

Resilience in Architecture and the Human Psyche

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Architecture carries with it a belief, articulated by Vitruvius near the end of the first century B.C.E., that one of the three qualities of a well-designed building is *firmitas*, meaning physical strength and durability, while implying permanence. By constructing buildings of stone, for instance, we believe they better protect us from changes brought on by the ravages of nature and the elements. We then add ornamentation and articulation to buildings to express deeply held desires, beliefs, and aspirations. Furthermore, our most significant cultural and sacred buildings convey historical references, evoke timelessness and, in some cases, the hope of immortality. Yet, architecture exists in a dynamic world of physical, cultural, religious, political, and economic forces. Buildings adapt to wear and tear and to changing surroundings and circumstances. They are equipped to cope with the progression of time through material transformations, and their durability is reinforced as an essential, desirable characteristic of a building. The fact that enduring architecture can accommodate and adjust to widely varied uses and multiple competing forces is a testament to its resilience.

One way to understand this architectural resilience is through the example of the palimpsest. The Oxford Dictionary defines a palimpsest as “something that is reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form.” Many architects and theorists have written about and discussed the architectural palimpsest. Recently Robbert Verheij wrote about six personal observations of the palimpsest in six representative projects by six architects: place, reuse, memory, traces, materiality, and dialogue. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Marco Frascari, among others, have addressed the complexity and meaning of the palimpsest. Spolia, too, is often understood in this context, relating to ideas of resilience framed around origins, history, re-uses, and, especially, the future.

Analogously, as human beings, we navigate the dynamic reality of our internal and external existence in a similar parallel. The mind is like a palimpsest with layers of feelings, images, ideas, and memories. As time passes, each layer is seemingly buried beneath what came before. Like a building that has experienced an entire and active life as an adaptive and resilient material artifact, the human mind is replete with meaningful potentialities drawn from the riches of its being. As Kabesh writes, “It is a palimpsest as traces of the past remain, persist in the present, and endure, despite our best efforts to disavow them. They make themselves felt, pulsing away in the present. The palimpsest of the mind contains the social and political past as, from the earliest moments of our lives, we are formed from and permeated by our relationships with others. We internalize profoundly dominant socio-political discourses and prevalent narratives in relation to history, events that have occurred, and their predominant emotions.”

In Jo’anne Van Ooijen’s essay, “Resilient Matters: The Cathedral of Syracuse as an Architectural Palimpsest,” she references Thomas de Quincey comparing the human mind to a palimpsest in *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845): “What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest is my brain, such a palimpsest, O reader! Is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as

light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality, not one has been extinguished.” The comparisons between the workings of the human mind and buildings have also been explored in Sigmund Freud’s musings on Rome in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. He writes, “...let us make the fantastic supposition that Rome were a mental entity with just as long and varied a past history: that is, in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest.” He writes of the ego and the defense mechanism, memory and the unreal, and the oscillating between the past and the present in *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis*. Psychoanalyst Stephen Sonnenberg describes his experience of Berlin as the loss of spatial and temporal orientation, fluidity of interiority and exteriority, and the merging of past and present in his essay, “A Psychoanalytic Reflection on Berlin, the Holocaust, and Interdisciplinary Research.”

By looking at three former and current sacred buildings, the Kolumba Museum by Peter Zumthor, St. Mary of the Angels Chapel by Mecanoo, and the Church of St. Peter in Klippan by Sigurd Lewerentz, and by referencing Michelle Provoost’s and Robbert Verheij’s categorizations of various architectural palimpsests, as described again by Van Ooijen, we will see how resilience over time is achieved, whether through subtle, blended materiality and detailing or more radical adaptations.

