The Building as a Palimpsest: Heritage, Memory and Adaptive Reuse Beyond Intervention. Insights from the San Girolamo Former Asylum in Volterra
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Insights from the San Girolamo Former Asylum in Volterra

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Introduction

This paper contributes to this special issue on the ethics and aesthetics of adaptive reuse with a reflection on the specific case of the reuse of those sites and buildings that can be regarded as ‘difficult’, ‘uncomfortable’, or ‘neglected’ heritage (MacDonald, 2009; Logan and Reeves, 2009; Pendlebury et al., 2018; Lanz, 2021).

Originally mainly used to refer to a design practices aimed at repurposing former disused industrial buildings, in the current architectural context, adaptive reuse is increasingly deployed as an umbrella term for a sheer variety of interventions that variously involve the transformation of a pre-existing redundant architectural asset or site for a new or different use. The range of terms used today to name the process of adaptive reuse is extremely wide - including remodelling, rewriting, rereading, undoing, adaptation, recycling, alteration, upcycling, and many more. Equally, although several authors have already discussed adaptive reuse from various and sometimes similar perspectives (e.g. Brooker and Stone, 2004; Scott, 2008; Wong 2017; Brooker and Stone 2019; Plevoets and Van Cleempoel, 2019; Stone 2020) there is currently no shared or common definition of what adaptive reuse is (Lanz and Pendlebury, 2022). This paper adopts an understanding of adaptive reuse beyond intervention, as a cultural ‘process’ of transformation of the built environment; a ‘re-inhabitation’ and resignification deed, involving ‘the reuse and revaluing of a place – and by extension its associations, memories, and behaviours – which have been inactive or dormant’ (Lanz and Pendlebury, 2022). On the one hand, such an understanding restates the future-oriented perspective characterising adaptive reuse practices and its inherently designerly, creative and transformative nature already restate by most of the authors who had researched and wrote on the topic. On the other hand, it expands and enriches the debate on adaptive reuse, opening it up to reflections pertaining to issues of places and owning and disowning, remembering and forgetting, and heritage-making practices. It enables to account for the social, cultural, and political entailments of adaptive reuse interventions that remain inadequately considered in the current debate on adaptive reuse (Lanz and Pendlebury 2022). It also calls for the development of new and expanded theoretical and methodological frameworks to think through adaptive reuse, both conceptually and on the ground.

Drawing on that and building equally on literature on the subject and extensive field work, the paper
works through one paradigmatic example – the San Girolamo mental asylum in Volterra, Italy – to discuss the ramifications of adaptive reuse processes in place-based memory and heritage practices. By doing so, I intend to add to the most recent research-driven and theory-oriented strand of the contemporary architectural debate on adaptive reuse (Lanz and Pendlebury, 2022). I also intend to encourage increased research engagement within such a debate, both across disciplines and with methods and approaches that may be able to bring in greater critical consideration of the more-than-architectural aspects involved in adaptive reuse practices.

The paper deploys a hybrid format, in between a research paper and a visual essay, combining observations and field notes with theory-driven reflections complemented by a rich photographic apparatus. The San Girolamo former asylum is introduced at the beginning of the paper, drawing on site visits, interviews, and archival research. It is then discussed via the metaphor of the building as palimpsest, paying key attention to its current status of abandonment to explore the significance of this built heritage in both its materiality and meanings. The paper concludes by expanding on how the case of the San Girolamo former asylum both showcases and advocates the need for developing more creative, explorative, transdisciplinary, and collaborative approaches and methodologies to the study and implementation of adaptive reuse ‘beyond intervention’.

Image 1 – A postcard from Volterra.

Volterra, August 2021
It is an extremely hot day of over 40 degrees and not even a breeze. I have booked a visit to the former Volterra asylum in the early afternoon for a small group of research participants and myself, but we have arrived early, which means we have time for an amble in the city centre. We walk along Volterra’s small and fascinating streets with their beautiful inner squares, palaces, and towers, enjoying the view of the surrounding hills and vineyards, with a stop for a quick refreshment. Volterra is a small town in Tuscany, Italy. Today it is an internationally renowned touristic destination for its fine food and wine and its Etruscan and mediaeval heritage; however, it was once famous for its alabaster quarries, and its ‘mads’.

Once, Volterra hosted one of the biggest and most peculiar asylums in Italy: the San Girolamo asylum. Established in the early nineteenth century, even before the Second World War the San Girolamo had a capacity of over 4,000 patients within an estate comprising 25 buildings, as well as extensive farmland and fields extending more than 300 hectares, 1 kilometre south of the town’s walls (Airoldi, 2013, pp. 207–208; Gli Spazi della Follia, accessed September 2022). Because of its remarkable size – which becomes even more remarkable when compared to the relatively small dimensions of Volterra – the asylum was one of the major employers in the area and an economic cornerstone for the small town of Volterra, as essential to the local economy as the alabaster quarries. Crucially, in time, it also became an important element of the life and identity of the city and its local population.

