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Adaptive Reuse: A designer's approach to interpreting an artefact

Abstract

Adaptive reuse is a process of reanimation of an existing building to function in the present. Architecture is a composition of many agents manifested into form. Existing buildings hold in themselves the traces of cultural, aesthetic and economic forces; they are forms of material culture. These qualities within architecture are not utilised in the process of Adaptive reuse, design work either ignores or erases these layers of information, and the dialogue with time and space within existing buildings is under-developed.

This PhD by Design explores how an existing building can be dissected through method acting approaches in pursuit of its architectural essence, which is then translated into a new architectural form that has fidelity to a host building. The way a method actor understands a character's backstory is applied to understanding existing fabric. The candidate has been channelling the existing building through himself, putting himself into the social, historic and built fabric of his case study building.

The abstract and tangible qualities of material culture embodied within existing buildings are accessed through the development of 'conceptual tools' which mobilise these qualities for their interpretation into architecture. These spatial speculations take the form as either additions or alterations within the existing building.

The project takes the Union House building at the University of Adelaide, designed in 1969-1975 by Dickson & Platten, as the setting for this investigation. The focus on a single building provides a consistent base as a starting point, allowing a clear mapping of a range of different design strategies, akin to a "theme and variations" approach in musical composition.

This research is positioned within the conference theme of 'Ethereal' presenting a speculative design methodology that aims to present alternative futures and challenge the way we think about adaptive reuse.

Introduction

“Speak to me, Stones...”¹

Invoking Gadamer, existing buildings are objects that are *between* two horizons. As we dwell and study them, we realise that they are sites or stages between *“efficient representation of pre-existing cultural values and detached autonomy of an abstract formal system.”*² Existing buildings are former stages of material culture via adaptive reuse they are restaged, made to perform a revised spatial practice. This research is interested in reading existing buildings within the context of adaptive reuse. The work is a critique on adaptive reuse and how its methods are informed by the existing building or site. Much of the adaptive reuse we encounter, ignores the architecture and focuses on the building. How do we reanimate architecture while maintaining a conceptual fidelity to the past when the architectural object is not the authentic value? *‘As critical architecture pushes aside other kinds of discourse or communication in order to place before the world a culturally informed product, part of whose self-definition includes the implication of discontinuity and difference from other cultural activities’*³ This research through design methods seeks to demonstrate a practice of critical adaptive reuse, creating transparency of meaning from the opaque artefact of an existing building. The modality of architecture can hold history within form and make it legible.

Design Approach:

The work seeks to demonstrate how an existing building can be dissected through a variety of interpretive and imaginative methods, in pursuit of its spatial essence and then translated into a new architectural form that has fidelity to a host building. Here spatial essence can be situated within the spatial triad expressed by Henri Lefebvre.⁴ I have been channelling the existing building through myself, in parts by becoming the original building or architect, while also applying my own idiosyncratic tools to 'read' the building. Through imaginative artistic methods, projects have developed, which employ 'conceptual tools' that mobilise or unveil tangible manifestations of cultural significance for their translation into a new architecture. These spatial speculations take the form as either additions or alterations within the existing building.

Contribution

The larger theorizing on my approach is still to be developed. Reflecting on the design work produced in this design research PhD, the candidate finds himself preparing or researching his case study building like a method actor. The work with existing buildings is a form of *adaptation*, *“The inner and outer human means that people use in adjusting themselves to one*

another in a variety of relationships and also as an aid in effecting an object."⁵ This concept of *adaptation* has been taken from, *An Actor Prepares* by Constantin Stanislavski.

