

## A Global Approach to the Architectural Palimpsest

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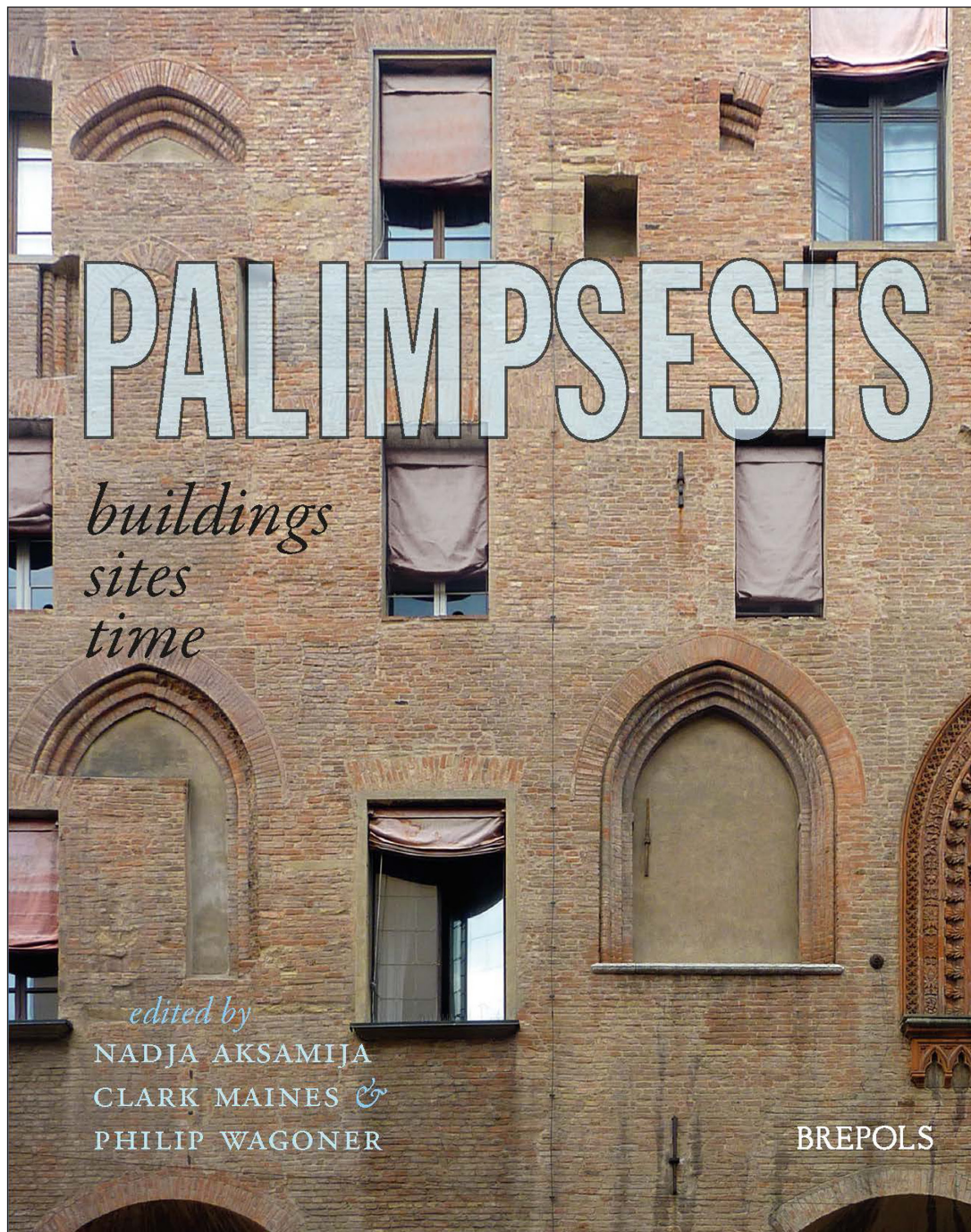
Palimpsest, a term originally used to describe the erasure and reuse of a papyrus or parchment manuscript for the inscription of a different text, has been extended in recent literature to indicate a similar process in the realm of architecture. *Palimpsests: Buildings, Sites, Time*, an edited volume, is the product of an international symposium organized at Wesleyan University in February 2014, with the intent of providing conceptual and methodological tools for future scholarship in several interconnected fields (Figure 2). Although the term palimpsest has been previously used in the field of architecture, this collection of diverse case studies aims to expand upon its geographical and temporal limits. In the introduction, the book's editors, Nadja Aksamija, Clark Maines, and Phillip Wagoner, discuss ways it has been mentioned by architectural historians and then focus on the methodological benefits of addressing a building as a palimpsest. They begin with the observation that, after the initial act of construction, every structure can be considered a palimpsest following any later demolition,

alteration, rebuilding, or expansion. While the historical phases of many buildings have been studied in spatial and experiential terms, the concept of the palimpsest emphasizes the temporal dimension of a construction, which is crucial for a full comprehension of a building or site. The editors also introduce the concept of 'cultural biography', which maps how the building has been seen and used during the different phases of its life. Finally, they seek to demonstrate that such concepts as spolia, adaptive reuse, and appropriation do not cover all the possibilities opened by addressing a building through the metaphor of the palimpsest, although 'spolia may be present as parts of a given palimpsest; adaptive reuse may describe a key process at work in shaping the palimpsest; and a desire to appropriate a site and its past may serve as the ultimate impetus for creating the palimpsest' (15). Therefore, the broader aim of these ten essays assembled in this volume is to provide 'a collection of chronologically and geographically diverse case studies to present a range of methodological possibilities' (18). These methods privilege – more than the moment of creation – how and when changes in appearance were linked to changing historical circumstances.

