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Reusing Atmospheres

The Case of the Adaptive Reuse of the Lombroso Pavilion

Francesca LANZ¹

Abstract. The paper is a contribution to the analysis of the role and nature of the built environment in mind museums - former asylums turned into museums. It notably focuses on the adaptive reuse intervention implied in the design of these museums by revolving around the concept of atmosphere. By building on the case of the Museum of the History of Psychiatry in Reggio Emilia (IT) the paper examines how the peculiar atmosphere of the museum premise has been in play and worked out in the museum design. In doing so, it posits atmosphere as a designerly element alike other material and immaterial ones characterising the site and points out how such a perspective can provide a fruitful position for delving into the role of design in the overall project of a mind museum.

Keywords. Atmosphere, Adaptive Reuse, Mind Museums, Museum Design

Mind Museums and the 'Power' of the Site

Most basically, a 'mind museum' is a former asylum turned into a museum (Moon et al., 2015, 79-84; Coleborne and MacKinnon, 2011; Bruggeman and Schmid-Krebs, 2007; Maj, 2013). However, it is not only a museum of the own history of its premise, or a historical museum of psychiatry. A mind museum rather, is a site-specific and place-based cultural institution devoted to the representation of the history of psychiatric care and treatment that has the chief mission to foster critical reflections and informed discourses on the histories and contemporary problems of managing mental health in society, eventually promoting awareness and dismantling stigma about mental health today².

In mind museums, similarly to other 'site of conscience', the site itself with its 'power' is crucial in determining and supporting the museum work (Sevcenko, 2010; 2011). Therefore, when it comes to study mind museums, among other issues, the nature and the role of the site - one that is particularly meaning and memory loaded and strongly evocative - shall be carefully analysed in its various implications. This means assessing how material and immaterial features of the building are played out and put into play in the overall design of the museum - i.e. its spaces and its practices - with which intent and effects, as well as evaluating how visitors react to and make sense out of them.

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2. The definition and study of mind museums is at the core of the ReMIND Project, from which this paper ensues. ReMIND is a two-year research project funded in 2019 from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, grant agreement No. 841174 and hosted at Newcastle University School of Arts and Cultures. <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/remind/> (Accessed June 2020).

As already discussed by other authors in relation to memory sites, the concept of atmosphere may provide productive insights into this, in relation not only to how these places feel but also to what they do, how they do it and what they mean (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019; Turner and Peters, 2015; Sumartojo, 2016; 2019; Sumartojo and Graves, 2018). All the more so in mind museums; indeed, even though “atmospheres can suffuse all spatial contexts, in some spaces this is more affectively, emotionally and sensually profound than in others” (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015, 252) and this is doubtless the case for former asylums spaces hosting mind museums.

Crucially however, the ‘spatial context’ of a mind museum is not downright a former asylum. Most precisely, and decisively, it is the result of an adaptive reuse intervention onto the original spaces of a former asylum aimed at turning them into a very specific type of museum. This paper focuses on this issue by building on the analysis of the Museo di Storia della Psichiatria (Museum of the History of Psychiatry), in Reggio Emilia, in Italy³.

From Asylum to Museum

The Museo di Storia della Psichiatria is hosted at the Lombroso pavilion, one of the original buildings of the former San Lazzaro psychiatric hospital in Reggio Emilia. As many other asylums in Europe and overseas, the San Lazzaro hospital was established in the early 19th century within a positivist approach, in the belief that insanity should be ‘treated’ and could be cured and that the built environment could play a role in doing so (Airoldi et al., 2013; Crippa and Galliani, 2013; Topp et al., 2007). Throughout the 19th century, San Lazzaro grew up and became famous all over Italy and Europe. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was a sort of small self-sufficient town, which included more than 20 buildings organised in a cottage plan with about 2.000 patients hospitalised every year. Shortly after that moment onward however, the hospital started a slow and regrettable decline, which characterized many other psychiatric institutions worldwide, and that eventually led to their closure at the turn of the 60s (Foot, 2014; Paulson, 2012).

In 1978 in Italy, the so-called Basaglia Law (L.180) ratified the closure of all asylums. However, across the whole country, deinstitutionalization was all but a straightforward and easy process, and the closure of asylums took years. The same happened at San Lazzaro hospital, which buildings had been progressively abandoned from 1978 onward and the last patients dismissed only in 1997. In 2009 a plan for the rehabilitation of the whole area – 296.792mq – has been eventually implemented, involving the reuse of several former asylum premises for different purposes, including a museum of the history of psychiatry to be hosted at the Lombroso pavilion.

