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A sense of place

As many regions in the USA and Western Europe move to a post-industrial economy, buildings from the industrial past become infused with nostalgia and romanticism. Simon Jones talks to architects reinventing these spaces, while paying homage to their original purpose.



The Bell Foundry, Whitechapel, 31/44 Architects



York Theatre Royal, De Matos Ryan | Photo by Hufton+Crow

Repurposed buildings pose an interesting challenge for architects. On the one hand there are the limitations of working with existing structures often woefully inadequate to meet current needs. “Structural (often seismic) issues, code-compliance, and expense. One must believe in the authentic value and sentiment of the old structure to survive the complexities of keeping and marrying it to today’s standards,” says Grant Kirpatrick, Architect, KAA Design.

On the other hand, the chance to breathe new life and purpose into buildings steeped in history can be irresistible. “Wherever possible, adapting and reusing a building provides a far better alternative to demolishing it. First and foremost, it is clearly a more sustainable solution. Second, the pitch for adaptive reuse in the face of mind-numbing globalisation and the homogenisation of the urban landscape the world over is as social as it is practical. The resulting palimpsest creates not only a sense of identity but imparts a feeling of

connectedness that makes people want to return to that place,” explains Ruchika Modi, Associate Partner and Studio Director, PAU. Jeffrey Dungan, Architect, Jeffrey Dungan Architects, agrees: “The history of a building helps us with clues of where it came from and tells a part of the story of a place. As designers we have an opportunity to celebrate the best parts of a building’s history and edit some of the less successful parts.”

Despite these attractions, architects acknowledge that this is a tightrope that has to be walked carefully. Angus Morrogh-Ryan, Director, De Matos Ryan explains: “There is always something in the underlying history of a building that can and should inform its future. We sometimes refer to this as its DNA. The building’s past narrative, the way it was used and the way it was structured, conditions its capacity for change into the future.” There is agreement that buildings need to evolve to survive. “The activity that has occurred in the building is the building; a building’s ▶



Domino Park, Pau



Domino Park, Pau



The Bell Foundry, Whitechapel, 31/44 Architects



The Photography Workshop | Photo by Jack Hobhouse

physicality is shaped by its users and occupants. We are always careful not to erase these histories. Buildings should not be display cases of the past, that just makes a city of museums devoid of life, but they should be conserved with care to keep their histories alive and visible,” says Will Burges, Director, 31/44 Architects. Caspar Rodgers, Director, alma-nac, agrees: “Design absent of external influence lacks depth. All architecture should strive to be site specific. The history of a building or site provides a huge amount of possible influence to a new project. Responding to the past within a project develops the character of a place rather than attempting to rewrite it.”

The increased interest and perceived value of industrial buildings isn’t always positive though; there is a danger that objectivity is thrown out of the window. “Everything old isn’t great just because it’s old; sadly there were bad architects a hundred years ago too. There are times when starting over is just a better and wiser course of action. But only after a thorough analysis and discussion has taken place can it be decided to reasonably remove an old building,” says Dungan. “The caveat for us is that the original building fabric and detail is allowed to breathe easy and be read clearly alongside any subsequent sensitive, but distinctly contemporary intervention.

There should be absolutely no pastiche,” adds Morrogh-Ryan of De Matos Ryan.

And working with these old, industrial spaces certainly isn’t easy. “Every building has its own quirks and eccentricities, and it can be difficult to crack them even if you are the original architect. This is especially tricky if the structure was built in a different era, for a different use, and with different codes and regulations,” says Modi of PAU. Dungan adds: “Do you remove some parts to get things into a form you can better deal with or do you add onto them to change the shape into something more palatable and useable for today? These questions and many more have to be dealt with in a deft way to make a beautiful end result.” Rodgers of alma-nac takes a pragmatic approach: “The phrase ‘never change a running system’ comes to mind. The line between old and new has a tendency to creep when dealing with older buildings. The minute you peel back the surface of a building you can find all manner of surprises that need to be dealt with.”

Architects are understandably circumspect about starting to work on a project with many potential variables. According to Hugh Broughton of Hugh Broughton Architects, this makes preparation all the more important. “When working with existing buildings there will always be surprises which remain uncovered until construction begins. To reduce the risk of these impacting on progress it is always advisable to carry out as many surveys as possible. Of course this doesn’t guarantee that everything will be known before you start.” Irene Kronenberg and Alon Baranowitz of Baranowitz + Kronenberg add: “Awareness is key. One must first learn the history of things before moving forward, even if that means breaking with history later. As long as one is aware of what is left behind that is a good way to start any project. The essence of place is as tangible as it is intangible, a multifaceted entity associated with objects and places, events and people, emotions and memories.”

With so many challenges it’s tempting to wonder why any old buildings are reinvented at all. Overwhelmingly, the answer lies in the importance of a sense of place. “Buildings are one of the key markers for human evolution and history. There is likely no better way to ensure a strong sense of place than to respect and evolve an existing structure,” says Kirpatrick of KAA Design. Burges of

31/44 Architects adds: “Knocking down and starting again is rarely the correct strategy, for so many reasons. At its crudest, who wants to see lorry after lorry taking away a demolished building to a landfill site? More importantly, to work in an established city comes with a great responsibility; there are ancient patterns to people’s daily lives, buildings that are familiar and reassuring that should be adjusted with care.” ●

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The Photography Workshop | Photo by Jack Hobhouse