What is useful in intersecting acting and adaptive reuse? Actors respond to existing material, whether that is a script, or a character, or a set of circumstances. Acting is where interpretation and imagination work together, in promoting new form to an existing conception of the writer. When it comes to rethinking the process of adaptive reuse, beyond the physical artefact, interpretation and imagination are the tools at hand also. The work has been creating methods to read and interpret the (hi) stories of existing buildings. This method of emersion into the context of the building can be seen as a fusion of horizons outlined by Gadamer, who the candidate finds is a useful thinker about history, context and meaning. It is here in this emersion, between the existing building and my own new authorship, I see a gap in the present processes of Adaptive reuse.

Community of Practice.

The community of practice connected to this PhD is still a work in progress. However, as the candidate is more interested in the meaning of architecture, or in some ways the 'meaning of text', the candidate has endeavoured to understand the work of architects such as Daniel Libeskind, John Hejduk, Peter Eisenman, Giuseppe Terragni. Their manipulation of form and meaning seem to be more valuable for the candidate at this moment in his candidature. The following artists, Jorge Otero-Pailos, Masao Okabe, Mona Hatoum and Rachel Whiteread have influenced the work. Specifically the acting methods outlined by Lee Strasberg have influenced the research. *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote by Jorge Luis Borges* has also influenced the candidate and his methods of investigation. Due to the word limit of this practice report, the candidate is unable to outline the scope and influence of these agents.

Experiment

I conduct my design research on a single case study building, The Union House (1968-1975) at the University of Adelaide designed by Dickson and Platten (Dickson the lead architect). "*The Union house is a prime example of Australian regional rationalism from the significant Adelaide practice Dickson and Platten.*"⁶ [Figure1] The focus on a single building provides a consistent base as a starting point, creating a clear mapping for a range of different design strategies. These strategies are akin to a 'theme and variations' approach in musical composition. The Union building has been an important place, facilitating formative social and cultural experiences in South Australia and the building has been heritage listed for its social and architectural significance. The Union house complex is "*a cohesive demonstration of*

Dickson and Platten's sensitive reinterpretation of the rational planning, massing and structural principles of modernism."⁷



Figure 1. University of Adelaide designed by Dickson and Platten

The process of Adaptive Reuse is tied to the introduction of a new program, for which I have selected an architecture school, based on the now abandoned plans to move the architecture department at the University of Adelaide into Union House. This program intends to set out parameters for my design experiments, yet there is no intention in finding new frameworks for the pedagogy of architecture and design.

So far, I have completed six designs within my research, their topics / titles are; Design 1: Nostalgia to Form, Design 2: Essence Through Destruction, Design 3: Atmosphere, Design 4: Past Users, Design 5: Trace and Design 6: Absorbing fabric. For the purpose of this practice report I will expand only on one design iteration: Past Users.

Design Research Iteration Four: Past Users

I present my approach in this section in the form of a dialogue between two voices, that of my activity as a designer (in italics) and the other of my reflective critical mind, which I interpret against my methodology and research questions.

"...The fourth design began with a further dive into archival material surrounding Union House...this search also included me revisiting the archival material surrounding Dickson and the physical architectural context around the building. With the aim of using event as a catalyst for design and re-enactment I began looking into the student-produced university publication, OnDit...After reviewing numerous publications, I noticed a recurring character...Ralph Middenway. He was the university client who worked closely with Robert Dickson during the design process of Union House. He was also the University warden taking care of student-related affairs and management of the University Union. After doing further research, I found that he had retired to Hobart in Tasmania. After an exchange of e-mails, I decided to visit him and record his memories or oral histories of his time at the Union building...he was a primary source...During my time spent with Ralph, he recounted many anecdotal stories of colourful characters he worked with during his time at the Union...these stories prompted me to focus on how I could channel the personas of the past users of Union house...The work of Dickson and Platten can be seen as humanist design - "To quote Professor Saunders, 'the potentially complicated and forbidding building is a "delightful" exercise in the romantic humanist vein, capturing the spirit of Australianism."⁸-Their architecture put the user first, designing their buildings from plan outwards...Designing with the memory of the past users, allows me to enforce their original design ethos, but from a different way...in some way honouring the plan and original intentions of the architects... The past users of Union house become the point of departure for this design. How would I translate these characters into architecture, I found inspiration in the work of John Hedjuk... After a series of false starts...I produced my first sculpture based on a past character from Union House. It was 'the musician'... I had begun the process seeking to create an instrument which could also portray a part of the eastern elevation...here I tried to feel the past characters with my body... personal pantomime was a useful tool in understanding each of the persona...The resulting sculpture was then bound together with this guitar string...For these sculptures, I tried to match the materiality found in Union house using timber and substituting concrete and brick for plaster-of-paris. [Figure 2]. Once the first character was made the production of the others soon followed in quick succession, as I was in a creative flow of production... The process of me developing these characters into sculptures was filtered through a method acting approach... many of the characters are conceptual tools that were used by the persona, I have created architectural props for myself... I also tried to embody each character in association with archival imagery and Middenway's descriptions... After modelling these characters, I began to think about how I could utilise these objects within the Union house building...translate into form... I placed