What distinguished the San Girolamo asylum was not only its dimensions, but also its unique approach to the care and management of its inmates. The San Girolamo asylum was once one of the most pioneering and progressive asylums in Italy, possibly across Europe, for its genuinely experimental community-based therapeutic approach and radical no-restraint policy. This was developed during the first decades of the twentieth century under the direction of the superintendent doctor Luigi Scabia,¹ and in the 1980s during the post-deinstitutionalisation period.

Mainly informed by Scabia’s vision, the asylum was conceived and run as a village, self-sufficient but open and strongly interwoven with Volterra’s socioeconomic life and identity. Quite unusually, in Volterra, there was no physical separation, containment wall or fence enclosing and isolating the asylum from the city; rather, between the two there were continuous and biunivocal exchanges. Several patients, for example, were allowed out of the asylum perimeter during daytime. It was usual to meet them walking down the town’s streets or sitting on the benches and stop for a quick chat with them; some patients contributed to the city’s maintenance as part of their occupational therapy. Most of them were known by name; on special occasions local families sometimes hosted patients or their family members, and some of them eventually created lasting friendships. Emblematically, for a period, the asylum even issued its own coins, which could be spent by the patients in local shops and then paid back either in cash or in kind by the asylum admin.

In Volterra, the proximity of the asylum and its patients was not merely tolerated; in their own way, they were integrated among the local population. In their turn, the asylum and its patients became part of the city’s life and identity. Because a large share of the relatively small local population worked at the hospital, the asylum had a core function within Volterra’s social, ethical, and political context, by providing a touchstone for the local community to form shared references for identities, encapsulating and fostering feelings of togetherness that further reinforced the already quite strong local sense of community and belonging. Volterra asylum’s ‘open’ model and the fact that several doctors, nurses, and staff members honestly sought, within the limits of their capacity, alternative and more humane models of care for the asylum’s inmates, remains today a source of pride among the local former asylum staff community and their relatives.

Despite the pioneering and progressive approach that characterised psychiatric practices implemented there, San Girolamo was far from a perfect ‘fairy-tale’ place. The relentless increase in the number of patients admitted to the asylum was not matched by any adequate increase in funding, staff

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¹ Luigi Scabia (1868–1934) was superintendent doctor at Volterra from 1900 to 1934.
training, and medical equipment. This resulted in an inexorable decrease in the quality of care and treatment provided; a spiral that proved difficult to reverse. As with many other asylums across the country and abroad, systematic overcrowding and underfinancing paved the way for negligence, misconduct, and abuses, resulting in incredibly harsh and often inhuman living conditions for patients and extremely challenging working conditions for staff members. In the meantime, at an international level, sociologists and thinkers both inside and outside the medical sector addressed increasing criticism of the asylum as an institution (Foucault, 1961; Goffman, 1961; Basaglia, 1968). The exposure of the highly deteriorated status of the asylum led to scandals, indignation, and distrust – not to say loathing – against it within both political and public opinion. The Sixties saw the height of deinstitutionalisation; a post-war trend across Europe and overseas towards gradually emptying out, running down, and closing traditional mental hospitals, and seeking the least restrictive treatments possible, looking at community care as an alternative to prolonged hospitalisation (Braham, 1992; Paulson, 2012). In 1978, Italy ratified a law that enforced the closure of all mental hospitals of any kind across the whole country and decreed that mental health treatments would be administered only and solely on a voluntary basis. The so-called Basaglia Law (L. No. 190, 13 May 1978) was, and arguably still is, the most radical deinstitutionalisation law ever approved worldwide (Donnely 1992; Foot 2014).

Following the ratification of the Basaglia law, the San Girolamo asylum also started to be gradually shut down. Meanwhile alternative forms of therapy and community-based care were explored and implemented, patients were slowly either discharged or relocated into other structures (the last patient was discharged in the 1990s); staff who could not be made redundant by contract were reassigned to other duties at different facilities in the area, and the asylum buildings were gradually emptied out and disused. Today, the asylum is closed. Some pavilions have been demolished; others converted for the public health system; a few have been sold for residential development which was not successful and therefore withdrawn, thus most of the former asylum structures today are just abandoned and in an advanced state of decay (Gli spazi della Follia, Accessed October 2022).
This pavilion was built in 1927 to accommodate about 500 female patients working in the asylum’s farming colony; it was surrounded by vegetable gardens and farming fields with fruit trees. In 1957 it was the first building in the asylum to be upgraded with central heating. In 1961 it was adapted to serve as an additional forensic ward, hosting the most dangerous patients who could not be accommodated in the main asylum’s forensic pavilion, the Ferri, due to overcrowding. The pavilion features some graffiti from the patient Oreste Fernando Nannetti, alias NOF4, who was detained here for a period. The Charcot pavilion was decommissioned in the early 90s. Since its closure it has been used as a location for several artistic projects. It is today inaccessible due to its precarious condition. Photo by Francesca Lanz, August 2021.

