

The background image is a photograph of an interior space. It features a series of white, curved structural elements that create a series of vaulted or semi-circular openings in the ceiling. Bright light streams through these openings, creating strong diagonal beams of light across the scene. The walls and ceiling appear to be made of a light-colored material, possibly plaster or concrete, with some areas showing signs of wear or peeling paint, revealing a darker, textured surface underneath. The floor is covered with a patterned tile, visible in the lower foreground. The overall atmosphere is one of architectural drama and the interplay of light and shadow.

# Interior Interruptions

Rehabilitating the Old to Design the New

JEAN WHITEHEAD

ROUTLEDGE

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# Interior Interruptions

## Rehabilitating the Old to Design the New

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## Palimpsest Techniques, Overwriting

## Three



**Figure 3.1** A palimpsestic interior highlighting 'additive' textual techniques is defined by the co-existence of different temporal eras, expressed as clearly articulated under- and overwriting – Broletto Uno, Mantova, Italy by Archiplan Studio.

Copyright: Davide Galli.



## AN INTRODUCTION

Chapter Two highlighted common characteristics, traits and terminologies relating to the palimpsestic process, as well as identifying the pertinence and prevalence of palimpsestic thinking across a variety of creative disciplines. Usefully, this investigative stance culminated in a series of conclusions relational to the establishment of an interior palimpsest. The aim is to now employ and develop this understanding further, for it to evolve, and become further attuned to the preoccupations of the interrupted interior. Integral to this inquisitive journey is for this chapter to expand upon the initial definition of an interior palimpsest, by selecting design precedents that illustrate and deepen the reader's understanding of this type of interior interruption. This chapter consciously moves beyond an appraisal of the characteristics of the palimpsest (already established in the previous chapter) to a categorisation of the 'techniques' it regularly employs. The intention, via an analysis of globally-significant design precedents, is to highlight its pertinence to the built environment, with particular reference to the discipline of interior design, interior architecture and adaptive reuse. Case studies will be analysed against a set of criteria that embeds the conclusions from the previous chapters in order to clarify the assumptions already made. The findings from Chapter One in relation to the importance of narrative via **site-based stories** and responsive place-centric investigations (of an approach linked to **design non-fiction**), alongside the role of **sustainability**, will be duly revisited. The outcomes from Chapter Two in relation to the palimpsests' revelatory and revisionary **narrative** capabilities and its affiliation to a building's **biography** and **textual techniques and analogies** will be utilised to critically analyse selected design precedents in the development of palimpsestic thinking. This is a process that reinforces the original host building as a source of contextual information to be analysed and capitalised upon that becomes a catalyst for change. This recognition helps to establish a forthcoming evaluation centring upon the following criteria, drawn from the outcomes of the previous two chapters:

1. **Project synopsis** – essentially a summary of the project to give much-needed context alongside the rationale for inclusion.
2. **Narrative** – an examination of revelatory and revisionary storytelling via an exploration of ongoing site narratives or design non-fictions in relation to a building's 'biography'.

3. **Textual Techniques** – an exploration of how a palimpsestic approach physically 'redrafts' the existing host building through translational and editorial techniques related to over-, under- and unwriting, interruptions and disruptions.
4. **Sustainability** – an analysis of how sustainable thinking is encouraged by theoretically embracing the concept of an interior palimpsest and its perennial interruptions.

Whilst the importance of both narrative and sustainability has been highlighted in relation to the interior palimpsest, the premise of 'textual techniques' needs expounding. The insidious, close connection of the palimpsest to literary theory is evident as many of the examples included in Chapter Two share this common analogy. Interruptions that ultimately link to a 'redrafting' immediately evoke thoughts in relation to building reuse, as these interruptive practices all draw upon the twin auspices of **alteration** and **retention**, of **addition** and **subtraction**. This duality leads to thoughts on construction, deconstruction, reconstruction and its relationship to a palimpsest in its purest form as an ancient manuscript, as the techniques of erasure, of under-, over- and unwriting echo this process. Whilst there is an obvious difference between the reality of a product such as a book, however historic, and the built environment, certain similarities remain.

