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The Fragmented Interior:
Decomposition of the Interior of the Generale Bank and its Nachleben

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ABSTRACT: This article reflects upon the practice of material reuse in contemporary interior design through a case study of the decomposition of the interiors of the Generale Bank in Brussels and the reuse of its fragments in new projects. Three research questions steered the analysis: How were the fragments of the interiors of the Generale Bank preserved and reused? Can the decomposition of historic interiors and the reuse of their fragments be a valuable strategy for their conservation? How does the meaning of the fragment shift in its new context?

The first part of the paper presents documentation and critical reflection on the process of decomposition and reuse of the fragments of the Generale Bank. The second part includes a more general discussion of the comparison between modern forms of material reuse and the ancient practice of spolia and considers the potential and pitfalls of reusing fragments as a method for the preservation of historic interiors. The conclusion elaborates on the meaning of the fragment in a new ensemble, adopting the art historical concept of Nachleben.

Keywords: Jules Wabbes; postwar interior design; material reuse; decomposition; spolia; Nachleben

Introduction

The reuse of materials is as old as the building practice itself. As both the transportation and production of materials were difficult and expensive, they were preferably gathered from the nearest ruin. However, from the 20th century onwards, cheap production and more accessible transportation made material reuse marginalized within formal architectural practices. Moreover, modern architects aspired to work with new building techniques and materials, including steel, concrete, and glass. Recently, attitudes toward materials are shifting, and architects are showing interest again in using reclaimed materials for new buildings. This trend can be read in response to rising ecological awareness and the ambition to reduce material waste. For commercial interiors, which typically have a shorter lifespan than the building that

envelopes them, the material waste is even more striking.[1] Concurrently, the impact of material reuse on a building's significance potentially exceeds the merely pragmatic, economic, and ecological as the material appearance of architecture and interiors is never free from associations and meaning.

A unique case of material reuse is the decomposition of the interiors of the former head office of the Generale Bank (currently BNP Paribas Fortis) in Brussels and the afterlife of its fragments. The building was designed by the architect Hugo Van Kuyck (1902–1975) in collaboration with Pierre Guilissen (1920–1989) and was built between 1968–1971. It was located in the center of Brussels, adjacent to the Palais de Beaux Arts, designed by Victor Horta, and in the immediate surroundings of the Central Station, Rue de Loi (the political center of Brussels), and the Brussels Parc. The building had an expressive, late-modern—some say brutalist—appearance, consisting of a massive, concrete base of three floors above ground and several underground floors for amenities, and two identical towers of eight additional floors with a dark glass façade (figures 1 and 2). The interiors of the public areas (counter hall, entrance, and elevator halls), the directors' offices, and the strongroom were designed by Jules Wabbes (1919–1974). Characteristic of Wabbes oeuvre, the interiors portrayed an unusual richness in materiality and craftsmanship, and the sensitive lighting of the spaces strengthened the appearance of materials and textures (figures 3 and 4). The staff restaurant was designed by Christophe Gevers (1928–2007), a leading Belgian designer of bars and restaurants at the time (figures 5 and 6).

After more than 30 years, the building no longer complied with an office building's current requirements: the installations were obsolete, the energy efficiency was low, and there was a lack of daylight underground and throughout the lower floors. A feasibility study for renovation

[1] Where up to the 19th century the average lifespan of a building was about 120 years, this dropped to only 60 years—but frequently even 20 to 30 years—for modern buildings (Normandin 2013). For interiors, the lifespan is generally five years (Douglas 2006).

was conducted, but in 2013, the building's demolition and a competition to design the new building were announced. The decision provoked a debate on the ecological impact of the whole operation and the heritage value of the original postwar building and interiors. Despite it being one of the finest examples of postwar office buildings in Brussels and its interiors comprising one of the sole still-preserved examples of its time, it was not protected as a monument. Several official organizations in Brussels took a position, among them urban.brussels (the urban planning and heritage administration of the Brussels capital region), the Brussels Bouwmeester (Bastin and Verbrakel 2014), and Docomomo.[2] The debate did not prevent demolition. Instead, a compromise was found, in which BNP Paribas Fortis strived to minimize material waste through recycling and reuse. They claim to have recycled more than 98% of the 100,000 tons of materials from the demolition. For most construction materials, this in practice came down to serious downcycling. However, (parts of) the historic interiors were decomposed and the fragments reused in other projects.