the models in the location that their real ancestor originally occupied within the Union house building... [Figure 3] ”

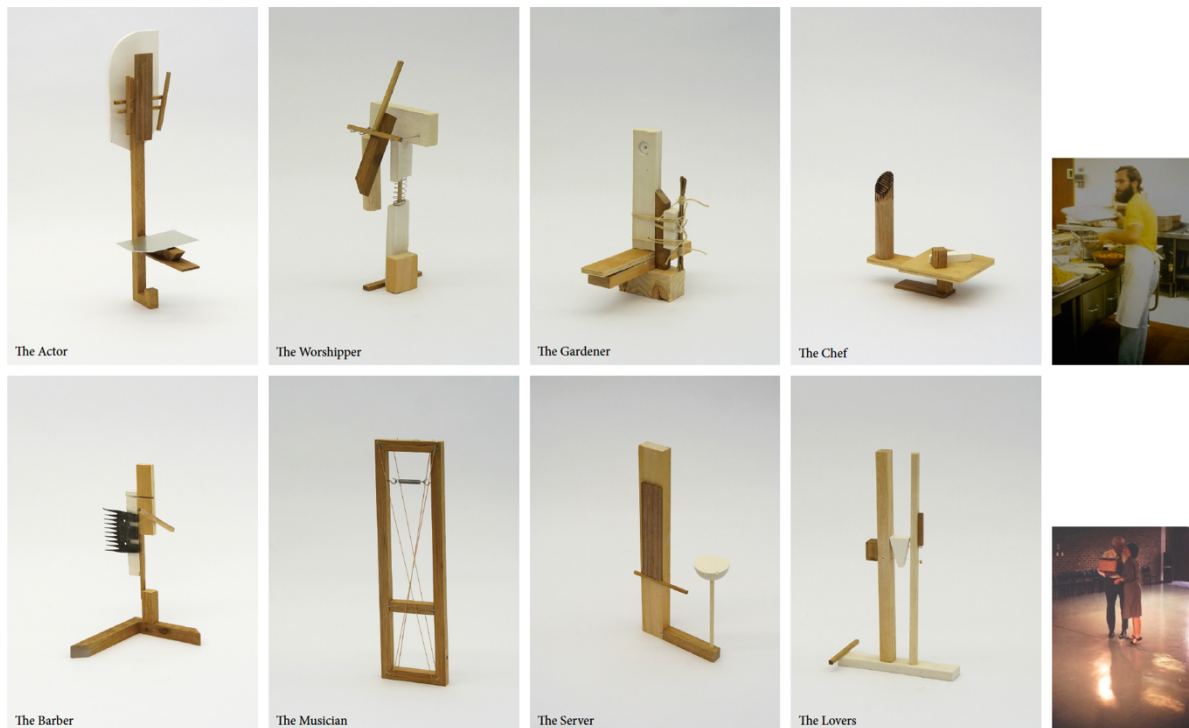


Figure 2. Tectonics sculptures

The starting point of this iteration had the aim to move past the building as a physical artefact, trying to see and interpret where else the building resides, where else does architecture exist and how it could be teased out into the open. I found the student publications were a relevant archive, where fragments of the building's social persona dwelled. Ralph Middenway allowed me to perform a reflective analysis of Dickson's work through a figure that was involved at the inception of the building. In the process of designing the Union House complex, Middenway became good friends with Dickson, and it was also nice to hear a few little anecdotes about him. This meeting further helped me understand the existing building and the architect's design ethos from a primary source. Here I am putting myself into the history and context of the building as a method actor.

Before departing for Tasmania, while reviewing the literature on adaptive use and preservation, I found myself reading *'Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* by K. Michael Hays⁹. This book re-exposed me to the work of John Hedjuk. The 'Victims project'¹⁰ by John Hedjuk was an entry for the 1984 Prinz-Albert-Palais competition in Berlin for the construction of a memorial park. The site of the intervention was the former Gestapo

