

TRANSLATED ANTHOLOGIES: (RE)ESTABLISHING ADAPTIVE REUSE AS A TRANSDISCIPLINARY CULTURAL PRACTICE

Colm mac Aoidh^a, Koenraad Van Cleempoel^a

^aHasselt University, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The immediacy of the climate crisis has necessitated a paradigm shift away from endless cycles of demolition and reconstruction towards more ecologically and socially sustainable architectural practices that focus on the *adaptive reuse* of existing buildings. Many recent approaches have tended however to concentrate on the technical, material and economic aspects of reuse at the expense of the equally important social and cultural aspects.

This paper discusses a recently-launched project at Hasselt University in Belgium that attempts to address this myopic imbalance through the development of a *conceptual framework* that firmly repositions adaptive reuse as a *transdisciplinary practice*, engaged not only with 'hard' values like technical and material concerns, but also 'soft' values encompassing the integral cultural and social aspects that give places *meaning*.

The project sets out to curate an *anthology* of textual and non-textual sources from both within and beyond the discipline of architecture that can contribute to the emerging theory of adaptive reuse and situate it within wider contemporary discourses. Through an exploration of anthologising as a critical practice, the paper highlights how the proposed theoretical foundation for adaptive reuse will (re)establish its cross-cutting nature as a *cultural activity*, at the same time emphasising

the critical role it has to play in any future sustainable development.

KEYWORDS

Adaptive reuse; architecture; transdisciplinary practice; anthologising; translation.

1. INTRODUCTION

How and by whom should an anthology of adaptive reuse be written? Who gets to select the featured works, to curate and edit the collection? Should it feature single or multiple authorship? Is there a hierarchy of collaboration? These are some of the questions that have been encountered so far during the first few months of a recently-undertaken PhD research titled *Meaning and Translation – Towards a Conceptual Framework for Adaptive Reuse*. The project emerged in response to the immediacy of the climate crisis, which has necessitated a paradigm shift away from endless cycles of demolition and reconstruction towards more ecologically and socially sustainable practices that focus on the adaptive reuse of our existing built environment. It aims to develop a conceptual framework that will contribute to re-establishing adaptive reuse as a transdisciplinary practice engaged not only with 'hard' values like technical and material concerns, but also 'soft' values encompassing

the integral cultural and social aspects that give places meaning.

The methodology involves firstly the curation of an anthology of textual but also non-textual sources from both within and beyond the discipline of architecture, that aims to contribute to the emerging theory of adaptive reuse and situate it within wider contemporary discourses. The second stage is to explore this collected body of knowledge through the critical lens of translation, investigating the acts of translation involved in reconciling different traces, time periods, interventions and actors.

An important thread running through the research is the exploration of processes of co-creation, given that adaptive reuse raises fundamental questions regarding the role of authorship in architecture. In a similar way, I want to take a pluralist and inclusive approach to the collecting and curating of the anthology, remaining aware that canonical theories have tended to be dominated by white, Eurocentric, straight male thinkers, writers and theories. While this has begun to change in recent years with a movement towards more balanced representation in architectural theory, in particular with regard to gender balance, we still have a situation today in which women, but also people of colour, queer, feminist, indigenous, 'non-Western', anti-colonial and other marginalised voices, continue to be underrepresented in architectural practice and theory. This makes it all the more important to re-read existing and historical texts through a critical lens that recognises the narrow focus of the existing canon and re-examines it by situating it within broader, more inclusive contemporary discourses. It also makes it equally crucial to find and re-evaluate previously overlooked practitioners and theorists, and invite new voices to contribute. This paper describes the first stage in the methodology that is currently underway, explaining how the process of collecting and curating an anthology or atlas of adaptive reuse mirrors the very practices and theories

which it gathers by outlining the parallels between practices of curation and practices of care, maintenance and repair in adaptive reuse.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Our current unsustainable paradigm

