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a critical palimpsest

reconstructing an existing spatial condition

caitlin fedor
This thesis is an investigation of embracing the figural possibilities of palimpsest through layering new construction upon extant. The existing building, a neglected warehouse in Louisville, Kentucky, is challenged by a new program that is intended to subdivide the vast, horizontal space and reconstruct the two distinctly ordered systems to formulate new interdependent spatial relationships. Filtered critical moments and continuities are explored through the implication of collapse, the embrace of datum and ideatum, and the lateral play of scale and repetition. Through development of these new relationships, the building is intended to not be a product but a construct of process, allowing particular moments of composition to exist within a collage of space and time.
many thanks

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This study does not assume a ‘suprahistorical perspective’, nor does it record the history of the palimpsest with any ‘monotonous finality’. Rather, it reveals how writing about the palimpsest becomes an act of palimpsesting: any new text about the palimpsest erases, superimposes itself upon, and yet is still haunted by, the other texts in the palimpsest’s history. Writing about the palimpsest is a process of writing on the palimpsest – of partaking in its history and of adding another layer to the involution of texts that characterizes that history. Moreover, the palimpsest’s perpetual openness to new inscription ensures that this history will constantly be rewritten.

Dillon, The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory

When we do away with what has gone before us, and pay no attention to what more stable groups of people next door to us, elsewhere, still possess, and thus make no use of the accumulation of images at our disposal, we nip the possibility of renewal in the bud. The various significations of everything that has taken place, and is still taking place now, are like old layers of paint lying on top of another, and they form in us, in their entirety, the undercoat on which a new layer may be placed; a new significatio which will slightly alter the whole thing.

Hertzberger, Homework for More Hospitable Form
Few things in life begin at tabula rasa. Most everything has a narrative history, a genealogical rhythm, a tangible lineage. When overwhelmed by information, there is often an inherent gravitation towards compartmentalizing and cataloguing facts in order to achieve a general comprehension of time and place. This type of understanding is essential to our existence as rational beings, having the ability to assemble a logical singularity of simple realities. However, when attempting to understand either the simple or the complex, there is something also to be gained from the opportunity of multiplicity. When cursory readings fall short, navigating through interdependent parallels and layered experiences can also illuminate undiscovered possibilities for evolution.

A palimpsest is one such phenomenon in which simultaneous realities can exist. It is a nature document (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing had been erased made through the act of layering text. It is a collapse of linguistic hierarchy, inscribed often on parchment or vellum, with resultant qualities of transparency, collage, and visual complexity. In the past two hundred years, the term has also been established as a literary construct to describe metaphorical synchronisms something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface <Canada is a palimpsest, an overlay of classes and generations - Margaret Atwood>. The dense and suggestive nature of a palimpsest naturally lends itself towards a tropological existence, "the concept of palimpsest exists independently of such phenomena [ancient manuscripts] - it is a strange, new figurative entity, invested in the stature of the substantive" (Dillon, 1). This intangible counterpart is a figural framework that intimately links the present and the past; it is a construct of the mind which gains power from the clarity of confusion and perhaps more closely conveys the realities of contemporary existence.
Main Entry: *palimpsest*

Pronunciation: \pəˌlɪmpˈsiːst\, \pə-\-

Function: noun

Etymology: Latin palimpsestus, from Greek palimpsestos scraped again, from palin - again, from Sanskrit pāśati, bahasti he chews

Date: 1825

1: writing material (as a parchment or tablet) used one or more times after earlier writing has been erased

2: something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface <Canada…is a palimpsest, an overlay of classes and generations — Margaret Atwood>
Embracing this phenomenon in architecture is not a desperate call to retain every insignificant relic nor is it a cry for contrived complexity. It presents a means to critically filter through the actions of the past and investigate the possibilities of evolved spatial relationships within existing circumstances. As opposed to simply layering new upon extant, palimpsest offers a conscious mindset inherent to the design process leading to intricate moments caught between a collage of built environments. A building that embraces discontinuous qualities has the ability to transcend singularity for something more profound—a locus for complexity, a symphony of dissonant systems, a frozen composition of temporal hierarchy, a living, three-dimensional palimpsest bound by columns, walls, light, and space.
A theory of versions tends to shift our conception of the artwork itself from product to process. Emphasis centers on the multiplicity of versions themselves rather than on privileging a final one to which the others seem mere stepping-stones. Seen in that way, the palimpsest becomes less of a bearer of fixed final inscription than a site of the process of inscription, in which acts of composition and transmission occur before our eyes.

Bornstein, Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities

I like complexity and contradiction in architecture. I do not like the incoherence or arbitrariness of incompetent architecture nor the precious intricacies of picturesque expressionism. Instead, I speak of a complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience, including that experience which is inherent in art. Everywhere, except in architecture, complexity and contradiction have been acknowledged, from Gödel's proof of ultimate inconsistency in mathematics to T.S. Eliot's analysis of "difficult" poetry and Joseph Albers's definition of the paradoxical quality of painting.

Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture
perception and identity

An architectural palimpsest in a sense is a dissolution of logic, an attempt to alter a space in order to simultaneously blur and sharpen the distinction of what is and what was. The warehouse is currently occupied by a scattered handful of businesses: a framing studio, a hardwood manufacturing company, an architecture office, and surplus storage space. The current open layout is conducive to the functions of these businesses, however, the dense matrix of columns and beams is syntactically problematic when trying to subdivide and enclose spaces for different functional needs. The new program is not intended to conflict with the building’s current use but reconfigures under utilized spaces and illuminates the dark interior with more natural light. Four individual studios and an enlarged architecture studio are inserted to challenge programmatic separation within an established system. The hardwood manufacturing company that occupies the west annex has mostly been left unaltered due to the fact that its interior structure is wholly unknown.
1536 Lytle Street is an industrial artifact located within an once prosperous neighborhood in Louisville, Kentucky. The warehouse was built in 1946 and is a stout, heavy masonry shell filled with a dense matrix of concrete columns. Its unusual oblique shape was determined in part by an adjacent building owned by the same proprietors and was built as an addition on a nearby lot. The building also responds to a now disabled railway line that terminates shortly before Columbia Street. The large openings on both the Lytle Street facade and the east facade facilitated the transport of goods between the train and large transport vehicles. In the survey on the left, the diagram indicates a party wall that runs perpendicular to Lytle and Columbia Streets. The warehouse to the left of the party wall is a later addition and is now exclusively occupied by the hardwood manufacturer. The remaining businesses occupy the original edifice on the other side of the party wall. The public entry for all occupants is on the Lytle Street facade and services both sides of the building.

The warehouse is elevated 3'-6" above street level. The floors are supported by a one way concrete slab system with the beams running parallel to Lytle street. The column lines are not uniformly spaced and vary in dimension from 14'-3" to 14'-9" from centerline to centerline. Additional structural columns are embedded into the masonry walls and are flush to the interior face.
Design is not making Beauty

Beauty emerges from selection
affinities
integration
love

Art is a form of making life in order - psychic

Order is intangible
It is a level of creative consciousness
forever becoming higher in level
The higher the order the more diversity in design

Order supports integration
From what the space wants to be the unfamiliar may be revealed to the architect
From order he will derive creative force and power of self criticism
to give form to this unfamiliar.
Beauty will evolve

Kahn, from Order and Form

this page: early conception of programmatic separation and measured drawing of the individual studio
The four new individual studios are comprised of a set sequence of programmatic parts: a streetfront gallery, a central courtyard that lends privacy to the artist(s), and an enclosed studio independent of all syntax of the warehouse. It is an isolated condition free of the order of the column grid and operates under a separate unit of measure. The verticality of the volume punctures through the roof and allows the artist to work in a bright, enclosed private space separate from the rest of the building. Visitors are only permitted into the space through the second level which exists at a height independent from the original second floor.

The rotation of the floor slabs along with a play of proportion are the primary generators for the introverted studio space. Punctuations to the volume are determined by entry and exit, movement from level to level, and permitting light to enter at specific locations. These key measured moments in the cube originate from an internal order and begin to laterally extend out into the new spaces within the warehouse. The continuation of these set geometries are intended to construct new relationships through perceptions of repetition and alignment.

The number of studios were determined in part by the current loading docks on the Lytle Street facade. The openings on the facade were the only previous indication of an internal dialogue and now act somewhat as signs for the individual business within. The enlarged architecture studio occupies the same general location in the warehouse and is ordered differently from the individual studio. It as before is an enclosed volume, as opposed to a sequence of parts, and shares a dual entry with the adjacent manufacturing company.
above: image of entry into studio
facing page: composite drawing of one of the individual studios and entry sequence, digital drawing printed on manila paper with vellum overlays
digital collage, sketchbook

what is new...comes not necessarily from the internal recasting of each of these disciplines, but rather from their encounter in relation to an object which...value in research cannot be accomplished by the simple confrontation of specialist branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinary is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines...in classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation. (1977a, p.55)

Palimpsests are precisely such objects. They embody and provoke interdisciplinary encounter, both literally and figuratively.

: at a time when the long-standing and fierce debate about the place of theory in literary studies still rages, this...exist between theoretical and critical writing, an intimacy which manifests itself in a mode of writing I wish to call theoretical criticism.

'Palimpsestuousness' - a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation - provides a model for this form, preserving as it does the distinctness of the texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence. The same model offers itself as a paradigm for the relationship between critical and theoretical writing manifest in theoretical criticism.

Although the process that creates palimpsests is one of layering, the result of that process, combined with the...is De Quincy's name for the way in which 'our deepest thoughts and feelings pass through perplexed combinations of concrete objects...in compound experiences of being disentangled' (1998b, p.104). The adjective 'involuted' describes the relationship between the texts that inhabit the palimpsest as a result of its palimpsesting and subsequent textual reappearance.