headquarter adjoining the Berlin Wall, which contained a torture chamber employed during WWII. A recurring theme in the work of Hejduk during this period is his development of the concept 'Masques'. These architectural structures embody a character. "...All the projects related to the 'Masques' intervene in places tied to a strong collective memory but laying in a state of abandon. Hejduk uses the tool of the project to revive the figures that inhabited a place by putting them in a relationship with the contemporary citizens and thus projecting the site towards its future"¹¹.

The way he embodied the victims into form, influenced how I would embody the past uses of Union house into some form of formal representation. Marcel Duchamp's abstraction of the body in such works as *Bride* (1912) or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (1923) inspired me in this process also. I also thought of these sculptures as voodoo dolls — many of them containing physical traces of functions. For example, the chef has been burnt with fire, while the interpretive sculpture for the cameraman is a pinhole camera (abstracted tool). Some of the sculptures employ *objet trouvé* (*found objects*) to add personality to the sculptures. An example of this is the electric clippers blade found on the barber sculpture. In total 15 sculptures were produced: The musician, the actor, the lovers, the gardener, the film projectionist, the chef, the warden, the native, the worshiper, the server, the banker, the chemist, the student, the cameraman and the artist.

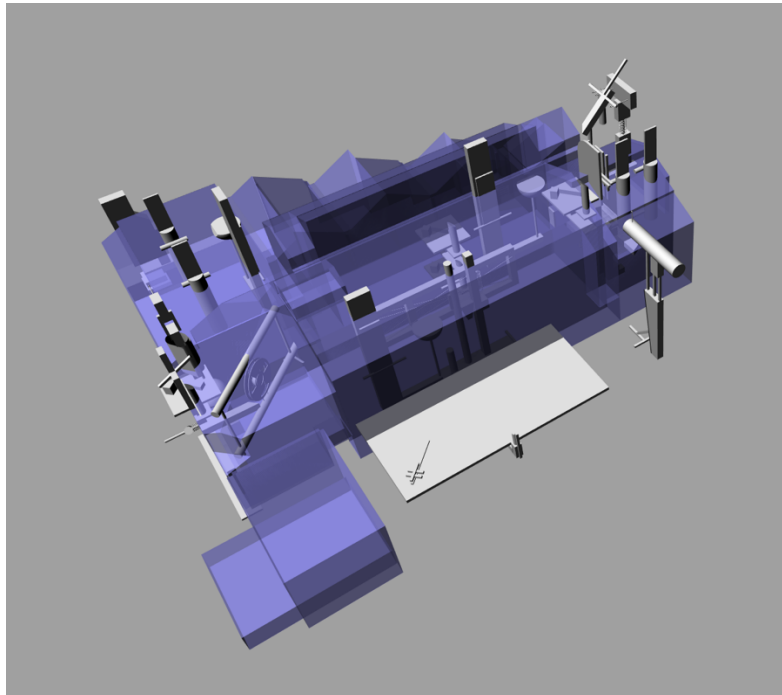


Figure 3. The models in the location before align to side in ancestral position.