The adaptive reuse of sites and buildings is not new, being at least as old as the practice of architecture itself. Throughout history, buildings were viewed as physical, material and cultural resources that were passed down from one generation to the next and therefore lent themselves to being appropriated and adapted according to changing situations and needs. However, with industrialisation, the division of labour and the streamlining of construction processes and techniques in the late 19th/early 20th century, architectural production entered a cycle of demolition and reconstruction in which buildings were seen as disposable, to be knocked down once they had reached what was deemed to be the end of their useful life (Jager 2020, 38). The current dominant capitalist-based model of architectural production (which originated in the Global North and was subsequently exported with globalisation) and the culture of extraction and consumerism that it spawned coincided with the abandonment of more sustainable patterns of building, land use and production that had developed over centuries in a slow process of adaptation between communities and their environment (ICOMOS 2019, 2). This artificial separation of nature and human culture can be traced as the source of the current climate breakdown, caused by the alarming decline of the ecosystems that underpin all human well-being. The construction industry is in large part responsible - in the European Union, the built environment consumes 50% of all extracted materials, produces 35% of all waste and emits up to 12% of total national greenhouse gas emissions (European Commission 2020, 11).

2.2. From *tabula rasa* to *tabula scripta*

Faced with the immediacy of these intersecting challenges, it is clearly no longer feasible to continue with the *tabula rasa* approach that has dominated architecture since modernism. A paradigm shift is needed, and indeed has already begun: recent EU research initiatives and policy frameworks recognise the need to radically change our existing models, away from endless cycles of demolition and reconstruction towards more ecologically and socially sustainable practices, specifically identifying the renovation and reuse of the existing building stock as a critical strategy. In April 2021, in her opening speech to the New European Bauhaus Collective conference entitled *Common Ground: Making the Renovation Wave a Cultural Project*, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated “one of the most important trends is the focus on renovation and re-use of buildings. In the future it should be an exception that a building needs to be scrapped. We should use our resources in a more responsible way” (European Commission 2021, 4).

However, in spite of these intentions, the recently-published EU Renovation Wave Strategy concentrates on technical, material and economic aspects of reuse, with no mention of a strategy to engage with the social and cultural aspects. The current lack of any conceptual or theoretical framework that specifically addresses the cultural aspects of adaptive reuse is especially surprising given that the European Union itself has called on institutions and policy makers to pay particular attention to the cultural aspects of architecture rather than focus solely on technical standards or material innovations (Council of the European Union 2008, 2).

Likewise, the Davos Declaration, signed by representatives from UNESCO, ICCROM, the European Commission and the Architects’ Council of Europe, similarly states that culture and cultural heritage are essential components of high-quality *Baukultur*, and highlights the

urgent need for a holistic, culture-centred approach to shaping the built environment (Davos Declaration 2018, 11).

Despite these and many similar statements and ambitions, limited effort has been made in this respect, even within EU research and policy. Unfortunately this apparent oversight is not an isolated incidence but reflects a wider recurrent pattern. An overview of current policies and research on adaptive reuse reveals an approach that focuses on developing material knowledge, technical solutions and financing mechanisms, with little or no mention of social and cultural issues.

This lopsided situation poses a significant barrier to the wider acceptance, increased uptake and further development of adaptive reuse, given its complexity and specificity as a practice that intersects a wide range of disciplines – architecture, interior design, planning, engineering, conservation; that encompasses many different sectors – not just technical and environmental, but also cultural and social. While I would argue that a conceptual framework remains undeveloped, it should be noted that the past year has witnessed some movement towards compiling resources for adaptive reuse that take a more conceptual approach. Graeme Brooker’s *50/50 WORDS FOR REUSE – A manifesto* (December 2021), positions itself as a “lexicon of language, an expression of vocabularies, and a glossary of terms used to distinguish the transformation of the existing, into something new”, and consists of 50 entries illustrated with examples and anecdotes from the author.