After becoming lost a few times in search of the meeting point – the asylum is very near the city centre but there are practically no signposts pointing tourists to its location – we join the group for the visit, led by a guide from the local cultural association Inclusione Graffio e Parola. This is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 2010 by a group of volunteers including several former nurses and their family members, with the chief objective to preserve and valorise the asylum’s heritage and in particular the graffiti by a patient, Oreste Fernando Nannetti, alias NOF4, on the interior and exterior walls of the two forensic pavilions, the Ferri and the Charcot (Miorandi, 2022). These works are today recognised

2 A rich photographic reportage of the pavilion’s interior and exterior spaces is available on the website Manicomio di Volterra https://manicomiodivolterra.it/padiglione-charcot/ [Accessed October 2022].
3 https://www.inclusionegraffioeparola.it [Accessed October 2022].
as a major example of ‘art brute’.  

During our visit, we walk around the former asylum estate, which once housed the asylum gardens, decorated with trees, flower beds, and fountains, and today is reclaimed by wild untamed nature. We view several former pavilions, once obviously magnificent, now crumbling and dilapidated, their walls covered with murals and writings and inaccessible because of their extremely precarious and dangerous condition. The site with its material remnants, notably including NOF4’s graffiti, is used as the support and starting point to tell us about the asylum’s history and the life in there. This is recounted to us by the passionate guide Andrea Trafeli, who is a volunteer in the association Inclusione Graffio e Parola, as well as its president and the grandson of Aldo Trafeli, the nurse who first established a relationship with Nannetti and realised the importance of his work.

Image 4 – NOF4’s Graffiti on the exterior walls of the pavilion Ferri.
The graffiti originally covered a surface 180 m long and about 2 m high, extending over the exterior walls of the Volterra asylum’s forensic pavilion, where Nannetti was detained from 1958 to 1973. It consists of a bustrofedic

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4 ‘Art brute’, or ‘outsider art’, ‘is a French term that translates as “raw art”, invented by the French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe art such as graffiti or naïve art which is made outside the academic tradition of fine art’ (Tate Website, Accessed October 2022 https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/art-brut).
text composed of images and words carved every day on the plaster of the wall by Nannetti during his time out. Here Nannetti used his uniform’s waistcoat buckle to annotate anything he considered worthy in this sort of day-by-day diary of the asylum life.

Photo by Francesca Lanz, August 2021.

What was once a site of noise (MacKinnon, 2003) is today pervaded by an alien silence, the twittering of cicadas, and the squeaking and creaking of the old pavilions falling apart. The atmosphere is extremely emotive. It is no surprise that the asylum has recently become a preferred place for urbex and those interested in neglected places for their aesthetic qualities, but also a place of inspiration for artists such as Marina Abramovic, who in 2001 created a site-specific performance, *Mambo a Marienbad,* for the Charcot pavilion (Exhibart, 2001), and Paolo Rosa from Studio Azzuro, for his film *L’osservatorio nucleare del sig. Nanof.*

Image 5 – Volterra Asylum, photo by Pepper, November 18th, 2018.

This image features as the cover for a dossier about the Volterra former asylum in the blog of the Dutch urban explorer ‘Pepper’. We read in the text accompanying the images: ‘Looking like something straight out of a horror movie, the Ospedale Psichiatrico di Volterra is the crumbling husk of a mental institution that was closed due to cruel treatment of its patients, one of whom left a mysterious work of epic scale etched into the plaster of the walls that imprisoned him’. Source: https://pepperurbex.com/ [Accessed October 2022]

5 Bustrofedic writing is a form of bidirectional writing in which each line begins on the side where the previous one ended.
During my visit to Volterra, I met Alice Ceppatelli and Alessandro Massi for the first time. Alice was born and raised in Volterra, her family’s home for generations. During our time together, Alice and Alessandro recounted to me anecdotes and episodes of daily life in Volterra that gave a vivid sense of how much the asylum was a part of the town, for good and bad. Alice herself has a strong personal and emotional attachment to the site, and to NOF4’s graffiti in particular. She told me about her granddad, who was a nurse at the hospital and used to walk his dogs in the asylum estate after the end of his shift to ‘check on it’. She told me about her and her friends’ night-time incursions into the abandoned site as a test of courage, and about the time she went down to Rome to retrace the places of Nannetti’s life. She showed me her tattoos inspired by NOF4’s artworks. Alice feels the asylum to be a key part of her identity as a ‘Volterrana’. Alessandro has also developed a strong sense of attachment to the San Girolamo; to him it encapsulates the open and inclusive spirit of Volterra, from which he does not originate but where he feels he belongs ‘by adoption’. Alice and Alessandro have turned their interest and passion for the site into a project called Manicomio di Volterra with the aim to ‘collect, promote and communicate information, memories and stories about the former asylum’ and ‘prevent the loss of the memory of this place at risk of neglect’ (Manicomio di Volterra website, accessed October 2022). They research and collect memories and stories of the asylum and share them through their website and associated social platforms, including a Facebook group with about 2,000 members.⁶

⁶ https://manicomiodivolterra.it/ [Accessed October 2022].
The San Girolamo former asylum as a palimpsest of ‘traces’

