

# ADAPTIVE REUSE AND COUNTERPRESERVATION; A STUDY OF HAUS SCHWARZENBERG

STAŠA KOLAR, DAVID PUČKO

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana, Slovenia  
Sk9921@student.uni-lj.si, dp9400@student.uni-lj.si

Sustainable development has throughout the years become an important topic in multiple fields. Despite this, it is rarely approached from a sociologically spatial intersection. This is the perspective from which we tackle sustainable development in this article, where we question the sustainability aspects of two different approaches in the field of building renovation. Our attention is drawn to the unique image of Haus Schwarzenberg, which with its antique appearance, strongly stands out from the rest of the Mitte neighborhood. We first approach the problem of sustainability from the perspective that Sanders calls counterpreservation, as well as from the slightly more familiar approach of adaptive re-use. We are interested in what these approaches to preserving historical authenticity bring to their immediate environment and what their impact is on society as such is. Even more than their impact here and now, we also analyze its prospects for the future and what potential counterpreservation and adaptive re-use carry with them.

DOI  
[https://doi.org/  
10.18690/um.epf.5.2024.50](https://doi.org/10.18690/um.epf.5.2024.50)

ISBN  
978-961-286-867-3

**Keywords:**  
counterpreservation,  
adaptive re-use,  
Haus Schwarzenberg,  
revitalization,  
Mitte

**JEL:**  
A13

## 1 Introduction

According to most theoretical understandings, sustainability is most often comprised of three aspects, i.e. the environmental, the social and the economic aspect (Kalandides and Gresillons, 2021). Focusing mainly on the social aspect of sustainability, we analyze markers such as quality of life while, at the same time, remain aware of the importance of an intersectional approach to sustainability (Miltin, 1992). Stemming from this approach, which draws from the knowledgebase of spatial sociology, we approach the issue from the perspective of the sustainable neighborhood (Medved, Kim and Uršič, 2019), which in and of itself brings many different approaches to renovation and adaptation that have been implemented in the past. Because of this, we choose to focus on two similar but still differing concepts, counterpreservation and adaptive re-use.

Counterpreservation is a relatively new concept in the field of urbanism, which was described by Sanders (2016). It provides a very unique insight into the retention of historical context of a structure through the preservation of its architectural features. It makes use of the dilapidated and the tarnished in order to preserve an authentic story, but, at the same time, it often serves as a bulwark in activists' fight against gentrification or other political intervention due to its resistance to revitalization guidelines. Adaptive re-use, on the other hand, is a far older approach that has been rigorously studied in architectural papers although it is much less present in sociological treatises. Adaptive re-use is similar to counterpreservation in its aim to rehabilitate old and unused buildings for a new socially beneficial use, although the two also have some meaningful differences which we will elaborate on at a later point.

We ground all these concepts on the example of Haus Schwarzenberg. It is a place for alternative artists and their studios, the galleries as well as a cafe, two museums and more. It is a building that has hosted a diverse population and served different purposes throughout its history, a housing complex, a broom factory, and a space for the development of alternative art. (Haus Schwarzenberg e.V., n.d.)

## 2 Literature review

The definition of sustainable development consists of two aspects (Jabareen, 2008; Robinson, 2004; Paris and Kates, 2003 and Mitlin, 1992), that is the aspect of sustainability or what is to be sustained and the aspect development or what is to be developed. Mitlin (1992), Deakin (2001) and Parris and Kates (2003) all use a similar definition, with Deakin (2001, p. 6) stating that “today, sustainable development is widely viewed as development that improves the standard of living and quality of life, while at the same time protecting and enhancing the natural environment and honoring local culture and history”; Mitlin (1992) presents quite a few more authors’ perspectives, such as that of Pearce et. al. (1989) (in Mitlin, 1992, p. 112), who focus on economics and who see sustainability as the possibility of wealth retention or growth. Some authors even contest the idea of further development entailing economic or productive expansion; instead, they advocate for ideas such as post- or de-growth (Shulz and Bailey, 2014).

Within the purview of sustainable development, one model that has proven quite popular in Europe is the sustainable neighborhood. Looking at Germany more closely, Medved, Kim and Uršič (2019, p. 23-25) focus their analysis on the neighborhood of Vauban (Freiburg), calling it a “typical example of a ‘bottom-up approach’ in sustainable urbanism” (Medved, Kim and Uršič, 2019, p. 24), and specifically point out the interpersonal organizational element of the local community, while emphasizing its focus on green spaces and communal gardens and “numerous multi-residential passive houses created by the bottom-up cooperatives” (Medved, Kim and Uršič, 2019, p. 24). This demonstrates a “socially oriented approach to housing development”, and “encourages more intensive, daily face-to-face contact between neighbors” (Medved, Kim and Uršič, 2019, p. 26).

