

Spaces in Transition — Notes from the *International Conference on Adaptive Reuse*

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From 15 to 19 September 2025, the International Conference on Adaptive Reuse took place in Pisa, hosted by the University of Pisa and supported by UNESCO Italia. This inaugural edition attracted strong participation, suggesting that it may inaugurate a recurring platform for future editions. The event was organized by a committee including Andrea Crudeli, Francesca Molle, Emanuele Carrai, and Emanuele Cremona, with the patronage of IEA, DESTeC, the University of Pisa, and the Ordine degli Architetti di Pisa. Conceived as a hybrid event, the conference combined two days of in-person sessions held in the evocative setting of the Gipsoteca of Ancient Art with a central keynote by Fabrizio Barozzi at the University's Aula Magna, followed by two days of online panels that enabled broad international participation. In this sense, the structure of the conference itself embodied one of the core themes of adaptive reuse: the coexistence of different temporalities, formats, and voices within a shared framework.

The conference proved highly multidisciplinary. The call for abstracts, launched on the official conference website, attracted contributions from architecture, engineering, heritage studies, urban planning, and cultural theory. This breadth of perspectives fostered a 360-degree scientific reconnaissance of adaptive reuse today, allowing distinct—and at times divergent—research vectors to enter into transversal debate. The international scope of participation further emphasized that adaptive reuse is not a regional concern but a global discourse. A publication collecting selected contributions in the form of extended papers will follow.

The opening sessions unfolded in the Gipsoteca of Ancient Art, where approximately thirty-five participants presented their work across six panels over two days. The first day opened with a thematic focus on methodologies for reading and representing transformation. Andreas Lechner introduced the book *Architectural Affordances: Typologies of Umbau* (Lechner et al. 2024), which examines thirty international transformation projects through layered diagrams and drawings, constructing a drawn theory of transformation bridging historical precedents and future paradigms. Elena Guidetti (Polytechnic of Turin) proposed a methodological framework rooted in Stewart Brand's "shearing layers of change," mapping adaptive reuse as the continuous reconfiguration of site, structure, skin, services, and space.

Within this methodological framework, another group of contributions addressed sacred and ecclesiastical heritage. Carla Sechi, Pier Francesco Cherchi, and Marco Lecis (University of Cagliari) presented research on rural churches in marginal contexts, arguing for adaptive reuse as a catalyst for cultural resilience. Vanni Sacconi (TU Berlin) revisited Florence's San Pancrazio—transformed in the 1980s into the Marino Marini Museum—highlighting how Alberti's *Tempietto* prefigured the museographic layering later achieved by architects Lorenzo Papi and Bruno Sacchi. Ruth Dowson (Leeds Beckett University) examined the venuefication of deconsecrated churches across Europe, calling for strategic frameworks capable of addressing not only physical transformation but also theological and cultural complexities. Together, these cases demonstrated how churches, once central to collective life, now demand new forms of interpretation, often oscillating between liturgical memory and secular appropriation.



Fig. 1: Conference session taking place in the Gipsoteca of Ancient Art

A parallel thematic thread concerned post-industrial conditions. Barbora Ponešová (Brno University of Technology) described the Typology of Lost Connections in South Moravia, where abandoned sites reflect ruptures in form, meaning, and spirituality, proposing design strategies rooted in place attachment. Melanie Tamm and Lionel Devlieger (ROTOR) offered a behind-the-scenes account of a Brussels warehouse converted into a library, where negotiation between conserving, reducing, and adding produced a delicate harmony of materials. Amaury Greig (Renzo Piano Building Workshop) reflected on three projects—the Fondation Pathé in Paris, Istanbul Modern, and Moscow’s GES-2—arguing that adaptive reuse operates not only as heritage preservation but as a cultural and civic agenda capable of revitalizing entire urban fabrics.

Other presentations expanded the notion of reuse to housing and domestic space. Ed Green (Cardiff University) illustrated how storytelling can guide retrofit projects in the United Kingdom, ensuring that technical upgrades do not erase lived memory. Luigi Arcopinto (University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli) presented his experimental transformation of a Neapolitan building through formalist stratification, while Juan José Mateos and Camila Aybar (Universidad Europea de Madrid) outlined “Eight Variations” of reuse strategies across Spain, ranging from industrial to civic transformations.

The first day concluded with contributions engaging more explicitly with theoretical and poetic dimensions of reuse. Simone Barbi (University of Florence) analyzed three libraries by Zhang Lei’s AZL studio in rural China, identifying a “tectonics of silence” rooted in *Yingzao Fashi* traditions yet reinterpreted for contemporary sensibilities. Roger Such and Ariadna Perich (ETSAB) revisited Lluís Maria Vidal i Arderiu’s intervention in the monastery of Santa Maria de Lillet, which employed minimal steel scaffolding to reveal the ruin’s absence rather than reconstruct its form. Francesco Chiacchiera (Marche Polytechnic University) reframed reuse as an act of “care,” a curatorial practice redefining heritage as incomplete and adaptable; together with Gianluigi Mondaini, he also presented a design studio for Ancona’s San Francesco alle Scale, exploring the idea of “inhabited ruins.”

The second day further expanded the spectrum of inquiry, focusing on pedagogy, authorship, and social responsibility. Patrizio Martinelli (Northumbria University) reflected on how to teach adaptive reuse, stressing the importance of montage, assemblage, and the cultivation of critical awareness in architectural education. David Leech (University College Dublin) presented his award-winning Hampstead House project, where two derelict flats were recomposed into a single-family dwelling. Thermal upgrades and material improvements were deliberately combined with “overt errors” and ambiguous classical references, producing a fictitious yet compelling narrative of domesticity.