The Museo di Storia della Psichiatria opened in 2013 with the chief mission to serve as a place displaying the history of the San Lazzaro hospital and promoting knowledge and awareness about mental health care in the past and in the present. To do so, the museum can count on rarely rich and diverse collections pertaining to the hospital life and practices and, above all, on its very peculiar venue: i.e. the former Lombroso

3. *The study is based on extensive desk research on direct and indirect sources including: a comprehensive literature review on the museum and its history; the study of historical records from the museum archive; the analysis of architectural drawings and technical reports related with the architectural intervention; transcriptions from three school visits. Desk research is complemented by fieldwork including: direct observation of two guided tours, interviews with the museum staff and the chief designers involved in the museum project.*

pavilion (Tagliabue, 2013; Grassi et al., 2013).

The Lombroso pavilion dates back to 1892. It was originally named Casino Galloni and it was devoted at hosting “calm chronic patients.” In 1911, after the Legge Giolitti in 1904 imposed the creation of specific sections in psychiatric hospitals for the isolation of “mad criminals,” the Casino Galloni was converted to this purpose. It was enlarged by adding two lateral wings hosting the cells and named after the doctor Cesare Lombroso. During its lifespan, the Lombroso pavilion had been going through minor changes and used until 1972, when it was considered obsolete and redundant and thus disused. After the hospital closure, there has always been an idea to establish a museum at the former San Lazzaro asylum, notably by reusing the former Lombroso pavilion; however, even though a call for project was launched in 1978, the project was not realized (Zambonini, 1980). The pavilion continued to decay, while the debate on a possible museum kept on growing in the following years, paving the way to the creation of the Museo di Storia della Psichiatria.

Encountering a Place, Designing a Museum

When the urban rehabilitation plan for area of the former San Lazzaro hospital started in 2009, the asylum memory was still resonating in the city’s memory in many ways despite the site was totally disused since more than 10 years. Almost anyone in Reggio Emilia knew the San Lazzaro, either for direct experience or hearsay. At the same time, whilst well known by almost all citizens, ‘stories’ and ‘legends’ were circulating about the asylum, and, it was a ‘mysterious’ and ‘ghostly’ place in the city’s collective imaginary.

The San Lazzaro was not a totally unknown space either for Giorgia Lombardini, the municipality architect in charge for the reuse of the Lombroso, although she was never been there before 2006 when she did the first preliminary site visit. She recalls that many at that time were asserting that, due to the advanced status of decay of the Lombroso pavilion, ‘there was nothing special there’ that could be valorised by any kind of restorative intervention. However, after she visited the site, she saw it differently.

“Despite the manifest deterioration - she writes in her reports - the place was emanating an atmosphere of rare uniqueness; at a closer look, one less superficial and more sensible, beyond the stained surfaces and the ruining structures, the place was allowing to be half-seen extraordinary potentialities and a remarkable formal and aesthetic value.”

Her encounter with the place determined her design approach, backing up the choice for a reuse project chiefly based on restorative measures. As Lombardini explains, the overall intervention has been aimed at preserving the spatial features of the building fabric as well as its materiality, by following the guiding principle to ‘integrate’ what was missing not by replacing it, but rather by evoking the same aesthetic impression, in order to ‘maintain intact the peculiar atmosphere of the place.’ Specific interventions secured the building and cleaned it from infesting vegetation, detritus, and rubbish left behind by squatters. Accurate surveys were carried out and historical and archival researches were done. On site construction-works started in 2009 and concluded in 2011. Structural interventions have been realised either adopting the same techniques and materials in the case of refurbishment - e.g. in the reconstruction of the collapsed vault and wood roof - or with self-evident interventions in case of new additions - as for the steel tie-rod structure aimed at reinforcing the floors and improve

the seismic reaction or new technical systems and plants realised at sights. Wall surfaces have been cleaned eliminating more recent painting layers, squatters' graffiti and signs on inner fires. Interior wall finishing have been restored and a specific attention has been paid to original 19th century mamorino plasters and to graffiti done by patients in different ages using spoons and soles. The same happened with other architectural elements and details and furniture, such as the cells doors, through and through similar to those of prisons; table and benches in the former dining room fixed and distributed in the space according to security and surveillance rationales or the cells windows; or blinders and radiator control valves, that could not be used and adjusted from the inside requiring a hospital operator to do so. As part of the reuse intervention moreover, the building containment wall, demolished in 1974 has been "recreated." The wall, has been rebuilt on the same size and location of the original one, but as a wireframe structure realised in corten steel, with the twofold aim to symbolically evoke the former wall and to serve as a support for temporary outdoor exhibition.