In addition to metaphoric coupling and theoretical criticism this study employs a third methodology, one that is equally determined by the structure of the palimpsest: critical history, or, genealogy.

the form of history that reintroduces (and always assumes) a suprahistorical perspective: a history whose function is to...a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development. (p. 152)
Despite the resulting complexity of layering new and extant relationships, the goal of the process was to create moments of composition which bring clarity and resolution within the hybrid spaces. The three main subsidiary ideas explored under the umbrella of palimpsest are datum, movement, and collapse. Just as the thesis explores both the literal and figural realms, these three qualities are also investigated in pursuit of dual existence.

These qualities are simultaneously studied in the print and collage series. Although the prints originated as modern, formal conceptions, the transition to collage was essential; the challenge of reconstruing individually constructed medi-ums into one composition became a tool to develop new hier-archie within the frame. The difference however, between the collage and the building is not merely a difference of medium or dimension, but of finality and fixedness. The new state of the warehouse is the result of a continuous attempt at redesign as opposed to a frozen composition once it is completed. A building of palimpsest embraces change and ac-cepts that the life expectancy of a building can outlast that of its architect(s).
'Palimpsestuousness' – a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation – provides a model for this form, preserving as it does the distinction of these texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence.

Dillon, The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory
datum

1a: A thing given or granted; something known or assumed as fact, and made the basis of reasoning or calculation; an assumption or premise from which inferences are drawn.
b: Comb., as datum-feature, -level, -line, -mark, -plane, -point, -year.
2: pl. Facts, esp. numerical facts, collected together for reference or information.

ideatum

1: (in epistemology) the object of knowledge as known by the mind. Compare datum.
2: (philosophy) the objective reality with which human ideas are supposed to correspond
The extant dimensions of the warehouse act as a datum within the new, reconstructed space. Although large portions of the concrete slab and numerous columns have been extracted, the remaining account of the old building provides enough resistance for the new program to respond. In the absence of the old, new sectional disparities between the different programmatic spaces break up the monotonous rigor of the building. As a result the stair becomes a primary element in every transitional sequence between levels.

The floor to ceiling ratio shared between the individual and architecture studios directly contradicts the floor heights of the old warehouse. This inconsistency between the dissonant levels is intended to force the occupant to establish an ideatum, or a non-factual perception of location relative to the subtle differences between floor heights. The column is also utilized to enforce this same sense of perception. In the situations where the column has assumed a new identity as a purely spatial, non-load bearing element, the original height of the column has been sustained to visually imply an ideatum where the floor used to span.
The act of movement or the perception of something that has been moved implies a both a past and a present state of action. The ability to discern something that has been moved can manifest perceptions of spatial continuities which may not be immediately evident from a singular perspective. The new construction in the warehouse is a careful push and pull of lateral movement intended to visually relate individual enclosures in order to connect different programmatic spaces. Although compositional movement is implied with parallel openings, uniformity of scale, and repetitious visual alignments, the actual physical movement of the person through the reconstructed space is critical to understanding the sequence itself.

The narrow light shafts and entry vestibules demonstrate this concept. They are used to break the facade as new visual indicators of entry as well as orient the person traveling through the studio. Uniform and repetitious proportions offer different understandings of the space as one moves through, around, and within the vestibules themselves.
this page: model photograph and study drawing with printed overlay
facing page: process sections of studio entry
enlarged plan at + 6'-6"
scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"
enlarged plan at +19'-6"
scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"
this page and facing page:
photo succession of studio sequence
back to front facade
this page: photo of process model from above and early drawing of studio sequence
recto and verso sides of early experimental elevation drawing, colored paper on vellum
The word collapse implies an act of internal destruction or an unintentional breakdown of a logical thing. In the warehouse, the idea of collapse is not used in the literal sense but is embraced as a constructed act of erasure. Like a palimpsest, the act of removal is essential to the strength of the object. Layering upon and challenging the existing logic of the building is a literal collapse of predetermined hierarchies as well as a perceived collapse of established spatial relationships.

The collapse of the column and the introduction of the wall demonstrates this action. Removing columns warrants the need for a secondary structural element and consequently imposes a new dialogue between the two systems. This dialogue allows the remaining columns to not only act in a structural capacity but to also act in a spatial capacity. Repetition, continuity, scale, and density of the remaining columns add another layer of complexity to various moments within the new spaces.
this page and facing page: oblique projection drawing series of architecture studio digital drawings printed on manila paper with vellum overlays
plan at +19’-6”

scale: 3/32” = 1’-0”
this page: model photograph of architecture studio from above and from lytle street entry
facing page: composite drawing of entry sequence and rhythm of light shafts
this page and facing page: photo sequence of entry and erasure of the party wall
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this page and facing page: mixed media collage series, 6" X 6", 2010
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When I speak of lasting and permanence - of an architecture that is not ephemeral - I mean only to emphasize the actuality of the building as its lasting domain. As one comes to understand that a building conveys its reality through the support of the material, it becomes increasingly possible to will the long life of the building. There is no doubt that the work of the architect should be an expression of personal commitment, but once this commitment has been clearly expressed, one should not worry too much if it disappears from the reading of the work itself.

Moneo, from "The Idea of Lasting"