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Recycling Heritage

UNESCO's 1972 convention concerning cultural and natural heritage defines our cultural heritage as 'monuments', 'groups of buildings' or 'sites'. Strategies of preservation of such phenomena are linked to their material, physical presence which in each individual case introduces particular challenges, opportunities and dilemmas. This paper will discuss another understanding of architectural heritage namely the architecture that exists as representations: as drawings, models, photographs et cetera. If we include representations in our understanding of architectural heritage, we are dealing with a body of material which presents other challenges and – just as importantly – other possibilities regarding preservation. Representations are of course also material phenomena. Even digital representations depend on some sort of hardware in order to be experienced and handled and as such, they too present us with material preservation challenges.

Still, if we change our view and think of architectural representations as bearers of information rather than as actual objects or files, we are dealing with a different kind of cultural heritage. A sort of virtual legacy that lends itself to reproduction and interpretation and which can be preserved as well as cultivated through recycling.

The paper will present and discuss examples of how representations of architectural motifs or spatial configurations can be transformed into new architectural projects. It will be argued that the information embedded in architectural representations is available to us as a potent reservoir of knowledge, not only on what architecture is and has been, but also – if treated as a recyclable material – about what it could become.