The term palimpsest was first adapted to architecture during the 20th century by archaeologists and architectural historians to discuss ancient and medieval buildings with evident traces of reconstructions or restorations (Giovannoni 1935; Coolidge 1943), and it is now employed by scholars studying different regions of the world (Flood 2003; Necipoğlu 2008; Cantatore 2000; Trachtenberg 2010). Since the 1980s, the use of the term has expanded to include landscape architecture (Corboz 1983; Marot 2003), history of cities (Adams 1994), museum buildings (Frampton 2009), and projects concerned with the renewal of industrial complexes. The term has also evolved to the point that it is used to describe new projects intended to facilitate their transformation in time. One of the first instances of this was Peter Eisenman's 1988 Wexner Center for the Arts at the Ohio State University, which was defined by the architect 'as a palimpsest. A place to write, erase, and rewrite' (19).

The editors aimed to present case studies of the most diverse variety in terms of their subjects' geographical breath, function, and formal characteristics. Of the ten essays, four address subjects in Europe, and two each consider structures in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The buildings' functions are evenly split between religious and non-religious. While the intrinsic idea of the palimpsest naturally favours structures with a long history, two examples from the twentieth century are included to demonstrate how the mechanics of erasure and reshaping can also happen in a short time.

The contributions are divided into four thematic sections. The first, 'Building Transformations', introduces three archetypal cases of architectural palimpsests. Phillip Wagoner explores how the Deval Masjid at Bodhan in India was originally a Hindu temple before being transformed into a mosque in 1323. He argues that traces of the temple were purposely left visible in the mosque as a reminder of the ruler's conversion to Islam. The second essay, by Sheila Bonde, describes the multiple reuses of



**Figure 2:** Cover of *Palimpsests: Buildings, Sites, Time*. Photo Credit: Brepols.

the Porta Nigra in Trier, from its original function of the city gate of the Roman city to its transformation into a medieval church and finally to its restoration as a gate under Napoleon. Porta Nigra perfectly illustrates the idea of 'heretopia', first introduced by Michael Foucault to indicate 'a space that maintains relationships to multiple times and places' (43), an essential element of a palimpsest. The final study in this section, by Erik Gustafson, examines the transformed meaning of a portal that originally decorated a crusader church in Acre and was later transported as a war trophy to Cairo and inserted into the facade of a Cairene madrasa. Going beyond its established interpretation as an example of appropriation, the author cites the views of the patrons, designers, and builders to

'make an assertive statement of the sultan's power in the Mediterranean world' (80).

The second thematic section, 'Restoration and Rewriting', contains two essays in fields that have resisted a palimpsestic approach. Sarah Newman applies the idea of palimpsest to the Mayan context, in which the idea of history was not linear but circular, examining two archaeological sites that stretch our concept of palimpsest by incorporating ruins in living cities, venerating invisible temples, and maintaining the original meanings in rebuilt structures. In the section's second contribution, Nadja Aksamija challenges the traditional scholarship of Italian Renaissance architecture, which has typically emphasized design and patronage over the issue of authenticity, showing 'immutable and

temporally static entities' (123) instead of their layered materiality. She describes the centuries-long process of continuous maintenance and rebuilding of structures as a 'restoration palimpsest', promoting a more comprehensive temporal perspective, and praising the few scholars who started to take this perspective into account.

The two examples in the third section, 'Buildings Inscribed', explore a subject in relation to the literal meaning of palimpsest, analysing the addition and erasure of texts on buildings. Christopher Parslow analyses the political and commercial graffiti painted on the properties of Julia Felix in Pompeii during the decade before the destruction of the city in 79 CE. He focuses on the intentionality of such inscriptions, made on buildings that were not intended to carry such messages, and their prominence in the political life of the city. In a parallel case, Clark Maines investigates the inscriptions added during the French Revolution to the Gothic portals of several Catholic churches in France, intended to transform them into 'temples of reason'.

The book's fourth and final section, 'Site Transformations', contains three contributions in which the idea of the palimpsest provides better insight into the complexity of contemporary building sites, at the level of landscape architecture. The multi-layered site of Kadwaha in India is described by Tamara Sears, who shows how a palimpsestic approach can help us understand buildings that have been recently destroyed or isolated from their context for conservation purposes, with the risk of losing their connection with the local inhabitants. Similarly, Annalisa Bolin uses a site of memory, the Presidential Palace Museum in Kigali, to demonstrate that Rwandan heritage can be exploited for contemporary political interpretations, and how the shifting meanings of memory might shape the country's future. Finally, Joseph Siry analyses the 'ground zero' site in New York City, from its early history as Little Syria, with the redesign of the area as World Trade Center, and after 9/11. He emphasizes the limitations on what the museum and memorial can display of the multifaceted history of the location.

This well-curated volume, rich in images, reveals the complexities of applying the concept of the palimpsest to the built environment and provides architectural historians, critics, and restorers – as well as a broader audience – with an innovative reading for a more comprehensive understanding of architecture. Following a recent trend in scholarship that includes the idea of identity and the 'effect of a doubling or bending of time' in works of art (Nagel and Wood 2010), *Palimpsests* successfully summarizes different avenues of investigation opened up by the historical application of the palimpsest concept. For the first time, in the limited space of a book, a comprehensive number of case-studies show differences in scale, time, and meaning, both physically and culturally, resulting in meaningful analyses that overlap physical, cultural, social, and temporal layers. This volume contributes to a renewed attention toward a methodological approach based on a layered temporality in architecture, ranging in scale from the single building to the city or a territory, and at the same time responds to the current interest in cross-cultural and

multiregional approaches to architectural history, based more on global themes than local traditions.