

# Sustainable ARTiculation: Adapting significant interiors to contemporary art galleries

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## ABSTRACT

Historical interiors can certainly be seen as repositories for cultural sustainability. They have diachronic aesthetic value and provide us with cultural identity. Their physical materials and methods of construction offer us a connection to the past. These interiors and their functions often become obsolete and require new functions more suited to our modern-day society. Historical interiors commonly get converted into contemporary art exhibition venues. The re-programming of historical interiors helps to keep these places relevant. It becomes a sustainable alternative to desertion or demolition, and ruination. However, in many cases old interiors are adapted to contemporary white box galleries, which compromise their internal meaning and significance.

Heritage legislation offers protection in this regard. However, these guidelines are vague and do not offer concrete methods on the responsive adaptation of historical interiors into contemporary exhibition spaces. To address this concern, additional methods for responsive adaptation are highlighted and investigated in this paper. This will be done by making reference to various art installations at the bi-annual Venice Biennale. Through these cases we hope to provide insight to interior designers by showcasing the practical implementation of culturally sustainable approaches to historical interior conversions.

**Keywords:** Exhibition spaces, historical interiors, responsive adaptation, authenticity

## 1 SPACES OF SIGNIFICANCE

Historical spaces often have the capacity for meaning and memory. They can be seen as ‘memory boxes’ or ‘containers of cultural heritage’. In *Poetry of Architecture* Ruskin notes: ‘We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her...’<sup>[1]</sup>. Due to social, environmental and economic unpredictabilities, historical spaces often become redundant and fall into disrepair. Recycling these offers a sustainable alternative and address issues of ruination, desertion or demolition. Re-programming these spaces help keep them relevant, and by doing so retains the cultural heritage which they represent.

Culture refers to identifiable characteristics, beliefs or behaviour unique to a specific society or group of people bound to a specific time and place. Cultural characteristics are concretised in historical spaces, which make them meaningful. Our active engagement with these spaces inform us of our heritage and offer a sense of belonging, and as a result should be protected for future generations<sup>[2]</sup>.

In many cases historical spaces are converted to contemporary galleries, a trend that is steadily on the rise not only internationally but also in Cape Town, South Africa. These spaces are often selected due to their prominent locations and their grandiose interiors, making them ideal for exhibitions. Many of them are adapted to white box interiors for the sake of flexibility.

## 2 BLEACHED OUT INTERIORS

White box interiors generally comprise of white walls and ceilings that lack architectural detail. They are quiet spaces, or have clinical sounds reverberating from their smooth surfaces. These spaces are contrived to promote artwork above their surroundings. They are usually closed off to their external environments, with artificial light conditions. They are seen to free visitors from any preconceived ideas or external influences that may affect their perception of the art on display<sup>[3,4]</sup>.

This decontextualisation and neutralisation of space reduces visitors from active participants into passive observers. Here, their visual sense is predominantly stimulated. They become psychologically removed from the exhibition and displayed content<sup>[5]</sup>.

These environments are stark, and often have homogenous lighting with sharp glare. They create detachment, and stifle our imagination<sup>[6]</sup>. Imagination being the process where new mental images are formed through rational thought by recalling past physical bodily experiences<sup>[7]</sup>. As a result white box interiors that conceal historical traces may prevent us from perceiving the cultural value of these places.

To gain insight into how to address this problem, our discipline of interior design needs look outside its discursive borders. Our praxis is certainly subject to so many practical, and more disturbingly, capitalist contingencies, that good precedents remain scarce. In the next section we will briefly investigate the merit of referring to the fine arts in this regard. This is done, with the argument in mind, that artists, not unlike philosophers, are the leaders of opinion. But where the latter is constrained by language, the former has, or indeed should have, complete autonomy - poetic license. If we were to refer back to the ancient Vitruvian triad, that architecture comprises *commodity, firmness and delight*, we hope, in the next section, to celebrate *delight*<sup>[8]</sup>.

## 3 SUSTAINABLE ARTICULATION

The Venice Biennale, founded in 1895, is a prestigious cultural institution in Venice that promotes contemporary arts, shifting focus between art and architecture biannually. We have selected the Biennale as it hosts installations that are bold and temporal, and based in the beautiful historic architectural interiors of an ancient city. Of particular interest is how many of these art installations do not conceal full interiors but rather are inserted by means of fragmentation and layering. This method of installation allows past and present to co-exist, and offers insight to how interior designers may approach responsive adaptation.

In the *Other Future* exhibition done by OMA Asia for the Chinese pavilion at the 2015 Biennale, interventions comprised of suspended screens onto which content was projected. It had a highly reflective circular stage, and the existing interior was left exposed (Fig. 1). The size and colour of the stage, and the way it had been installed in the space anchored the stage and clearly delimited the content from its context. Visitors could walk around it while watching performances taking place. This journey provided them with a 360 degree view of the existing interior, whilst the reflective floor surface extended the attention of the visitors to the ceiling.



Figure 1: Delimiting platform

In the 2016 Irish exhibition titled *Losing Myself* by architects Níall Mclaughlin and Yeoryia Manolopoulou, a ‘drawing machine’ was constructed to map out, using time-based projection, lessons learnt from people with dementia and how they experience and remember a space compared to the architectural plan thereof (Fig. 2). The way in which each ‘drawing machine’ connects to the ceiling above, visually attaches the content to its context, whilst the direct projection onto the floor provides the base for an attached display platform. This idea of attachment is strengthened with the existing column becoming part of the content. The bright projected image on the floor plane delimits the spatial parameters of the artwork and clearly differentiates between the container and the intervention.



