

ARCHITECTURE IN EXISTING FABRIC
Planning Design Building

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ARCHITECTURE AND THE EXISTING FABRIC

*It is a rare occurrence for a great building to be completed by the same person who began it.**

Leon Battista Alberti

The shrinking of many European cities at the end of the second millennium is a clear sign that the design and construction of new buildings is in steady decline. At the same time the alteration of existing built structures is becoming increasingly important. Society is growing more aware of ecological issues and the thoughtless demolition of old buildings is now perceived not only as an ecological waste but also as the eradication of local identity, of cultural heritage and of socio-economic values. Various studies estimate that between 50% and 70% of all construction work and about half of the entire economic volume of construction now concerns work on existing buildings. Yet, many architects are not adequately prepared for this shift in the focus of architectural work.

Up until well into the 20th century, architects have enjoyed a balance between the design of new buildings and designs for existing built structures, both tasks being regarded as of equal status. Michelangelo Buonarroti's brilliant plans for St. Peter's in Rome were informed by a number of constraints from the existing site as well as by the surrounding structures built by his predecessors. Almost all great architects up to the time of Karl Friedrich Schinkel have split their attention between new constructions and a commitment to architecture within existing built contexts. Only from the 1920s onwards conversion or modernisation work was discredited with terms like "conversion architect" or "building in existing fabric". Today, many architects find even the very suggestion that their design should be informed by what already exists so restrictive that they feel impossibly constrained in their creative liberty. This irrational fear is reinforced when the structure in question is a listed building. Listed buildings constitute perhaps 3% of the existing building stock, but the methods developed for their conservation and restoration have also proven applicable to more everyday existing buildings. Just as irrational is the belief that conservationists wish to hinder good modern architecture. There is no good reason for any of these reservations.

The suggestion that designs for existing built structures allow no room for creativity is also unfounded. A handful of famous architects from the 1960s

*Maxima quaeque aedificatio vix nunquam dabitur per eundem absolvi possit, qui posuerit.

The beginnings of consistent architectural design in existing building fabric: the conversion of the Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy, to a museum by Carlo Scarpa (1964).

have ably demonstrated the opposite, among them Carlo Scarpa, Karljosef Schattner, Aurelio Galfetti or Massimo Carmassi. Their projects clearly show exactly how exciting a task the qualitative development of existing buildings can be in the hands of an ambitious designer. For example, in the monograph of Herzog & de Meuron's work, more than a third are conversion projects for existing buildings.

The pioneers of the 1960s, embracing the innovative credo of the times, gave little consideration to the conservation of existing building fabric and resources. Today more attention is paid to these aspects. Many projects by prominent architects have proven that it is possible to unite diverse considerations in a qualitative design. The plans by David Chipperfield and Julian Harrap for the Neues Museum in Berlin are just one such example. Without compromising their design or aesthetic aspirations, they have been able to combine the existing building fabric, methodically recorded and analysed, with a modern concept to create a stimulating and yet restrained project. Such designs, founded both on methodical analysis and creativity, demonstrate the validity of this approach and should serve as examples for other architects.

All the above designers were, and are, aware that the design approach for new buildings is not always appropriate when developing designs for existing built structures. In addition to adhering to general building and planning regulations and fulfilling technical requirements, it is also necessary to consider the given condition and configuration of an existing building, as passed on to us by our predecessors, and the need and wish to integrate this into a future design. In order to achieve this, it is vital to obtain a clear picture of the initial condition. Accordingly, the methodical recording and surveying of the existing building is the first step in the planning process. Although often complex and laborious, these steps prove their worth further down the line. Without an understanding of the structural system, one cannot consider its characteristics; without knowledge of the historic value of the building, one risks damaging or destroying it in the design. A good understanding of the existing building allows one to intelligently take into account distortions and to bring out the qualities of the building materials as well as the building's artistic and historic value. It is therefore inevitable that designs for existing buildings will have to react to more complex parameters than a design for a new building. Consequently, the coordination requirements and negotiations are more complex. At times this may