Buildings Used

*Buildings Used* takes the reader on an exploration into the impact of use on buildings and users. While most histories and theories of architecture focus on a building’s conception, design and realization, this book argues that its identity is formed after its completion through use; and that the cultural and psychological effects of its use on those inhabiting it are profound. Across eight investigative chapters, authors Nora Lefa and Pavlos Lefas propose that use should not be understood merely as function. Instead, this book argues that we also use buildings by creating, destroying or appropriating them, and discusses a series of philosophical, cultural and design issues related to use. *Buildings Used* will appeal to students and scholars in architectural theory, history and cultural studies.

**Nora Lefa**, MSc, MA, PhD, is an architect and visual artist. She is an Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Architecture, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Pavlos Lefas** is a Professor in History and Theory of Architecture at the Department of Architecture, University of Patras, Greece.
The Routledge Research in Architecture series provides the reader with the latest scholarship in the field of architecture. The series publishes research from across the globe and covers areas as diverse as architectural history and theory, technology, digital architecture, structures, materials, details, design, monographs of architects, interior design and much more. By making these studies available to the worldwide academic community, the series aims to promote quality architectural research.

Architecture, Space and Memory of Resurrection in Northern Ireland
Shareness in a Divided Nation
Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem and Gehan Selim

Open Architecture for the People
Housing Development in Post-War Japan
Shuichi Matsumura

Ruined Skylines
Aesthetics, Politics and London’s Towering Cityscape
Günter Gassner

Architecture and Silence
Christos Kakalis

The University as a Settlement Principle
Territorialising Knowledge in Late 1960s Italy
Francesco Zuddas

Buildings Used
Human Interactions with Architecture
Nora Lefa, Pavlos Lefas

For a full list of titles, please visit: www.routledge.com/series/RRARCH
Contents

Introduction 1

PART I
Use as function 3

1 A historical perspective 5
   Form and use 5
   Form and use in the passage of time 8
   Perceived use 11
   The name of use 12
   The persistence of form 13
   Form versus use 16
   The persistence of use 17

2 Aspects of use 21
   Traces of use 21
   The body of users 23
   Form and perception 25
   Use and narrative 28
   Perception and identity 29
   The question of ontology: the anthropological approach 31
   The question of ontology: signification 33
   Architecture: signification and identity 34
   Identity and creators 38
   Evaluation issues 40

3 Some philosophical considerations 42
   Echoes of the theory of signification in architecture – the theory of intention 42
Contents

Echoes of the theory of signification in architecture – the theory of reflection 46
Echoes of the theory of signification in architecture – the theory of construction I 50
Echoes of the theory of signification in architecture – the theory of construction II 54
The ontological character of the use 57

4 Use and architectural design 59

The instrumentalisation of buildings: from Vitruvius to modernism 59
The two levels of function 65
Function and form in history: the origins 68
Function and form in history: the modern era 70
The disengagement of function from form 71
Forms for every use: digital morphogenesis 73

PART II

Use as attitude 75

5 Users and use 77

Form and use II 77
Use and acting subject 79
Use as cultural phenomenon 83
The roots of our interest in the use of buildings 85
Us and the others 87
The beautiful and the mediocre 89
Personification of edifices 91
The life circle 92

6 Destruction 93

Buildings in themselves, and buildings as symbols 93
The varying motives for destruction 97
Destruction: ideological and political motives 98
Destruction: psychological motives 100
Destruction: practical motives 106
A different kind of destruction 107

7 Creation 109

The motives for creation 109
The act and the product I 111
Contents

The act and the product II 114
Use as creation 117
Reuse 121
Creativity and aggression 123
Beyond creation: the quest for the new 126

8 Disregard and appropriation 129
Disregard 129
Appropriation I 131
Appropriation and immortality 135
Appropriation and nation-building 136
Buildings and artworks as trophies 138
Appropriation II 139
Restoration as appropriation 144
Restoration and authenticity 146
Some psychological and ideological aspects of restoration 147
The unholy exchange 149

Afterword 152

Referenced bibliography 156
Index 173
“We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us”. With these words, Sir Winston Churchill wrapped up his arguments in the debate of the 28th of October, 1943, on the reconstruction of the House of Parliament, following its partial destruction during a German air raid two years earlier.

By using them, he implied.

