *assessoires*, has been adjusted to house shiny bottles of liqueur, beer glasses and football signs. The shop counter has been adapted to the pumping of draft beer. The quiet conversation and the scent of exclusive leather in the old shop has been replaced by the smell of beer and the sound of pop music and clinking of glasses.

Although the original furnishings have been kept with only minor alterations, the atmosphere and experience of a fine, traditional upper class shop has gone. Even though most of the original materials of the interior are intact, the lack of respect and understanding of the cultural values that characterized the old shop is evident. The new use has become inconsistent with the original function of the place.

DEFINING CULTURAL MEMORY VALUE

As stated, to maintain the feeling of cultural heritage in an interior an element of immateriality is needed. I have mentioned examples of terms used to describe some of the intangible aspects: Lefebvre referred to it as *interrelationship* of elements, Cullen called it *the art of relationship*, Bachelard described it as *transcendence of geometrical space*; Norberg-Schulz named it *genius loci (spirit of place)*, Scott used the expression *rituals of occupation*. All are descriptions of intangible experiences of architecture and interiors. To identify that experience as one of the criteria for determining heritage value of a place, one could name it the '*cultural experience value*'.

A whole set of defined value criteria is used by the conservation authorities to determine values in a heritage asset. The immaterial *cultural experience value* is not one of them. The idea of defining precise value criteria in conservation was introduced in the beginning of the last century. Alois Riegl^{xvi} was one of the pioneers, defining such values in an essay from 1903 called *The Modern Cult of Monuments*^{xvii}. He was the first to point out the dichotomy between historic memory value and use value in heritage assets. At that time, discussions on conservation of cultural heritage had been limited mainly to material matter.^{xviii} In our time there has been a move from seeing conservation as strictly material and objective to a more subjective view. Salvador Muñoz Viñas (2005) expressed this view:

[...] societies protect these objects [heritage assets], not because of the objects themselves, but because of the intangible, symbolic effect an unwarranted alteration might have upon the subjects that make up that society.^{xix}

Muñoz Viñas used the term '*intersubjectivity*' to define the meaning and understanding that human subjects agree to find in a heritage asset. It is this agreement that gives the asset value, not the object itself. Bringing in subjects and meaning - the human aspect - he opens for immaterial and experiential values to be of importance in the treatment of cultural heritage assets.

ALTERATIONS TO HERITAGE INTERIORS

Preserving heritage value when changing an interior is a complex matter, whether it is upgrading the interior to adapt to an existing function or redesigning the interior to implement new functions. An example of a successful upgrading of existing function is the parliament hall in the House of Parliament in Oslo, built 1866^{xx}.



Figure 7. interior of Main Hall, House of Parliament, Oslo.

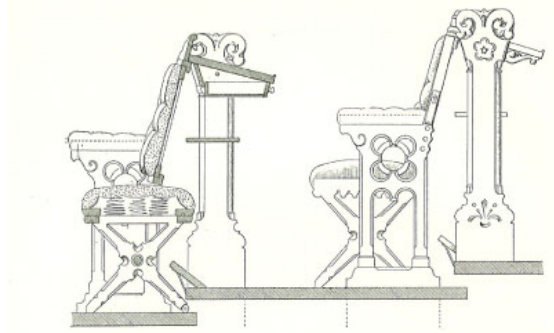


Figure 8. Original drawing (1866) of Members' chair for the House of Parliament, Oslo.

To the common eye the hall is the same as when it was built. But it has undergone substantial changes over the years due to additional representatives in the Parliament, changes of procedures and new technical requirements. The task of the designer^{xxi} has been a humble one, making new designs in the style of the existing and even copying the original furniture. Although modest in terms of visibility, the complexity of the design task is not to be underestimated.

The task of redesigning a heritage interior for a new function raises complexity of another, more fundamental, kind. Since important memory values lie in the relationship between function and material furnishings, to change the function while preserving the memory values is by definition contradictory and difficult to fulfil, like in the pub example. The great challenge for the designer lies in creating a balance between the need for preservation of memory values, including the *cultural experience value*, and the need for a new function to be expressed in the design. One approach to such a complicated task is the example of the Park Avenue Armory in New York.



Figure 9. Park Avenue Armory. built 1861, refurbishing started 2007.
Photo James Ewing of Company D.



Figure 10. Park Avenue Armory, Rendering by
architects Herzog & de Meuron

By working closely with artisans in woodwork, paint, plaster, and metal-work, the architects have tried to capture the historic essence of each room and treat each room individually, while allowing it to fulfill its contemporary needs. *"We set ourselves the challenge to prepare the Armory for new functions with updated infrastructure, while not only preserving its palpable sense of history but enhancing it by revealing the physical traces produced over time,"* to quote the architects.^{xxii}

STRATEGIES FOR NEW DESIGN

Preserving intangible cultural value of an interior in a design for new use requires a high degree of knowledge on the part of the designer. Deep analysis is needed of the material place, its architectural form and organisation, but also needed is a sensibility for the intangible qualities expressed by atmosphere of the place and an understanding of its history and former use. As stated by Brooker &

Stone, adaptation of existing buildings to new use must *"be based upon a sound analysis and a theoretical approach"*^{xxiii}.

I have no definite guide to methods of approach to this complex task of both knowledge and sensibility. However, I will argue that the most important tool to successfully implement changes to heritage interiors is the designer's own ability to develop his or her artistic sensibility for the intangible cultural values in the existing interior.