A recurrent metaphor in the literature on adaptive reuse is that of the building as palimpsest (e.g. Machado, 1976; Robert, 1989; Brooker and Stone, 2004; Brooker and Stone, 2019; Plevoets and Van Cleempoel, 2019; Brooker, 2021). A palimpsest is a manuscript page, either from a scroll or a book, from which the text has been scraped or washed off so that the page can be reused for another document. The metaphor of the palimpsest is widely used in a variety of disciplines, notably those investigating the evolution and transformation of the built environment, to emphasize the interplay between erasure and inscription associated with human interaction with and transformation of spaces and places by means of their inhabitation, and ‘how that interplay creates complex layered and multi-temporal entities that disrupt conventional views of temporal sequence’ (Bailey, 2007, 9). In his paper discussing time perspectivism in archaeological practice, Geoff Bailey (ibid.) distinguishes five different types of palimpsests: the ‘true palimpsest’, the ‘cumulative palimpsest’, the ‘spatial palimpsest’, the ‘temporal palimpsest’, and the ‘meaning palimpsest’. He clarifies how ‘in its extreme form a palimpsest involves the total erasure of all information except the most recent. But palimpsests can also involve the accumulation and transformation of successive and partially preserved activities, in such a way that the
resulting totality is different from and greater than the sum of the individual constituents’ (ibid., 10).

The former San Girolamo asylum, I argue, is in effect a palimpsest. More precisely, using Bailey’s definitions, the San Girolamo can be conceptualized as a ‘cumulative palimpsest’ – that is, ‘one in which the successive episodes of deposition, or layers of activity, remain superimposed one upon the other without loss of evidence, but are so reworked and mixed together that it is difficult or impossible to separate them out into their original constituents’ (ibid, 12). It is also a ‘meaning palimpsest’ – namely ‘the succession of meanings acquired by a particular object in the course of its career trajectory or “life history” as a result of the different uses, contexts of use and associations to which it has been exposed from the original moment of manufacture to its current resting place, whether in the ground, a museum, a textbook, an intellectual discourse, or indeed as an object still in circulation and use’ (ibid., 18). In other words, we may say the San Girolamo is an emblematic example of a palimpsest of ‘traces’. ‘Traces’ are here understood by Jon Anderson’s interpretation, as ‘marks, residues or remnants, left in place by cultural life’ (Anderson, 2021, 8). Traces can equally be smaller or bigger physical leftovers, as well as memories, events, or emotions. Whatever their nature, however, traces last and endure in time: they can be seen, sensed, or thought about. Furthermore, traces ‘are constantly produced’ – says Anderson – ‘they continually influence the meaning and identity of places’. In that, ‘they function as connections, tying the meaning of places to the identity of the cultural groups who make them’ (ibid., 9). They tie the past to the present in a continuous process of making and becoming.
The layered nature of this built heritage as a palimpsest becomes all quite evident, even palpable, walking around the former San Girolamo asylum estate. During our visit we could easily see the ‘beauty’ of the site and its buildings as they were once back in time. The architecture of the asylum, its pavilions and outdoor spaces, harks back to the 19th-century idea of the asylum as a curative, therapeutic, and healing place. This underpinned the design of the San Girolamo, conceived and constructed in the wake of the positivistic psychiatric revolution of the time in the belief that insanity ought to be treated and could be cured, and that the built environment could play a role in doing so (Topp et al., 2007, Piddock, 2007; Airoldi et al. 2013). The apex of the visit is at the Ferri pavilion,
where NOF4’s graffiti are. The architectural style of the Ferri pavilion is similar to the one of the other asylum buildings, such as the Charcot pavilion. However, its spaces and their specific architectural solutions speak of its different use and the life taking place there. It suffices to look at the yard surrounded by remnants of its double containment walls, iron-barred windows, and its furniture. Made of solid concrete and firmly fixed to the ground, tables and benches were arranged in the space to impede any modification and allow the nurses and guards to have complete visual control over the patients and the activities taking place there. NOF4’s graffiti unfold on the Ferri exterior wall, going round windows, wall decorations, and wall-mounted fixed furniture. Sometimes they take the shape of silhouettes; these are the outlines of some of his fellow patients, who were so alienated that they sat every day on the same bench, practically motionless. Nannetti carved his daily diary around them, as if they were part of the architecture of the place. After the pavilion closure it has been abandoned and left to decay. The graffiti deteriorated fast. However, the very artistic relevance of the graffiti has spurred the creation of the association Inclusione Graffio e Parola and the place atmosphere and history has nurtured rich cultural responses to it from urbex explorations and reportage to artistic productions, and exhibition. Despite this in time, with the site abandonment and neglect, the Ferri pavilion and the graffiti has been also vandalized. This fact has raised anger and frustration among some in the local population who in some cases, as for Alice, have a strong emotional attachment to the site, and to Nannetti’s work.

