

The Nine Lives of Buildings

Like cats being gifted with a new life every time they just miss their demise, buildings are constantly propelled towards change and reinvention in order to sustain their existence. Here **Jill Stoner**, Director of the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University in Ottawa, and Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, for 28 years, identifies and reflects upon nine possible future lives for buildings.

With supple spines and instant reflexes, our feline friends land lightly on their feet from great heights, and slip unscathed between the wheels of moving cars. These attributes figure largely in the myth of their multiple lives. But unlike cats, buildings are immobile and heavy, with rigid joints and fixed foundations. Historically, expectations were that their single lives would be long, that they would outlive their owners and carry forward a kind of cultural immortality, a virtual forever.

Yet even in centuries past, abandonment was normal, renovation common and adaptation essential. These practices were part of many a building's metabolism, but unnamed and unremarkable, and went largely unnoticed. Only when units of measure for architectural time began to shift or shorten significantly – eras became centuries, centuries became decades, and decades became years – did these common practices attract attention. Over the past half-century, time's pulse has quickened exponentially. Escalating technological innovation has produced a market economy of planned obsolescence, and globalisation has engendered rapidly destabilised or expanded systems of belief. These transformations challenge the intellectual idea of a building's singularity, its static or eternal life.

From monographs delving into the minute details of a single renovation project to technical works on strategies of demolition and treatises on the politics of historic preservation, dozens of books have been written on the practices described below. The purpose here is not to review that literature, but to outline nine possibilities for future lives for buildings, and to briefly reflect on how each one may challenge the concept of architecture as time arrested.

Consecutive waves and guises of impatience, greed, cultural sentimentality, environmental sincerity and artistic irreverence provide a catalogue and illuminate ways and means for deliberately extending buildings to a second (third, or fourth) life. The extreme conditions of passive abandonment or erasure by dynamite are the 'second lives' addressed in sections one and two. But today even the most banal buildings are more likely to dodge the wrecking ball than just a quarter of a century ago; their various alternative lives are outlined in sections three to eight. And then there is the true afterlife of a building long dead, a resurrection in whole or part, as a symbol or as a new contribution to civic life. This is the subject of section nine.

Abandonment

Abandonment is the oldest and most immediate, perhaps most natural, response when a building has outlived its intended purposes. For centuries we have simply left behind those structures that no longer seem to serve or to 'mean'. These are the majestic ruins of Greece and Rome, and more recent blighted buildings that speak for industries that are imperilled or have already failed. Sites of abandonment tend to embody the stories that rendered them obsolete, whether from failing economies, political upheavals or nuclear disasters.

The exploration of abandoned buildings and towns has become a new kind of adventure travel, often unlawful and at some risk to the explorers. Photographs of such sites have opened a new genre known as 'ruin-porn'. These buildings acquire character; they become witnesses to the slow motions of time, and prophecies of possible futures.

Demolition

Though objections to building demolition are now frequently tied to concerns about proliferating landfills and wasted resources, this is a fairly recent development. Demolition in US cities was, successively, the engine of urban renewal and slum clearance policies in the 1950s and 1960s, and hence the response to the perceived failures of those same policies. On the site of the famous Pruitt-Igoe public housing towers in St Louis, Missouri (1954), these two waves of demolition came less than two decades apart.

More recently, building demolitions have become a form of entertainment, a carnival atmosphere surrounding the event. In 1994, the implosion of the Sears Merchandise Center in Philadelphia attracted a crowd of more than 50,000 people, with bands, food and hawking of demolition memorabilia. But demolition is a bell that cannot be un-rung. It removes potential and revokes any future; a demolished building's second act as landfill offers little possibility for any life beyond its first.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction of buildings (not to be confused with the philosophical analytics set in motion by Jacques Derrida in his 1967 work *Of Grammatology*) refers literally to the selective dismantling of a building in order to keep its components 'alive' for future use. In fact, deconstruction is an ancient practice. One of the earliest recorded examples of deconstruction and material reuse is in Avebury, England. There, a linear village runs through an ancient Neolithic stone circle, which itself is substantially incomplete. The missing stones were repurposed

Andrew L Moore,
The Rouge,
2008

The rolling room at the Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, Michigan, designed by Albert Kahn in 1928. Detroit's substantially empty urban landscape embodies both the profound cultural reality of a city in crisis and an aesthetic metaphor of 'time suspended' in the emergence of a politics of crisis. Moore's haunting photograph from his book *Detroit Disassembled* (Damiani/Akron Art Museum, 2010) is a complex portrait of abandonment's paradoxical promise.



