

Reuse of Modernist Buildings

BY MICHEL MELENHORST

In his keynote lecture “When the oppressive new and the vulnerable old meet”, at the 13th **docomomo** Conference in Seoul 2014, Hubert-Jan Henket (1940–) made a passionate plea for “Sustainable Modernity”. Hubert-Jan Henket quotes John Allen: “the conditions of our time have surely taught us that progress must now consist in learning how to renew the world with things that exist already”. In **docomomo** Journal 52, an invitation to join this plea was published and a list of questions as input for more discussion on the subject accompanied this invitation:

- Do sustainability and Modernity really form a paradox? How could they strengthen each other?
- At a historical level: how did the idea of the Enlightenment and the free market economy merge into the devotion to the “constant new”, which is dominating our behavior today?
- At a cultural level: what are the effects of loss of tradition?
- At a social level: how do sense of community and solidarity survive in our ever more plural societies?
- How could we translate our conclusions into practical information for sustainable architecture and urban design fitting specific local requirements? How could we benefit from practical and physical environments and traditions we represent?
- How could we benefit from embodied energy in obsolete materials?

Hubert-Jan Henket also spoke of a wish to change the curricula at all schools of architecture and include the history of modernity as well as the conservation and adaptive reuse of what is there already as a standard part of the education.

Since then, and even before 2014, a lot has happened in exploring the further potential of reusing Modern Movement Architecture. In 2016 the project “RMB Reuse of Modernist Buildings” started. For the RMB project **docomomo** International and the University of Antwerp, Belgium; the University of Coimbra and the Instituto Superior Técnico – University of Lisboa, both from Portugal; Istanbul Technical University, from Turkey and TH-OWL, Detmold School of Architecture and Interior Architecture from Detmold, Germany, came together to prepare a master course, addressing the subjects as formulated in 2014 by Hubert Jan Henket and **docomomo**. In March 2019, RMB, in cooperation with **docomomo**

Germany, organized a conference in Berlin on the occasion of 100 years of the Bauhaus. This Bauhaus anniversary was a great opportunity to evaluate what is the actual situation, and to find out what new directions can be detected in these explorations in Reuse, Heritage and Sustainability and Education in relation to Modern Movement Architecture. Moreover, invitations were sent out to write an essay for this journal and add to the conference results, broadening the scope of the **docomomo** Journal 61.

We start at where it all began in the first three essays: how did and how do we conceive the Bauhaus.

To better understand the image that we have of the Bauhaus two writers, Barry Bergdoll (1955–) and Jasmine Benyamin show how the perception of the Bauhaus that many have, or at least had for a long time, was actively formed and manipulated by some Bauhäuslers, Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in particular.

In his essay “*Memento Mori* or eternal Modernism? The Bauhaus at Moma 1938”, Barry Bergdoll describes the genesis of the 1938 Bauhaus exhibition in New York and how deliberately, but also accidentally, and due to the global political situation of the time, parts of the Bauhaus history, its artistic production, educational legacy and people were omitted from this exhibition. The exhibition and accompanying catalog were to shape the general view on the Bauhaus for decades.

Jasmine Benyamin’s essay “Walter Gropius and Operative History: an architectural Palimpsest” shows how Walter Gropius retroactively manipulated architectural history in his education of architects and continuously reframed his own work, eliminating unwelcome aspects of it, thus designing an oeuvre that fitted the image of modernism he wanted to communicate. Fake news is nothing new!

“From ‘White City’ to ‘Bauhaus City’ — Tel Aviv’s urban and architectural resilience” is the title of the essay by Marina Epstein-Pliouchtch and Talia Abramovich. How “Bauhaus City”, became the epithet for Tel Aviv shows the omnipresence of the brand “Bauhaus”, despite all specialist objections to the misuse of the term Bauhaus in general speech.

Contextualizing Modernism

Contextualism has become a keyword for all architectural assignments and reuse assignments in particular. An understanding of the values of places and buildings should always take the context, in all of its diverse components, as reference. Two essays show early examples of adaptive reuse by

two distinct architects. Both Aldo van Eyck (1918–1999) and Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992) had an extraordinarily sensitive approach towards contextual qualities and towards design with the role of the user in mind. Vincent Ligtelijn, author and editor of the 1999 book “Aldo van Eyck Works”, writes about Aldo van Eyck’s Amsterdam playgrounds, realized between 1947 and 1978, on vacant lots and urban wastes. From the often small “injections” gradually a “network of public places” grew together.¹ By close reading of the designs for various playgrounds, Ligtelijn shows the beautiful dynamics of space, movement and contextuality in Aldo van Eyck’s designs and criticizes the short-sighted, brusque attitude of the officials in Town Administration and Heritage Agency towards Aldo van Eyck’s oeuvre.