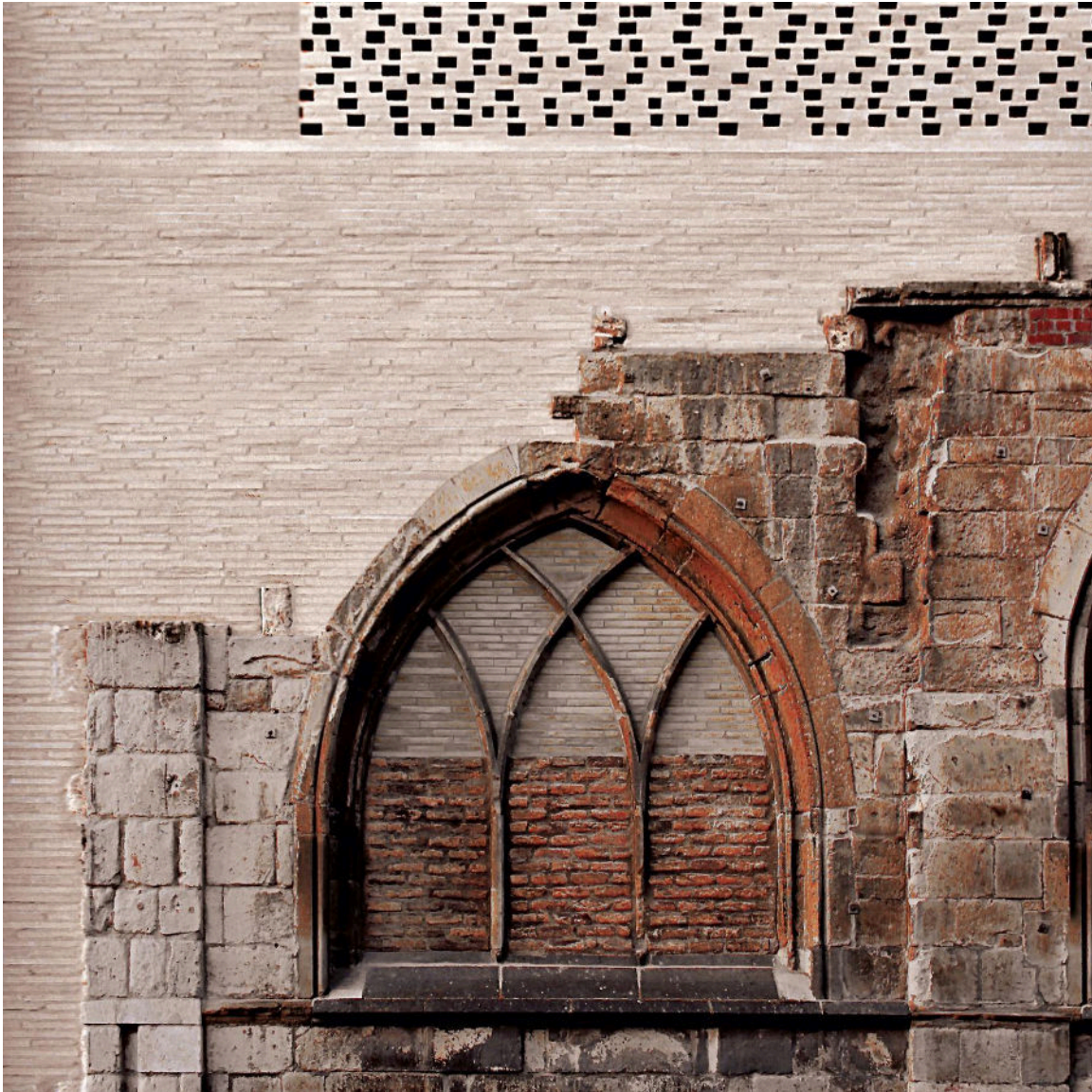


Figure 1: Kolumba Museum, Cologne, Peter Zumthor architect (Rasmus Hjortshøj). The museum is built upon the ruins of a gothic church destroyed during WW II, protecting the ruins, and fusing them with a minimalist intervention aimed at preserving the essence of the original church.



Figure 2: St. Mary of the Angels, Rotterdam, Mecanoo architects (Christian Richers). The chapel sits within the perimeter of an 1869 historic chapel whose outline is visible from the exposed ruins of the original walls.

