

An Archaeology of the Interior

Case Studies: The Archaeology of Obsolete Stairs

Noor Fajrina Farah Istiani

Department Architecture, Pancasila University, Jakarta
noor.fajrina@univpancasila.ac.id

Received: 17th February 2022 / Revised: 16th July 2022/ Accepted: 6th September 2022

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the possibility of adopting the study of archaeology as known in cultural theory to redesign the obsolete interior architecture element. The archaeological discipline might offer a possibility to understand the interior element thoroughly through emphasizing the specific material characteristics and their correlation to the different periodical lifetimes of the context. The idea of the archaeology of an interior introduces well-recorded analysis and material experimentation in the physical translation of interior elements. The design process is mainly conducted by emphasizing the notion of "after use" and imagining the object's future to tackle the issue of the obsolete interior. This study becomes an essential basis for understanding the role of an interior architect in responding to the subject of the decayed interior from the other point of view by taking a personal stand for "use" and "after use" beyond the conventional idea of functional space. In the case study, this paper examined the idea of repurposing obsolete stairs as an archetype element through the physical and poetic approach of the object by taking one of the projects in Master interior architecture studio in Rotterdam. This practice aims to augment the material and generate the essential foundation for a design practice that could sensitively respond to the personal stand on the spatial design process.

Keywords: archaeology, obsolete, materiality, "after-use", interior element

1. Introduction

1.1 General Background

Interior architecture as a transdisciplinary practice: how is it relates to the disciplines of archaeology?

In Venice Biennale 2013, the Spanish artist (Almarcegui, 2013) presented, for the Spanish pavilion, an impressive spatial installation of towering mountains filled with various construction materials, such as cement rubble, roofing tiles, and brick smashed to gravel. These piles of materials parallel the types and quantities used by the workers to construct the Spanish Pavilion in 1922 (fig 1). This project challenges our perception about creating space by adopting the past, present, and future roles of materials. In this case, examining immediate and extensive archaeology of the chosen material element of the interior became the basic idea for developing this spacious installation project.



Figure 1. Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale 2013.

Source: Installation views by Wolfgang Thaler. Process photos by Oliver Ottenschläger, <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/>

The position of archaeological study in the interior architecture discipline examines the discovering and observing process of the unknown exploration subject. The subject can be anything from isolated artefact to the broader existing site (Minale, 2014). Although the records and the documentation about the site's origin are available, the condition would lose the primary purpose for the present context. Therefore, it is necessary to correlate the systematic excavation and well-recorded object information to make the present context more coherent and meaningful in the spatial design process.

The issue of material obsolescence in the interior architecture discipline considers as both a potential and a challenging topic. The word "obsolescence" was first used in the built environment in 1910 to explain the American skyscrapers rapid loss of value. Abramson (2016) examined obsolescence in the concept of an architectural building that is losing its value and utility. The notion of obsolescence then correlated to the assessment approach to manage and comprehend the changing value of architecture, from historical preservation to adaptive reuse.

Working in historic preservation deals with almost erasure properties where the potentiality of repurposing underused deserted objects, buildings, or sites is difficult to imagine (Joris, 2014). However, in the spatial design practice, by restoring the obsolescent object or site, different shapes could appear, and different feelings evoke than the one we already knew before. Also, while investigating the obsolete object, we could mark each particular element's uniqueness and different character with its way of life over time (Dekkers, 2000).

This paper discusses the possibility of adopting the study of archaeology as known in cultural theory as one of the approaches to comprehend the redesigning obsolescence context in interior architecture. The archaeological discipline offers a possibility to thoroughly understand the interior element as a continuous entity emphasizing the specific material characteristics and how it correlates to the different periodical lifetime of the context. We divide this paper into three main parts. First, the study starts with a brief overview of the origins of the term archaeology in relevance to the discipline of architecture and interior. Second, This paper discusses the role of the archaeological approach in the study of interior space. What archaeological investigation could offer? Moreover, how a designer can apply archaeological discipline in the interior element of space as a design practice? Lastly, we will discuss one case study to discover the archaeology of an interior by taking one of the projects in Master interior architecture studio in Rotterdam. This part illustrates the possibilities of employing an archaeological method to develop the spatial design.

