

**Adaptable Architecture: Theory and Practice**

*Robert Schmidt III and Simon Austin*

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The book *Adaptable Architecture: Theory and Practice*, by Robert Schmidt III and Simon Austin, brings both a theoretical and practical contribution to a specific way of dealing with sustainable buildings, maintaining what its title and subtitle (*Theory and Practice*) promise. Whereas this turn of phrase is often connected with an all-embracing view, often leading to an ill-defined practice or related to vague concepts dealt with, this book assumes a specific target: postponing the demolition phase of a building while increasing its useful and/or desirable life span through its “ability” to change, adapting itself to new, different circumstances: sustainability through extension of the number of cycles users can see their requirements satisfied.

The subject was previously investigated in general terms, for example, by Stewart Brand (1995) in the last years of the last century, where he discussed that buildings survive at their best when constantly refined and reshaped by their occupants: in this process, architects are the interpreters of users’ changing needs while their design efforts should reconcile existing constraints and curbs with future use expectancies. “Buildings usually live on past their initial use”. Brand observes, “and already planning for adaptability at the design stage could mean our cities might evolve more easily, with less need for demolitions and wholesale redevelopment”. It could not be better said.

This perspective however is considered more theoretical than heuristic, and the online magazine *The Plan* observes: “While the imperative to create sustainable architecture remains an urgent priority, new buildings with an architectural identity that grows over time are relatively rare [1]”. We have examples of efforts made in this direction, of course. Relatively large-scale programmes with flexibility and adaptability requirements for public housing were established in the 1970s in England, Belgium and Italy, with specific requirements to this purpose established in Regione Emilia-Romagna Building Regulations, following a strong debate on the subject which led to similar regulations in other areas of Italy (Lombardia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Abruzzo). Recently, brilliant ideas were developed with the same keyword, adaptability: an interesting example we find in a mobile gallery designed by a group of Brazilian architects, intended to travel along the river Thames in London. Nevertheless, while such regulations led – in the limited field of public housing – to a systemic vision through the performance approach in the form of specific flexibility/adaptability requirements, a corresponding systemic vision was difficult to find in terms of method under the stance of the designer. This is one of the strong points of this book: it gives not just examples (which are present, historical and present case studies, very interesting and illuminating as they are) but a method, suggesting courses of action in design and “stuffs” of support to designers in their work and their efforts to obtain longer life spans for buildings, “wiring” flexibility and adaptability in them, instead of increasing durability of materials which would be – alone – just a waste of resources and money.



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Ease of practical use is assured by a remarkable amount of summaries, tables and charts, pictures and diagrams.

Whoever is involved in architecture, design and architectural engineering will be interested in this book: both professionals and students will profit of it for inspiring ideas and its practical approach.

Finally, the book is supplemented with more case studies and updated with last-minute info at [www.adaptablefutures.com](http://www.adaptablefutures.com), which guarantees [...] an extended life span.

**Maurizio Costantini**

*Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento, Italy*

#### **Note**

1. The Plan, Triptyque Architecture, Harmonia 57, São Paulo, Brazil, available at: [www.theplan.it/eng/magazine/the-plan-035-07-2009/harmonia57#sthash.brXNpeI1.dpuf](http://www.theplan.it/eng/magazine/the-plan-035-07-2009/harmonia57#sthash.brXNpeI1.dpuf)

#### **Reference**

Brand, S. (1995), *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*.