From architecture to community: adaptive reuse as social practice

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Abstract

This paper brings forward the idea of adaptive reuse as a social practice able to reconnect urban communities, and actively contribute towards their consolidation.

Further, it demonstrates how skills and competences from the academic realm can facilitate community engagement and (re)engender a sense of belonging.

Adaptive reuse, intended as a series of actions and processes to transform existing buildings into different ones 'fit' for new purposes, is a practice that has become the focus of discourse around architectural heritage, sustainability and the future of our cities. The central idea of the discipline is to reprogramme existing buildings through a set of tools and tactics able to modify structure and matter. However, it is our contention that the remit of the discipline has evolved, emphasising the notion that buildings are symbolic entities - "memory spaces" and "cultural experiences" able to actively contribute towards the building of communities.

Looking to the principles of maintenance and care that adaptive reuse embodies, we propose an interpretation of reuse, that considers how people interact and identify with places, rather than focusing on function or mode of inhabitation. Consequently, the process of re-activating/re-using architecture situated within the public realm, can be framed as a social practice.

As Spatial Designers we work on projects focused on establishing a dialogue with the community as both an idea and a real entity, identifying practices of engagement, gaining trust and exercising empathy. Working in contexts where communities are sometimes fragmented and not readily able to build a dialogue - a situation exacerbated by covid and the current cost of living crisis in the UK, our role is to support and enable a process of envisioning.

Spatial adaptive practices - by embedding principles of maintenance and care - become an effective strategy for actively engaging with the complex and often conflicting needs of diverse communities and neighbourhoods. The contribution to the Handle with care/Inclusivity track is enriched by the account of KilburnLab, a practice-based research project led by the Interiors Team at Middlesex University in London, comprising a series of collaborative activities with local stakeholders exploring the future of the area.

The Kilburn Lab project is part of a wider strategy for reframing adaptive reuse as a social practice that transposes the principles of 'care', that are evident in its processes and tactics, to urban regeneration. Buildings, and more generally existing spaces, are custodians of memory, history and legacy.

Author keywords

Interior architecture; adaptive reuse; social practice; community engagement.

Introduction

'Architecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action and what happens in space [...] architecture cannot be dissociated from the events that happen in it' (Tschumi 1981).

'What we really need to study is how the world gets put back together.' (Rottenberg and Segal from the Care Collective).

'The vision we need is one that advances a model of 'universal care', where care is understood as an enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life. Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow for the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive —along with the planet itself.' (Rottenberg and Segal from the Care Collective).

This paper brings forward the idea of adaptive reuse as a social practice able to reconnect urban communities, and actively contribute towards their consolidation. Further, it demonstrates how skills and competences from the academic realm can facilitate community engagement and (re) engender a sense of belonging. In rearticulating adaptive reuse as a strategy for recovering communities as social entities, we look to its empathetic core and appropriate its tactics to rebuild dialogue across and between the various actors and stakeholders that comprise them, and reopen a dialogue impacted by the dismantling of public services and the reassignment of municipal architecture as commercial infrastructure. Offering a counterpoint to gentrification – the default mode of neoliberalism, which tends to frame the transformation of urban environments in economic terms -

we are looking to institute a practice of care that supports and enables communities to thrive.

The etymology of the word adaptation has its roots in the Latin words 'ad' (to) and 'aptare' (fit) and means 'to make fit' - make (something) suitable for a new use or purpose and become adjusted to new conditions. Adaptive reuse, intended as a series of actions and processes to transform existing buildings into different ones 'fit' for new purposes, is a practice that has become the focus of discourse around architectural heritage, sustainability and the future of our cities. The central idea of the discipline is to reprogramme existing buildings through a set of tools and tactics able to modify structure and matter. However, it is our contention that the remit of the discipline has evolved, emphasising the notion that buildings are symbolic entities - "memory spaces" and "cultural experiences" able to actively contribute towards the building of communities. Looking to the principles of maintenance and care that adaptive reuse embodies, we propose an interpretation of reuse, that considers how people interact and identify with places, rather than focusing on function or mode of inhabitation. Consequently, the process of re-activating/re-using architecture situated within the public realm, can be framed as a social practice.