We usually assume that a building is essentially what we see, and, moreover, what we feel while walking in it and around it, the texture of its materials, the sequence of light and shade, the echoes of our steps, the smell of timber or fresh paint. We ultimately consider that it is its form – in the widest sense of the term, that is, the arrangement of the physical elements it consists of – that determines what this building is. Whether it is the Villa Rotonda or the Villa Savoye.

Our conviction that the building is what we see and what we touch stems from the fact that we, as humans, are made to trust our senses. Without this information, and particularly our sight, we would not be able to survive.

However, by asserting that this is Villa Rotonda and that is Villa Savoye, and by attempting to break down their differences and identify their similarities as physical objects, we grossly underestimate how important the way they are used is in order for them to become what they are.

This book argues that the use of an edifice is as important as its form in determining its identity. Actually, in a great many cases, it is much more important. If the construction of an edifice is the bringing in order of a heap of bricks and stones by the creation of a more or less clearly structured form, then it is its use by people that transforms this ordered heap of bricks and stones into a house, a school, a town hall, a church; use, which is favoured or served to a lesser or greater degree – but not dictated – by this or the other building form.

And, much more than form, it is its use by people that allows the creation of one or another narrative related to the edifice itself and the people around it – a narrative that makes the edifice part of our cultural environment.

However, the history of architecture as a literary and scientific genre has been rather indifferent towards the use of buildings, focusing primarily on
issues of form, symbolism and construction; works focusing on the “after-life” of buildings are rather rare.

On the other hand, theory of architecture has dealt with the use of buildings, at times quite extensively. Generally speaking, though, architectural theory mostly focuses on the intended use, which, in most cases, is seen as a quite significant factor to be taken into account during the design process, and may even thoroughly determine the form of the building.

This said, only a handful of theorists have placed the use of buildings subsequent to their erection at the centre of their research, most notably Jonathan Hill, author and editor of books such as *Occupying Architecture: Between The Architect And The User*, published in 1996; *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users*, published in 2003; and *Immaterial Architecture*, published in 2006. Hill understood use as a notion encompassing the full range of ways in which buildings and cities are experienced, and offered a penetrating view into the power games between users and authors of edifices, signified and regenerated by these very edifices.

This book further elaborates on the user’s interaction with buildings, by introducing new perspectives. It only marginally examines who is practicing (or should we say: delivering? Or creating?) architecture: whether they are the future users, as is the case with the participatory architecture of the 1960s, or the laypersons, people who make their own homes, as is the case with the so-called vernacular architecture, extensively documented in the twentieth century worldwide.

The starting point of our considerations is that only by using a building do we let it function in a certain way: as home, as school, as town hall, as shrine – function is inconceivable in the absence of use. However, it is essential that we broaden the notion of the use of an edifice – the purpose we use it for – so that it encompasses our attitude towards it – how we use it, how we treat it. In this sense, the concept of use exhibits a remarkable variety.

Modern humans live their lives creating new edifices, but also disregarding, destroying or appropriating existing, older and newer, ones; in other words, using them as objects with which, or on which, they can serve their most divergent needs and satisfy a wide scope of desires, ranging from the most practical to the darkest and well hidden. Indeed, we may use buildings as shelters to keep us safe from rain and people with nefarious intentions; we may use them as symbols of authority and power; we may use them as inspiration for daydreaming; we may also use them as objects on which, or through which, we can express our drive for aggression, domination, supremacy and destruction.

It might well be the case that the latter use is the most frequent.

These two aspects of use – the use as function of an edifice, and the use as stance or attitude towards an edifice – are quite discernible from each other but intertwined.

Use as function makes buildings what they are.

Use as attitude towards buildings characterises our culture collectively, and impacts our personality individually.


Cicero, Marcus Tullius, 1979: *De divination*. In: Cicero: *De senectute; De amicitia; De divinatione*. Translated by William Armistead Falconer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.


References:


Koh, Caroline, 2006: “Reviewing the Link between Creativity and Madness: A Postmodern Perspective”, *Educational Research and Reviews*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (October), 213–221.


Melchinger, Siegfried, 1974: *Das Theater der Tragoedie, Aischylos, Sophokles und Euripides auf der Buehne ihrer Zeit*. Muenchen: DTV.


172 Referenced bibliography


Weatherhill, Rob, 1999: *The Death Drive: New Life for a Dead Subject?* London: Karnac Books