Within this framework of the sustainable neighborhood, the first concept we are concerned with is the idea of adaptive re-use. In the simplest of terms, adaptive re-use is a process in which a historic building is renovated and put to use in a new context than its original purpose, with some authors also adding that it stresses the importance of preservation (Lah, 2019; Mohamed, Boyle, Yang and Tangari, 2017; Mısırlısoy and Günçe, 2016). Lah (2019, p. 143-144) offers several examples of adaptive re-use, from “schools converted to condominiums,” to “factories to artist studios”. Importantly, adaptive re-use is not a new process; however, modern

adaptive re-use strategies are far more systemic when compared to the adaptive re-use of the past (Mohamed, Boyle, Yang and Tangari, 2017; Mısırlısoy and Günçe, 2016; Sandler, 2016). Adaptive re-use is also one of the most efficient practices of sustainable development, because it reuses the 'embodied energy', here defined as "the total energy required for the acquisition, processing, production, supply and installation of building material on the construction site" (Lah, 2019, p. 145) that was used to construct the building, which puts much less stress on the environments' natural resources (Lah, 2019; Mısırlısoy and Günçe, 2016). Adaptive re-use also brings several social benefits to the communities around it (Lah, 2019; Mohamed, Boyle, Yang and Tangari, 2017; Mısırlısoy and Günçe, 2016), as "renovation of the building heritage preserves knowledge, professions, jobs and favorably impacts on economic development", while maintaining "the identity of the space, the appearance of the landscape and its attractiveness" (Lah, 2019, p. 146).

When talking about adaptive re-use, it would not be unreasonable to also examine the process of gentrification, which often accompanies its implementation. Gentrification has many different and varying definitions, but what they have in common is that gentrification can be explained as "a process of spatial and social differentiation" (Zukin, 1987, p. 131). More modern definitions define the problem as a process within urban transition, in which "low property investment spurs a process of reinvestment and an accompanying shift in social demographics and built form." (Mathews, 2010, pp. 660-661). Adaptive re-use can, in this way, be seen as a gentrifying process in its very concept as it entirely revolves around the redevelopment of unprofitable and unused structures (Lah, 2019).

There are other processes of social development that buck this trend in some way. The process of revitalization often follows rigid guidelines, with orders coming from the top of complex political structures of governments or cities. However, there are some alternative approaches which tackle the idea of revitalization in a different, unconventional way. Plevoets and Sowinsk-Heim (2018) describe alternative approaches in urban planning with the words such as "DIY, "guerilla" and "insurgent". In 2016, the topic of city subcultural image was addressed by Sandler, who, in her work, described in detail an alternative project that is based on the initiative of the population and requires low costs, coining the term counterpreservation.

Counterpreservation is an innovative and unique approach to preserving the architectural, symbolic as well as purposeful features of the space. It is an approach in which the decay of the building is treated as genuine and desirable in terms of preserving the cultural heritage and historical characteristics of the space. Sandler (2011) describes counterpreservation as an organic approach to preservation that opposes rigid state guidelines on downtown revitalization. Counterpreservation often serves as a resistance to ruling politics. After the fall of the Berlin wall, counterpreservation served as an answer to three sociopolitical factors: gentrification, historical memory, and unification (Sandler, 2016, p. 20). The concept of counterpreservation therefore houses within it more than only the retention of an authentic historical image, but is also the consequence of activist demands, which are hinged on either the need for attainable housing costs, or on general accessibility of public spaces for everyone. It is the very activist potential of individual structures, which allows for their transformation and gives them meaning in a wider societal context. Without the activist tendency to preserve historical heritage and rebel against ruling ideologies, the decaying buildings would be merely aesthetically unsatisfactory complexes, and it is precisely because of the aesthetic deviation from the surrounding environment, that they are of vital importance to the population of the studied area.

Even though counterpreservation is often used by activists to oppose attempts at gentrification, we must mention that in some cases it can wield inverse results. To see this, we need to look at the role of art and artists in gentrification. Mathews (2010, p. 663) points out that artists themselves can be a powerful gentrifier, as due to their uncertain economic status and other factors related to their work, they most often occupy “marginal spaces of the downtown for their central location, social tolerance, aesthetic, and monetary appeal”, such as old lofts and factories, driving up their value in the process. This label of gentrifier can also be extended to art itself, as it is often used in a wider process of spatial aestheticization, with the end goal of attracting more investors (Mathews, 2010, p. 662). We can see the echoes of this in Sandler’s (2016, p. 22) analysis of Berlin itself as she notes: “The rebelliousness of Berlin’s alternative culture has itself become a tourist attraction, and as it increases the city’s desirability and cachet, it also increases its real estate prices.”