Out of Place

Interiors as a spatial practice deals with the idea of place as a porous membrane able to mediate between the built environment (in a very broad sense) and its inhabitants. The definition of place is filtered by social, political and historical constructions; it is defined by local institutions, cultural heritage and social conventions. A place can be described in many different ways - as a physical environment, through its history, features and inhabitants; and also as "experienced", which can encompass a multitude of perspectives. For Kilburn Lab[1] - which we will come back to later - it is evident how the perceptions of residents, politicians, students and tutors are sometimes radically different. The place, in its positive and negative connotations, is held responsible for supporting or fragmenting communities, bringing forward the dual effect of inducing a sense of belonging or being out of place.

The sense of place, as defined by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, is 'the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over [...]' (Feld and Basso, 1996) - there isn't one single sense of place nor one place identity that can be univocally representative of any place. Exploring the idea of place and its relationship with communities, it is undeniable that there is a strong connection between people's quality of life of and the physical environment in which they live and thrive. This doesn't simply relate to their private dwelling but, in a substantial way, with the urban space they inhabit (as residents or workers, for example) – the place of the local community, the neighbourhood.

Cultural Geographer Doreen Massey wrote extensively on the idea of place, which she described as 'as an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories [that] poses the question of our thrown togetherness.' (Massey, 2005).

For Massey, place - as a specific and highly contextualised entity - represents the experience of space, which is itself complex and continually in flux. 'Space for Massey is (after Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) "striated," highly variegated, and dynamically evolving. It derives both its use and its exchange value from a combination of the value of its physical characteristics (i.e., bedrock stability, or waterfront adjacency), its relational proximity to other users (i.e., the number and composition of people who exist and act nearby), and humans' experiences of its aesthetic properties' (Pierce, 2022).

From Massey's extensive writings on the subject we can summise that places, and communities, do not have a single identity but are plural, full of conflict and never static. They evolve and adapt to new circumstances, transforming their material structure and receiving new inhabitants. What gives a place its specificity is not a shared historical background but the network of social relationships and common experiences that are able to illicit 'a sense of place which is extroverted, ... link[ed] with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local" (Massey, 1991).

Daniel Kemmis argues that our disengagement and loss of interest for public life goes parallel with our loss of a sense of place (Kemmis, 1990). The construction of a 'sense of place' goes through a renewed desire for inhabitation and care for the public spaces of a neighbourhood, producing collaborative and humane policies that create better places to live. The satisfactory sense of belonging to a place further triggers a process by which citizens become actively engaged in rethinking the city they want to live in. 'The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization" (Harvey, 2008).

It is evident today how the debate about cities as hubs for social, human and economic development - and the role urban environments play in the well-being of its population, has shifted its terms of reference and is today focused on the research aimed at managing the risks associated with its development, promoting systematic actions and regulatory frameworks in which participation, integration and sustainability are the driving goals. These strategies do not just lie at urban and metropolitan level, but also at a global level, such as in the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations in 2015.

The UN SDG goal #11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable recognises how this is an essential condition, which has an impact on a number of other Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda also calls for local authorities to put in place strategies to "localise' the 2030 Agenda – for example providing leadership in the mobilization of a wide range of stakeholders and facilitating "bottom-up" and inclusive processes. Looking at the principles of maintenance and care and notions of empathy and trust, we argue that identifying and reusing collective dismissed spaces (adaptive reuse) could be an effective strategy to investigate how people interact and identify with places, and actively propose new uses for the future.

The built environment, the multiple spaces we inhabit every day, plays a central role in creating a sense of place and

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1 Kilburn Lab is a practice-based research project led by the Interiors Team at Middlesex University in London, comprising of a series of collaborative activities with local stakeholders exploring the future of the area.

a sense of belonging that ultimately impact upon communities' wellbeing.

