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21 A Library Hovering in the Chapel in Bogotá, Colombia

Abstract: The chapter considers the potential of repurposing disused religious buildings for use as libraries and examines an exemplary model of library adaptive reuse in a cultural heritage context: La Capilla, the Biblioteca Satélite de Arquitectura y Diseño at Universidad de los Andes/University of the Andes (Uniandes) in Bogotá, Colombia. The author outlines the La Capilla project in detail, including the larger context of adaptive reuse in the Uniandes campus and in Bogotá. The architectural strategy used in the La Capilla conversion was an almost freestanding structural insertion placed inside an unaltered historic shell. The history of the Uniandes campus and the city of Bogotá is explored. Two other church to library conversion case studies are briefly examined to conclude that architectural intervention in culturally significant buildings can enhance public understanding of history while simultaneously serving library programmatic needs.

Keywords: Academic libraries – Colombia; Library buildings – Design and construction; Church buildings – Remodelling for other use

Introduction

Architect Carlos Campuzano likes to describe his 1996 La Capilla architectural intervention as a ship in a bottle. The analogy fits: a delicate, expansive construction sits within an existing vessel of unyielding proportions, and observers might wonder how the graceful object was ever assembled inside its unaltered container. Situated within the 19th century shell of a chapel on the campus of Universidad de los Andes/University of the Andes (Uniandes) in Bogotá, Colombia, the library is one of the University's satellite libraries and supports the Facultad de Arquitectura y Diseño/School of Architecture and Design at Uniandes which was expanding and outgrowing its existing physical spaces when the library conversion commenced. In the two and a half decades since La Capilla opened, the library has housed and lent materials related to architecture and design, provided evolving study spaces, honoured local history and inspired aspiring designers and established professionals alike. The renovated library is small in area but provokes instructive questions on the nature of cultural heritage renovations, thoughtful approaches to library conversion projects and the role of local experts.



Fig. 1: View of the study platform from choir toward apse. © Antonio Castañeda Buraglia.

Facts and Figures

Name: Biblioteca La Capilla del Campito, Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad de los Andes

Address: Biblioteca Satélite de Arquitectura y Diseño, Sistema de Bibliotecas, Universidad de los Andes, Cra 1ra Este N 19A – 40, Bogotá, Colombia

Website: <https://biblioteca.uniandes.edu.co/>

Opening: 1996

Builder (owner): Universidad de los Andes

Project Architect: Carlos Campuzano Castelló <http://campuzanoarq.com/>; *Collaborator:* Gustavo Duque

Gross floor area: 325 m²

Main floor space: 170 m²

Collection size: 15,200

Staff: 3

Workstations: 64

Building Costs: US\$ 200,000

This chapter closely examines La Capilla, the Biblioteca Satélite de Arquitectura y Diseño/Satellite Library of Architecture and Design at Uniandes, as an exemplary model of library adaptive reuse in a cultural heritage context. The study

considers the architectural strategy of a nearly freestanding structural insertion within a historic shell (Figure 1) and suggests that such design intervention in culturally significant buildings can enhance public understanding of history while serving library programmatic needs in a pragmatic, elegant and conservation-minded way. The chapter explores the potential of religious buildings that have fallen into disuse, architectural interventions that rely on minimal building alteration, and the sustainability of adaptive reuse, positioning the reuse of La Capilla chapel (Figure 2) into a library as one more layer in the building's unfolding history.

History of the Uniandes Campus and the La Capilla Project

To understand the La Capilla renovation project, it may be helpful to learn something of the context of Uniandes. Uniandes was founded in 1948 as an alternative to state-run Colombian universities that offered a more restrictive model of higher education at the time (Escovar 2002, 24). Styled after liberal arts colleges in North America, Uniandes allows students a broad range of courses and more freedom to take classes outside a declared course of study. Uniandes is physically located in the Las Aguas district of Bogotá on a sloping hillside approaching the picturesque Monserrate peak; the entrance to the nearly vertical Monserrate funicular is a short walk from the northeastern edge of campus, not far from La Capilla. A one-time residence of Simón Bolívar occupies land just up the mountainside, near the aptly named Quinta de Bellavista/Villa of the Beautiful View.