In Renato Anelli’s essay, “Bauhaus and Lina Bo Bardi: from the modern factory to the Pompeia leisure center”, we can read how Lina Bo Bardi’s relation with the Modern Movement and the Bauhaus changed over the years, especially after coming to Brazil. Being one of the pioneers that sought to faithfully reinterpret the agenda of the early Bauhaus to local conditions and new times, she is one of the architects that stand at the start of a contextualized, empathic architecture. An attitude towards the profession that is essential to every diligent work of restoration and adaptive reuse. I, personally, think that the legacy of these two architects has been, and should be, very influential in the conception of all university education programs on the preservation, restoration and reuse of modern movement heritage.

Education and reuse

The two most important university programs in Europe are the Section for Heritage and Architecture (HA) at the TU Delft and, the courses and studios on the themes of “Techniques and Preservation of Modern Architecture (TSAM)” at the *École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne*. Over the years they have built up an enormous repertoire of knowledge, methodologies and educational “cases” of Modernist Architecture.

One of the challenges in both examples is the fact that students are free to move between courses and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make sure students have a certain level of knowledge on reuse and modernism or can acquire this in the shortest time when entering a class or design studio.

In “Education For Adaptive Reuse — The TU Delft Heritage and Architecture Experience”, Nicholas Clarke, Hielkje Zijlstra and Wessel de Jonge describe the development of conservation education at the TU Delft from a classical architectural maintenance practice to one of addressing conservation through adaptive reuse as a valid and proven method, paralleled by an attention shift to the built legacy of the 20th century. At the HA in Delft, a scientific approach was also developed to achieve a controllable, traceable and repeatable methodology in reuse and design of 20th century architecture.

Franz Graf sketches out the history and aims of TSAM, which started in 2007 and has, since 2012, been under

his direction. Franz Graf addresses the importance of a scientific approach to reuse education to overcome the subjective feelings and formalistic emotions that inevitably accompany every project dealing with “the existing”.

A new experimental platform in the educational landscape is “Bauhaus reuse (BHR)” in Berlin. In Robert Huber’s essay “Modern reuse” we read about a shift in how we can access our built legacy. Robert Huber addresses some exciting notions on modernism, legacy, heritage and reuse and links them to contemporary questions of a circular economy, building lifecycle and their possible confronting principles with modernist ideology. Modernist concepts of the ready-made, transplantation, alienation, modernism in a postmodernist society and the notion of substance and truth versus mass production and repetition are part of his contemplations. The article offers new concepts and food for thought in the development of methodologies in the triangle of modernism, reuse and education.

Practice

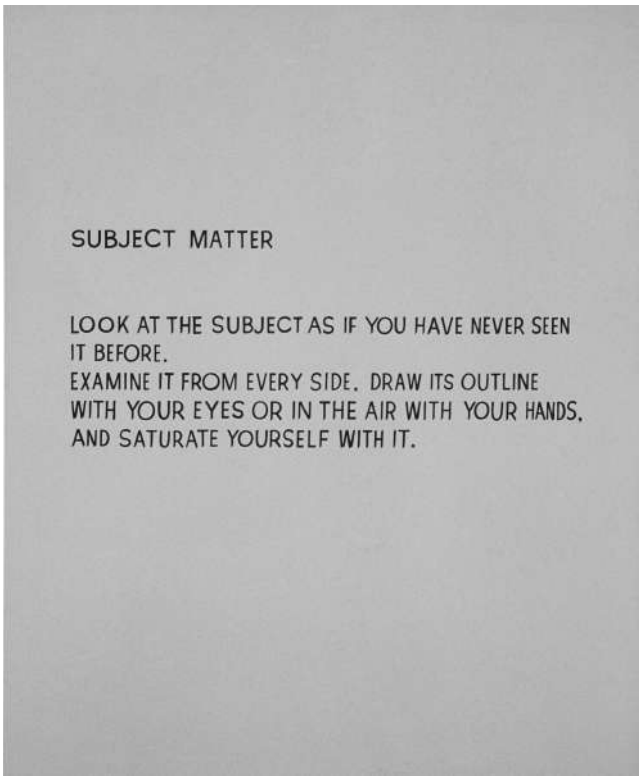
At the *100 years Bauhaus Conference*, there were three Keynote speakers: David Chipperfield, Wiel Arets and Fernando Romero. David Chipperfield did not only present his restoration project for Mies van der Rohe’s Neue Nationalgalerie but also reflected on his practice as an architect and the difficulties he faces in the preservation of “everyday modernism”. Wiel Arets in his keynote shared his thoughts and images on what he thinks modernism actually is and, by the example of his restoration of Fritz Peutz’ (1896–1914) Glass Palace in Heerlen, showed his ideas on restoration and reuse. After their talks both Ana Tostões and I had a strong wish to further explore these subjects with the two architects. The transcripts of the conversations we had with them in Berlin and Amsterdam - more casual conversations rather than actual interviews - are the last two contributions in this collection of inputs on the Bauhaus, the Modern Movement, adaptive reuse and education.