Care and Community

'To study maintenance is itself an act of maintenance. To fill in the gaps in this literature, to draw connections among different disciplines, is an act of repair or, simply, of taking care — connecting threads, mending holes, amplifying quiet voices' (Mattern, 2018).

'Maintenance and care, as practices crucial to the production and reproduction of places, are less spectacular …, but nonetheless essential elements of throwntogetherness and, as such, undoubtedly political' (Lisiak, 2022).

Moving forward from Massey's concept of 'throwntogetherness', as a consequence of the 'conflicting and unequal' social relations that characterise space and place (Massey, 2005), we need to look towards how we produce and reproduce places in order to address how these are both understood and experienced. Fundamental to strategies of adaptive re-use are the dual principles of maintenance and care, which operate in tandem to effect positive change within our world. Agata Lisiak, in her essay 'Politics of maintenance and care: Rosa Luxemburg's commonplace urban theorizing' (Lisiak, 2022), references the writings of Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto around the definition of care as a 'species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible'. She continues, 'That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web' (Lisiak, ibidem). Lisiak further talks to the work of the Care Collective (specifically their Care Manifesto), which was formed in 2017 initially as a reading group focussed on articulating the crises of care that manifest in our times - 'As the authors of The Care Manifesto note, "care has long been devalued due, in large part, to its association with women, the feminine and what have been seen as the 'unproductive' caring professions"' (Lisiak, ibidem). There is a notable alignment here between the gendering of care as a feminine activity and the marginalisation of interior architecture and design - with which adaptive reuse is intrinsically connected - as a largely invisible and misinterpreted practice and discourse that is similarly gendered[2]. It is through strategies of adaptive reuse that we can reidentify both the practice of care and interior architecture and design as (re)productive activities that operate in tandem to reimagine the places we inhabit.

Underpinning the definition of care as a set of actions that work upon and inside the world(s) we live in, are the principles of empathy and trust. Within late 19th century German philosophical aesthetics, empathy or 'einfühlung' was a term used to describe 'the human ability to "feel into" works of art and nature in order to aesthetically perceive them' (Devecchi, Guerrini, 2017). This notion of empathy as an emotional response to something has been harnessed by designers as a mechanism for intuiting the needs of users and interpreting them - 'designers are expected to focus on their empathic abilities in order to make interpretations of what people think, feel and dream, and to envision the experiences triggered by products or services' (Devecchi, Guerrini, ibidem). Trust however is more reciprocal - where empathy implies a feeling towards something, trust is embedded in an understanding of shared experience and unconditional support. Within the context of space and place, empathy and trust are core to the success of neighbourhoods and the communities that comprise them.

The etymology of the word "community" is rooted in the Latin word "communitas", which means the public spirit, partnership, joint possession/use/participation and emphasises an active role in aspects of "participation" and the "public". A neighbourhood[3] is defined as a 'a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common' and 'the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common'[4], providing citizens with opportunities to meet, share and support each other, but also with the responsibility to contribute to building physical places that facilitate civic engagement, community interaction and participation within the planning processes.

For a community to work, members David Chavis and David W. McMillan as 'A feeling that members have a sense of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (McMillan, Chavis, 1986).

As Spatial Designers we work on projects focused on establishing a dialogue with the community as both an idea and a real entity, identifying practices of engagement, gaining trust and exercising empathy (Rifkin, 2010)[5]. Working in contexts where communities are sometimes fragmented and not readily able to build a dialogue - a situation exacerbated by covid and the current cost of living crisis in the UK, our role is to support and enable a process of envisioning. Peter Blundell Jones, has argued in Architecture and Participation that the reason why community engagement is indispensable to practices of maintenance and care within neighbourhoods and communities, is that it creates 'a sense of belonging to the world in which they (the user) live' (Blundell Jones, Petrescu, Till, 2005) - an existing space that is reimagined through adaptive practices is better able to reflect and embed that sense of belonging. Spatial adaptive practices - by embedding principles of maintenance and care - become an effective strategy for actively engaging with the complex and often conflicting needs of diverse communities and neighbourhoods.