Sam Bunton & Associates,
Red Road Flats,
Glasgow,
1966

Originally intended to be a 'timed spectacle' – a global event to be televised to millions – the demolition of the Red Road Flats in 2014 was rescaled to be viewed only by a local audience. The idea of demolition-as-entertainment nevertheless emphasises our inclination to link the lives of buildings to socially complex issues. This recent erasure simply perpetuates the false promise of urban clearance as a vehicle for effective social renewal.





Charles Henry Purcell,
San Francisco-Oakland
Bay Bridge, Oakland,
California,
1937

In 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake damaged the bridge's east span (on the left). In 2014 the span was finally replaced at a cost of approximately US\$7 billion (shown in the background here). The original span is now being deconstructed in the reverse order in which it was built. Fragments of the span, representing 'pieces of time', may likely find second lives in Chinese industry, private construction and a proposed architectural salvage enterprise called the Bay Bridge House.



Thomas Fuller,
Chilion Jones,
Thomas Stent and
Augustus Laver,
Parliament Buildings,
Ottawa,
1859-63

The three houses of Parliament are currently undergoing a massive programme of preservation and restoration expected to last until 2030. Stone-carvers Danny Barber and John-Philippe Smith are restoring the decorative masonry by hand. Although the project takes advantage of contemporary technologies to model and faithfully reproduce original details, the masons' sensitivity to authentic detail is still the final and essential contribution to this project of 'time preserved'.

Purposeful revealing (by taking away layers added over time) or recovery (by adding back layers that have been taken away over time) allow the state of a work of architecture to remain matched to a specific time, most often the date of the building's construction.

for the village's houses, having offered an on-site, ready-made supply of sandstone requiring no quarrying or transportation.

Architectural ornament from the 19th and early 20th centuries has been salvaged and placed in museums; perhaps most significantly the elements and fragments from the Chicago Stock Exchange (1894) and other lost Louis Sullivan buildings that are now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. In recent years, when a building is slated for removal, it has become increasingly common to systematically delaminate its materials and extract the most obviously valuable resources beforehand. As this practice continues to flourish, it is becoming clear that deconstruction makes economic as well as ethical sense. Materials in older buildings tend to be of higher quality; old-growth wood from deconstructed buildings is stronger than wood newly milled from younger trees. The salvaging of building materials is now a robust industry, and often the used components sell at a higher price than new materials straight from the lumber yard.

Preservation, Conservation, Restoration

To preserve and conserve suggests inherent value and the necessity for protection from time itself. The intention is straightforward: to stabilise a building, to retard deterioration, to honour both material and cultural history, to confront time head-on and mitigate its advance. Restoration implies that the ravages of time have already taken a significant toll. It requires an ambitious and painstaking process. Whether a project attends to small components or entire buildings, architectural restoration places emphasis on exactitude, and on the significance of material authenticity. Purposeful revealing (by taking away layers added over time) or recovery (by adding back layers that have been taken away over time) allow the state of a work of architecture to remain matched to a specific time, most often the date of the building's construction. As a strictly material art, preservation and restoration are independent of use.

Renovation and Rehabilitation

To 'renovate' is literally to 'make new again'. While a building that has been preserved, conserved or restored will likely look no different than before (except, perhaps, cleaner), one that has been renovated or rehabilitated will reveal within itself at least some aspect of something new. Renovation may or may not be applied to culturally or architecturally significant structures. Like demolition, it restarts the clock, but it does so with a building that has been renewed and allowed to remain in place.

The 'making new' will often require significant change to what is old – taking down of walls, making windows larger and staircases wider, even altering fundamental aspects of the spatial plan. It is here that competing interests emerge. A plan for renovation may bring preservationists out in force to debate issues of value, economy and authenticity.