This and forthcoming chapters will examine these similarities and their textual allusions and analogies in more detail. The palimpsest as a manuscript is inherently a device that is concerned with surface articulation and close layering, so this investigation will initially explore its application and impact via the expression and coherence of the interior surface. By maintaining this focus, the textual analogy of the interior via the palimpsestic 'devices' or 'techniques' of **writing**, **rewriting**, **overwriting**, **underwriting** and **unwriting** can be explored; especially how they can be utilised to chronicle the 'life' or timeline of any interior. However, interior palimpsests have an obvious advantage over bound volumes and manuscripts in that they exist within a spatial, habitable environment. Within the built environment, the text or narrative can literally 'leap' from the surface, obviously a luxury manuscripts do not share, and one that loosens the close textual relationship to a single page. Instead, physical stratification within the built environment offers both a volumetric and a surface exploration, easing the theoretical bond between the palimpsest's origins and its application spatially. The use of



techniques in relation to erasing, highlighting or adding helps to inform ongoing revelatory narratives that harness both design response and site legibility. All of these palimpsestic processes embrace continual reinvention as a series of perennial interruptions via superimposition and involution. The process of writing, rewriting, over- and unwriting becomes an act of sustainable creative translation, of redrafting, concerned with revelation and reinvention.

#### THE 'TYPE' OF INTERRUPTION – OVERWRITING

If the palimpsest encourages and celebrates interruptions as integral to the act of translation, a key question has to be: what is amplified, what is suppressed and what techniques are employed? By examining how this story is told, commonalities concerning temporal layering, heralded by transitory change, become evident via a revelatory narrative process typically concerned with:

- **ADDITION** – writing/rewriting via overwriting
- **SUBTRACTION** – writing/rewriting via unwriting
- **REDRAFTING** – writing/rewriting via a rewording or rephrasing (or alternatively from interruptions to disruptions)

This chapter, by concentrating upon the palimpsestic 'additive' technique of **overwriting**, will examine how this technique is utilised to 'reveal', enhance or extend site narratives. Further chapters will explore the 'subtractive' techniques of erasing or removing via unwriting, culminating in translational techniques that 'redraft' and 'reword' the interior narrative. However, a word of caution is necessary, as this 'separation' of techniques utilised to aid comprehension remains simplistic as the boundaries between them remain ambiguous. Indeed, many of the design precedents analysed employ all of these techniques simultaneously. Whilst a more careful reading recognises a hierarchical deployment, analysis and groupings are by nature fluid, concentrating on the primary use of a particular technique to deepen the reader's understanding of the chapter's focus. To facilitate this, five precedents will be analysed within the chapter that examine the interior palimpsest via the techniques it regularly employs. Their selection and arrangement are deliberate, as they progress from an initial surface preoccupation to more robust spatial enhancements or architectural modifications and alterations. In summation, the precedents will advance from the decorative to adaptive

reuse, a deliberate collation that informs both the possible scope and the nature of an interior palimpsest. The precedents used are:

- **Broletto Uno Apartment, Mantova, Italy – Archiplan Studio**  
The renovation of a historic building replete with frescoes creates a palimpsestic residential interior that highlights the co-existence of different temporal eras through the surface application of 'over-' and 'underwriting'.
- **Canvas House, Singapore – Ministry of Design Pte Ltd**  
A traditional shophouse plays with its heritage via a homogeneous painted 'overwriting' punctuated by carefully choreographed 'peek-a-boo' circular reveals, an approach that allows the past and the present to co-exist within this rewritten interior.
- **Sala Beckett, Barcelona, Spain – Flores & Prats**  
The abandoned old 'Cooperativa pz y Justicia', a former social club, reveals its cultural history and acknowledges its many 'ghosts' via a bricolage of 'under-' and 'overwriting' preserved as collective cultural memory.
- **The 10K House, Barcelona, Spain – TAKK**  
A project that aims to rethink a traditional residential apartment by questioning sustainable possibilities within strict financial constraints. The introduction of an interior 'house' creates a participatory dialogue of co-existence through occupational 'overwriting' with the host building.
- **Astley Castle, Warwickshire, UK – Witherford Watson Mann Architects**  
An award-winning scheme that revitalises a historic ruin by 'grafting' a new dwelling directly onto the architectural remnants, this approach to 'overwriting' enhances an ongoing narrative of 'incompleteness' and temporal continuation.



prior to renovation. These small, scattered, temporal 'interruptions' reveal historic surface treatments such as the brick walls, timber floors and even the materiality of the stair treads, complemented by carefully-selected architectural features such as entrance screens, doors and signs, all offering vivid glimpses into the past. Even the retained, pre-owned furniture and decorative ceramics do not escape this holistic white aesthetic as circular reveals expose the textures, patterns and colours of the original. Conceptually 'time shadows' play with this temporal conceit further as the notional shadow cast by the beds allows the past to symbolically exist in the present. By employing the textual techniques of over- and underwriting, temporal continuity and coexistence is achieved in an approach that is typically associated with an interior palimpsest. These are techniques that are playfully exploited in the creation of a contemporary design response that interrupts by overwriting, that retains, but neutralises the historic past.