Another recent book that takes a similar approach is Sally Stone and Edward Hollis’s *Inside Information* (March 2022). While this slightly more substantial volume does not restrict itself exclusively to concepts of adaptive reuse, nevertheless states its intention to engage with the past and uncover the future potential of the interior that “transcends the boundaries and genres that often define interiors, providing a comprehensive view of the concepts and vocabulary of interior design.” A lexicon of

interiors organised alphabetically, Hollis likens it to a thesaurus (in its original meaning as a treasury or repository of words) rather than a dictionary, a resource that lists terms and ideas in groups of related concepts arranged according to a certain sense, "rather like how you might arrange objects in an actual interior."

Both these have been published within the last year, and while they represent a welcome development in the effort to establish some concepts for adaptive reuse, they differ in form, aim and scope from the project currently being discussed.

2.3. Developing a conceptual framework: anthologising as a critical practice

What sets this research apart from other contemporaneous and recent projects is its collaborative and transdisciplinary approach; the research methodology addresses the current lack of a conceptual framework by focusing on how textual and non-textual sources from both within and outside the discipline of architecture can contribute to an emerging theory of adaptive reuse through a *critical practice of anthologising*. Anthologies have long been used to give form to architectural theory through the collection and classification of referential texts. In *Theory into History or, The Will to Anthology*, Sylvia Lavin notes how they provide an important strategy for "setting into practice a philosophical spirit of critical reflection" (Lavin 1999, 494). The intention is to draw from scholarship in other disciplines - literature, art, translation, history, urbanism, sociology, geography, communications, new media, political science, ecology, and so on, borrowing vocabulary and methods that have the potential to inspire, enrich and support new strategies, and engaging with narratives from a range of non-architectural sources as a way to broaden existing knowledge and situate adaptive reuse within wider contemporary discourses. Indeed, the very choice to create an anthology in itself reaffirms the transdisciplinary nature of the endeavour, the format being borrowed from literature and literary theory.

In establishing the aims of the proposed anthology, I have been guided by two questions posed by Theodore O. Mason, Jr. in his 1998 essay, *The African-American Anthology: Mapping the Territory, Taking the National Census, Building the Museum*, namely "To what vision of cultural production does the making and the reading of this anthology commit us?" and "What are some of its critical and theoretical implications?" (Mason 1998, 187) The answer to the first question appears fairly straightforward - a vision of adaptive reuse as a collaborative, cultural practice, which is what I intend to explore further in the course of this paper. In terms of its critical and theoretical implications, as well as possible future applications, the anthology aims at a crossover audience and therefore strives to be a pedagogical, educational and practical resource, that can be used in different ways by students, educators, academics, policy-makers, practitioners, professionals, as well as the wider public. In relation to practice, being aware of the perceived risks of working with the unknowns that come with reusing existing buildings as well as the many and wide-ranging responsibilities of the architect, the aim is to encourage practitioners to change their approach by offering guidance and support while at the same time raising cultural awareness amongst practitioners.

3. TRANSLATED ANTHOLOGIES

3.1. Anthology and canon

The word *anthology* is defined by the Cambridge English dictionary as "a collection of artistic works that have a similar form or subject, often those considered to be the best." The term was first used in the modern sense in the 1630s; its meaning is metaphorical, derived from the Greek *anthologia* meaning "collection of small poems and epigrams by several authors," but translated literally as "flower-gathering," from *anthos* meaning "a flower" and *logia* meaning "collection" or "collecting."

Barbara M. Benedict emphasises how “this characteristic of collecting explains how the anthology works”, going on to define an anthology as:

“a book of no less than three distinct works of literary art, each registered and read independently of the others, yet all understood by readers as part of the anthology as a whole... Anthologies are more than one work, at the same time as they also are one work.” (Benedict 2003, 236)

Anthologies emerged as a result of (as well as a response to) the sudden superfluity of books precipitated by the invention of printing processes which rapidly displaced manuscripts and oral literature. Key to their success and popularity was the way in which they “purveyed “novel,” time-sensitive information to a dispersed audience: the quick production and wide distribution of print was essential” (Benedict 2003, 233).