Questions of accessibility and inclusivity emerged in Benedetta Marradi’s (University of Pisa) study of the Sant’Agostino complex in Pietrasanta, transformed into a multisensory cultural center through tactile pathways, digital technologies, and adaptive virtual guidance systems. Marco Bonaglia, Chiara Ferraris, Lorenzo Gonzo, and Antonio Frisoli (Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies) shifted the geographical focus to China, analyzing the reuse of Chongqing’s industrial heritage as a laboratory for sustainable urban innovation.

Critical reassessments of recent architectural practice followed. Anne Scheinhardt (Deutsches Architekturmuseum) examined projects such as Rome’s MACRO and MAXXI, noting how early 2000s reuse strategies by Odile Decq and Zaha Hadid emphasized iconicity and disruption over sustainability or repair. By contrast, Ralf and Maya Weber (TU Dresden) explored the adaptive reuse of cemetery buildings in Germany, including their own project converting Dresden’s Trinitatis mortuary chapel into a community center, reframing cemeteries as civic landscapes rather than spaces of avoidance.

The Italian debate on ecclesiastical heritage continued with Cristian Sammarco (Sapienza University of Rome), who presented the Civic Museum of Poli as a case of “re-sacralization to the landscape.” Manuela Raitano (Sapienza University of Rome) offered a theoretical reflection on authorship, describing the contemporary architect as an “editor” rather than an “author,” and introducing the notion of “gentle reuse.”

Several interventions addressed informal or modest architectures. Milena Farina and Mariella Annese (Roma Tre University) discussed the conversion of a caretaker’s house and schoolyard in Polignano a Mare into a children’s cultural center, demonstrating how ordinary structures can act as catalysts for urban regeneration. Tobias Rabold narrated his personal project *Doubling Spolia*, where the reuse of a single discarded stone as a structural pillar exemplified a humble yet radical practice of architectural transformation. Monica Tusinean (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology) examined Romania’s post-communist industrial ruins through drawing, video, and walking as tools of design research, advancing the notion of reuse as spatial justice. Franc Shllaku (University of Florence) analyzed the transformation of Tirana’s Pyramid by MVRDV, showing how a contested monument was turned into a vibrant cultural hub. Emily Marie Shiga (Polytechnic of Milan) addressed Japan’s *Akiya* housing crisis, highlighting the urgency of sustainable reuse strategies for abandoned everyday architecture, with implications for urbanization and climate change worldwide.

The central day of the conference was marked by the keynote lecture of Fabrizio Barozzi (Barozzi Veiga), held in the Aula Magna of the School of Engineering. The event coincided with the inauguration of the academic year of the Building Engineering and Architecture degree, introduced by Luca Lanini (University of Pisa). In his opening remarks, Lanini reminded students that “No one invents architecture; we copy what already exists,” a statement anticipating Barozzi’s reflections on continuity and analogy in design. Greetings followed from Leonardo Germani and Andrea Crudeli, who recalled Barozzi’s trajectory from Venice to Seville and his receipt of the 2015 Mies Award.

Barozzi then presented, for the first time in detail, the rehabilitation of the Abbey of Kortrijk in Belgium (2020-2025). The project, won through a two-phase international competition, addressed a complex site: a medieval abbey transformed into a museum in the 1960s and compromised by invasive interventions. The architects’ strategy was to liberate the preexisting fabric,

removing discordant additions while introducing new functions through discreet gestures. New galleries were placed underground to meet climatic requirements without disturbing the historic layout. The only visible addition, the “city living room,” is a pavilion shaped like a chimney recalling vernacular silhouettes of Kortrijk. Positioned within the abbey grounds, it functions as a public salon open to the park and the city, simultaneously modest and iconic. Beyond its architectural significance, the project assumed a decisive urban role by preventing speculative housing foreseen in the masterplan and integrating the abbey into the broader ecclesiastical network structuring the city.

The discussion following the lecture reinforced these themes. Manuela Raitano emphasized how the project illustrates a shift in the notion of authorship: whereas earlier practices pursued visibility through formal signatures, contemporary authorship increasingly manifests as methodological rigor and contextual sensitivity. Francesca Molle questioned whether such a method evolves from project to project, allowing architects to learn from each experience. Barozzi confirmed that the method is continuously refined, while acknowledging that contexts with minimal historical fabric—such as some Middle Eastern commissions—pose specific challenges. In these situations, the identity of the practice resides less in form than in method.

The keynote thus crystallized many issues raised throughout the conference: the tension between memory and invention, reuse as urban strategy rather than mere conservation, and authorship understood as a dynamic, adaptive method capable of negotiating even the absence of context. In this sense, the Abbey of Kortrijk emerged as a manifesto for contemporary adaptive reuse.

The final two days of the conference were conducted online, significantly expanding participation to approximately one hundred speakers across twelve panels. Unlike the eclectic in-person sessions, the online panels were organized around macro-themes, including the reuse of religious heritage, industrial buildings, urban districts, and the role of new technologies. This thematic clustering fostered deeper comparative dialogue, underscoring the international reach of adaptive reuse as a global discourse.

Overall, the International Conference on Adaptive Reuse in Pisa offered both a survey of current practices and a critical lens on the evolving identity of architecture. If the first day revealed the variegated landscape of reuse, the second emphasized its pedagogical and ethical dimensions, while the keynote distilled these tensions into a powerful demonstration of method as authorship. The balance between in-person diversity and online thematic focus mirrored the dual nature of reuse itself—fragmented yet unified, local yet global, technical yet cultural. Ultimately, the conference confirmed that adaptive reuse is not merely a pragmatic response to obsolescence but a central paradigm for architecture in the twenty-first century.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

Fig. 1: Photo: Emanuele Cremona.