"...I chose to disembody the models... and align their parts to a site west of union house. [Figure 3]... I used this action of disembodiment to make a commentary on the shifting function of the existing building... Observing the architectural qualities of Dickson's work in his stage three concept for Union house and his design work and methodology explained in his monograph 'Addicted to Architecture', I created a volume that was contextually scaled to the existing building This volume used the same pitch of roof found in the existing Union House... from the process of disembodiment, I composed the parts into some form of Frankenstein and I shrunk it into this volume... I found this process poetic... In some sense, these models which were initially placed in the building, then dismembered would have their final resting place within a volume which had DNA close to Union House... Digitally modelling, I proceeded with resolving this compressed Frankenstein into a design outcome... the parts of the sculptures became the structural and volumetric element within the building... During this process, I produced a physical model, which I used to resolve spaces within the building.... Through a process of palimpsest digital modelling, I reached a completed state of this design." [Figure 4]."

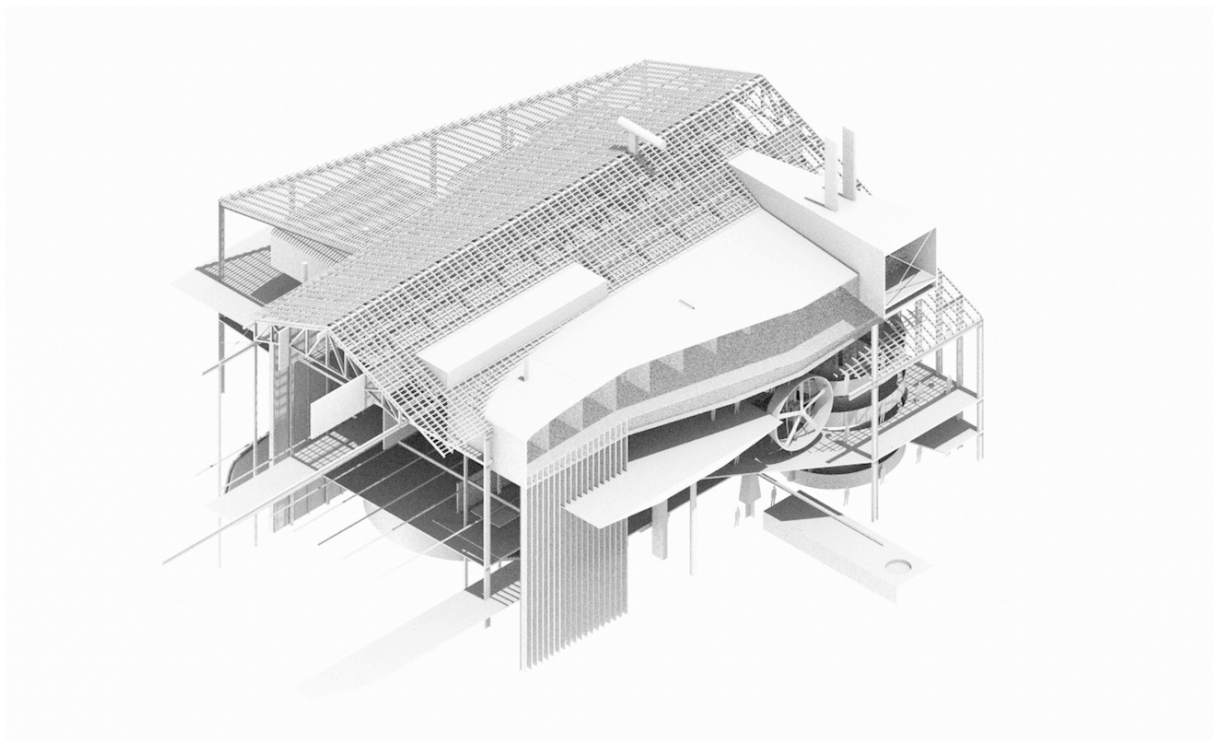


Figure 4. Frankenstein