### 3 Case study

The findings presented in this study are the result of a hybrid methodological approach which combines a historical review of the existing literature on the development and transformation of the area of Haus Schwarzenberg with a field study that was conducted at the location and which included detailed observations of its characteristics and elements that connect it to our overarching concepts of adaptive reuse and counterpreservation.

Haus Schwarzenberg is a complex in the Miete district, which has been known to attract the attention of passers-by with its vintage visage as it stands out from the otherwise aesthetically consistent presentation of Hackescher Markt. The Haus Schwarzenberg project is backed by the organization Schwarzenberg e.V., which is concerned with the promotion of young alternative artists. In the time after the fall of the Berlin wall, the organization entered the then completely dilapidated building, which they cleaned of mold and equipped it with basic safeguards, giving it a new meaning for the local community in the coming years (Haus Schwarzenberg e.V., n.d.). The project of Haus Schwarzenberg represents the antithesis of the revitalization directives of the city center. Berlin has, to a certain extent, abandoned the traditional idea of urban development, which has been “superseded by an approach aimed chiefly at image creation by prioritizing aesthetics and culture in planning processes” (Brent, Grell, and Holm, 2013, p.53), a practice which is overall aimed at attracting “global players to the city and encouraged their involvement.” (Brent, Grell, and Holm, 2013, p.55)

In general, the area of Hackescher Markt represents a model example of adaptive reuse, as the district was originally a market square which was gradually transformed into what it is today. This change is also evident in Haus Schwarzenberg, which has in its own way been reappropriated and transformed into a cultural center itself still containing many features that call back to its storied history (Sandler, 2016, p. 32). Though it is also worthy of note that compared to the systematic top-down approach that most adaptive re-use projects take (Mohamed, Boyle, Yang and Tangari, 2017), the appearance of Haus Schwarzenberg evokes a far more unstructured and less legible feeling (Sandler, 2016, p. 32), a feeling not too unfamiliar to the concept of counterpreservation.

## 4 Discussion

When talking about Haus Schwarzenberg, it can be stated that it stands out even inside its neighborhood. In our view, it is hard to deny that the building represents a wholly unique approach to retaining an authentic historical feeling inside the commercialized district in the heart of Berlin. Despite its standout nature and commendable goals to fight against gentrification, against being forgotten and to elevate alternative art, what arises here is the question of Haus Schwarzenberg's wider social significance, as well as the question of its long-term existence and impact on the environment.

If we approach the area from the perspective of social sustainability, we can confidently state that it plays an important role when it comes to connecting the population in opposition to ruling politics. It is exactly that constant support of the populus that allows Schwarzenberg to maintain the space in the way that Sanders (2016) describes with the word counterpreservation. After a period of long wars and demarcation in this territory, any space that promotes the tolerant coexistence of all ethnic and religious groups seems more than desirable. Mutual support and the desire to maintain contact with one's own past and the past of close and distant relatives, as well as finally living in a peaceful environment, contributed to the fact that the space of alternative culture, which is physically embodied by Haus Schwarzenberg, did not fail like a large part of other attempts at similar spaces. We strongly believe that both the visual appearance as well as the activities carried out inside of it played a large part in retaining this alternative space. The sum of these two components allows for a greater identification with the space and strengthens the feeling of belonging, which consequently creates a connected community that strives to preserve and maintain their district, the people inside it and a greater overall quality of living. Despite several victories in preservation that Haus Schwarzenberg has achieved, its main objective is in our view still more of a utopian dream than a certain future. Already, in the near 30 years of their existence, the Schwarzenberg association has been forced to renovate certain areas of the structure to ensure the safety of visitors. We do acknowledge that Schwarzenberg e.V. strives to keep Haus Schwarzenberg as authentic as possible; however, even as is, this type of preservation cannot be sustained forever, especially inside an area that is in constant use. We must concede that at some point in the future it will be necessary to adapt the excessive area of this cultural complex, which will gradually blur the

boundaries of individual periods which today are reflected in the spatial image of Haus Schwarzenberg.