For many people in fact, including patients but also staff, the asylum was indeed an often grim and terrible place, a place of lowliness and abuse, where living and working conditions were so harsh as to become physically and psychologically unbearable. However, it also true that sometimes, for some individuals struggling to survive in the world, an asylum has actually been a refugium, possibly the only one they could have, and a lifesaving shelter. Asylums have also been a relieving support for their families, as for a long time ‘madness’ has been solely a family matter, a shame to be hidden; falling to the responsibility of family members, usually women (Porter, 2002; Scull, 2011; Jay, 2017). At the same time, asylums were also clearly part of the communities in which they were situated, influencing their growth and development from an economic and social point of view. They were a key element for the formation of collective identities within asylums’ proximate communities and for some people who worked there – often with other family members and for generations – they were rewarding places of work. Their closure in many instances represented a ‘rupture’ (Coleborne, 2020) as well as a ‘loss of community and purpose’ (Moon et al., 2015), and this was largely the case in Volterra.

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7 ‘Ciao Babbo’ [Hi daddy]. A open letter from a women from Volterra who felt compelled by the vandalic act against Nannetti’s graffiti to writing about her attachment to the site. https://manicomiodivolterra.it/?s=babbo [Accessed October 2022]
The San Girolamo exemplifies how since its inception throughout its lifespan and over the years, several memories, meanings, and agendas might converge and coalesce on an architectural assemblage, erasing, rewriting, overlapping, sometimes competing and conflicting with one another. It is all quite evident how at the San Girolamo asylum all and each of them individually and in accumulation have left behind their traces, and so has its current status of abandonment. Arguably abandonment today largely characterizes the Volterra former asylum, both visually and in the way people experience it. Beyond its material and visible effects on the building fabric, however, abandonment is part of the process of palimpsest production and it also reveals the tensions, conflicts, and competing memories and meanings associated with this built heritage.

Abandonment

With very few exceptions, a phase of disuse always follows the discharging of a redundant building and proceeds any intervention on its built fabric, be it demolition or adaptation for reuse. Often, for this phase is usually relatively brief, it is somehow embedded and dampened within the building transformation process itself. In other cases, however, it lasts longer. Sometimes, as has happened in Volterra, it extends so far in time as to become not just a temporary status but a building’s actual way of being. Thus some buildings are an ‘abandoned building’. They have no function, no users, no scope; emptied of their purpose and inner life, they are disowned, for they virtually belong to nobody, because they serve none. Thus, they just stand where they were, decaying. Abandonment, however, is not a definitive or final status either; rather it is a deeply transformative one in itself. During abandonment, erasing and inscribing continue in a continuum process of accumulation of episodes and traces that tangle with one another in and with the site’s materiality and deeply beyond it (Edensor, 2005; Littlefield and Lewis, 2007; Hollis, 2013; DeSilvey, 2017; Plevoets and Van Cleempoel, 2019, pp.42–48; Lanz, 2021).

Abandonment most obviously impacts on the building fabric, both structurally and in terms of appearance. When a building deteriorates and falls into a state of decrepitude, this starts actively changing its material and architectural features, with consequences for both its stability and appearance. Meanwhile, nature reclaims what was once its own, regrowing untainted and reoccupying the emptied buildings (De Silvey, 2017). Fixtures spoil, the elements and dampness cause wall stripping and weakening; roofs eventually fall apart, and structural collapses follow. Interior spaces exposed to weathering dilapidate and change fast; floors are covered by debris, wall finishings peel away, their original colours fade, washed by the rain, covered by graffiti, blackened by dust and dirt and sometimes even by fires and arsons. Defaced ornaments decorate crumbling rooms lit by the natural light filtering...
in from collapsed roofs and broken windows, furnished with leftover fixtures and overrun by nature
with climbing plants, grass, moss, and young, growing trees. The building is decrepit but still it stands
where it was, although it is no more ‘only’ what it was in both its function and its form. It is, it looks
like, and it feels like an abandoned building.

Abandonment modifies the building, affecting and changing not only its appearance and materiality
but the way it is used and thought about. The state of abandonment and decay often leads to the building
devaluing in terms of its economic appraisal as much as in the way it is widely perceived. This may
generate a further lack of care, and even provoke loathing and fear among local populations, eventually
spurring antisocial behaviour pouring onto and revolving around the building itself (Keene and Padila,
2014). Not infrequently, abandoned buildings are indeed deliberately vandalised, and turned into
hideouts for drug dealing and other illegal activity. Often, they are turned into makeshift shelters for the
homeless, addicts, the poorest, and those most vulnerable and marginalised in our societies. From being
neglected and abandoned places, they become places of neglect and abandonment. Graffiti, writings,
and signs of incursions are everywhere visible on San Girolamo’s pavilions.