Trust+Emphaty > Care+Adapt

In his seminal essay, 'Old Buildings as Palimpsest', published in the journal Progressive Architecture in 1976, Rodolfo Machado defines the remodelling of existing buildings as a process of 'rewriting', where 'the past takes on a greater significance because it, itself, is the material to be altered and reshaped. The past provides the already written, the marked

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2   For a fuller exploration of this discussion see Harriet Harriss and Naomi House, 'Interiority Complex', in A Gendered Profession, RIBA, London, 2016.

3   https://www.etymonline.com/word/neighborhood

4   Oxford Languages https://languages.oup.com/

5   Design approach should address the issue of how to create the conditions for the empathic experience, for it is "the very means by which we create social life and advance civilization" (Rifkin, 2010, Chapter 1, Section 2).

"canvas" on which each successive remodelling will find its own place. Thus, the past becomes a "package of sense," of built-up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed, or suppressed (refused)' (Machado, 1976).

More often than not interiors, if not the architecture that frames them are altered, hidden, closed off – they become invisible, subtracted from our vision and perception. As spatial designers and educators we have developed a number of tactics for reading and interpreting the often difficult to detect signs and clues that present themselves at the surface of the urban landscape - survey and surveillance, the collection of evidence, intuition and narrative reconstruction - in an attempt to access and decode the 'past' that Machado refers to above. These 'pasts', which in turn embody hidden narratives are themselves in a perpetual state of flux resulting in an entanglement of interactions that imprint themselves upon the material environment.

The implication of Machado's reading of the material environment is that it is full rather than empty - similar to Massey's articulation of space, which Joseph Pierce describes as 'seething with plural occupation' (Joseph Pierce, 2019). Says Pierce, 'for Massey what space is includes all the things that it has ever been and all the things it could be in the future' (Joseph Pierce, ibidem). Adaptive reuse acknowledges this fullness, beginning with the building itself as a rich and textured "body" comprised of the conjunction between the material and immaterial. Rather than evoking the tabula rasa, the practice of adaptive re-use assumes complexity rather than negating it. In dialogue with the existing, adaptive re-use invokes strategies of maintenance and care to build empathy and trust.

KilburnLab

Kilburn is an area of northwest London which spans the boundary of three London Boroughs: Camden, City of Westminster and Brent. Located between Oxford Road and Kilburn Station, Kilburn High Road is the second largest town centre within the London Borough of Camden. The area has a rich history – the former heartland of London's Irish community, Kilburn is a multi-cultural/multi-ethnic community - a consequence of diaspora. Due in part to its strategic position with a good public transport network, Kilburn is a 'hypersensitive' and 'fragile' place, that is in constant flux.

There are a wide number of developments planned or undergoing in the wider Kilburn area, from large-scale housing schemes and public realm projects - the result of both traffic and "greening" policies - and smaller-scale community-driven initiatives. Camden and Brent have recently teamed up to pilot a new experimental process aimed at fostering and supporting local stakeholders – residents, businesses and associations – in finding mechanisms to transform the neighbourhood.

Kilburn Lab is a practice-based research project led by the Interiors Team at Middlesex University in London, comprising of a series of collaborative activities with local stakeholders exploring the future of the area. As educators in Higher Education Institutions, we are involved in Teaching and Learning and Research activities and in what is defined as the 3rd

mission – the commitment for higher education institutions to "contribute to society". These aims are shared by local authorities who are investing in strategies for facilitating and promoting citizenship and community engagement.