#### Sustainability

This approach gives new life and purpose to a historic shophouse but also acknowledges the limitations on the budget alongside a tight four-month renovation schedule. 'Upcycling' remained central to MOD's rationale as the simple device of a decorative blank canvas (essentially painting the entire house white) is utilised to fast track the scheme to completion ensuring its economic viability. Additionally, these financial constraints led to an upcycling of the existing furniture, interior surfaces and ceramic object d'art. This reuse prompted a sustainable approach of similitude that has helped to both justify and create a neutral interior. MOD's design philosophy accommodates an 'inquiring' approach to heritage and preservation that aims to 'disturb' accepted approaches through temporal layering. In doing so it 'redefines' a response to building reuse that, by embracing decorative homogeneity, becomes wholly sustainable. The notion of layering, longevity and continuation remains central to many palimpsestic schemes and is fundamental to embracing the sustainable mantra of reduce, reuse, recycle, so the creative response undertaken at Canvas House successfully reinforces this ethical agenda.

#### Sala Beckett International Drama Centre, Barcelona, Spain - Flores & Prats



**Figure 3.9** An extensive site investigation celebrates, retains and recycles the decorative remnants of a building's biography, successfully employing the textual techniques of 'over-' and 'underwriting', as illustrated by the rendered section – Sala Beckett, Barcelona, Spain by Flores and Prats. Copyright: 14. Colour section through vestibule/ Courtesy Flores & Prats.

#### Project Synopsis

In a chapter concerned with over- and underwriting Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats' response to a former cooperative is a seminal example of architectural remembrance that embraces bricolage, a fortuitous process that creates from whatever is available. Established in 1998, Flores and Prats operate a busy Spanish practice, whilst their experience as both architects and academics has led to numerous publications exploring the discipline of the 'existing'. A co-published volume for IQD serves to underline a shared interest in the 'second hand' and its affinity to architectural reuse, whilst a subsequent publication, *Thought by Hand*, captures their creative methodology of extensive site documentation via lovingly-produced hand drawings (2022)<sup>11</sup>. Observation and representation as an investigative process is utilised to understand the inherent conditions of a specific site: 'When we sit and draw, we are not looking for a solution, we are trying to understand and recognize the world around a precise project, observing it by drawing . . .'<sup>12</sup> (Prats, 2021: 24). This contextual sensitivity is central to their renovation of the former Peace and Justice Cooperative building (Cooperativa Paz y Justicia) into the Sala Beckett International Drama Centre. The result of a winning competition in 2011, this adaptive reuse project facilitated the rehousing of the 'Beckett Room', a centre that supports creative writing, production and cultivates local talent.



Completed in 2017, 'Sala Beckett', located in Poblenou (a former industrial neighbourhood of Barcelona), prioritises the palimpsestic nature and temporal timeline of a former cooperative, as the building's ghostly biographical remnants remain integral to its architectural resuscitation. The thorough examination, preservation and reinvention of the poetic 'ruination' of the host site is central to its inclusion in this chapter, as over- and underwriting coexists as a form of decorative continuation that acknowledges the importance of heritage within the built environment.

#### Narrative



**Figure 3.10** The building's ruinous narrative via its many 'ghosts' is celebrated, informing the ongoing character of the space in an approach that acknowledges the value of the 'second hand'. Condition of the site prior to renovation.

Copyright: 4. Former café of the worker's club/Courtesy Flores & Prats/Photo by Adrià Goula.

Flores & Prats' obvious veneration for this abandoned building, alongside a celebration of its cultural value and resonance to the community that surrounds it, was integral to their decision not to demolish (even though the building was unlisted). As one of the few remaining examples in the city of a workers cooperative, the building was instead 'rehabilitated'; a process that proved to be sensitive to its accumulated cultural, political and architectural inheritance. By utilising the analogy of a 'used suit' or 'dress', the architects developed an empathetic

approach to architectural reuse as one of shared ownership that acknowledges the 'second hand':

... our work has something very similar to this form of adaption to a dress already used by others; you have to unstitch it to discover the used pattern, start to work from it, cutting on one side to add on another one, you may need new fabric or to add some pockets. ... and so on until the garment responds and identifies with the new user<sup>13</sup>.