Nevertheless, abandonment can also be a productive moment. Abandoned buildings sometimes
acquire from their state of ruination a sort of aura, not solely that of a negative and tainted place, but also
of a contemporary ruin, somehow fascinating and evocative in its own way that variously plays out in
the imagination and curiosity. Not by chance, abandoned ruins have always been a trope for artistic
production, and so they are today in the sense that abandoned places have become recurrent subjects for
artists and photographers as well as urban explorers. On the one hand, given the frequent disinterest of
the viewer in engaging with the object at any closer level than the merely voyeuristic, this trend has
been termed ‘ruin porn’ (Griffioen, 2009). This has been happening in Volterra too, with the site
becoming popular among ‘urban explorers’ and extensively featuring in several Urbex websites, such as
I luoghi dell’abbandono8 and Ascosi Lasciti.9 On the other hand, the very look and feel of abandonment,
and the peculiar ‘atmosphere’ of these places of ruin, also have the potential to provoke very strong
emotional responses in those who encounter them (Edensor, 2005). This may lead to self-reflexivity,
spurring critical engagement with the site and supporting alternative place-based memory practices,
including spontaneous non-official practices of reappropriation. Representative of this are the activities
promoted and documented by Inclusione Graffio e Parola and Manicomio di Volterra revolving around
the former San Girolamo asylum.

Especially for those buildings that prove particularly resistant to reuse, notably including difficult

built heritage, abandonment can be a productive moment of ‘suspension’ and ‘shift’ from a design and future-oriented point of view (Brooker, 2013; Hollis, 2013; Cherchi, 2016; DeSilvey, 2017; Lanz, 2021). This suspension may create the conditions to explore, test, and assess different uses, new functions, and architectural settings, as well as initiating the process of community engagement and consultation with local groups, policymakers, and stakeholders. It can create a space for the implementation and exploration of new memory and heritage practices. It can support the processing of the change involved in reuse, respecting the time for a re-elaboration of memories and feelings associated with the place by the different communities concerned, giving time and space for the change to happen in a more physiological way.

Abandonment is also very telling of the cultural meanings, dynamics, tensions, and conflicts revolving around difficult heritage sites. Although, with very few exceptions, a phase of disuse always follows the discharging of a redundant building and precedes any intervention on its built fabric, for some buildings more than others it is a common, recurrent, and almost inescapable fate that leads to abandonment and neglect. This is the case for former asylums.¹⁰ Virtually all scholars who have researched asylums, when discussing the afterlife of their architectural complexes, acknowledge the extreme difficulties and particular challenges posed by former asylums to their reuse from both a design and a sociocultural and political point of view (e.g. Franklin, 2002; Osborne, 2003; Moon et al., 2015; Gibbeson, 2020). Crucially, as Graham Moon, Robin Kearns, and Joseph Alun articulate in their work, the reuse of former asylums is further complicated by the high level of stigma surrounding these sites, arguably equal only to that attached to prisons (Moon et al., 2015). Asylums are not only stigmatised but also largely stereotyped in the collective imagination, not least for the imaginaries of these places produced by fiction in popular public culture (Rondinone, 2019).

On the one hand their current status of abandonment eventually reinforces the stereotypical image of the asylum as an abandoned place that largely dominates in the imagination of most people. On the other hand, as Sharon Macdonald discusses about Nazi heritage in Nuremberg, their abandonment can be seen as a strategy of obliteration of a heritage linked to a past deemed to be forgotten (Macdonald, 2009, pp. 52–79). Ignoring, abandoning, and allowing the building to decay and fall apart, neglected and abused, can in fact be seen as an indirect form of ‘removal’, ‘mutilation’, and ‘defacing’ of that heritage, __________

¹⁰ There is no official data about the number and status of conservation of former asylum complexes, but studies in Italy and the UK give an idea. In the UK there were over 100 county asylums before the 1980s Mental Health Act; only 10 are still running, considerably downsized. The majority have been either demolished or converted for residential use and the few remaining are in a severe state of deterioration (Taylor, 1991; https://www.countyasylums.co.uk/ [Accessed 27.06.2022]). In Italy, according to a recent research project funded by the Ministry of University and Research, almost all of the 70 mental asylums built in the country are today completely or partially abandoned and falling into decay, deteriorating in the landscape (Airoldi et al. 2013; Gli Spazi della Follia, Accessed October 2022).
whenever its actual physical removal is, for various reasons, impossible (Macdonald, 2009; Foote, 2009). In a way, the absence of signposts in Volterra pointing to the location of the asylum can be seen as the manifestation of this strategy of removal of a ‘difficult’ heritage from the ‘official’ heritage of the city (Smith, 2006). In Volterra this ‘hiding’, using Macdonald’s words, also reveals an ongoing conflict between a more positive and easily commodifiable image of the city as a place of fine food and wine, Etruscan and mediaeval heritage, and another one, not less real but more problematic and even potentially stigmatising, of Volterra as ‘the city of alabaster and mads’.

Conclusive reflections: adaptive reuse beyond intervention

Through time and uses, misuses, disuses, and reuses, the over-imposition on the site of multiple layers of physical traces, memories, and meanings has made the San Girolamo a ‘palimpsest’ with a significance ‘greater than the sum of the individual constituent episodes, both for the people who used and still use it and for those who study it’ (Bailey, 2007). I do not ignore or deny the particularly challenging and awkward nature of such built heritage, the problems this poses for its adaptation and reuse, or the dilemmas it raises about its public representation and reception, as Macdonald has already pointed out (2009). However, as Macdonald herself remarks, the findings of my study confirm (Lanz, 2023) and the San Girolamo example demonstrates, precisely because of their layered nature, these heritage sites have the potential to act as a productive ‘starting point for contemporary critique’ (Macdonald, 2009).