The dramatic terrain is not merely scenic, as this area of Bogotá was an industrial centre from the 17th century onward. The place where the San Francisco River and the San Bruno mountain stream intersect and tumble together down the steep elevation provided an ideal site for water-powered mills, initially for grain and later for paper. Over the following centuries, the area in which La Capilla is located became the home of a range of other industries, including a hat factory, brewery and tissue factory. Further down, the sloping landscape that comprises the Uniandes campus, the Buen Pastor jail, the headquarters of a chocolate company and an historic estate aptly named the Quinta de Bellavista were located. All of these and more were later incorporated into the wide-ranging collection of buildings comprising Uniandes (Universidad de los Andes 2010).

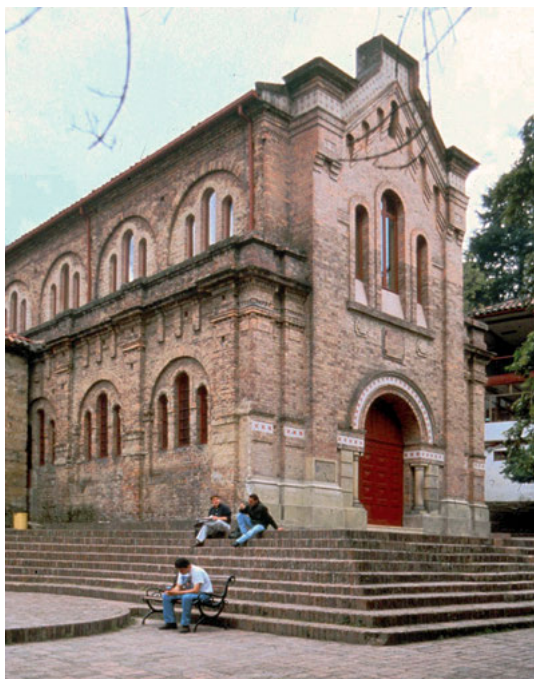


Fig. 2: View of La Capilla exterior, looking west. © Antonio Castañeda Buraglia.

Biblioteca La Capilla is located in a former chapel in the historically significant portion of campus known as El Campito. In the 19th century, the built environment of the formerly industrial sector was further developed with the infill of single-storey vernacular structures that housed a complex of charitable institutions. Alberto Escovar describes the sector's architectural history in his informative 2002 guidebook *Bogotá: Guide to Bogotá, Historic Center*:

Some of the buildings that form this sector of the university belonged to what was known as the Campito de San Jose, the site of a convent, surgical ward, and psychiatric clinic founded on April 30, 1883 by the Sisters of the Congregation of the Presentation of the Most Holy Trinity; it was later converted into an insane asylum. (Escovar 2002, 30)

As Escovar elaborates, the somewhat motley assemblage of buildings that occupies the El Campito zone was never intended to comprise a single institution. Ranging from single-storey tile-roofed adobes to taller brick buildings and reinforced concrete structures, the variety of architectural styles and building types is broad. The entire sector was part of the lands acquired by the University at its founding in the mid-20th century.

La Capilla Restored and Renewed

The former chapel that was eventually converted into Biblioteca La Capilla initially provided a lecture hall and offices for the Facultad de Arquitectura y Diseño. While useful and necessary for the school to function, the chapel spaces were provisional, undesigned, and somewhat dispiriting for students and faculty to occupy.¹ The upper windows of the chapel had been bricked over in prior decades for use as an auditorium, making for dim light and gloomy, unplanned spaces, contributing to an unpleasant user experience within the building (Figure 3). In addition to factors of light and spatial experience, the building had been subject to inconsistent upkeep and had begun to show its age. The restoration and renovation commenced in 1993, was designed by architect and Uniandes faculty member Carlos Campuzano Castello together with Gustavo Duque and completed in 1995.



Fig. 3: View before the refurbishment.
© Antonio Castañeda Buraglia.

¹ Information in the following paragraphs is primarily based on documentation provided to the author by Carlos Campuzano Architects, including plan and section drawings, project texts, photographs and email correspondence, with grateful acknowledgement of generous information sharing during the global Covid-19 quarantine.