The deconstruction of the characters into a volume is an ironic procedure on current adaptive reuse processes. Normally, buildings are stripped back to only retain their facade. The original function of the building is lost. Typically, the plan of the building is destroyed in this process of stripping back as it does not suit the new function being implemented within the building. The work wanted to retain an essence of plan via the characters which inhabited the existing building.

The previous users of the building are visualised into sculptures and then deconstructed to form an extension to Union house. The design of Union house was dictated by the functional aspects of its plan. The past users who inhabited Dickson's plan are transcribed into a new plan of a building extension. This iteration exhibits a conceptual fidelity to the past, testing the limits of creative interpretation within the process of adaptive reuse. [Figure 5].

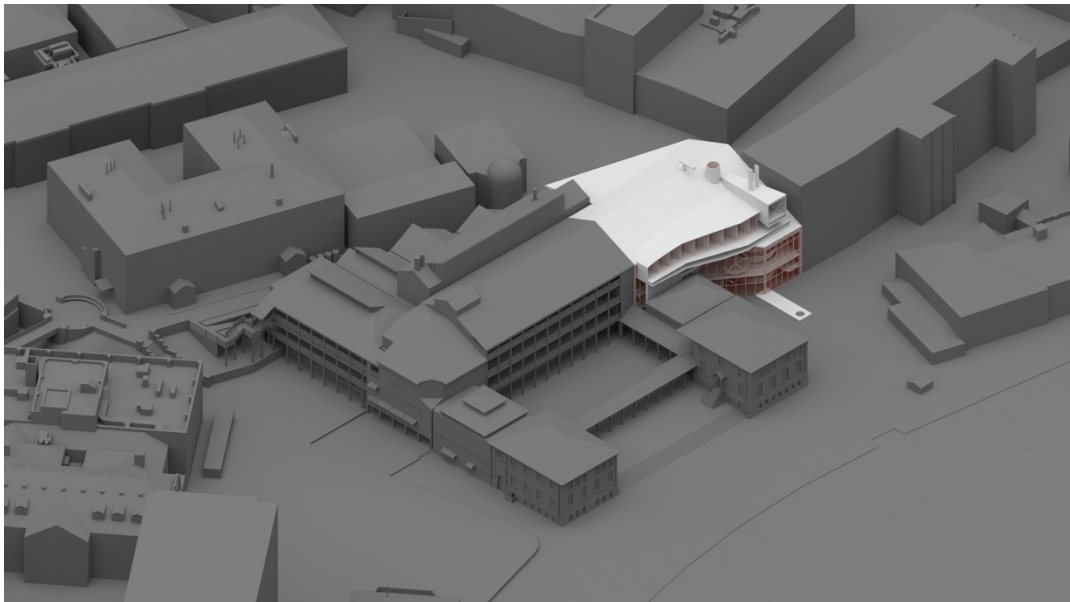


Figure 5. Frankenstein in Context.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hamburger, *Goethe: Roman Elegies*, 1983, 37.
- ² Hays, *Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form*, 1984, 15.
- ³ Hays, *Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form*, 1984, 16.
- ⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 2011, 8-9.
- ⁵ Stanislavski and Hapgood, *An Actor Prepares*, 1967, 207.
- ⁶ Goad and Lewi, 2019, *Australia Modern*, 258.
- ⁷ Goad and Lewi, 2019, *Australia Modern*, 258.
- ⁸ Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, 1986, 68.
- ⁹ Hays, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-garde*, 2010, 89-138.
- ¹⁰ Hejduk, *Victims*, 1986
- ¹¹ Fabrizi, *A Growing, Incremental Place*, 2015

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