The word canon similarly has Greek origins, being derived from *kanon* meaning “measuring line”, “rule”, or “standard of excellence”. While historically in English the word referred to the rules and laws of the Church, today its most common usage relates to “the writings or other works that are generally agreed to be good, important, and worth studying” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

Scholars have discussed at great length the decisive role played by anthologies in establishing and consolidating canons, and how the so-called ‘canon wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s were fought to control anthologies’ tables of contents (Benedict 1996, Price 2003). Christopher M. Kuipers posits that “The anthology is a literary storage and communication form”, whereas “the canon, on the other hand, is not a form, but a literary-disciplinary dynamic: it is a field of force that is never exclusively realized by any physical form” (Kuipers 2003, 51). This idea of a collection of works that is continually shifting and mutating

according to the tastes and standards of the era, context and circumstance is as applicable to the notion of an architectural canon as it is to a literary one. Like literary canons, architectural canons can also be problematic, since as there will never be complete agreement on what constitutes a ‘great work’, there can never be a definite list. I do not believe that the main role of the anthology is to canonise, and this project does not wish to become bogged down in binary arguments of what should or shouldn’t be included in any given canon. In this respect, it prefers to retain the freedom to include both major and minor works, including voices from the non-canonical fraction.

3.2. The question of authorship

As Ankhi Mukherjee notes, as “works with multiple authors and editors, anthologies defer and displace authorship” (Mukherjee 2019, 751). Just as questions of authorship tend to be somewhat ambiguous in relation to anthologies, adaptive reuse likewise raises fundamental questions regarding authorship in architecture, even going so far as to question the role of the architect in a broader sense. What Benedict refers to as “the consensual dynamic of multiple authorship” central to all anthologies can also be observed in projects involving the adaptive reuse of existing buildings and sites. However, despite being pronounced dead over 50 years ago, the spectre of the author continues to haunt contemporary architectural production. Protective of a profession perceived as threatened by the erosion of their autonomy, many architects continue to jealously guard authorship as if it were the sole possession of a singular genius who alone “has the capability to conceive the idea for a building and has an elevated taste that allows them to make judgements as to what is right and what is wrong” (Olgati and Breitschmid 2019, 139). Arrogance (and moral and aesthetic absolutism) aside, such narrow and antiquated definitions of authorship do not reflect the transversal, intersectional and

collaborative nature of current architectural practice, nor the reality of building in a context that is increasingly characterised by uncertainty.

As well as denying the agency and contribution of other actors, this notion of a single 'author-architect' presumes that a finished building represents a *fait accompli*, existing in an ideal state as envisioned by its author. Yet this imposes an artificially-constructed limit on architecture by failing to take the temporal dimension into account and neglecting to acknowledge the fact that buildings can adapt and change over time, as was the case throughout the entire history of architecture until the advent of a streamlined construction industry premised on the infinite exploitation of finite resources. Societal and environmental challenges are forcing the architectural profession to move beyond anachronistic 20th century practices, but it has so far proven difficult to transcend the associated, deeply-entrenched definitions of authorship.

Positing that the processes of negotiation involved in engaging with existing buildings and with other actors neither limit nor diminish the creativity of the architect but rather have the potential to enrich it, practices of adaptive reuse allow and encourage us to explore more inclusive theories of authorship.

3.3. Anthologising as an act of adaptive reuse

Acts of anthologising mirror architectural practices of adaptive reuse in the sense that it is a dynamic and ongoing process of reading, interpreting or translating, and rewriting that often involves simultaneously adding a new layer to the existing, while at the same time scraping away a layer that is already present to reveal other previously hidden ones. Deciding what to retain, what to remove and what to add represents a key responsibility or judgement of the practitioner who has to negotiate the multiple existing conditions and traces, much like the processes of selection for inclusion (or exclusion) in anthologising.