The project received several international awards for excellence in renovation and little has changed in the 25 years since its opening (El Colegio de Arquitectos del Ecuador 2013). The library space is functional, inviting and innovative. The exterior of the building was unchanged by the renovation, except for the restoration of the upper storey windows, formerly removed and bricked over. Abundant equatorial light pours in through the upper windows of the historic façade into the library interior, where steel study and storage platforms seem to hover within the brick shell (Figure 1). The separation of study space from browsing space enables undisturbed studying for library users, but separation is difficult to achieve in a small space; the solution of elevated platforms allows the two functions to coexist at a harmonious distance.

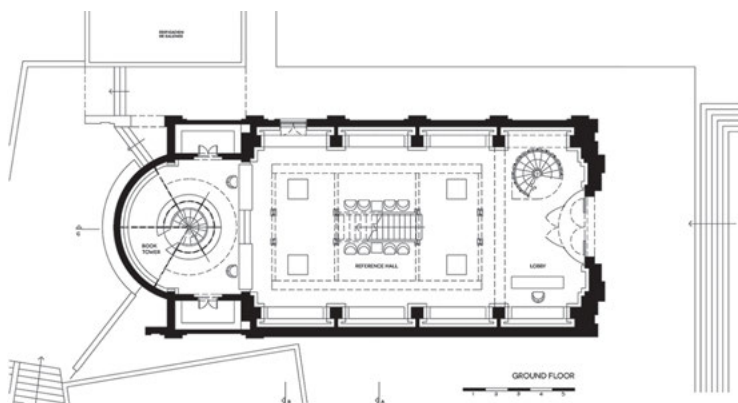


Fig. 4: Plan of ground floor level. © Carlos Campuzano Arquitectos.

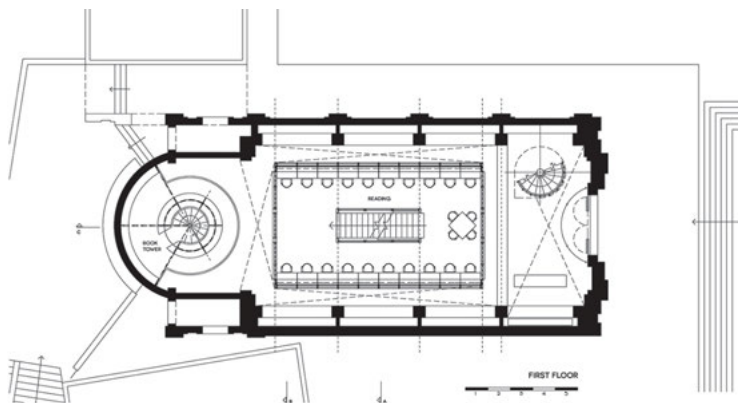


Fig. 5: Plan of second level. © Carlos Campuzano Arquitectos.

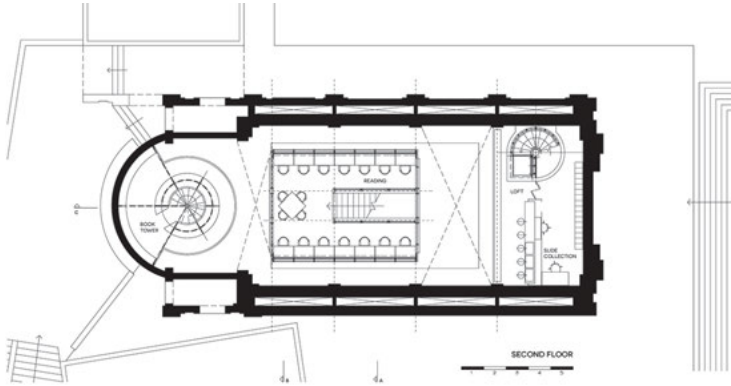


Fig. 6: Plan of third level. © Carlos Campuzano Arquitectos.

La Capilla is a diminutive project, measuring in at 170 m² of ground floor space, with an additional 155 m² gained on the second and third floors of the freestanding steel insertions (Figures 4–6). The chapel is a double-height brick structure that measures 8 m wide by 22 m deep, with ceilings of roughly 12 m in height. A slab on grade foundation is situated above a channelised river, running beneath the midline of the building, thus no basement or sublevel exists beneath the chapel. The renovation project called for the placement of two free-standing multi-level steel platforms inside the historic shell (Figure 7), and the issue of structural footings was the first to be addressed.