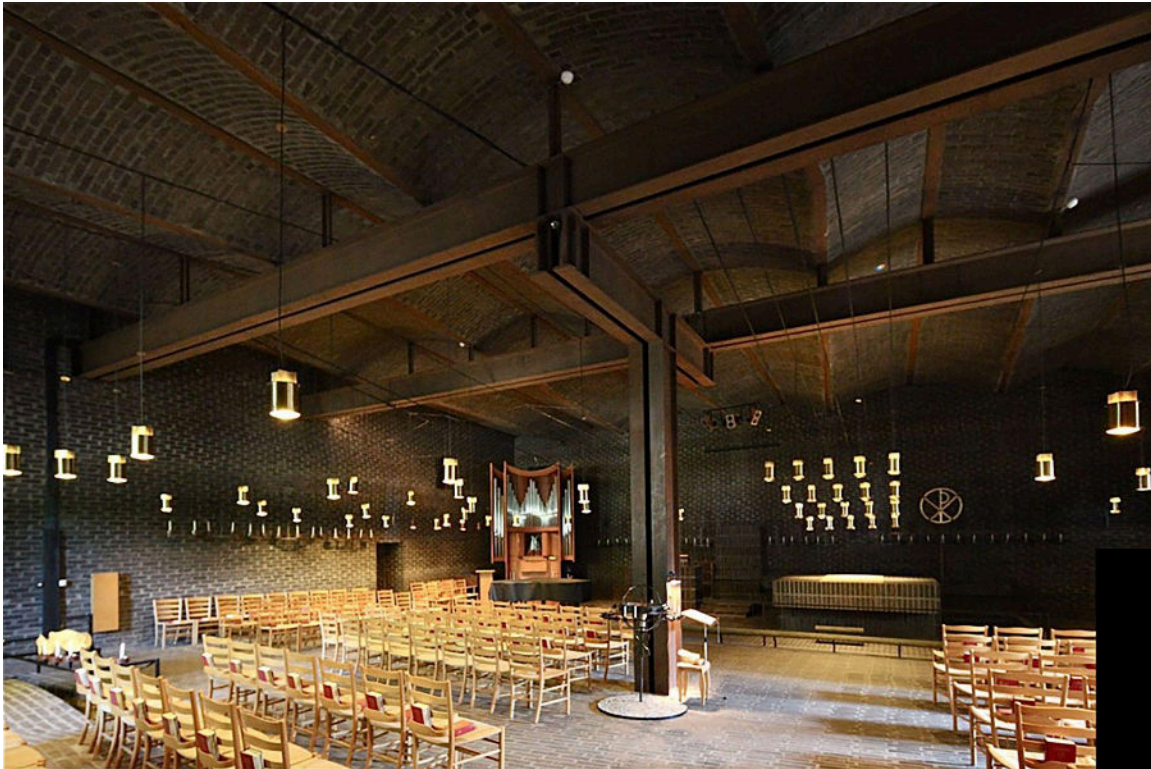


Figure 3: Church of St. Peter in Klippan, Sigurd Lewerentz, architect (Anna and Eugeni Bach). "A church should not look as if it had been designed; it should look as if it happened."—Sigurd Lewerentz

These physical characteristic, modifications, and additions, with their layers and erasures, sometimes more radical, other times subtle and careful, recall the field of psychoanalysis. Like the architectural palimpsest, where the building bears visible traces of its earlier form and transcendent meaning is understood in these buildings for generations of people, so we individually and collectively thrive not by erasing, but by understanding, "building" upon, embracing and working with both the troubled and secure (unburdened) parts of our past.

In this way, psychotherapy, or talking cure, becomes a transformative practice and that builds a more robust knowledge of the entirety of the "self." By remembering, repeating, and working through the present we come to terms with each stage of our human development and past experiences. As we address resilience, memory, and change in a way that makes our lives richer and ourselves more resilient, psychotherapy and its theoretical and clinical applications enliven and deepen our understanding of architectural elasticity and transformation. Our narratives as self-telling and self-making, especially in creating and developing personal resilience, are embedded in the aging process. Each age of our lives represents a stage of crossing, a moment in the transition, a layer of the palimpsest. Each age is, like aging itself, painfully truncated and astonishingly full.

Our understanding of what we do and do not remember as time proceeds, as well as the nature of remembering, repeating, and working through during psychotherapy is more complex and diverse now than when Freud wrote "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through." Both the individual and society as a whole experience this layer-upon-layer of past, present, and future, as we work through and understand the meaning of the worst and best parts of ourselves individually and collectively. Like us,

architecture is not static but is continually inside that process, whether due to natural aging or a more robust and intentional intervention and adaptation. The Kolumba Museum, St. Mary of the Angels, and the Church of St. Peter fuse the past to the future in different and unique ways exemplifying and bearing witness to endurance in the face of adversity and change. By looking at architectural examples of transformation and the individual's psychodynamic and spiritual aspects of change, we might better understand architects' role as agents of greater resilience and a more fulfilled life in today's world.

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