

Architectural Palimpsest and Its Effect on Cultural Identity A Tool of Manipulation and Its Social Power

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* Supported by Beijing Social Science Foundation (20LSC014)

* Supported by Scientific Research Program of Beijing Municipal Education Commission (KM202110016016)

* Supported by Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Future Urban Design (X20021)

Abstract

Palimpsest is a re-editing process in which the existing layers of objects or traces were covered or removed, partially or completely. As the architectural heritage can be understood as accumulation of layers, thus palimpsest could effectively modify the interpretation of it. To achieve particular goals such as manipulating cultural identity, by erasing and covering the “unpleasant” layers, palimpsest could blur and twist the information and connotation that people receive from the heritage. In a way, the architectural palimpsest could cause double damages to the heritage, one is the irreversible destruction of authentic historical information, another one is blurring the way that people interpret the history and cultural identity.

By comparing the past scenario with present, architectural palimpsest could be identified, but to explore the way that palimpsest get realized, as well as its influence on cultural identity, one has to look through the evidence to see the motivation and method of an architectural palimpsest, especially in the situation that the palimpsest producer deliberately tried to blur the authenticity.

This paper takes Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba and Nuremburg historical cityscape as examples, by briefly overlooking the past and present existences, it tries to review the possible purpose, method, process and consequences of these intentional architectural palimpsest. Meantime, the

paper also tries to open up a perspective for researches on social dimensions of architectural heritage, and it is hoped that this paper could raise the awareness of architectural palimpsest in the past, and especially the ones being created at present.

Its evil day must come at last; but let it come declaredly and openly, and let no dishonoring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory.

—John Ruskin,

Seven Lamps of Architecture

Palimpsest, a tool of modifying historical layers

Palimpsest, from Greek word palimpsēstos (παλιμψηστος), which consists of palin “again” and psēstos “rubbed smooth”.^[1] As the stemming shows, it describes a re-editing process in which the original existence was covered or removed, partially or completely. Originally, palimpsest was mainly used to reuse the costly parchment in the era when papyrus and paper were not widely applied. In early era, people would write another layer of texts in different direction on top of original texts. Later on, some church scholars developed a technique that uses mixture of milk and oat bran to wash parchment for getting blank surfaces to write new content on. In this way, the faint remains of the former writing would have a chance to reappear after years, and this provides a possibility that people could discover and decipher the original text later on.^[2] At that moment, palimpsest was more or less a neutral tool that few people would doubt the authenticity of information after the new modified layers, since the techniques require considerable amount of expenses and time.

Considering the history as a process of accumulating layers, the information and its evidence of past would be gradually covered by newer ones in the stream of time. Thus, removing or modifying the historical layers of heritages would cause inevitable damages to its historical information. However, palimpsest could do more. Imagine when people scrape out some layers, they would have chances to decide which layers to be taken out, “beautified” or exposed, that could make another level of impact to the heritage. Undoubtedly, this action could effectively erase the “unpleasant” layers and leave the wanted ones for others to read and interpret, in order to blur and twist the information and connotation that people receive from the heritage. According to the purposes and demands, the architectural palimpsest could be carried out in the forms of superimposition, blur, clip and collage, etc.

With these fascinated advantages, in the history, manipulating heritage or architecture by palimpsest to influent cultural identity is always a cost-effective option for people who want to obtain supreme social power. Because as Moha Ennaji indicated, “culture is the content within which people exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the glue that binds a group of people together. Cultural identity can be described as an internal power of belonging that links people together as a unity.”^[3] As the indispensable carrier of cultural identity, heritage or architectural existences with intentional modification, could also be utilized as beacon and weapon. Meanwhile, the intentional palimpsest is commonly utilized to achieve goals in various aspects, such as religion, politics and culture, with the manipulated restoration as tools and covers.

This paper thus takes two specific examples, Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba and Nuremburg historical cityscape out from abundant evidences, by overlooking the past and present existences, tries to review the possible purposes, methods, process and consequences of these intentional architectural palimpsest.

Stratigraphy of a church.

Cordoba

In Medieval age, Christians and Muslims competed to acquire dominant power over Mediterranean rim, so the places on the boundary such as Spain inevitably became battle

field. But the war was not always carried out by swords, erasing people’s original belief was a more efficient way to stabilize the conquered people. Thus, the religious architecture became witness and victims of this “war”. Some buildings were directly demolished, some others may still luckily stand, but were palimpsest to represent the glory of another religion.

In Cordoba, the most iconic architecture is the Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba. As the title implies, there is a complicated history between the Christians and Muslims in Cordoba. Since the Roman administration, Cordoba had become one of the most important cities in the region. In the later several centuries, the domination and jurisdiction of the city passed through Byzantine Empire and Visigoths, until it was conquered by Muslims in 8th Century. Because Cordoba locates besides the Strait of Gibraltar, it is one of the first places where Muslims from North Africa landed in Europe, and the frontier where cultures and religions encounter and mutually influent.