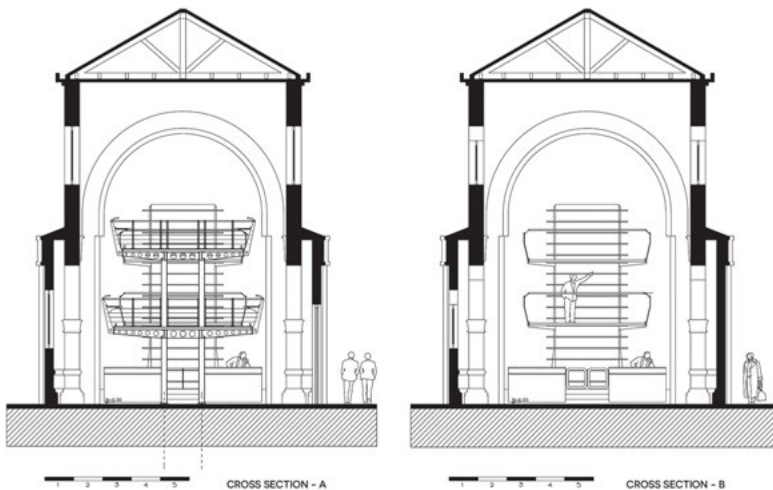


Fig. 7: La Capilla, transverse sections. © Carlos Campuzano Arquitectos.

Removal of the original flooring and foundation within the walls was among the first tasks of the renovation. Rectangular steel rebar cages were placed underground to create stable footings for the steel study platforms and shelving spaces that later would be placed in the structure above. The cages were excavated away from any influence of the river running under the chapel. A single tall, broad door permits entrance to La Capilla and all elements were brought by the construction team through it to assemble the large steel platforms. The custom steel components were cast in a steel workshop in Bogotá, and large I-beams form the upright structure connecting to the underground rebar cages.

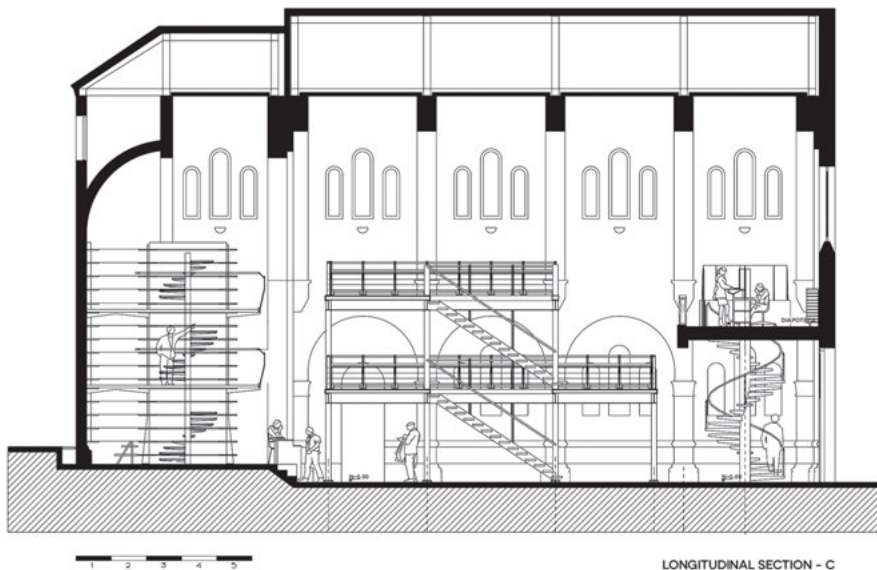


Fig. 8: La Capilla, longitudinal section. © Carlos Campuzano Arquitectos.

The two platforms (Figure 8) are distinguished by use: one for studying and one for book storage. A two-storey study platform is centred within the length of the space, rising toward the ceiling like a craft at sea (Figure 1). Originally the area beneath the study platform had provided some seating and an open circulation space, but the space is now used for shelving and computer workstations.

Set within the apse, a three-storey circular shelving structure, the Wisdom Tower (Figure 9) in the words of the architects, allows users to climb an internal spiral staircase toward original frescoes of winged cherubic heads, a decorative element uncovered during the restoration phase of work. The double-faced



Fig. 9: The Wisdom Tower.
© Antonio Castañeda Buraglia.

shelves of the book turret allow the user to examine journals and books while ascending; platforms at each level allow perusal of the outside shelves of the turret. Arriving at the top of the structure, it is possible to pause and glance across the full length and breadth of the chapel, towards the entrance, across the second steel platform where students quietly study, towards the choir mezzanine, where new periodicals are shelved and light streams in from the windows above. The spatial experience of ascending each platform and looking out towards the next feels akin to looking across a body of water to another watercraft nearby.