Both Benedict and Price remark on how anthologies, unlike other literary forms such as short stories or novels, encourage reuse in a variety of ways, and indeed are specifically intended to be used and reused, inviting readers to reread existing works, to make connections between similar but different elements and to choose their own reading, from which to create their own meanings (Benedict 2003, Price 2003).

3.4. Practices of care

A pertinent and topical question that has repeatedly come to the fore during the first few months of curating this collection is whether the move away from demolition and reconstruction in the built environment towards an approach based on maintenance and repair represents a mirroring of a shift in our wider society in general towards practices of care. This is exemplified by the current exhibition *Critical Care* organised by the Flanders Architecture Institute in collaboration with Architekturzentrum Wien at de Singel in Antwerp, where care in relation to the built environment is the broad theme for this entire year's public programme. Scholars Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton remind us that the root meaning of the word *curate* is "taking care of" or "caring for":

This is to say that to "care for" the past is to make something of it, to place and order it in a meaningful way in the present rather than to abandon it. But how does one "care for" the past? (Lehrer and Milton 2011, 4).

One case study which can perhaps suggest an answer to precisely this and similar questions around care involved the renovation of a group of dilapidated buildings on Place Masui in Brussels to become the new home and ateliers of Zinneke, a social-artistic organisation that specialises in the art of creating shared spaces. Zinneke's

aim is to connect what isn't connected by building bridges across the different types of boundaries that exist in Brussels, between communities, cultures, and languages, but also between already existing organisations and initiatives across different sectors. All of this work culminates in a huge parade through the centre of Brussels every two years. What is particularly interesting is that this architectural project represents a literal translation of Zinneke's philosophy and can be read as a physical manifestation of their approach to processes of co-creation, which always begin with the reflection:

- *why do we do what we do?*
- *who are we doing it for?*
- *who are we doing it with?*

I would argue that these questions are equally pertinent to keep in mind for anyone working with adaptive reuse, and indeed architecture in general.

3.5. The form and structure: from printed collection to digital archive

Discussions concerning the curation but also the form of the project output have spurred me to further investigate a wide range of potential options. With regard to an actual printed anthology, which is hopefully what will constitute the final outcome, I have been inspired by references of books that collect existing essays and canonical works and combine them with critical reflections as well as newly commissioned texts. As discussed earlier, this can in itself be seen as a form of adaptive reuse.

We are currently in a transitional phase with regard to publishing and how research is shared, having moved from a longstanding tradition of commercial publishing towards an open access model. The serials crisis of the early 2000s was the tipping point that set this transition in motion – the moment when escalating subscription prices of

journals were adversely affecting the ability of universities and libraries to pay to such a degree that academic publishing had become unsustainable. This led to a wave of protest and a publishing revolution, from which Open Access was born (initially as a DIY response, published by and for academics), all made possible by the advent and development of online publishing which meant print was no longer the only way to share and access information (Van Orsdel and Born, 2007). Since then, however, the ease and availability of online publishing has created a situation where we are now living in a ridiculously over-published world – Routledge alone publishes more than 1,500 journals and approximately 7,000 new books each year, with a backlist that encompasses over 140,000 titles.

Just as the genre of printed anthologies emerged in part due to printing and book making becoming more affordable and copyright laws becoming more relaxed, it makes sense to similarly take advantage of contemporary developments in how information is shared. In a similar manner to how 17th century anthologies embodied “the great shift in the nature of literature over the early modern period from an oral to a printed form, and from an elite to a mass-produced commodity” (Benedict, p.235), the more open and contributory nature of the web offers a way to overcome what she refers to as the “paradox of the anthology”, with both remaining simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. This has encouraged me to look to experimental online formats that can offer new possibilities that are innovative, digital, open access, transdisciplinary, accessible, non-linear, and horizontal.