The site of the Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba was originally occupied by a Roman temple during the Roman regime, then Visigoths replaced it by Christian Basilica of San Vicente after the occupation. When Cordoba was conquered by Muslims in 711AD, Abd al-Rahman I converted the church into mosque.^[4]

As the rehabilitation of Visigoths’ heritage, the Great Mosque was not firstly built in the present scale. At beginning, the mosque was even smaller than the previous church buildings cluster. While, some of the previous church materials were reused in the construction, which were deliberately damaged to remove Christian traces.^[5] Afterwards, since the Muslims’ regime got consolidated and developed, the mosque received several expansions in the ninth and tenth centuries. The major part of the mosque, the Prayer Room was enlarged and upgraded three times under decrees of Abd Al Rahman II, Al Rahman III and Almanzor. Until the era of Almanzor, as previous Sultans expected, the Great Mosque of Cordoba had become extremely significant that made city of Cordoba recognized as important as Baghdad, Jerusalem and Damascus for Muslims.^[6]

In 1236, Cordoba was captured by King Ferdinand III and Christians. People soon started to remove the influence of Muslims, not

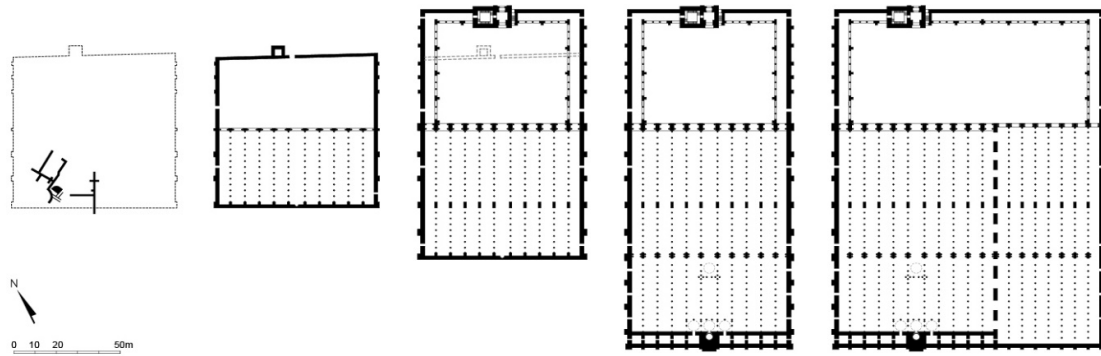


Figure 1. Historical plans of the Great Mosque of Cordoba (in ages of Visigoths, Al Rahman I, Al Rahman II, Al Rahman III, Almanzor). Historical plans of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, <http://archnet.org/collections/843/publications/1237>, Author modified

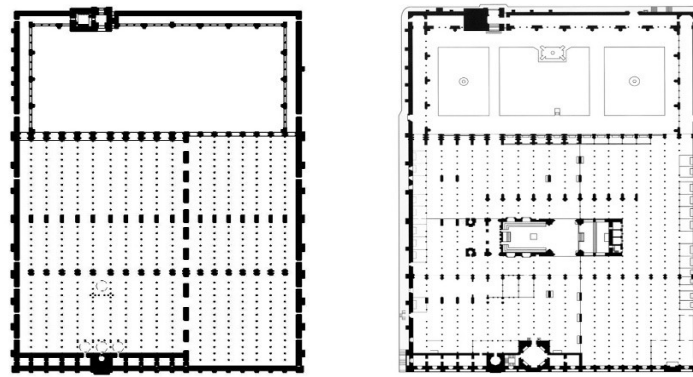


Figure 2. Plan comparison between the Mosque and Cathedral. Historical plans of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, <http://archnet.org/collections/843/publications/1237>, Author modified

surprisingly, the Great Mosque of Cordoba became the first priority to deal with. Because of its enormous historical value and reputation in Islamic world, people decided not to demolish it. Instead, they restored it and turned it into church by only adding chapels, burial spaces and other ritual architectural components, left the main layout of the mosque untouched. Just as what Muslim did to Basilica of San Vicente, by the architectural palimpsest, the radical social and religious transformation could be lightened, meanwhile, the authoritativeness of King Ferdinand III was thus established. Just as Jerrilynn Dodds' comments, "The Christians who conquered Córdoba understood that there was much more power to be gained from appropriating this extraordinary metaphor of their conquest than from destroying it."^[7]

Around beginning of 15th century, a purge movement was carried out in Spain. Muslims and Jews were given compulsory options, leaving the country or converting their belief to Christianity. But for architectures, there wasn't that much choices, like the mosques in Toledo, Granada, Seville and other cities were completely demolished and replaced by gothic or renaissance churches. In 16th Century, under the decree from Charles V, the central arches of Great Mosque were removed, in order to insert a choir in Gothic Style. By this act of "destruction", with possibly some senses of revenge, the characteristic of the architecture was completely changed. The original roofs, columns, arcades and walls of Great Mosque became architectural attachments of the new cathedral.