107 Kingsgate is a former community centre at the heart of Kilburn. Owned by Camden Council, it has been closed since 2019. During the pandemic, the space was adapted to function as a Covid testing centre and now hosts live-in Guardians[6]. As one focus of the Kilburn Lab, this site pilots the use of adaptive strategies to facilitate a collective rethinking of urban public space at the scale of the neighbourhood, encouraging the community to consider how they can use and share this space, by talking about its past(s), present(s) and future(s).

The important role these neighbourhood communities can play in effecting urban regeneration and transformation, and the ever-growing challenges to so many aspects of our urban and social life (pandemic, cost of living crisis,..) are among the reasons why local authorities are developing new tools and tactics to engage different stakeholders.

One of the tools of such a strategy is the Community Improvement District – a concept refined by Professor Tony Travers who is an expert on London's local governance and which has been adopted by some local authorities within the UK - 'from a loose set of guiding principles for local people to apply as they see fit, or a more structured and funded system. . . that will help stakeholders develop their place for the benefit of all. With a CID in place, management of the neighbourhood is stewarded by local stakeholders on an equal footing, recognising the interdependencies between them, creating strong local networks and extracting greater social, economic and environmental value for local benefit' (Stephenson, 2020).

Because the CID is a bottom-up strategy, but formally included in the body of laws, it has the capacity to undertake some of the functions suggested for neighbourhoods within the Localism Act[7] and Community Right to Challenge[8], such as community planning enabling voluntary community bodies and parish councils to express an interest in running a local authority service. The benefits of involving communities in the regeneration of their own neighbourhoods can contribute to an increased sense of 'ownership and responsibility' towards the local environment. Although a CID has yet to be implemented in London, it is possible that Kilburn could pilot the scheme.

It is worth noting that many neighborhood communities struggle to have an effective communication platform, get organised and adopt tools able to establish a dialogue and then translate this into action. In the last few years, the role of local government has shifted towards the construction of a support framework to build into the community the necessary awareness and willingness to undertake such action. Our project Kilburn Lab, and more broadly the activities promoted by the Interiors Directorate at Middlesex University[9], provide an opportunity for students to share design skills and competencies to encourage a process of envisioning, putting forward the idea that the academic realm can facilitate community engagement and (re)engender a sense of place.

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6   https://liveinguardians.com/property-guardians

7   The Localism Act 2011 is an Act of Parliament that facilitate the devolution of decision-making powers from central government control to individuals and communities
     https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted

8   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-right-to-challenge-policy-statement--2

9   The Interiors programmes at Middlesex University (BA Interior Architecture, Ba Interior Design, Ma Interiors) collaborate with council, association and organisation to support community engagement in process of adaptive re-use and urban regeneration.

We believe that this process, to be impactful and long-lasting, must be led by a network of 'actors' including resident citizens, local businesses, associations, institutions as well as experts. Camden Council, in collaboration with Brent Council, has facilitated and enabled social interaction between the different stakeholders, identifying organisations, groups and individuals interested in actively taking part in this reclamation of public space.

The first activity organised and promoted by the Participation Office of Camden Council, was a series of walkabouts – each one focused on exploring a specific area (North Kilburn, South Kilburn,..) or topic (history walk, community engagement walk,..). These very simple activities have established new relationships between individuals and associations already operating in the area, facilitating a space for debate, rather than simply operating as a device for collecting local histories and memories. This groundwork has resulted in the publication of the OneKilburn website [10] - a tangible map of all the stakeholders currently participating in the process. The website also functions as a repository or 'project bank' – anyone can add an idea and circulate it to see if there is interest to develop or even to fund it.

The work that students at Middlesex are currently undertaking, is concerned with reading and interpreting the Kingsgate Community Centre and its surrounding context, to provide the local community with insights and ideas able to generate a discussion around the future of the building. This process of research and investigation, utilises forensic methods of detection that seek out existing or passing design precedents, and uncover hidden narratives - gathering fragments and traces of previous occupations, compiling and scrutinising the evidence presented, and constructing narratives that attempt to understand and re-imagine the past(s), present(s) and future(s) of the site. Further, using Secondary Research, our students look to reconstruct the sequence of events that have been witnessed by the building, establishing priorities and registering effects. Through the exposure of different interpretations and assumptions at play, these tactics enable not only discussion, but offer an envisioning of possibilities.