Reusing Atmospheres: Cues for Debate

Atmosphere and the idea of atmosphere had an important role in the project for the Lombroso pavilion, variously coming into play within the different project stages. Firstly it was a designerly inspiration, determining the architect's design approach. Then, atmosphere became an actual object of intervention being the whole project not aimed at creating or recreating a specific atmosphere, but at 'maintaining intact' the existing one. Finally, a specific atmosphere resulted from this design process, one that inherently characterizes the site today and that has a crucial role in how the museum works.

This raises the question: is it possible to preserve an atmosphere? How?

Lombardini resolved for a restorative project to do so. It implied a mindful intervention, grounded on accurate on-site preliminary surveys and in-depth historical research, attentive to the building fabric, its material and architectural features and details; based on architectural preservation techniques and the work of skilled labourers and professionals. However, regardless the accuracy of the intervention and its actual results, the objective Lombardini set herself was an impossible one to achieve in many regards.

Firstly and most obviously, because atmospheres are ongoing and inherently individual phenomena (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019). As any atmosphere, the one Lombardini sensed was something largely subjective, influenced by her knowledge and foreknowledge about the site and its history, imaginaries of the public discourse and collective imagination about asylums in general and San Lazzaro in particular, and by her background as an architect. Most crucially however, the materiality of the site and other 'generators' of that atmosphere (Böhme, 2013) could not be actually kept intact in any way through any kind of intervention, precisely because of it.

Indeed, albeit it aims to conserve the building at some extent, an adaptive reuse intervention is a designed form of transformation of a disused architectural assemblage, intended at making it apt to be used again for a new purpose, which is different from its original or previous ones in functional and/or behavioural terms (Scott, 2018; Brooker and Stone, 2019; Plevoets and VanCleempoel, 2019; Wong, 2019; Stone, 2020).

To do so the intervention works with and reworks the material and immaterial elements characterising the preexisting building that crucially involve also its atmosphere. Atmosphere thus shall be considered a designerly element alike other material and

immaterial ones characterising the site and constituting what Machado called a “‘package of senses” of built-up meaning to be accepted (maintained), transformed or suppressed (refused)’ through an adaptive reuse intervention (Machado, 1976, 49). From such a perspective, as this case demonstrate, rather than a design practice somehow aimed at preserving an atmosphere, adaptive reuse intervention becomes a practice of designing with atmosphere and designing atmosphere – i.e. a ‘process for attending to what already exists and how the affordances of these elements might be augmented, ameliorated or transformed through design processes’ (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019, 13).

Obviously, notwithstanding the attentive restorative approach of the intervention carried out at the Museo di Storia della Psichiatria, the site hosting the museum today is something different from the Casino Galloni, the Lombroso pavilion, or the ruined asylum leftover it had been before, so is its atmosphere. This is not to say that accounting for atmosphere in adaptive reuse intervention, especially in the case of a mind museum, is not worth. Quite the contrary. At the Museo di Storia della Psichiatria the museum ‘spatial context’ resulting from the reuse intervention, plays a key role in the museum work. Along with the objects on display, the media installations and the contribution of the guides and the ‘cultural mediators’ who accompany visitors, the museum site, its materiality and architectural details have an essential role in the museum visit. They support and illustrate it spurring visitors’ physical and emotional engagement, eventually contributing for a certain atmosphere to emerge in the museum with some specific implications and effects (Turner and Peters 2015). As this case demonstrate, thinking adaptive reuse through atmosphere and considering atmosphere as part of the ‘package of senses’ to be reworked by the adaptive reuse intervention implied in the creation of a mind museum, can provide productive insights into adaptive reuse both from a practical and analytical point of view. On the one hand, it can help addressing how the place and its ‘power’ can be used, reused and designed in these museums and with which effects. On the other, it supports a needed yet still overlooked critical assessment of adaptive reuse interventions onto the built heritage in relation to the cultural significance, interpretative and selective dimension of heritage practices (Lanz and Whitehead 2019; Pendlebury et al. 2018).

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