The decomposition of the interiors and distribution of fragments were executed in 2014–2015 by Rotor, a Brussels-based design practice specializing in the organization of reclaimed-material flows. The operation received much press attention and was published in several architectural journals as an example of best practices in sustainability and preservation. However, the practice of decomposition is, in fact, highly ambiguous. On the one hand, as an alternative to demolition, it lowers material waste and contributes to the appreciation and conservation of postwar heritage. On the other hand, it also risks being used as a pretext to justify demolition as an alternative to renovation or adaptive reuse.

This contribution aims to reflect upon the risks and the potential of the practice of reusing fragments from decomposing interiors, elaborating on the Generale Bank in Brussels as a case

[2] https://docomomo.be/building/warandebergmontagne-du-parc-office-generale-bank-bnp-paribas/, accessed March 5, 2021; interview with Pierre and Pablo Lhoas (Docomomo Belgium and Lhoas & Lhoas Architects), March 25, 2021.

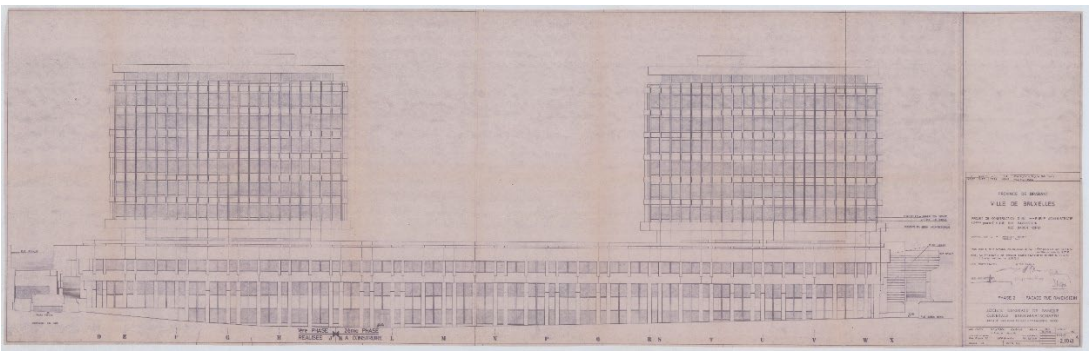
study. The case study methodology includes a literature study, archival research, and interviews with different stakeholders.[3] The following research questions steered the analysis:

(1) How were fragments of the interiors of the Generale Bank preserved and reused?

(2) Can the decomposition of interiors and the reuse of their fragments be a valuable strategy for the conservation of historic interiors?

(3) Does the meaning of the fragment change in its new context?

As the former interiors and the afterlife of the fragments of the Generale Bank were not systematically documented, the first part of this paper includes a description and critical reflection on the different steps in this process. The second part of the paper positions this case study in a more general discourse on the politics of material reuse and the *Nachleben*[4] of the fragment in a new composition—drawing a parallel between contemporary practices and the ancient use of *spolia*.



[3] Six interviews were conducted in the period January–March 2021.

[4] The term *Nachleben* may be literally translated as "afterlife," or "survival." It was introduced by Aby Warburg to refer to the survival (in the sense of continuity, or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs—as opposed to their renascence after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations. Warburg's conception of *Nachleben* rejects the notion of time as a succession of direct relationships and the idea of history being an accumulation of progressive steps. Instead, it refers to the capacity of images and motifs to survive without exhibiting significant evolution (Didi-Huberman, Rehberg, and Belay 2003).

Figure 1 (top): Elevation of Generale Bank. Felix Archive.
Figure 2 (bottom): Building before demolition with adjacent Palais de Beaux Arts and across the Ravenstein Gallery. Photo by J. Van Hevel. © urban.brussels

The interior of the Generale Bank

As the applied methodology of dismantling and reuse is explicitly framed as a means of conserving the interiors of the Generale Bank, it is relevant to first elaborate on its heritage value. For the design of the interiors of the public areas of the building, the Generale Bank commissioned two leading Belgian interior designers: Jules Wabbes (1919–1974) and Christophe Gevers (1928–2007). Wabbes designed the interiors of the more representative rooms such as the counter hall, entrance, elevator halls, directors' offices, and the strongroom. He was an autodidact who started his career as an antique dealer and decorator and has always been extremely sensitive to the interior as an ensemble. When he became a respected interior designer in Belgium and abroad—working on projects such as the design of Sabena aircraft cabins, the Belgian pavilion for the New York World Trade Fair, and the interior of the U.S. Embassy in The Hague (a building designed by Marcel Breuer)—he showed his remarkable skill in designing interiors down to the smallest detail (Ferran-Wabbes 2010). As stated by Pombo, Wabbes created total works of art. He wished to be in charge of each detail of the design and considered himself responsible for the ensemble (Pombo 2014).

