

Enhancing Umbau – Interdisciplinary Practices & Processes (Aachen, 15–16 Oct 26)

Aachen, Reiff Museum, RWTH Aachen University, Oct 15–16, 2026

Deadline: Jul 10, 2026

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Doctoral researchers are invited to submit proposals for a one-day interdisciplinary colloquium on Umbau – the adaptation, transformation and continued use of existing buildings, neighbourhoods, and urban environments. The colloquium gathers early-career researchers from many disciplines that engage with the built and lived environment, providing a platform to discuss the conditions, practices, and processes of Umbau from an interdisciplinary perspective.

While maintaining, renovating, remodelling and adaptively reusing existing buildings is as old as architecture itself, Umbau remains marginal in a planning and construction culture that still organises around new construction. In Germany, only around 8% of the building stock is expected to consist of new construction between 2022 and 2035; the remaining 92% will involve working with what is already there. Umbau is working with the existing, climate and use adaptation, demographic change, and shifting use requirements. It also reshapes the conditions under which people inhabit and appropriate space – disrupting or reinforcing community ties, producing new contests over belonging and memory, and raising questions about who bears the burdens of transformation and who benefits from it. However, it also encounters persistent obstacles in the form of regulatory frameworks, liability regimes, economic logics, and comfort standards that all favour new construction.

Our aim is to position Umbau as a systematic driver of a resource-efficient, climate-neutral, healthy, just, and aesthetically rich built environment. Consequently, the colloquium will examine Umbau practices as systematised modes of action, knowledge production and lived experience that actors across disciplines employ when engaging with existing buildings and structures. Professional, non-professional, and institutionalised practices – ranging from spontaneous, evolving, experimental to deviant forms – will be considered.

This colloquium is based on the idea that the potential of Umbau is realised at the intersection of disciplines, where architectural design, building conservation, construction, building systems, design computation, urban planning, architectural history, artistic research, and social geography meet, overlap, and interact – bringing together material, spatial, social, cultural, and political perspectives on the built and lived environment.

We invite doctoral researchers to contribute work that explores and advances Umbau practices from multiple disciplines, engaging with interdisciplinary references and intersections – whether

by speaking from one discipline to another, by working at a methodological boundary, or by proposing a genuinely cross-disciplinary research.

Four Core Concepts

To structure the conversation across disciplines, we propose four concepts as shared lenses. Each is broad enough to be addressed from any discipline and sharp enough to surface productive tensions between them. Contributions should engage with at least one, ideally more, of these concepts.

1. Temporality

From real-time design computation to centuries-long historical cycles, Umbau unfolds across intertwined timeframes. How are short-term interventions and long-term consequences negotiated? How do the differing temporal horizons of planners, designers, users, conservators and investors come into contact? What does it mean to plan for an open-ended process where waiting, uncertainty and incremental adaptation are structural features rather than failures? Contributions might address layering and palimpsest, life cycles, intergenerational responsibility, or the temporal mismatches between project time and lived everyday time.

2. Valuation

Assessment of the existing is foundational to any Umbau practice, yet rests on contested and shifting criteria. Economic, ecological, use, symbolic, historical, architectural, conceptual, and social values coexist and compete; their weighting changes over time and across scales. Whose valuations are heard, and whose are sidelined? How do we evaluate what is worth keeping when parameters remain partially unknown? Contributions might address criteria for working with historic layers, dynamic and iterative valuation in design, cross-scale assessment of building and neighbourhood qualities, or valuation as a political process.

3. Friction

Friction in Umbau is not a peripheral inconvenience but a structural driver. Unforeseen conditions, gaps between planned and actual states, collaborative practices that collide with industrial standards, top-down planning meeting bottom-up agency, market rationalities meeting lived attachments – frictions are productive as much as they are obstructive. Contributions might examine technical-regulatory tensions, conflicts between competing requirements, governance frictions, the uneven distribution of adaptation burdens, or the everyday frictions of inhabiting and negotiating spaces under transformation.

4. Convergence

If friction is the resistance, convergence is the binding force of Umbau. How do fragmented data, disciplinary expertise, stakeholder interests, and material potentials get re-assembled into coordinated outcomes? Convergence is critical: dynamic redevelopment models, planning vocabularies and design templates produce similarity across places that may erase local specificity and displace locally grounded practices and identities. Contributions might address handovers between survey and design, cross-scale coordination of planning instruments, new actor constellations and shared agency, or the simultaneous occurrence of convergence and divergence in lived outcomes.

Who should participate

Doctoral and early-career researchers at any stage, working in or across the following fields: architectural design, typology, architectural history, building conservation, building systems and construction, design computation, urban planning, artistic research, and human geography. Adjacent perspectives – e.g. building construction, material sciences, art history, building law, real-estate economics, sociology, environmental science – are explicitly welcome, provided they connect to the four core concepts.

We especially encourage proposals that speak across disciplinary boundaries: work that locates itself at an intersection, makes its disciplinary assumptions explicit, and offers something its neighbours can take up. Empirical, theoretical, design-based, and artistic-research contributions are equally welcome.

How to apply

Applications should include an Abstract of max. 400 words as well as a short bio (max. 100 words). Please indicate which of the four core concepts the contribution engages with and state your disciplinary background. Please send your application as one combined PDF to umbau@arch.rwth-aachen.de. For the conference please prepare a 15-minute talk. This will be followed by a discussion. Working language is English; questions and discussion may be bilingual (English/German). The deadline for proposals is 10 July 2026. Participants will receive a Notification of acceptance by 31 July 2026.

Conference proceedings

Submission of an extended abstract for the conference proceedings (to be published in the RWTH Publication database) with 1.000-1.200 words, one illustration, up to 10 references by 7 September 2026. Selected contributors will be invited to submit full papers for a peer-reviewed thematic collection on www.archimaera.de, which is due to be published in summer/autumn 2027.

For further questions please contact Anke Naujokat (aujokat@ages.rwth-aachen.de).

Reference:

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