When the issue is life safety, rehabilitation comes into play. Like the rehabilitation of the human body after trauma, prosthetic elements help to keep the original structure in place. A subset of renovation, rehabilitation is almost always additive. In active seismic zones like the west coast of California, retrofitting is a common rehabilitation strategy, introducing historically incongruent elements such as steel-frame bracing and reinforced concrete 'sister' walls into 19th-century masonry buildings, or into inadequately engineered structures from the mid-20th century. Though these elements can feel intrusive, once in place even a diagonal steel brace running across a window opening may acquire an aesthetic value of its own, elevating a banal building towards the status of 'architecture'.

Adaptive Reuse

As the name suggests, adaptive reuse is all about use. While the cultural significance of the building's original purpose may be evident in its structure, siting or ornament, very often the old site or building is redesigned to meet a purpose other than the one for which it was first intended. Perhaps the most pragmatic of a building's many possible lives, it is a strategy that can be repeated again and again to the same structure. As with renovation, preservation and restoration advocates may challenge adaptive reuse proposals. By itself, adaptive reuse is most often economically motivated, unsentimental and without nostalgia.

Some of the great adaptive reuse projects over the past 20 years are of old spaces once for industry, and infrastructure that has been reclaimed for the public realm. Two of the most spectacular are Herzog & de Meuron's Tate Modern in London (2000), where a vast turbine hall has become a gallery for temporary exhibitions, and the abandoned railway line in Manhattan that is now the High Line (by Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, 2006–14), an immensely popular public park. Another example is OMA's adaptive reuse of the 13th-century Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice.

Welton Becket and Associates,
University Hall,
University of California,
Berkeley,
California,
1957

In active seismic zones, one common prosthetic solution applied to buildings with no particular historical provenance or significance is the X-braced exterior, illustrated here by architects Hansen/Murakami/Eshima's seismic retrofit of University Hall in 1991. Aggressively visible, this unapologetic aesthetic speaks eloquently to architecture's continued efforts to 'resist time'.



Once in place even a diagonal steel brace running across a window opening may acquire an aesthetic value of its own, elevating a banal building towards the status of 'architecture'.

OMA,
Renovation of the
Fondaco dei Tedeschi,
Venice,
2015

Built in 1228, used variously as a trading post, a customs house and a post office, and rebuilt between 1505 and 1508, the adaptive reuse of this 13th-century building as a high-end department store has provoked timely debate about the future of the city itself: whether to attempt a return to a residential, productive town or to succumb to Venice's ongoing transformation into a virtual replica of itself. That is a setting in which the only images are photographs; the occupants are tourists except for a few; public life is merely performance; and the only relevance of 'time' is 'money'.





Francisco de Castro,
Grande Hotel,
Beira,
Mozambique,
1954

Designed as a luxury resort, with 120 rooms and a swimming pool, the hotel never became profitable. Following the non-violent Carnation Revolution in 1974, it has survived variously as a prison for political dissidents, a military base and, since 1991, a squatter settlement for around 2,000 people. The Grande Hotel embodies a constantly evolving pageant of 'provisional time'.

A similar unsanctioned reoccupation of the Grande Hotel in Beira, Mozambique, vacant for several decades after a short stint as a luxury hotel in the 1950s, still continues today.



Houses,
Heidelberg,
Detroit,
Michigan,
2010

In the 1980s, artist Tyree Guyton began attaching salvaged objects to abandoned houses and painting brightly coloured dots on them in this empty, nearly completely abandoned neighbourhood. This project of a single artist grew to become a non-profit organisation – the Heidelberg Project – that combines arts education, political action and individual expression. It has contributed to the neighbourhood's public presence as a canvas for 'time's surface'. But by 2016 many of the houses have been lost to arson.

Reoccupation

Like adaptive reuse, reoccupation brings new life to abandoned buildings, but without architectural plans or preservationist pretence. Unsanctioned and provisional, often socially fragile, some examples of reoccupation are especially vibrant. It is perhaps the oldest and most unsung practice in this catalogue, from the City of the Dead in Cairo to the much more recent Tower of David in Caracas, Venezuela. On the death of developer David Brillembourg, the Tower was left unfinished in 1994; in 2006 people began moving in, altering and adding to the bare 40-storey structure in rudimentary, functional and compelling ways. In 2014, the 2,500 residents were forcibly evicted, thus commencing the Tower's third life. A similar unsanctioned reoccupation of the Grande Hotel (Francisco de Castro, 1954) in Beira, Mozambique, vacant for several decades after a short stint as a luxury hotel in the 1950s, still continues today.