3.6. Information wants to be free, and shared

The most interesting references of online repositories for knowledge building and sharing source expertise from a global

network of scholars and practitioners, thereby bringing together multiple stories and voices. Some of these have also resulted in an eventual publication – for example, Spatial Agency. Particularly inspiring is the format of Women Writing Architecture, which has at its heart an ever-growing annotated bibliography and open-access list of texts written by women about architecture, a clever way of neatly sidestepping copyright issues. Created collaboratively, it is a free resource that invites contributions and suggestions, and allows users to easily create their own personalised reading lists.

Digital collections in this way build on what Benedict described as the anthology's "rejection of linearity, its hospitality to a multiplicity of reading procedures, its invitation to readers to read nonteleologically" (Benedict 2003, 249), offering virtually unlimited connections and networks that can be accessed from anywhere around the globe with an Internet connection.

3.7. Anthologies as makers of meanings

The second stage in the methodology of this PhD research, briefly mentioned earlier, will involve exploring the body of knowledge collected in the anthology through the critical lens of translation. While this paper will not discuss this step in great detail since it constitutes a forthcoming exercise that has not yet begun, it is still useful to include the notion of translation in our discussion of anthologising as it has a large bearing on the current act of collecting.

The word translation derives from the Latin *trans* meaning "across" or "beyond" and *latus* meaning "borne" or "carried". As such, it refers to carrying over or transferring meaning, engaging with existing languages and narratives to arrive at new meanings and understandings. As well as relating to buildings and sites as carriers of meaning,

this idea of moving beyond is also relevant to practices that cross boundaries - for example between disciplines, but also between material and immaterial, tangible and intangible, past and present.

In *Assembling the refugee anthology*, Emma Bond asks the questions "what makes an anthology better equipped than a single authored piece of writing to respond to contemporary themes?" and "how are they assembled by various stakeholders at different stages in production and reception processes in such a way that enables them to offer diverse sets of meaning to different readers?" She theorises that "The answer might lie in their heterogeneous form, which allows anthologies to be assembled and reassembled by various stakeholders during their production and reception so that they mean differently in different times and places" (Bond 2019, 1).

Rather than focusing on the canon-making capacity of anthologies, my research is much more interested in the potential of anthologies to create meaning - meanings that are more than the sum of the individual parts. In choosing not to concentrate solely on the canonical functions of anthologies, the project hopes to sidestep narrow binary discussions of inclusion and exclusion. In this regard, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari encourage us to "make a map, not a tracing":

"What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real... It fosters connections between fields... It is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 12)

proposal was rejected by every print publisher in Australia they approached. This serves to highlight the important role of more experimental and non-traditional forms of anthologising and publishing in the face of refusals from more traditional outlets, where narrow selection criteria based on profitability can serve to lock out or deny a platform to less financially viable projects and voices outside of the mainstream.

purely virtual creation, and working towards a publication gives the project a tangible output that can complement rather than render the online version obsolete, and can also help to legitimise the project and its findings. For the moment, it is impossible to know for certain the final form that the project might take or how successful the experimental online format will be, since it remains a work in progress.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This project hopes to develop more than an anthology in the traditional literary sense, in that it aims to go beyond merely cobbling together and repackaging existing thoughts, texts, theories and ideas. Much like the endless adaptation of the built environment, it aspires to assemble a open access body of knowledge that is constantly evolving and being added to, creating a digital palimpsest that will be gradually built upon to become a repository of adaptive reuse. The proposed anthology creates a space for dialogue, exchange and learning, inviting users to participate in a collaborative act where they can not only freely discover, collect and reuse existing resources, but also assemble, shape and adapt new resources that can in turn be freely read, reread and reused by others.

Whether or not this participatory activity of collecting texts via an online repository represents the first step towards an eventual printed anthology remains to be seen – in a way, this could be seen as defeating the purpose of having a more open-ended collection, since the curation of a book would involve further acts of selection with the result that certain entries would be rejected and excluded, and perhaps it might seem regressive to revert to a more restrictive format that offers less flexibility. At the same time, there is undoubtedly a sense of satisfaction and a certain immediacy about being able to hold a physical object in your hand that is hard to replicate with a

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