1.2 An Attempt to Define Archaeology of Interior

The term archaeology is originated from Late Latin, *archaeologia*, and from Greek, *arkhaiologia*, *arkhaios*, or *arkhē*, which means the study of what is ancient or beginning (dictionary.com, 2017). From the dictionary of cultural literacy, archaeology in the cultural study refers to "the study of material objects, such as graves, building, tools, artwork, and human remains, to investigate the structure and the behaviour of the past culture." To study the cultures, archaeologists depend on physical remains as clues to the emergence and development of human societies and civilizations. In contrast, the

anthropologist relies on community participation and interaction with living people to study their culture (E. D. Hirsch, Joseph F. Kett, et al., 2002).

The term archaeology is associated with the cultural theory, which refers to the “very material culture” that is studied, as well as to the discipline itself (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2007). By conducting the process of “analysis, recovery, and interpretation of the material remain,”(p.13) the archaeological study provides useful information of human activity which would be fruitful in the spatial design process. Edgar & Sedgwick (2007) also initially pointed out the distance period of archaeological study, which is not limited to the past or prehistory. The study of modern archaeology now complements history by applying the method to all ranges of a period. Therefore, the range of analytical work for modern archaeologists could expand from past, present, to future in investigating the material aspect. In the preliminary spatial design step, the process of site or object analysis bears a resemblance to the development of the design identity. The specific analytic condition of the site or object can be obtained by relating to the past, present, and future context, which enable the development of the design concept.

A primary element of the archaeological study is the analytic method of reconstruction and excavation from the unspecified subject as mentioned in archaeological metaphors in Freud’s work (Bernfeld, 1951). The analyst process attempts to discover the unknown from the fragment, meaning, and behavior of the subject of analysis. For the same case, the archaeologist reconstructs and builds up the building’s wall from the remaining grounds, struggles to determine the unknown numbers of columns from the erasure hollow sign on the floor, and reforms the abstracted form of painting mosaics or murals from the leftover ruins. As a spatial designer, the starting point of the design process can be explored through the lenses of archaeological study when the subject (context, site, object, key concept, or anything) of analytical work is still unspecified and abstract. Therefore, archaeological study as the process of analysis of the unknown is one of the potential approaches for developing the preliminary idea of spatial intervention in the design process.

The subject of the archaeology of interior architecture is not entirely novel and applied in some previous studies. McCarthy (2011) investigated the subject of interior archaeology as an illustration of where interior architecture and history are connected. She described interior archaeology as when the building or object excavation process uncovers historic objects. This process decides the building and objects design modifications. As a case study, this work examined the archaeological site in New Zealand, specific to the glass material as a primary role in constructing and mediating this theoretical context. Another works by European Association of Archaeologists (Vila et al., 2003) presented ‘Architectural archaeology’ and published the *Archaeotecture: Archaeology of Architecture*. *Archaeotecture* is the compilation of works concerned with studying constructions and architectonic spaces, analyzed from an archaeological perspective. Most of these works focus on the architectonic heritage from historical periods. By gathering the different approaches to all types of architecture and periods, *archaeotecture* attempted to offer the possibilities of application in designing plans for the direction of old towns, creating maps detailing regional techniques, and the conservation of heritage construction and restoration projects.

The two above works present the idea of archaeology in spatial design, which focuses more on the practical project in the context of a heritage site. One more project based on archaeology from the design theory point of view includes *Architecture of archaeology: Investigation into Unknown* by Travaglini (2002). This project explored the relationship between archaeology and architecture by weaving the process of these two disciplines where the uncertainty of an architectural design integrates with archaeological conception and its unknown. Both processes deal with the continuous changing; therefore, this project proposed the repetitive process of change in the architectural design based on the archaeology practice.

2. Methodology

There are two ideas from the above understanding of the archaeological discipline as an analysis method and the relation to interior architecture study. First, archaeology deals with the material object as

physical remains and second, the study of archaeology underlines the issue of the life cycle of the material. Second, the study of archaeology underlines the issue of the material's life cycle.

2.1 Archaeology and Research into Material

Firstly, archaeology deals with the material object as physical remains, which considers the object of analysis in architecture or interior design production. The study of archaeology suggests the development of architectural discourse by understanding and focusing on an architectural object's material or physical entity. In this case, the archaeological study of space in architecture or interior should illustrate the materiality of a spatial element. Materiality in the design phase refers to the dialogue with the materials (Schön, 1983). Through the archaeological study, it is necessary to focus on the functional and technical properties of the material and the explorative side of the material (Karana et al., 2014). In particular, material study regarding the idea of the archaeology of an interior also encompasses a "personal, experiential, cultural, emotional, environmental, and social aspect" (Bang et al., 2015).