Figure 2: Attached platform

In 2015 Recycle Group displayed their *Keep Me Updated Your Holiness* art piece in the Church of Sant’Antonin, along with their other works, to form a body of work titled *Conversion* (Fig. 3). The exhibition commented on our obsession with social media, and whether the Internet has replaced religion. The art piece made from mesh featured what appeared to be traditional relief sculptures interacting with technology devices and infrastructures. Display platforms comprise of scaffolding which articulates the temporary and detached nature of the exhibition. This frame structure and the material used in the artwork retains visibility of the pulpit, and the cultural significance of the space. The artwork works well in this particular setting as it is positioned to foreground the religious architectural elements, yet allows visibility, and in doing so illustrates the idea of the internet replacing religion in our daily lives.



Figure 3: Detached platform

Furthermore, the way in which interventions and display platforms are arranged inside adapted historical interiors impacts on the overall spatial experience. *Gunpowder Forest Bubble* by Loris Gréaud is an art installation that was constructed in 2008 in the Pallazzo Grassi. The piece comprised of large bare trees, covered in gunpowder, with a low moon shining in the centre of the

forest (Fig. 4). Darkness in this exhibition plays an important role. It invites imagination and encourages unconscious peripheral vision, tactile fantasy, and at times fear. Clear contrast is visible between the bright moon and the dark walls. The moon becomes the drawing force and focal point in the space which pulls visitors directly to the core of the forest. This phenomenon is known as positive phototropism, the drawing force of light<sup>[9]</sup>. The trees are used to partially screen the moon, which encourages visitors to explore the space, and in so doing prolongs spatial engagement, a method known as *blocage*<sup>[10]</sup>. During this spatial experience, visitors find themselves positioned in the centre of the room, where they are encouraged to look up and experience and explore the ornate ceiling.

Here the light reveals materials, colours and elements of the ceiling, whilst the shadows express its texture, form, depth and details. As a result, light is used to highlight specific and significant key points inside the exhibit.

This co-existence of shadow and light along with the use of multiple display techniques stimulate the tactile sense and encourages viewers to linger in the space. The installation therefore does not try and retain all attention for itself, but instead encourage spatial awareness.



Figure 4: The focal point and blocage technique

In 2011 the artists Raja and Shadia Alem were commissioned to design an exhibition for Saudi Arabia, entitled *The Black Arch*. The art piece comments on the perception of Saudi Arabian woman, often perceived to present a black façade to the world which for the artists is not a true reflection of who these women are inside. The art piece is positioned with its back facing the point of entry and becomes an architectural barrier (Fig. 5). Upon entering the room, visitors are greeted by the back of the installation. To experience the art piece visitors need to move around it, and look back, a technique known as *renversement*<sup>[10]</sup>. As one moves around this barrier, the art piece unfolds to reveal 3457 spheres surrounding a giant cube. These elements are reflected inside the mirror and essentially represent the fragile nature and complexity of these individuals. As with the delimiting platform, visitors are encouraged to move around the art piece along the perimeters of the space, whilst the giant mirror projects one's attention to the ceiling.

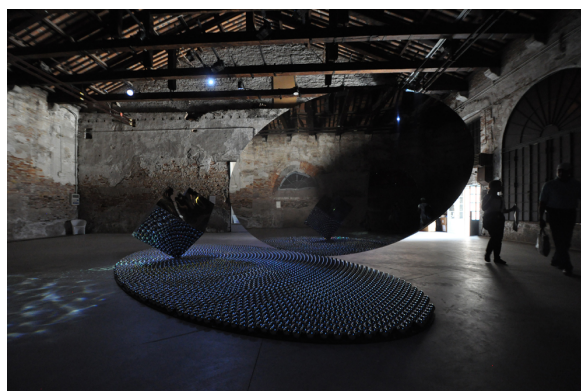


Figure 5: Architectonic display and technique of renversement

## 4 CONCLUSION

Interior designers have a significant part to play in countering the eradication of significant interior places through re-adaptation projects. Historical interiors are increasingly at risk of falling into disrepair. To keep them relevant and preserve their cultural cache, these spaces get re-programmed, often into exhibition environments. White box exhibition interiors in such spaces have proliferated for the past 100 years, and have been noted to threaten and even negate their cultural significance and dignity.

In this paper it was argued that to address the sensitive nature of these interiors, our discipline must reach outside itself. And the world of art can provide us with nuanced cues. The Venice Biennale was selected as a platform for this investigation as it is one the biggest art events in the western world that comprises temporal artistic exhibitions, in buildings all over one of the most beautiful historic cities in the world.

From the examples explored, it was found that spatial artworks that are fragmented and layered help us to experience the historical containers, and distinguish the interventions from them. They take on the role as mediators between the content and context, and enable the designer to create environments that are multi-sensory, memorable and spatially moving. These art installations further show us the potential of applying principles of fragmentation and layering, to floor, wall and roof planes. Various themes emerged. *Delimiting interventions* are additions that clearly define their perimeters either visually or physically. *Attached interventions* are connected to their host interiors either physically or visually, and constitute a clear contrast between old and new. *Detached interventions* clearly pronounce their independence from their surroundings through the use of platforms, skeletal structures and/or gaps.

Display techniques of *renversement*, *focal points*, *blocage* and *architectonic display* were also explicated through these cases. Where *focal points* offer clear direction to visitors; *renversement* forces visitors to move and turn around in order to engage with the content; *blocage*, leads visitors on a road of discovery by partially screening content; and *architectonic display* obstructs pathways by using content as architecture to prolong spatial engagement.

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