The active and critical engagement with the San Girolamo architectural complex by different groups, artists, and communities, including some who originate from Volterra and some who do not, prove the significance and value of this place to the so-called ‘authorised heritage discourses’ (Smith 2006). In particular, the spontaneous initiatives recently promoted, spurred, hinged on, and tapping into the former asylum site and its ‘traces’, can be seen for all intents and purposes as developing new place-based counternarratives opposed to other dominant official ones, perceived as stigmatising and stereotyping. Among them, the bottom-up memorialisation endeavour – the basis of activities independently promoted by the Association Inclusione Graffio e Parola and the project Manicomio di Volterra, which revolve around the attempt to retrieve positive memories of the asylum – reaffirm its role in shaping Volterra’s identity and sense of community. These constitute (although perhaps not entirely intentionally and explicitly) a counternarrative opposed to the ‘postcard’ tourist-oriented official one, as well as standing against a broader stereotyped narrative, common in popular imaginaries, that depicts ‘the asylum’ (no matter which, where, why, and when), as a grim, nightmarish place of abuses and torture deliberately perpetrated by uncaring doctors and nurses.
The case of Volterra exemplifies in a paradigmatic way what Sharon Macdonald (2009) calls the ‘palimpsest effect’, describing the power of certain places to work as platforms supporting and even enabling different heritage and memory practices to surface, coexist, and even collide. Macdonald notes how ‘frequently … visiting difficult heritage becomes an occasion for prompting reflections. Indeed, many people use it as a starting point for contemporary critique – even though this is not actively attempted by the site or exhibition that they have visited’ (italic added, ibid., 190). In her conclusions she calls for the exploration of ‘negotiation strategies’ for the preservation and valorisation of these heritages, building on their nature as ‘palimpsests’ and countenancing ‘continual unsettlements’. Strategies that ‘allow different layers of the past to appear, variably, through their later accretions, and in doing so disturb, prod, and raise questions – that is, to unsettle fixity and heritage’ (ibid., 192). I maintain that adaptive reuse, as both a practice and a conceptual framework, is particularly well positioned to explore and offer meaningful insights into the development and implementation of such strategies.

However, the questions remain: How can the former San Girolamo asylum be reused to capitalise on this potential? How can this site be preserved, avoiding fixity and embracing change? How can we allow the different layers of the site to be visible, and tensions and conflicts to surface, while at the same time creating a space for their continuous transformation, reappropriation, and resignification by new and evolving communities? I argue that to answer these questions, we need to expand the way we think of adaptive reuse as well as the methods we deploy to inform it, going beyond an idea of adaptive reuse as ‘intervention’. This means shifting from an understanding of ‘intervention’ as ‘the act of intervening’ to the ‘process of intervening’, remembering that the first meaning of intervening is ‘occurring, falling, or coming between points of time or events,’11 and therefore by extension ‘mediating’. To clarify my point, I will return now to the metaphor of the building as a palimpsest.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of the building as palimpsest is a metaphor recurrently utilised to conceptualise adaptive reuse. Rodolfo Machado was one of the first to use it in this way. In his 1976 article, he discusses adaptive reuse as an act of ‘remodeling’; that is, ‘a process of providing a balance between the past and the future. In the process of remodeling, the past takes on a greater significance because it, itself, is the material to be altered and reshaped. The past provides the already written, the marked “canvas” on which each successive remodeling will find its own place. Thus, the past becomes a “package of sense” of built up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed or suppressed (refused)’ (1976, pp. 46–49). Since Machado’s article, the metaphor of the palimpsest has

become a dominant leitmotiv when discussing adaptive reuse interventions (e.g. Broker and Stone, 2004; Plevoets and Van Cleepoel, 2019; Brooker, 2021). Drawing on Machado’s idea, Graeme Brooker in his recent book 50|50 Words for Adaptive Reuse says that ‘[b]uildings, and by extension sites, are like palimpsests’. He follows by describing how reuse is in effect a process of production of the palimpsest, involving ‘both actions of erasure and addition’ (Brooker, 2021: 79).

However, when the metaphor of the palimpsest is deployed in the debate on adaptive reuse, the layered nature of a building is often mostly considered and assessed in terms of the material remnants of previous uses and transformations of the building. Such an understanding stops short of considering other-than-material aspects involved in the process of stratification and ‘accumulation’ of signs and meanings through the history of uses, disuses, misuses, and reuses of a building – alias, the site ‘traces’ inscribed on that site – and how these could be brought into the adaptive reuse project, informing and determining design choices. Consequently, adaptive reuse is merely understood as the design action of actual erasure and rewriting of those layers. In this way, paradoxically, the metaphor of the palimpsest ends up oversimplifying the significance and implications of adaptive reuse as a ‘process of production of the palimpsest’. This eventually restricts the real transformative power of adaptive reuse: its significance and its potential to bring a future-oriented contribution into heritage and memory practices within processes of creation and transformation of the built environment (Pendlebury, 2009; DeSilvey, 2017; Lanz and Pendlebury, 2022).