However, that change is not in our view a negative one. Already in its current form, it can be argued that individual periods of history are hidden behind the renovations that took place before Schwarzenberg e.V. took over the building. Haus Schwarzenberg is therefore a combination of counterpreservation and adaptive re-use. The changing of the building throughout German history thus subtly dictates its future. Along with the growth of society and its changing needs, the space will also have to adapt to those needs to maintain its relevance within that society. This need to adapt can be seen even in some of the less savory aspects of change we face today, as in many ways Haus Schwarzenberg is slowly becoming more gentrified and commercialized, processes which the people of Schwarzberg e.V. seem to strongly oppose. In fact, this battle is ironic in a way; despite the fact that the district is known for its rebelliousness and alternative bent, it is exactly this oppositional disposition that has caused Haus Schwarzenberg to become one of Berlin's leading tourist attractions, and consequently brought on the rising prices, investor interest and other signifiers of gentrification.

## **5 Conclusions**

In this paper, we have discussed from different aspects the strategies employed in Haus Schwarzenberg's preservation, its path through history and its relation to the concepts of adaptive re-use and counterpreservation. Now at the end, we must answer the question proposed in the very beginning, i.e. what this means for the future of Haus Schwarzenberg and, more broadly, for counterpreservation as a model.

Regarding the first, we can without doubt state that, at least in the short term, there are no problems with which the Schwarzberg e.V. association has not been dealing for a long time. However, this changes when we look at a longer period, as the district will have to contend with the rising questions of gentrification, for which, if the district wishes to halt the process, a different strategy might be required; that is, if the process can even be halted or if that is even desirable. And with this we reach the second long-term problem facing Haus Schwarzberg and one that connects us to the latter question as maybe even an innate weakness of counterpreservation as a



concept that being that it is limited and must by necessity at some point begin compromising on its own ideals due to factors purely outside of its control. Indeed, this might be the problem for which finding a sustainable solution which still holds to the ideals of Schwarzenberg e.V. might prove to be the most challenging task in the future.

## References

- Bernt, M., Grell, B., & Holm, A. (2013). *The Berlin reader: A compendium on urban change and activism*. transcript Verlag.
- Deakin, E. (2001). *Sustainable Development and Sustainable Transportation: Strategies for Economic Prosperity, Environmental Quality, and Equity*. UC Berkeley: Institute of Urban and Regional Development. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0m1047xc>
- Haus Schwarzenberg e.V. (n.d.). *Das Haus*. <https://haus-schwarzenberg.org/>
- Jabareen, Y. (2008). A New Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Development. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 10, 179-192. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-006-9058-z>
- Kalandides, A. & Gresillion, B. (2021) The Ambiguities of “Sustainable” Berlin. *Sustainability*, 13(4): 1666. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041666>
- Lah, L. (2019). Adaptive Re-use of the Built Heritage; Fundamental Principles in the Doctrine of Heritage Conservation. *Prostor*, 27(1(57)), 140-151. [https://doi.org/10.31522/p.27.1\(57\).11](https://doi.org/10.31522/p.27.1(57).11)
- Mathews, V. (2010). Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City. *Geography Compass*, 4, 660-675. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00331.x>
- Medved, P., Kim, J. I. & Ursic, M. (2020). The urban social sustainability paradigm in Northeast Asia and Europe. *International Review for Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development*, 8(4), 16-37.
- Mitlin, D. (1992). Sustainable Development: Guide to the Literature. *Environment and Urbanization*, 4(1), 111-124. [https://doi.org/10.14246/irspsd.8.4\\_16](https://doi.org/10.14246/irspsd.8.4_16)
- Misirlisoy, D. & Günçe, K. (2016). Adaptive reuse strategies for heritage buildings: A holistic approach. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 26, 91-98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2016.05.017>
- Mohamed, R., Boyle, R., Yang, A. Y., & Tangari, J. (2017). Adaptive reuse: a review and analysis of its relationship to the 3 Es of Sustainability. *Facilities*, 35(3/4), 138-154. <https://doi.org/10.1108/F-12-2014-0108>
- Parris, T. M. & Kates, R. W. (2003). Characterizing and Measuring Sustainable Development. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 28, 559-586. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.28.050302.105551>
- Sandler, D. (2011). Counterpreservation: Decrepitude and memory in post-unification Berlin. *Third Text*, 25(6), 687-697.
- Sandler, D. (2016). *Counterpreservation*. In *Counterpreservation*. Cornell University Press.
- Schulz, C. & Bailey, I. (2014). THE GREEN ECONOMY AND POST-GROWTH REGIMES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 96(3): 277–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geob.12051>
- Zukin, S. (1987). Gentrification: Culture and Capital in the Urban Core. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 13, 129–147. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/208324>
- Plevoets, B., & Sowińska-Heim, J. (2018). Community initiatives as a catalyst for regeneration of heritage sites: Vernacular transformation and its influence on the formal adaptive reuse practice. *Cities*, 78, 128-139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.02.007>