Kilburn Lab's work is in progress and will continue to be the main focus of final projects for both BA and MA cohorts this academic year. It is anticipated that the body of work produced will impact on the future choices for the building at 107 Kingsgate Road and the wider community. At the end of January 2023 an event organised by Camden Council, in partnership with Brent Council, Kiln Theatre and Middlesex University, invited local residents and workers in the area to explore possibilities and ideas, through a series of workshops that, using the design outcomes produced by students so far, focused on 4 main questions: 'What makes Kilburn special', 'What is the vision of Kilburn', 'What can we do now', 'What can we do in the future'. The outcomes that emerged from this event will inform and potentially shape the next phase of the students' projects culminating in an exhibition that we are planning for Summer, 2023.

CONCLUSIONS: Design Activism

'If we apply "care" as a framework of analysis and imagination for the practitioners who design our material world, the policymakers who regulate it, and the citizens who participate in its democratic platforms, we might succeed in building more equitable and responsible systems' (Mattern, 2018).

The Kilburn Lab project at Kingsgate Community Centre is part of a wider strategy for reframing adaptive reuse as a social practice that transposes the principles of 'care', that are evident in its processes and tactics, to urban regeneration. Buildings, and more generally existing spaces, are custodians of memory, history and legacy.

The principles underlying this approach to urban regeneration can be found in design activism as an agent for change. Guy Julier suggests that while design cultures are 'largely produced through circumstances', their 'agency is often less explicitly declared'. Design activism on the other hand 'is a movement that is more self-consciously and more knowingly responsive to circumstances. It is politicized' (Julier, 2013). Julier's thesis envisions design activism as a response to the 'crises' of neo-liberalism, which, in its privileging of the market over communitarianism, has contributed to its destabilisation. He continues, 'I take design activism to include the development of new processes and artifacts, where their starting points are overtly social, environmental, and/or political issues, but where they also intervene functionally in these' (Julier, ibidem).

An example of such an intervention may be seen in Granby Four Streets in Toxteth, Liverpool. The project is led by the local community who, over a period of two decades, have gradually rebuilt this once derelict neighbourhood. In 2011 the Granby residents 'entered into an innovative form of community land ownership' with Assemble Studio and Steinbeck Studios working with Granby Four Streets CLT 'to present a sustainable and incremental vision for the area that builds on the hard work already done by local residents and translates it to the refurbishment of housing, public space and the provision of new work and enterprise opportunities'[11]. The overarching approach is underpinned by what Assemble Studio describe as a 'resourcefulness and DIY spirit' [12], which is evident across all of the different projects that have so far been instigated. In 2015 Assemble were awarded the Turner Prize for their 1:1 model of the Granby Workshop Showroom, which further exhibited a range of products they had created in collaboration with artists, designers and makers working in Granby.

As an ongoing collaboration between various stakeholders within the Granby Community and Assemble Studio, the regeneration of this once fragmented neighbourhood has been achieved through the slow, but steady renovation of its architecture and streetscape through processes of maintenance and care.

In this perspective, Spatial Design - specifically the practice of Interior Architecture - becomes a mediator between places (in our case existing buildings) and the communities that inhabit them, facilitating the transformation of spaces into places within which all stakeholders have agency.

10   https://onekilburn.commonplace.is/
11   https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/granby-four-streets-2
12   ibid.

Kilburn Lab facilitates the process through which the (local) community actively engages with the decision-making mechanism that invests aspirations, needs and practical considerations. Exploring its past and present multiple identities and narratives, envisions shared possible futures.

Acknowledgments

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