The approach to interior painting of the walls and ceilings of the chapel favoured selective restoration. The surfaces were painted mainly white or yellow when the restoration and renovation commenced. Rather than fully removing the paint, small bands have been stripped to reveal the successive layers of wall surface and paint. These strips are scattered throughout the ceilings and walls of the library, labelled in the places that are at eye-level, presenting a highly visual lesson in techniques of historical construction and interior architecture.

The minimal degree of contact between structural insertion and historic envelope honours the building's history and suggests future repurposing as well. For now, the chapel is a library. It has been other things in the past, and it may yet be something else in the future. The acknowledgment of temporality and change is particularly understandable in the larger context of the campus of Uniandes and the specific context of El Campito, with its long history of changing uses of buildings and land. As the architects describe in their original project text, "the very carefully manufactured iron structure expresses the capacity of the transformable, of existing now but going one day, if La Capilla del Campito wants it to be so."²

At the time of writing, the library houses 14,408 print volumes and 858 audio-visual items. La Capilla has three staff members: one director and two assistants.³ Very few modifications have been made to the library since its opening: the circulation desk was moved to the left of the entrance rather than under the study tower; the original carpeting has been replaced; and shelving has been placed in all available space within the library. The study space accommodates sixty persons, and most users are students in the departments of architecture and design. The library is well-used and well-loved by users across the university and outside of it.

Bogotá and Architectural Reuse

Bogotá, Colombia, is a city that is adept in the repurposing of buildings. In the mid-20th century, a time marked by the systematic razing of disused or outmoded buildings in affluent cities in the west and the north, Colombia was trending in the opposite direction. A prominent example of architectural repurposing is the national museum of Colombia, situated in downtown Bogotá near the still-active Plaza de Toros bullfighting ring. When the Penitenciaría Central de Cundinamarca, commonly referred to as *el panopticon*, was vacated after the construction of a modern prison outside the city centre, a centrally located, extremely sturdy building suddenly stood vacant. Rather than dismantling the prison, the national government of Colombia undertook renovation of the space to provide a permanent home for El Museo Nacional de Colombia, the country's oldest museum (Museo Nacional de Colombia n.d.). The prison was built in the panopticon style typical of many 19th century penitentiary buildings, with long corridors radiating from a central hub, a design that coincidentally makes for a reasona-

² *Memoria*, project text provided by Carlos Campuzano Architects.

³ With thanks to Sandra Fonseca of Universidad de los Andes Sistema de Bibliotecas for generous information sharing.

bly good museum experience. Prison cells became galleries, and wide hallways with tall ceilings provide additional display spaces. The central hub that originally provided a surveillance point for guards now serves as a node from which to make choices about whether to view art, nature or history exhibitions down each respective corridor.

The campus of Uniandes provides excellent specific examples of the practice of architectural repurposing. When the campus land was acquired by the university's founders, the landscape was already populated with a variety of buildings, as described above. Juan Carrasquilla Botero's comprehensive account of Uniandes campus history summarizes the former functions of this diverse collection of buildings: "Wastelands, orchards, roof gardens, mills, farms, factories of paper, fabrics, candles and soaps, and hats, convents of nuns and sisters of the charity, women's prison, old people's home, madhouse, public toilets; all that has been that today is the University of the Andes" (Carrasquilla Botero 1991, translated by the author).

Rather than using precious start-up funds on tearing down the old buildings, the existing structures were incorporated into the Uniandes campus. Decades later, once the university was firmly established and could afford refurbishment, many of the buildings were renovated. Among the architects who have designed the renovations is Colombian architect and Uniandes Architecture Faculty member Daniel Bermudez Samper, who has worked on several renovations and who designed the building that houses the Facultad de Arquitectura y Diseño/School of Architecture and Design at Uniandes.