Material research is frequently quite technical and focuses on the engineering field in the design process. However, material research could play another role in correlation to design production at the conceptual level, particularly in the early architectural design phase. Aagaard's project (2015) employed material research as an active initiator in the experimental approach in correlation to architectural design methods and architectural representation. Research into the material in the interior architectural design field also allows one to directly engage with the physical object through the systemized analysis process and explore the formal properties on a real scale. In this case, Zaera-pulo (2005) referred to the material research in the artistic practice, which is not just concerned with the subjective point of view and human consciousness instead focuses on the genuine quality of the material. Therefore, the conceptual design stage can apply the archaeological study of interior architecture where the exploration and experimentation phases are conducted continuously. Through the material research in the archaeology of the interior, it should be possible to identify the tangible matter of the space and discover the uncertainty of physical elements in the design site.

2.2 Archaeology and The Question of Obsolescence in Interior Architecture

Secondly, the study of archaeology underlines the issue of the material's life cycle. The definition of archaeology in the previous section suggest that the discipline of archaeology is associated with the analysis and the recovery of material obsolescence to understand the structure of one culture. The process of excavating the remaining material involves the period as a parameter that is not just limited to the past but also includes the present and the future.

In the architectural and interior design discipline, the loss of value or material obsolescence intends as a part of an initial state of the object's life cycle in which the designer should conceive (Nobels et al., 2015). The aspect of "changing", whether in the scale of an object or architectural space, could be shown by the evolution of shape, surface, and material properties. The question of future use has been taken into account on the part of study archaeology of interior architecture where the parameter of time and lifetime in design become the significant challenges, especially in fast-replacing goods society (Vezzoli & Manzini, 2008) (van Hinte, 2004).

The possible design approach is proposed by revealing the object's beauty during the lifetime and by considering the notion of "use" and "after use" of the object to avoid the object obsolescence in the design production (Bourlanges & Khurtova, 2015). The archaeological study offers the possibility to explore critically and interpret the fundamental material value within the time, starting by digging the past aspect, uncovering the present characteristic, and imagining the future potentiality of one particular element. Moreover, during the process of repurposing the decayed material through the lenses of archaeology, three design method should be rethought as a spatial designer. First, "use" means more than the limitations of an ordinarily set of function and consumption points of view. Second, what

remains the "after use" is not waste or outdated, but a memory that adds something to the object's story as well as a projection that adjusts to its utility. Lastly, how we could design and present an alternative future of awareness of the past to the audience.

3. Results

This case study is the student studio project in discovering the topic of archaeology and interior architecture by investigating the selected archetype of an interior element through a physical and poetic approach. The project aimed to sensitively respond and take a personal stand on "use" regarding the issue of obsolescence in interior architecture. Comprehending the archaeology of archetype elements of the interior involves investigating how the designer will develop chosen spatial elements beyond its restrictions of function and purpose. The student began the design process by first deciding on the subject of choice defined as an archetype element of an interior, a personal essence of interior space: a window, a door, a closet, stairs, a floor, bookshelves, etc. The student chose the rusty metal stairs as the selected element in this study case. The designer investigated the element on the 1:1 scale by using various techniques. Therefore, it was essential to select or acquire the actual subject which will allow doing such physical research.

The next step was to discover the element through a physical and poetic approach. Each archetype object's physical implication and poetic meaning will be investigated in-depth and on a real scale based on specific features and parameters using direct techniques such as imprints, footage, casting, enlarging details, photocopying, etc. On the other hand, the student also questioned the value of the selected object, considering its detailed volume of material, the duration, and the complexity of transformation. To emerge the conceptual standpoint of the project, students also discover approaches to initiate an idea between physical matter and poetic sense. In this phase, the concentration of matter-fact of the object is combined with conceptual speculation in imagining the pre-life and anticipating the post-life of the chosen element.

As an example, the student attempted to do both physical and poetic approaches in this phase. Figure 2 dan Figure 3 illustrates the physical exploration of stairs as a selected archetype element of an interior. It focused on the opportunity to understand in-depth through casting the object into parts and components. During the early phase of exploration, the student applied the technique of material casting by using plaster (Figure 2) and plastic tape (Figure 3) as a tool. In this conceptual phase, the student attempted to analyze the physical shape of the stairs and tried to discover how the stairs have a dialogue with the user's body as an initial design idea.