RMB

All in all, this *docomomo Journal* presents an extensive, up-to-date overview of positions and opinions in adaptive reuse of modern buildings, allowing one to verify the role of reuse can take, both on the level ideas as well as substance and spaces, in dealing with issues such as sustainability, resilience, climate change, demographic challenges, digitalization and changing conceptions of space, time and reality.

Of course, all of us, dedicated to the reuse of Modern Movement will continue exploring this tremendous richness that lies in, and here I quote Stan Allen again, “renewing the world with things that already exist”.

The RMB project seeks to become a platform and a vessel for this exploration. RMB has initiated an educational framework of common definitions, approaches and methodologies on a European level on the subject of Modernist Buildings and reuse. RMB prepared a two year, joint Master Degree, and will apply for a funding for this master at the EU Erasmus Mundus Program. The master is scheduled to start in 2020. The master program and methodology is



01 *Subject Matter, 1967-1968, John Baldessari, Acrylics on Canvas*
172 x 143,5 x 2 cm. Courtesy of John Baldessari.

based on existing and new RMB research, educational practices and reference projects. RMB offers a study program, combining the local and the international. This international focus, its interdisciplinarity character and its dedication to the reuse of modernist buildings turns this program into a unique case.

The connection between academia, education and practice on an international level is perceived as an asset for the future profession of the graduates who learn not only to collaborate in international teams but also find out about various attitudes in dealing with modernist heritage based on culture, climate, politics and legislation, thus broadening their view. RMB is open for students with different professional backgrounds such as heritage, architecture, interior architecture and construction who will work in interdisciplinary groups. Students will benefit, and so will the building industry. Urgent European topics on human habitat and climate goals will thus find better solutions and the still-vulnerable position of many modern movement buildings and public spaces will have a real chance of being improved.

From all the contributions gathered in this issue of the **docomomo** Journal, the analysis of what are the values of the objects under examination is one of the most important things students can and should learn. One should know and understand what is the value if one wants to use it, maintain it, and be able to keep on living, liking and loving it in the future. I want to add and finish this introduction by describing some more poetic experiments we are doing at the THOWL and in RMB to achieve this deep understanding.

We will use Paolo Portoghesi's Historical Method, in its essence formulated as criticism on the functionalist or naive modernism, but which is an excellent method to place the architecture of different eras in a continuum of historical development and interaction. Or as Argan wrote on Portoghesi's method,

Portoghesi's historical method does not consist in the relatively easy task of discovering Palladio in Aalto, or Borromini in Wright, but in the inverse and more difficult operation of discovering Aalto in Palladio and Wright in Borromini...

This opened potentially endless fields of experimentation exploited by the masters of modern architecture, Rietveld, Mies, Wright, Poelzig and Aalto. Portoghesi took a path, based on the concept of "contamination" of historical sources, convinced that each form of architecture is generated by other architectures² "by a not-so-fortuitous convergence among precedents combined together by the imagination".³

We use art to get to the essence of what modern movement architecture is about, for instance, quoting John Baldessari (1931-), to understand the difference between subject, object matter and meaning.

We did and will continue to organize workshops in Detmold with Jurriaan Molenaar, an Amsterdam-based painter who made architecture and, especially, modern movement architecture, the topic of his works. In these workshops, we focus on aspects of modernism, especially modernist architecture. By transferring the concepts of architecture to painting and by focusing on one aspect, for example, the window, the corner solution, the column, the power of modernist concepts becomes evident. By understanding these concepts on intellectual, conceptual, haptic, tangible and poetic emotional levels, the object of research becomes precious and worth preserving.