As previously mentioned, architectural palimpsest on the Great Mosque to gain social power was not first, and certainly not the end. For instance, after the conquest of Constantinople by Ottoman Empire in 1453AD, the Muslims did exactly the same thing to Hagia Sofia which was the greatest church in the world at that time, and furthermore, the spatial typology of Hagia Sofia was applied and spread among the Turkish mosques. In some way, it is not occasional.

Although modifying the mosque into a church was an effective method and tool to claim the authority of Christianity upon Islam, it indeed happened to preserve the past historical layers from being erased. But, from the Muslim's point of view, the Great Mosque Cathedral is not only the symbol of past glory, but also the witness of their loss of social power. Hence, some of the Muslims and their community require to pray inside the cathedral with the reason that the cathedral was restored from a mosque. For Christians, to fight back this appeal, they opened up the archeological excavation site of Basilica of San Vicente inside the cathedral, which was actually found back to 1930s. Meantime, a museum was set to exhibit the relics and antiques of Visigoth's period origins from Basilica of San Vicente. In a way, people could claim the rights to this sacred land and the cathedral above. [8]

Apparently, the Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba had never extricated from being the frontier between religions and social groups. In the foreseeable future, the conflict between Christians and Muslims on Mosque Cathedral would not be easily settled. Because the way of defining these historical monuments, which has tremendous social influence, would effect on various aspects of society. For a simple instance, considering the name of the cathedral, should it be a cathedral Mosque or a mosque Cathedral? And this all depends on how people see and interpret about those layers of history, which is the intrinsic power of the architectural palimpsest.

**A past never exist
Nuremberg**

Nuremberg, which was considered as the "unofficial capital" of the Holy Roman Empire and center of German Renaissance, is one of the most important cities in German history, [9] and its historical features of architecture and

landscape highly represents the German cultural identity and pride. Thus, when Nazi took the authority, Nuremberg was praised to become one of the symbols of German race and culture. For this reason, Hitler and Nazi held their party rallies there, in order to maximize their legitimation, glory and prestige by taking advantage of cultural significance of the city.

To achieve this goal, various modern buildings in Third Reich Style were built in Nuremberg, such as Zeppelin Tribune, Luitpold Arena, the New Reich Chancellery and so on. In these designs, purified forms, classical façade proportion and simplified materials were applied to generate an atmosphere of monumentality and eternity. Meanwhile, imitating the traditional German architecture also played an irreplaceable role in this process. Quite some important buildings like Hermann Goring Heim were built by Teutonic folk architectural elements such as steep roof and white façade with timber structure. Together with Third Reich Style architecture, these buildings were created to remind people their past greatness and to stimulate the inner pride of German multitude.

In Nuremberg, the Hauptmarkt is the historical city center, due to its symbolic meaning, it was chosen for parades and rally related activities. But for Nazi "traditional" aesthetic preference, the building style around the square was not enough "original" in the German context. For example, according to Heinrich Hohn who is a staff member of the German National Museum, the neo-gothic building right beside the cathedral is an "unbearable foreign body" that



Figure 3. A postcard illustrating Hermann Goring Heim, <https://www.akpool.co.uk/postcards/26032529-postcard-moelln-in-schleswig-holstein-hermann-goering-heim>