Preservationist Sally Stone describes in her book *Undoing Buildings: Adaptive Reuse and Cultural Memory* the notion "that the reuse of existing structures and situations can be culturally beneficial, even if it is not necessarily the easiest or most straightforward strategy" (Stone 2020, 126). However, cultural benefit is not necessarily a common motivation of architects and real estate developers, whose interests may compete with objectives to preserve history. As Stone states, "Developers and architects may want to make a contemporary statement, the users may not be an exact fit, adaptation may be difficult, and efficiency difficult to achieve, but given the important cultural value of the historic environment, razing and rebuilding may not be the most responsible solution ..." (Stone 2020, 126–27).

The history of the Uniandes campus and the city of Bogotá together help to illustrate the possibilities of making a place's history known through continuous use of its built heritage.

Repurposing Disused Religious Buildings

In the United States, the home country of the author of this chapter, the decline in church attendance in urban centres, often caused by relocation to suburban areas, has been a trend of increasing significance over the past three decades. The primary denominations affected by the trend are the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholic Church (Simons 2016, 13), three faith groups that have tended to construct especially handsome, sturdy buildings. With the decline in church attendance, an increasing number of physical facilities of religious organizations, generally stately churches and chapels, stand vacant, frequently in prominent locations within cities and towns. The unlikelihood of immediate occupancy without extensive renovation can sometimes result in low selling prices for these buildings, particularly if town or city government becomes involved with a building's sale. Unoccupied structures in prominent locations are seen to contribute significantly to urban blight, something municipal authorities are eager to avoid.

One common strategy for the conversion of religious buildings is their development as performing arts spaces. This is one of the most harmonious new uses for churches and chapels, and among the least resource-intensive, given the typical acoustic qualities and existing spatial arrangements which are well-suited to performers and audiences. Often a renovation of this type will not need to involve the creation of additional floors and walls, and it can be a relatively affordable conversion. A second common conversion strategy is the redevelopment of religious buildings into condominiums and apartments. There are numerous examples of this conversion strategy around the world, and particularly in North America. From Brooklyn and Toronto to Albuquerque and Columbus, many owners and developers have capitalized on the prime locations of vacant religious buildings to create profitable housing. While recent architectural history includes a handful of precedents for the conversion of religious buildings into libraries, the potential remains comparatively unexplored.

The conversion of former religious edifices into libraries can result in buildings that are extremely successful as architectural works, as libraries, and as conveyors and containers of local history. To elaborate this point, two European project precedents are described. The examples include a public library set within a larger public complex, DePetrus in Vught, the Netherlands (Figure 10), and a university library, Biblioteca UNED in Madrid, Spain (Figure 11).

Excursion: Other Examples of Church Buildings' Reuse

De Petrus, Vught, Netherlands

The DePetrus adaptive reuse project is a library, museum and community centre completed in 2018 and designed by the Dutch firm Molenaar&Bol&vanDillen Architecten. The project is in central Vught in southern Netherlands with a total area of 3,000 m² (Library, Museum and Community Center 'De Petrus'/Molenaar&Bol&vanDillen Architects" 2018). DePetrus Vught began its life as Saint Pieter church, built in the early 1880s to replace a church that had served the town for centuries. After years of neglect and declining use, the 19th century building's condition became dangerous to occupants, with pieces of the ceiling matter



Fig. 10: DePetrus, Vught, Netherlands. © Jeroen Schortemeijer.

dropping onto worshippers during services, prompting an immediate halt to the use of the building for religious purposes. Community support saved the building from demolition, and a group of seven financial backers eventually settled on a programme for a community centre for the city. The open-plan hybrid space includes a library, café, coworking spaces, the Vught Museum and temporary exhibition spaces. A local charitable organization, Welzijn/Wellbeing Vught, offers counselling and social work services, and another group, Stichting Anders Bezig Zijn, offers adult education courses (DePetrus 2018). While the building rises to a soaring three-storey height, the main programmatic elements are clustered on the first floor in a plan that flows from one space into the next, without

walls or continuous partitions. The building is open to the ceiling, and the visual experience is striking. Interior walking paths at a second-floor mezzanine level provide a serpentine counterpoint to the traditional rectilinear plan of the church, encircling the space in gentle arcs and bringing users in close visual range of the building's historic stained-glass windows and murals. The DePetrus reuse project provides a community hub for the residents of Vught that is uplifting, attractive and exceedingly practical (Figure 10).