Architecture is most often intended to provide comfort, safety and the setting for a marketable lifestyle. Packaged and predictable, and requiring only the resources to participate, most is tepid and uninspiring, lacking the wild industriousness of the complex social system of the Tower of David, or the now lost quarter of Kowloon in Hong Kong. Even Enrico Rizzo's condemned, cold-water accommodation in John Schlesinger's 1969 film *Midnight Cowboy* offers so much more.

Pure Expression

Artistic expression upon and within buildings takes both two- and three-dimensional forms. These expressive interventions may be aggressively temporary or may endure for millennia. We do not know the exact history of the wall paintings at Lascaux in southwestern France, but we can assume that the caves were inhabited long before they were decorated with the shapes of animals. Unlike adaptive reuse, here there is no use at all except to call attention to a transformative moment in time.

Recent appropriation of abandoned buildings has taken many forms. In works such as *Circus* (1978) and *Conical Intersect* (1993), the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, armed with a chainsaw, cut into abandoned warehouses and suburban homes. In *House* (1993), Rachel Whiteread filled an abandoned house with concrete; the house then disappeared, leaving its alter ego as a ghostly commentary on the decline of a London neighbourhood. In Detroit, the entire Heidelberg neighbourhood became an experimental art studio, with buildings providing much of the raw material.

With the artist as mediator, an altered building acts in dialogue with our expectations for architectural norms and conventions, as a character that serves both as critic of stodgy formulations and as a radical advocate for change. These artist's interventions are tactical and most powerful when they appear spontaneous. They remain memorable even after their time on stage has passed.

Resurrection

Every so often a building is so missed after its demolition that it is rebuilt as new. The motives for this sort of resurrection can be similar to those that inspire preservation – a desire to maintain history through the immortality of a significant building. At the site of the Arbeia Roman fort in the north of England, a gatehouse, barracks and a commanding officer's house have been reconstructed on their original foundations. The gatehouse holds many displays related to the history of the fort, and its upper levels provide an overview of the archaeological site.

Another type of resurrection, much less costly, is to build only a fragment, or simply an ephemeral inference in the outline of a building from the past, as with Venturi and Rauch's Franklin Court 'ghost house' (1976) on the site of the renowned American polymath Benjamin Franklin's former home in Philadelphia, where a simple, minimal white frame evokes the shape of the original structure. And every year in lower Manhattan, twin beams of light rise up into the night sky to commemorate the towers that fell in the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

Buildings no longer physically present are also resurrected in drawings and through writing. Graphic and textual representations bring a building into dialogue with its past, and with all that building's other paper lives.

Between Chance and Intention

To some extent buildings have always had the instinct to reinvent themselves, to survive through multiple or serial lives. This is inherent to architecture. But now the questions have become more deliberative. What should be saved, what should be restored, what should be torn down and what should be rebuilt are furiously controversial issues, even emotional ones. Global frames of reference between material and meaning, between chance and intention, open opportunities for new dialogues around buildings as resources to be carefully cultivated, managed and creatively adapted to multiple future lives. ▽

Tribute in Light,
New York,
11 September 2011

Each year on the anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York, two beams of light rise skywards above the former location of the city's Twin Towers. Though the project is expensive and technologically complex, the result appears pure and simple – a moving resurrection that is memorable precisely because it is 'time fleeting'.



*What should be saved,
what should be restored,
what should be torn
down and what should
be rebuilt are furiously
controversial issues,
even emotional ones.*

Text © 2016 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Images: p 19(t) © Andrew Moore; p 19(b) © Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images; pp 20(t), 21(t) © Jill Stoner; p 20(b) © Julie Oliver/Ottawa Citizen. Reprinted by permission; p 21(b) © Federica Goffi; p 22(t) © STRINGER/AFP/Getty Images; p 22(b) © Andrew Morang; p 23 © Karen A Franck