Figure 2. Casting the Formal Properties of the Stairs as Object

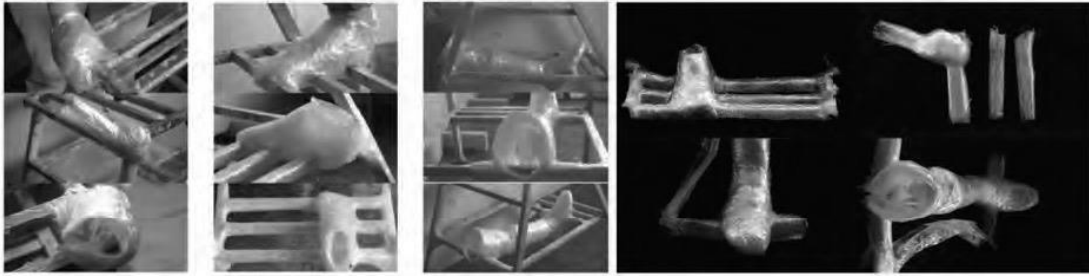


Figure 3. Exploring the Formal Properties of the Stairs as Object Related to Body



Figure 4. Series of Body Locomotion

On the other hand, the concentration on the physical matter discipline combined with conceptual speculation included sense and imagination, which refers to poetic analysis. Figure 4 shows the student assumption of the idea of stairs as body supporting tools. The student conducted a series of locomotion in exploring the physical form of the stairs. After deciding the specific approach, the student developed a personal method to capture it into materials. The particular techniques and types of material will be thoroughly investigated, embracing the analytical and conceptual input. The student also included her intuition of will as an individual practice of experimentation and the conceptual consequence of a chosen material and technique. This series of processes exploring formal properties and material experimentations will expand toward designing spatial installation on a 1:1 scale (figure 4). In this project, the stairs as an archetypal element of the interior become a spatial installation with the idea "Stairs as Body Prosthesis" presented in the exhibition place in Rotterdam. This project investigates the newly spatial context as a public installation or commodity where the stairs will settle. This spatial installation shows the process of exploring the stairs' alternative future life by conducting archaeology of interior architecture as a design approach.

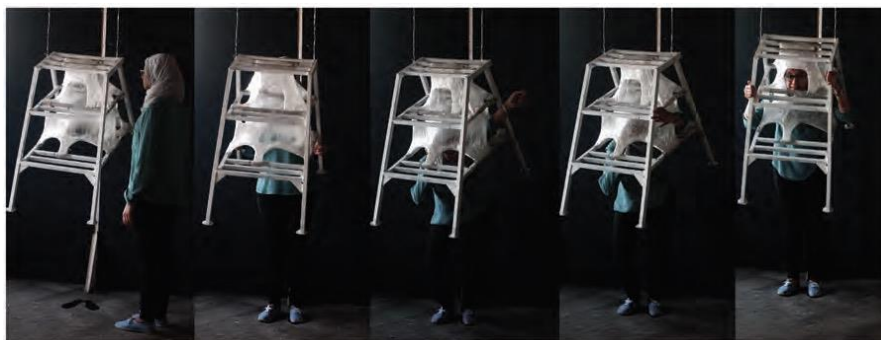


Figure 5. Stairs as Body Prosthesis

4. Conclusion

In the earlier student's works, the concentration on the matter-fact discipline is combined with conceptual speculation, including sense and imagination, which I refer to as poetic analysis. In the research archaeology of the interior, the poetic analysis of the chosen archetype promoted the understanding of the matter to imagine the pro-life and discover the speculative future of the element: post-life. Zaera-pulo (2005) referred to this artistic methodology as an alchemist practice who was deeply involved with the material; he manipulated the process of materialization with symbols, images, and ideologies to bring the matter alive. In the context of reanalysing the obsolete object, studying through the physical and poetic approach of the object is possible to augment the material ultimately and becomes an essential foundation for a design practice that could sensitively respond and take a personal stand on adaptive reuse practice.

To work with the aspect of archaeology in architectural design is to deal with the idea of recalling memories and set the state of remembrance for the user. By referencing RuskinJ (1906) in 'Seven Lamps of Architecture, He describes that architectonic is in line with literature which performs as cumulative memory, particularly memorial values in our environment. Therefore, to pursue this aspect of personal remembrance, Joris (2014) in his work, proposed the narrative and storytelling approach implicit in the design of the object. In addition, designing the memorial object does not have to be outstanding; rather, involving designing places or objects for the everyday experience of the inhabitant as well considering the specific experiential and sensory quality. This subjective experience is expressed through narrative and storytelling approaches. As we can see through the above student work, the narrative and the personal point of view when redesigning the obsolete object become of the utmost importance. Although there is still a lack of study regarding the variety of designed obsolete objects after using other archetype elements in the interior, the practice of archaeology as a design methodology still needs to be improved in the interior design studio in the future.