Conversely, embracing a more rich and complex interpretation of the building as a palimpsest, which acknowledges its ‘cumulative nature’ and accounts for heterogeneity of the ‘traces’ inscribed into it, implies acknowledging that when dealing with the reuse of buildings, matters of architectural design and preservation intertwine with questions of memorialisation, representation, and communication. This implies a political dimension (whether it is acknowledged or not), and, arguably, a profound responsibility in respect of ethics of representation. This is not to advocate for a noninterventionist approach but to reinforce the need for adaptive reuse theory and practice to take on a more critical and ethically responsible and aware approach, and to pursue the development of new, more open, explorative, transdisciplinary, and collaborative theoretical frameworks, research practices, and methodologies to do and think through the subject. This also involves opening up the debate to the contributions that other disciplines can bring in, most obviously from the fields of geography, ethnography, and heritage studies but possibly more widely. We must explore, adopt, and adapt new methods to read, understand, and engage with the site. This is also an invitation to stop considering adaptive reuse solely as a design ‘act’ but rather as a cultural ‘process’ of transformation of the built environment; a ‘re-inhabitation’ and resignification deed, involving ‘the reuse and revaluing of a place – and by extension its associations, memories, and behaviours – which have been inactive or dormant’
As I have already argued elsewhere, an understanding of adaptive reuse as a process rather than an intervention has the potential to greatly enrich the debate on the subject, notably enabling us to consider ‘its implications beyond architectural aspects as well as its different phases in time, including pre and post intervention’ and opening it up to ‘reflections pertaining to issues of memory and identity, owning and disowning, remembering and forgetting practices and heritage-making’ (Lanz and Pendlebury, 2022). Such an understanding does not undermine the architectural and creative nature of adaptive reuse as a design deed; rather it bestows on it a greater significance, political and social agency, and urgency, recognising its impact on matters that go beyond the creative recycling of old buildings to encompass the ethics of how we inhabit our world.

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A postcard from Volterra.

170x97mm (166 x 166 DPI)

169x101mm (150 x 150 DPI)
This pavilion was built in 1927 to accommodate about 500 female patients working in the asylum’s farming colony; it was surrounded by vegetable gardens and farming fields with fruit trees. In 1957 it was the first building in the asylum to be upgraded with central heating. In 1961 it was adapted to serve as an additional forensic ward, hosting the most dangerous patients who could not be accommodated in the main asylum’s forensic pavilion, the Ferri, due to overcrowding. The pavilion features some graffiti from the patient Oreste Fernando Nannetti, alias NOF4, who was detained here for a period. The Charcot pavilion was decommissioned in the early 90s. Since its closure it has been used as a location for several artistic projects. It is today inaccessible due to its precarious condition.

Photo by Francesca Lanz, August 2021.

170x112mm (300 x 300 DPI)
NOF4’s Graffiti on the exterior walls of the pavilion Ferri.
The graffiti originally covered a surface 180 m long and about 2 m high, extending over the exterior walls of the Volterra asylum’s forensic pavilion, where Nannetti was detained from 1958 to 1973. It consists of a bustroedic text composed of images and words carved every day on the plaster of the wall by Nannetti during his time out. Here Nannetti used his uniform’s waistcoat buckle to annotate anything he considered worthy in this sort of day-by-day diary of the asylum life.

Photo by Francesca Lanz, August 2021.

170x127mm (300 x 300 DPI)
Volterra Asylum, photo by Pepper, November 18th, 2018.

This image features as the cover for a dossier about the Volterra former asylum in the blog of the Dutch urban explorer 'Pepper'. We read in the text accompanying the images: 'Looking like something straight out of a horror movie, the Ospedale Psichiatrico di Volterra is the crumbling husk of a mental institution that was closed due to cruel treatment of its patients, one of whom left a mysterious work of epic scale etched into the plaster of the walls that imprisoned him'. Source: https://pepperurbex.com/ [Accessed October 2022]

708x472mm (72 x 72 DPI)
About Alice, Alessandro and the former Volterra asylum. Courtesy of Alice Ceppatelli and Alessandro Massi, October 2022.

1058x747mm (72 x 72 DPI)
Photos of the Ferri pavilion. The top left picture shows the remains of the surrounding double containment wall. The Ferri pavilion was built in 1934 as the asylum forensic pavilion, following the ratification of the 1904 ‘Giolitti law’ that mandated every asylum to have a specific area for the detention of ‘mad criminals’. The number of inmates in the Ferri grew from 350 in 1934 to over 1,000 in only five years, with a nurse-patient ratio of 1 to 30. Photos by Francesca Lanz, August 2021. Bottom right picture by Gloria Marchini, 2012.

170x147mm (300 x 300 DPI)