(Flores and Prats, 2019: 1)

This desire to document and understand, to retain rather than discard, led to an investigative analysis of the building's history, sustained by a supportive dialogue with the new client, the director of Sala Beckett Toni Casares. Founded in 1924, its previous incarnation as a worker's community cooperative originally contained a grocery store, café, theatre stage and dance hall until this became economically unviable. Later, unsuccessful uses saw the building reused briefly as both a swimming pool and a gymnasium, followed by 30 years of abandonment. Entering the disused building was akin to stepping back in time, leading to an approach defined by architectural remembrance, that sought to celebrate these collective social memories as 'ghosts'<sup>14</sup> (Flores and Prats, 2020:192). As Prats explains: 'the director told us okay this building is full of stories and Sala Beckett writes new stories so this is encouraging for us to have these around us when we come to work ...'<sup>15</sup> (Flores and Prats, 2021).

The ongoing biographic narrative of occupation, abandonment and reoccupation became equitably valued. For three months, Flores & Prats documented the original building, believing explicitly that the process of drawing aided their acquaintance with the site's situational remains. The extensive production of models and drawings aimed to capture the historic, poetic atmosphere, an approach that simultaneously identified architectural fixtures, period details and materials that could be rehabilitated. This extensive site inventory led to a philosophy of reuse and retention that safeguarded vestigial traces, carefully itemised, catalogued and removed during the renovation stage before being reinstated. This is an approach that employs a deliberate narrative of revelatory storytelling, of reclamation and continuity.

#### Textual Techniques

The notion of both retention and migration is integral to the palimpsestic textual techniques employed to reactivate this interior. This was





**Figure 3.11 and 3.12** Flores & Prats embrace palimpsestic textual techniques in a bricolage approach that clearly values the existing as part of a continual evolutionary process at Sala Beckett.

Copyright: 1. First Floor. Lightwell/Courtesy Flores & Prats/ Photo by Adrià Goula.  
Copyright: 10. Vestibule at First floor/ Courtesy Flores & Prats/Photo by Adrià Goula.

never about just preserving an abandoned building, of wrapping it in aspic. Instead:

The ruinous state in which we encountered the building was of interest, not because we wanted to restore it, but rather to take the ruin forward and make it a participant, with its unfinished character of superimposed periods. . . .<sup>16</sup>

(Flores and Prats cited in Murphy, 2017: 116)

This desire to retain and celebrate the past was offset by the inclination to 'add' in the development of an ongoing narrative, surely yet another essential palimpsest trait. The entrance vestibule was enlarged, circulation rethought and the relationship to the original isolated co-operative store on the ground floor addressed. New contemporary additions included the central staircase, lobby seating and a bar as a supplement to those already in existence. A 'patchwork' of historic interior surface treatments (in essence the existing underwriting) became a curatorial exercise depicting a story of perennial evolution. This legibility is made visible via a rationale of decorative overwriting as carefully chosen surfaces are overpainted, but allow historical remnants to remain. This

celebratory language of attrition, of investigative preservation, is clearly responsive to the inherent decorative ruination. The 'found' on-site colour palette as a form of overwriting adds visual coherence through red and green wayfinding. This approach created a narrative of past and present that coexisted rather than differentiated (an important distinction) and exploited the notion of an active, continuous life defined by decorative bricolage.

However, this is not just a passive process of editorial retention, it is also an active process of 'cuts', of selective demolition, of erasure and change (and it is worth noting that both processes are integral to a palimpsest, as highlighted in earlier chapters). New oval 'cuts' in the first-floor vestibule create opportunities for light to enter the central circulation spine whilst offering new vistas internally. Inspired by the 'found' ruinous quality of the building prior to its rehabilitation with its open vistas to the sky peppered by light shafts, this remodelling acknowledges the inherited spaces and their lofty dimensions, but sensitively remodels the interior in order to accommodate its new theatrical programme. The embracing of these textual techniques linked to



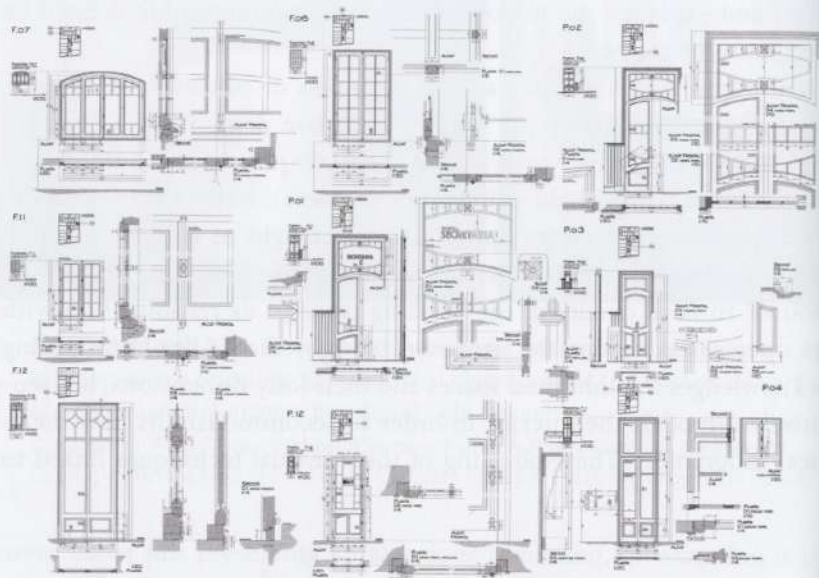
**Figure 3.13** An investigative drawing study analyses the atmosphere and architectural inheritance of the existing building as it searches for clues to inform the colour rationale.