This study introduced the idea of the archaeology of an interior through well-recorded analysis and material experimentation in the process of physical translation of archetype elements of an interior. The design process is mainly conducted by emphasizing the notion of "after use" and imagining the "future use" of the object to tackle the issue of the obsolete interior. This study becomes an essential basis for understanding the role of an interior architect in responding to the subject of the decayed interior from the other point of view by taking a personal stand for "use" and "after use" beyond the conventional idea of functional space. In the context of repurposing obsolete stairs as archetype elements, studying through the physical and poetic approach of the object is possible to intensify the materiality and becomes an essential foundation for a design practice that could sensitively respond and take a personal stand on the spatial design process.

Acknowledgment

We are thankful to the STUNED (Studeren in Nederland) scholarship for funding a master program of the author under Thematic Design Studio 3 of Master Interior Architecture Program in Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam University of Applied Science, Rotterdam.

Reference

- Aagaard, A. K. (2015). Materials Driven Architectural Design and Representation in Tangible Means Experiential Knowledge through Materials. *EKSIG 2015–KOLDING International Conference 2015 of the Design Research Society Special Interest Group on Experiential Knowledge*.
- Abramson, D. M. (2016). *Obsolescence: An Architectural History*. University of Chicago Press.

- Almarcegui, L. (2013). in *Materiales de construccion del pabellon de espana, Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale 2013*. <https://vernissage.tv/2013/07/08/lara-almarcegui-spanish-pavilion-venice-art-biennale-2013>
- Bang, A. L., Buur, J., Lonne, I. A., & Nimkulrat, N. (2015). Tangible Means - Experiential Knowledge through Materials. *EKSIG 2015–KOLDING International Conference 2015 of the Design Research Society Special Interest Group on Experiential Knowledge*.
- Bernfeld, S. C. (1951). Freud and archeology. *American Imago*, 8(2), 107–128.
- Bourlanges, M., & Khurtova, E. (2015). *Matter and memory an archaeology of the interior*. MIARD, Piet Zwart Institute.
- Dekkers, M. (2000). *The Way of All Flesh: A Celebration of Decay*. Harvill Press.
- dictionary.com. (2017). *Archaeology*. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/archaeology>
- E. D. Hirsch, Joseph F. Kett, & James S. Trefil. (2002). *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Edgar, A., & Sedgwick, P. (2007). *Cultural theory: The key concepts* (A. Edgar & P. Sedgwick, Eds.). Routledge.
- Joris, E. (2014). Drawing as a third party phenomena. *THE MEDIATED CITY CONFERENCE. Architecture_MPS*.
- Karana, E., Pedgley, O., & Rognoli, V. (2014). *Materials Experience: Fundamentals of Materials and Design*. Butterworth-Heinemann.
- McCarthy, C. (2011). Glazing over the Past: Thoughts on Interior Archaeology. *Interiors*, 2(2), 169–187.
- Minale, M. (2014). *Past, Present, Future*. MIARD, Piet Zwart Institute.
- Nobels, E., Ostuzzi, F., Levi, M., Rognoli, V., & Detand, J. (2015). Materials, Time and Emotion: how materials change in time? *Tangible Means Experiential Knowledge through Materials. EKSIG 2015–KOLDING International Conference 2015 of the Design Research Society Special Interest Group on Experiential Knowledge*.
- RuskinJ. (1906). *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. George Allen.
- Schön, D. (1983). *Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*. Ashgate.
- Travaglini, M. (2002). in *Architecture of archaeology: Investigation into Unknown*. www.presidentsmedals.com/Entry-9111
- van Hinte, E. (2004). *Eternally yours: time in design: product value sustenance*. 010 Publishers.
- Vezzoli, C. A., & Manzini, E. (2008). *Design for environmental sustainability*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Vila, X. M. A., Blanco, R., & Borrazas, M. (2003). *Archaeotecture: archaeology of architecture*. British Archaeological Reports.
- Zaera-pulo, A. (2005). *Alchemical Brother in Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History:[Ausstellung. Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA (P. Ursprung, Ed.). Springer Science & Business Media*.