

# Four Minutes on... ARCHITECTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS

with Françoise Astorg Bollack, AIA



I prefer the expression “architectural transformations,” to the limited vision offered by “adaptive re-use,” “adaptive use,” and “re-purposing”—all recent expressions—because it places transformations of old buildings in a larger architectural context, one with a rich history available for study: from Andrea Palladio’s 1545 wrapping<sup>1</sup> of a “modern” (i.e. Renaissance) loggia around the, by then outmoded, 15th-century buildings housing the law courts in Vicenza; to Michelangelo’s 1563–64 insertion of a Christian church into the ruined Baths of Diocletian in Rome; to Mount Vernon in Virginia, enlarged by George Washington in 1758 and 1774;<sup>2</sup> and to the 1928 Maison de Verre in Paris where Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet inserted a modern residence under an 18th-century house (the tenant refused to move!).

Historically, architectural transformations cover the whole range of changes needed for buildings to survive. To continue being useful and culturally relevant, buildings are updated to satisfy new functions or a new architectural sensibility; they are enlarged, added to, or reconfigured, with the same uses or with different uses. These factors have always been in play, and buildings that last are buildings that adapt, one way or the other.

Histories of architecture are full of architectural transformations and many iconic buildings are additive buildings, even though they are rarely analyzed from this perspective in the history books. As in the case of the Maison de Verre, such buildings are often presented as wholly new, built in one single time period—what is missing from the story is a full analysis that allows us to learn from transformative strategies and their history. Another example, in *The Architecture of the Renaissance* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978),<sup>3</sup> Leonardo Benevolo describes Alberti’s 1450 design for the transformation of the church of San Francesco in Rimini into the Tempio Malatestiano: “He decided to surround the building with a masonry casing, detached from the original masonry along the sides, in order to free the rhythm of the arches from that of the windows behind them.” The illustrations consist of a plan and photos of the side,



This side view of the Tempio Malatestiano shows the two time periods of the building: the gothic core and the Renaissance “wrap.”

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front, and a detail. The plan shows a partial “wrap” of the old structure with the new loggia. One is curious about the relation of the two, but the photographs offer no clues. Although it is fair to say that Alberti was trying to suppress the older building in order to achieve a contemporary expression, we don’t have to accept this point of view. It is time to look at such designs from a new perspective—the works will gain added significance and we might learn something!

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1. For a suggested taxonomy of architectural transformations see *Old Buildings—New Forms: New Directions in Architectural Transformations*, Françoise Astorg Bollack, the Monacelli Press, 2013.

2. For an interesting discussion of Washington’s interventions see “Reflections on Mount Vernon: A Declaration of Architecture” by Tom Killian in *Material Culture: The Journal of the Pioneer America Society*, Fall 2005. Vol. 37, No. 2, p.60–64.

3. First published in Italy in 1968 as *Storia dell’Architettura del Rinascimento* by Giuseppe Laterza e Figli