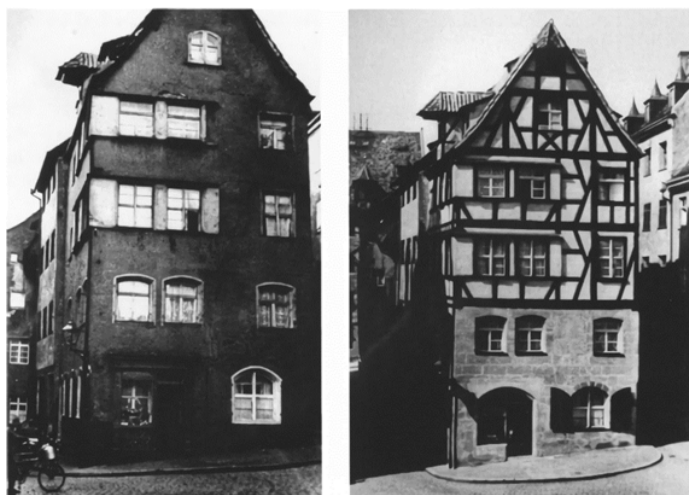


Figure 4. Telegraph Building, before and after “restoration”, Joshua Hagen

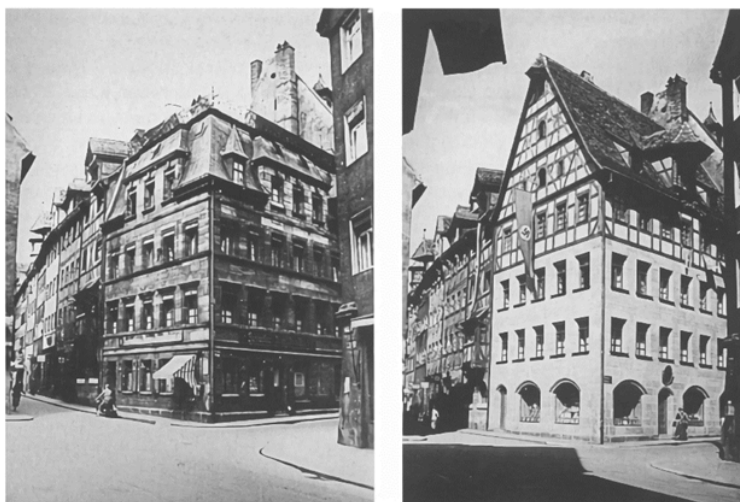


Figure 5. Building on Ebnersgasse, before and after “restoration”, Joshua Hagen

disturbed the square's medieval charm. ^[10] Therefore, with the support of people who were motivated by the national pride, a process of architectural palimpsest in the name of “restoration” started.

During late 1933 and early 1934, besides the improvement of infrastructure in the square, plenty of architectures in the city center received “restoration” to rebuild the “Teutonic appearance”. The Telegraph Building was one of them. To reach those Nationalists’ aesthetic standard, the Telegraph Building was completely reshaped. The paints on the façade was removed, and three sects of façade was exposed to complement neighboring structures and create a more orderly aesthetic scenario. As the traditional German architectures, the ground

and first floor of Telegraph Building showed the materials of stone block, upper level was structured with timber beams, trusses and columns with the wall painted white. And for those modern architecture, the works like realigning windows and doors, or applying traditional color and materials were soon carried out, in order to harmonize the building facades surrounding the square to conform with Nazi visual and ideological preference. ^[11]

For some buildings, the “restoration” was not simply replacing the materials to timber and stone, but was also a work of construction. Like a building on Ebnersgasse, its top used to be a combination of flat roof and decorative windows. Later on, the levels above second floor were completely reshaped to form the

steep roof and triangle timber-structure gable wall. While, on the ground floor, the windows and gates were also reorganized and designed to generate a more formal appearance.

In fact, these are only miniatures of this process. Meantime, many of municipal historical architectures also underwent some degree of “restoration” during the Nazi period, including the town hall, the Holy Spirit Hospital and town's churches. Besides, the local residential and commercial buildings were also renovated to an “Old German” look by exposing half-timbering, as well as removing obtrusive signs of commerce and modern architectural components like flat roofs. By doing this architectural palimpsest, many buildings were dressed to meet folk’s taste, as a local administrative report celebrated, “one of the ugliest homes in the old town has today become one of the most beautiful”.^[12]

Since then, the general appearance of Nuremberg was dragged back to that illusory glorious medieval German capital, even it may not exist in any period of history. In another word, these buildings were shifted from true historical existences to the “heritage products”. This intentional challenge to authentic historical layers by Nazi is brutal and obvious, but by spreading this bottom up transformation process, almost no one was excluded to be a supporter intentionally or unconsciously. Nuremberg is an extreme example to see how the nationalism was raised up by re-forging the cultural identity, even the cityscape never existed in that way in the history. Together with other propaganda efforts, architectural palimpsest clearly became a dangerous provocative. Nazi thus enhanced the cultural identity and gained the social power as they expected, while this process eventually brought society the extreme Nationalism and the catastrophe.

Reflection

By comparing the past scenario with present, architectural palimpsest is not hard to identify, but the historical importance and social influence embedded in the current existence are not that easy to extract. One has to look through the appearance to see the reason and motivation of an architectural palimpsest, especially in the situation that the palimpsest producer deliberately tried to blur the authenticity of historical evidence.

At the end, this paper is hoped to open up another perspective for researches on social dimensions of architectural heritage. While, since the architectural palimpsest could cause double damages to the heritages and architecture, one is the destruction of authentic historical information, another one is blurring the way that people interpret history and the cultural identity, it is hoped that this paper could raise the awareness and concern of architectural palimpsest in the past, and especially the ones being created at present.

Endnotes

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