

Resilience Rooted in Traces

Cultivating life from neglected past

Research By Design Journal

Public Building Graduation Studio
- PUBLIC CONDENSER -

|Copenhagen | Haraldsgade |

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INTRODUCTION.

In modern times, despite growing sustainability concerns, demolition remains a widespread approach for buildings that no longer fulfill their function, yield profit, or have suffered from a lack of maintenance. The future of industrial heritage—especially those buildings without official heritage status and damaged by time and weather—is often predetermined: they become piles of waste, making way for new development.

This continuous cycle of destruction and creation, though natural in the built environment, often leads—due to globalization and neoliberal economic policies—to a loss of identity. It results not only in the destruction of building fabric but also in the erasure of the unique and site-specific qualities of places, the small businesses that shaped the area's identity, and to the memories engraved in its walls and stories.

The connection to the past is lost, along with ties to neighbors with whom that past was shared, to local communities are pressured to leave developing areas, often feeling deprived of their right to the city. There seems to be no place for the people of the past in a rapidly developing future. This project aims to reclaim the residents' right to their area, proposing an alternative strategy for the triangular block located in the Haraldsgade area of Copenhagen.

Historically, Haraldsgade was an industrial zone. Today, we observe clusters of remaining industrial buildings from the 1920s to the 1940s. Many of these structures are vacant, neglected, and have been repurposed by local communities and creatives. Residents, small businesses, and diverse communities have organically shaped the area and its buildings—much like nature shaping a landscape. This transformation has allowed clusters of buildings to age, grow extensions, change façades, and become canvases for graffiti and street art. However, a lack of maintenance and ad hoc alterations have rendered many of these buildings ineligible for heritage protection, leaving them vulnerable under current development plans.

The beautiful quality of places is that they frame every interaction and emotion we experience—and we, in turn, reward these places with traces and meaning. People pass away, places change or fall into ruin, but the marks of time remain as a testimony of life. Instead of focusing on destruction, erasure, or redefinition, we might embrace reflection and cultivation—allowing for growth and creativity rooted in acceptance and reinterpretation.

This project explores how new functions can be integrated through adaptation and activation, embedding interventions in the existing context. **The value held by neglected heritage can serve as a strong framework for the development of new life, for both human and non-human species.** Public functions that respond to current users can unite the community and strengthen their sense of belonging.

Methods. The influence of the research on the design and visa versa.

The development of this architectural proposal was rooted in a deep engagement with the site and its historical context. The initial site visit proved essential, enabling observation, photography, and on-site interviews, which directly informed the design trajectory. As part of the History subgroup, I investigated the industrial heritage of the area, analyzing both the broader urban fabric and the transformation of the triangular plot over time.

In the early phases of the project, significant effort was directed toward archival research, including the collection and study of historical architectural drawings and documentation of the existing structures. These investigations revealed patterns of urban and architectural development, which became instrumental in shaping a proposal that interprets the new as a continuation of the existing.

The act of designing through the lens of adaptive reuse unveiled numerous challenges. Engaging with the material history of the site demanded a recursive approach—frequent returns to archival documents at multiple scales and the analysis of precedent studies became integral to resolving design questions. This iterative process underscored the complexity of working with inherited structures and informed the development of spatial strategies that honored the existing while accommodating new functions.

Technical research into insulation strategies and climate-responsive design was conducted in parallel with spatial development. These studies directly informed facade articulation and service integration, further embedding environmental considerations into the design process. A multi-scalar approach—shifting between neighborhood, block, building, and detail—allowed for a nuanced understanding of both architectural and social conditions.

This methodology supported a more precise use of archival material at the same time enabling a meaningful dialogue between past and present. The layering of programmatic elements was influenced by both historical uses and insights gained from contemporary users through interviews.

The applied methods and iterative design-research process proved effective in addressing the core questions of the project. They provided a foundation for a proposal that is historically informed, socially engaged, and contextually grounded.

Relation between graduation project and the studio

Public buildings serve as intersections where diverse functions, communities, and narratives converge. As such, designing a public building presents a multifaceted challenge—one that engages a wide spectrum of architectural theories, spatial practices, and social considerations. It offers a valuable opportunity to explore contextually grounded design while emphasizing the lived experiences of users.

This project focused on creating a space for local public use within a rapidly transforming urban area. The design emphasized sensitivity to the needs of current users, the architectural and cultural value of existing structures, and the broader ambitions of the state. By integrating existing and emerging public functions, the proposal directly responded to the studio theme: “Public Condenser.” This concept was explored not only in spatial terms, but also through the coexistence and layering of programs that invite diverse public engagement.

The AUBS Master’s program is characterized by a dual emphasis on design and research, which are often pursued independently. However, in the Public Building Graduation Studio, these two dimensions were deeply intertwined. Research directly informed the development of architectural strategies, while design decisions provoked new lines of inquiry—resulting in a meaningful and coherent process.

Prior experience from a range of architectural projects and elective courses undertaken during the first year of the Master’s program had a strong influence on this design process. This background enabled a more confident and responsive approach to varying scales, user groups, and programmatic demands, all of which are essential in the design of public architecture.

academic & societal value

The project proposes an approach towards a type of architecture that is often subject to demolition, combined with a focus on the local public, who are frequently sidelined in the face of new development. Neglected industrial architecture, damaged by time and use and lacking formal heritage status, is often considered worthless. However, with the growing need for sustainable strategies in the built environment, we are continuously searching for new methods to reuse and give a second life to existing buildings—adapting them to climate demands and assigning them new functions that benefit the community.

The idea of “Resilience Rooted in Traces” conveys the value embedded in such architecture and highlights its importance for the area, while also proposing an activation strategy. On the scale of the block, the approach incorporates multiple ways of “rooting” into the context, by integrating desired new functions into the existing urban fabric. These methods are adaptable and can be applied in different contexts to achieve site-specific outcomes.

The strategy presented in the project integrates neglected existing architecture, reuse of on-site materials, the use of local and bio-based materials, and explores how these materials shape detailing. The application of such strategies in practice could reduce CO₂ emissions, limit waste, strengthen social memory, and reinforce a sense of belonging.