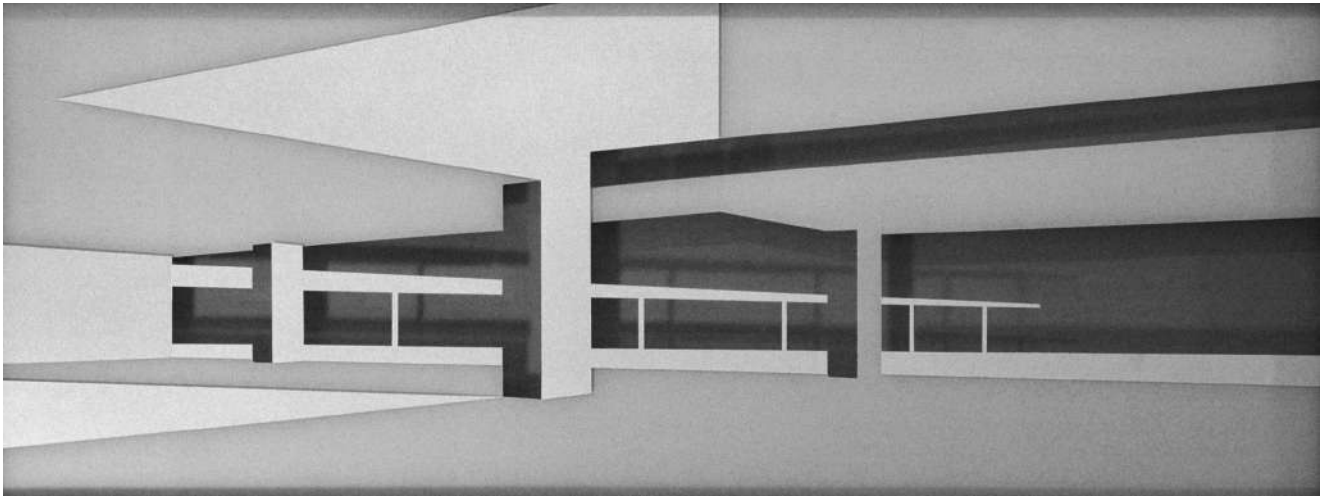
Studying user behavior in buildings in use and studying use methodologies developed in sociology like photo-elicitation helps us to understand buildings, neighborhoods and free-space better. From this deeper understanding, students can develop tactics, processes and designs that are not general but as specific as they can be.

Perhaps the attitude we ask of our students is best illustrated by the text of the Dutch architect John Habraken (1928-) "Towards an architecture of the field", showing the mindset needed for all designing with the existing:

*Study the built field;
It will be there without you,
But you can contribute to it.*

*Study the field as a living organism.
It has no form, but it has structure.
Find its structure and form will come.*

*The field has continuity,
merge with it and others will join you.*



02 Gropius 2, 2006, Jurriaan Molenaar, Laquer on glass 60 x 136 cm. Courtesy of Jurriaan Molenaar.

*Because the field has continuity no job is large or small;
all you do is adding to the field*

*Nobody builds alone:
When you do something large, leave the small to others
When you do something small, enhance the large.*

*Respond to those before you:
When you find structure, inhabit it;
when you find type, play with it;
when you find patterns; seek to continue them.*

*Be hospitable to those after you:
give structure as well as form.*

*The more you seek to continue what was done by others already,
the more you will be recognized for it,
the more others will continue what you did.*

*Cooperate;
When you can borrow from others borrow, and praise them for it.
When you can steal from others steal, and admit it freely.
No matter what you do, your work will be your own.*

*Avoid style: Leave it to the critics and historians.
Choose method: It is what you share with your peers.
Forget self-expression: It is a delusion.
Whatever you do will be recognized by others as your expression;
don't give it a thought
Do what the field needs⁴*

Notes

- 1 "Van Eyck 1959", preface by Joseph Rykwert, in Vincent Ligtelijn, *Aldo van Eyck: Works*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 1999, 34-37, 36.
- 2 Silvia Micheli, Léa-Catherine Szacka, "Paolo Portoghesi and the Postmodern Project", in Ákos Moravánszky, Torsten Lange (Eds.), *Re-Framing Identities Architecture's Turn to History, 1970-1990. East West Central Re-Building Europe 1950-1990*, Vol. 3, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2017, 179-191.
- 3 Giancarlo Priori, *Paolo Portoghesi*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 1985, 15.
- 4 N. John Habraken, "Cultivating the Field: About an Attitude When Making Architecture", in *Places*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 1994. Available at: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/70d0q4ff>.

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