Biblioteca de Escuelas Pías de San Fernando (UNED Madrid), Spain

Located in the Lavapiés neighbourhood in Madrid, the main structure that comprises the Biblioteca de Escuelas Pías dates to the early 18th century. The original construction was completed in 1791 and functioned for nearly 150 years as a church and a faith-based school for underprivileged and orphaned children. During the Spanish civil war, the building was set ablaze and sacked. In the decades that followed, the building was briefly home to a cinema before being fully abandoned. The restoration of the school building was completed in the late 1990s and the church to library conversion was completed in 2004; the architect of the full complex conversion and restoration was José Ignacio Linazasoro. The imperfections of the partially ruined brick structure are left largely intact and visible. Curving slatted wood insertions arc across the ceiling, tying together new and old spaces, with simple circular chandeliers hanging low in the room to provide light (Figure 11). Mercedes Gomez notes that “the idea was to integrate



Fig. 11: Biblioteca Escuelas Pías, Madrid, Spain.
© Libe Fdez. Torrón-tegui, from the digital publication reharq.com.

the library into the ruins, without altering them, so that they kept their suggestive and romantic aspect... the new was subordinated to the old, the remains of the past are not exhibited as a mere ornament but are valued in themselves” (Gómez 2012). The library now serves a university, UNED Madrid, but keeps a regular schedule of public opening hours. As summarized by preservationist and writer Libe Fdez Torrónategui the conversion has been a complete success, for “it has adapted to a new functional programme, its use is ongoing and defined, it has regenerated part of the neighbourhood, it has become a cultural attraction... [and] it can be visited by the general public” (Torrónategui 2017).

Sustainability in Architectural Reuse

Architectural reuse is a potentially advantageous approach to the built environment in many ways, but significantly in terms of ecology. The embodied energy present in an existing building can be immense, particularly when one considers masonry processes such as bricklaying, which, in previous centuries, necessarily involved an additional layer of craft in the making of individual bricks themselves. All three original buildings discussed in this chapter were primarily constructed of brick, a material common to Europe and former European colonies throughout the world.

In the conversion of existing buildings to new uses, the process of adaptation must take a reasonably gentle approach if sustainability is to remain paramount. In La Capilla, the siting of the building could not be changed, so the footings of the steel platforms needed to take account of the channelised river running beneath the building, lest the project shift from light-touch renovation to a substantial environmental and hydrological engineering project. The full removal of existing paint in La Capilla might have become excessively labour-intensive, tipping the project beyond the threshold of environmental and economic sustainability. A selective removal of paint was undertaken instead, keeping the particulate materials of sand, lime and cement inside the walls under an upper layer of plaster and paint, rather than releasing them and creating indoor air quality issues during the renovation that would require subsequent remediation. Restoration of the building’s upper window apertures provided a source of increased naturally abundant equatorial sunlight. These types of light-touch interventions can enhance the overall sustainability of a project, both in the renovation process and in the long term.

Conclusion

Architects and institutional clients increasingly seek to optimise the environmental and financial sustainability of building projects (Plevoets and van Cleempoel 2019). The renovation of La Capilla can serve as an instructive precedent. With relatively low costs, minimal demolition and reconstruction, and a harmonious shift in building use, the conversion of La Capilla from worship space to makeshift classrooms to library has been an enduring success (“‘La Capilla’ Universidad de los Andes” n.d.). In the pursuit of architectural projects that are simultaneously functional libraries and habitable elements of local history, conversion projects such as DePetrus and Biblioteca de Escuelas Pías de San Fernando provide excellent examples of library conversions in buildings of historical significance. The renovation of La Capilla was completed almost 25 years ago, but the project continues to provide an innovative and instructive example of building rehabilitation. The sensitivity to place and history demonstrated in the library’s design is a lesson for the many architecture students who use the books and study space inside La Capilla.

While older churches and chapels continue to become vacant because of population shifts and decreasing religious engagement, more opportunities will arise to convert religious buildings to other uses. The three examples described, La Capilla, DePetrus, and Biblioteca de Escuelas Pías de San Fernando, support the argument that converting churches and chapels into libraries can make for harmonious and successful transformations in building use. As these projects demonstrate, spaces that were originally designed for contemplation and spiritual communion can be transformed beautifully into spaces for study and intellectual reflection.

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