An ongoing master project^{xxiv} by a student of mine at Oslo National Academy of the Arts may illustrate one way of working both artistically and analytically in designing within a heritage interior.



Figure 11. Sketch master project. Hans Christian Elverhøi Thomassen

The project concerns changing a former synagogue in Oslo into a Jewish museum. In his theoretical approach the student studies the history of both building and its function, the history of Jews in Norway, and he interviews people associated with the museum and its collection. Artistically he analyses the place through his own senses by spending much time on the site where he analyses materiality and atmosphere through sketching and also through uncovering layers of architectural interventions that has taken place over the years since the synagogue was closed as a place of worship before world war II.



Figure 12. Working model master project. Hans Christian Elverhøi Thomassen

One of his methods of understanding the relationship between the building's history and alternative new designs is to build 1:20 models of significant parts of the interior. This helps him to study principles for implementation of new design in different parts of the interior in a way that allows layers of history to be visible in certain places and be part of the new museum. His idea is to make the museum in two stages: in stage one the interior will be used as it stands today with all its temporary and non bearing walls and surfaces, but he intends to cut several sections through the constructions to reveal traces of the original synagogue and positions of the original structures. This stage will be a temporary exhibition space showing the long and winding history of the building linked to the history of Jews in Norway. In stage two he will remove the existing non-bearing walls in a rediscovery of the original space of the synagogue, in order to use the 'new' space partly as a place for archives and research into Jewish history, and partly as a public museum. The design challenge is of course how the new elements will be designed. This remains to be seen, though, since the project is still in

progress, and expected to be finished in May 2012. However, my point by referring to this project is not the end result, but the process and method he uses.

CONCLUSION

This presentation does not give a concrete answer to my initial question on how cultural memory values can be preserved when a heritage interior is transformed for new use. My aim has been to point out the complexity related to transformation of heritage interiors and the importance of analysing both the material space and objects at hand and also the intangible *cultural experience value* of the place.

I have also wished to draw attention to the dichotomy that exists between preservation of a heritage interior in the full sense of the term and the need for new use. This tension is the greatest challenge for the designer.

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- i Scott, F. (2008) *On Altering Architecture*, (Oxon: Routledge) p. 62: The term "*stripping back*" used in a discussion on conservation of buildings, meaning removal of rotting elements and all extraneous elements in order to return the building to a sound condition.
- ii Architects: Jensen & Skodvin Arkitekter AS, Oslo, Norway.
- iii The transformation project was awarded the Norwegian National Prize for Excellent Building (Statens byggeskikkpris) in 2006.
- iv Planning Policy Statement 5: *Planning for the Historic Environment* p.1, www.buildingconservation.com, accessed 14 Oct 2011: "*Those parts of the historic environment that have significance because of their historic, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest are called heritage assets*".
- v *Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act (Lov om kulturminner)* § 1: "*The purpose of the act is to protect archeological and architectural monuments and sites, and cultural environments in all their variety and detail, [...] as part of our cultural heritage and identity [...]*"
- vi www.regjeringen.no/en/doc/Laws/Acts/Cultural-Heritage-Act.html?id=173106, accessed 01.12.2011.
- vi McQueen, R. 'Government Planning Policy and the Historic Interior', article, www.buildingconservation.com, accessed 30 Aug 2011.
- vi In the article Rosemary McQueen states that in England's Town and Country Planning Act 1990 "*a listed building is one that is included in the statutory list and includes, inter alia, 'any object or structure fixed to the building'*".
- vii The Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act §15 states: *The Ministry may protect structures and sites or parts of these which are valuable architecturally or from the point of view of cultural history. The protection order includes fixed inventory (cupboards, stoves etc.) [...]*
- viii Lefebre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) pp.124–5.
- ix Cullen, G. (2010) *The Concise Townscape*, (Oxon: Routledge) p.6.
- x *ibid.* p.8
- xi Bachelard, G. (1964) *The poetics of space* (Boston: Beacon Press, translation by The Orion Press Inc.) p. vii.
- xii Lindqvist, H. (2002) 'Skiss til en upplevelsesgrammatik' article in O'Dell, T. (ed.) *Upplevelsens materialitet*. student litterature, (Lund: Lund University) p. 200 Translated from Swedish by E.S. Klingenberg,
- xiii Brooker, G. and Stone S. (2004) *Rereadings - interior architecture and the design principles of remodelling existing buildings*, (London: RIBA Enterprises) p.11.
- xiv Scott, F. (2008) *On Altering Architecture* (Oxon: Routledge) p.17.
- xv Stige, M. (2009) *Fortidsminneforeningen, årbok 2009* (Oslo: The Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments).
- xvi Alois Riegl (1857-1905), Austrian art historian.
- xvii Riegl, A. (1982) 'The modern Cult of Monuments; its Character and its Origin', *Oppositions*, vol.25 pp. 21–51.
- xviii Immaterial cultural memory value was not a distinct issue until 2003, when UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* was written.
- xix Muñoz Viñas, S. (2005) *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann) p.160.
- xx designed by the Swedish architect Emil Victor Langlet.
- xxi designed by Jan Bauck Arkitektkontor AS, Oslo.
- xxii <http://www.archdaily.com/176436/park-avenue-armory-herzog-and-de-meuron/>. Downloaded Feb.2012
- xxiii Brooker, G. and Stone, S (2004) *Rereadings - interior architecture and the design principles of remodelling existing buildings*, (London: RIBA Enterprises) p.11p.15.
- xxiv Master project in progress by Hans Christian Elverhøj Thomassen, Oslo National Academy of the Arts

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