Copyright: 22. Study of colours at entry vestibule/ Courtesy Flores & Prats.



over- and underwriting, of layering, editing, subtraction and addition, exploits palimpsestic techniques and utilises them to articulate the surface as well as the spatiality of the host building.

#### Sustainability



**Figure 3.14** A sustainable strategy informs this project via an approach that can be referred to as 'renewed old', as illustrated by the drawing schedule of 'found' doors and windows.

Copyright: 19. Inventory of found doors and windows/ Courtesy Flores & Prats.

The immersive dialogue of succession, of inheritance that resonates within the Sala Beckett, acknowledges its palimpsestic credentials through a conscious decision to celebrate and extend the building's biography. This architectural narrative of continuity, of prolongation, responds to the building's 'past', whilst allowing its 'present' manifestation relating to the changes wrought by its new programme to coexist within the historic building shell. The project response safeguards the building's future by carefully analysing how the existing host building accommodates a new functional programme. Complementing this redemptive architectural approach is the classification of 'renewed old'<sup>17</sup> (Gómez-Moriana, 2019: 112), which refers to existing elements such as stairs, windows, doors and period flooring that were retained but spliced, mended, resized or migrated to new locations.

This form of architectural rebirth via salvage consciously embraces the circular economy as the building and its interior become locked in a cyclical reuse relationship. By understanding the qualities of the second-hand, by examining the host building, carefully cutting and re-stitching it where necessary, it becomes a good 'fit' for its new community of users. This sustainable realisation is conscious of its many architectural and cultural ghosts, of its apparitional appeal, as the site becomes a treasure trove of finds and discoveries. For Flores & Prats, this biographic response acknowledges the debate regarding how we respond to heritage within a rampant throwaway society by valuing all architectural eras and signs of life equitably. The result is a redemptive architecture, full of residual detritus and traces, that prioritises contextual remains by giving them a new sustainable high 'usage value'<sup>18</sup> (Lahuerta, 2020: 58). The building's past biography, its preserved fragility, becomes interdependent with the present, inexplicitly intertwined in the establishment of a sustainable, palimpsestic response that retains rather than erases, and successfully marries the spirits of the past to the functional needs of the Sala Beckett.

*Interior Interruptions* examines the role of the 'palimpsest' and its relationship to narrative, sustainability, renovation and adaptive reuse. By exploring storytelling, palimpsestic characteristics and techniques, the book argues that these devices play a central role in the consideration of the designed interior.

Narrative has a burgeoning relationship with the palimpsest and this approach embraces an aesthetic of incompleteness and imperfection as a site rich response. It recognises the ongoing 'biography' or heritage of a building as a form of transient architectural narrative that encourages reuse through the continual process of writing, rewriting, overwriting and unwriting. This process has sustainable, societal, archaeological and textual connotations that can be interpreted as a process of 'layering' whereby the architectural shell is viewed as a container; a rich repository that is 'overlain' by surface changes, documents architectural and spatial modifications, and is populated by interior fixtures and fittings that all unite to create an ever-changing interior story.

Exploring case studies from the UK, Netherlands, Palestine, Belgium, Singapore, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Brazil, Japan, USA and China and beautifully illustrated in full colour, this book proposes that the act of interior renovation can be viewed as a perpetual form of revisionary storytelling re-imagined as a series of temporal interior 'interruptions'. It is essential reading for students and professionals interested in the built environment, including, but not limited to, interior design, interior decoration, interior architecture and architecture.

Jean Whitehead lives in the South West of England, has published extensively and has over 30 years' experience in Higher Education, both within the UK and abroad. Jean is the recipient of the 'Visionary Tutor' award for Interior Design from the Society of British & International Design (SBID) and is the author of *Creating Interior Atmosphere: Mise-en-scène and Interior Design*.

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