The furniture and interior features that Wabbes designed and selected for the Generale Bank were executed in high-quality materials such as granite, tropical woods, bronze, aluminum, glass, and leather, featuring wool rugs and tapestries with a very high level of craftsmanship. Many pieces were custom-designed for this project. The strongroom was the masterpiece for the Generale Bank and was Jules Wabbes' last project before his sudden death in 1974. As stated by his daughter Marie Ferran-Wabbes, it was one of the most important projects of his career (Ferran-Wabbes 2010). Although the furniture and dismantled features definitely hold value as individual objects (Ferran-Wabbes, Persijn, and Strauven 2021; Floré 2017; Pombo and Heynen 2014), the significance of the interiors was found in the ensemble, composed through the exquisite combination of high-quality materials, rich textures, colors, and the elegant lighting of the space.

Christophe Gevers designed the spaces used by bank employees, such as the restaurant and coffee bar. The atmosphere of these interiors was less formal and more colorful and bright. Although not executed with the same luxury of material and craftsmanship as Wabbes' interiors, they were fashionable ensembles with extensive use of graphical and pop-art-like decorative elements (des Cressonnières 1979).

Figure 3 (left): In situ preserved strongroom. Photo by J. Van Hevel. © urban.brussels
Figure 4 (right): Expo bMa—Man of Thought, September 2014. Photo by Filip Dujardin. ©Plusoffice


Figures 5 and 6: Restaurant by Christophe Gevers (photos published in Décor*, Nov 1979).*

The decomposition

When the building's demolition seemed inevitable, Docomomo and urban.brussels made a photo documentary of the building and its interiors. Simultaneously, Rotor became involved and conducted an inventory of the interior elements to assess the practical and economic feasibility of the decomposition process. Rotor was founded in 2005 with a mission to promote and facilitate the reuse of building elements to reduce the waste of resources and materials. Although they had some experience with the decomposition of interiors of (mostly) modern office buildings, the Generale Bank was their first largescale project. Hence, they had to scale up their activities to handle it; they founded a spin-off, Rotor DC, and rented a warehouse to store materials to facilitate their work. As the interiors' decomposition was not part of the original project planning by BNP Paribas Fortis, preparations for demolition were ongoing when Rotor began its work in December 2014. The conditions under which its projects were executed were far from ideal: there was no electricity in the building, and it was necessary to complete each task rapidly in order to avoid delaying the planned demolition.[5]

Decomposed elements included furniture, granite tiles from floors and walls (some very large), suspended ceiling elements, lighting fixtures, doors, door handles, railings, coat hangers, and signage. In total, 230 tons of materials were reused (Devlieger 2017)—approximately 0.2% of

[5] Interview with Lionel Devlieger (Rotor), January 21, 2021.

the total mass of the building. As the decomposition and fragmented reuse of the Generale Bank interiors were explicitly framed as a means to conserve Jules Wabbes' and Christophe Gevers' heritage, a protocol for distributing materials was established to define the hierarchy among different forms of reuse. Firstly, the bank kept some of the furniture and fragments. Secondly, certain fragments were offered to public museums in Belgium to be included in their collection. Thirdly, interiors were to be reintegrated as a whole into new projects. Fourthly, fragments were to be reused in public buildings. Only after these steps had been taken were materials then placed on the market. In particular, the features that were custom-designed by Jules Wabbes had a high market price, which made the whole operation economically viable. In what follows, the different steps of the protocol are described and critically reviewed.

The *Nachleben* as fragments

1/ Reuse by BNP Paribas Fortis

BNP Paribas Fortis kept most of the building furniture and some dismantled fragments of the interior. The furniture will be reused in the new building, but there is no clear plan to reuse the building fragments. Despite the bank's claim that it will recycle nearly all material from the former building, the new building's design does not incorporate any reclaimed or recycled materials or features.[6] The strongroom, however, has not been dismantled but is conserved in its entirely. The room is located underneath an adjacent building, also in use by the bank, and was accessible through the former office building. Its location outside the footprint of the demolished building allowed its preservation in situ. The room will not be used as a vault anymore but will be preserved as part of the bank's patrimony.

2/ Museum collections

[6] Interview with Loraine Beckers (BNP Parisbas Fortis), March 9, 2021.

The fragments were offered to different design museums throughout Belgium.[7] Despite the pieces originating from the interiors of some of the most renowned Belgian interior architects of the postwar era, museums were relatively uninterested. Design Museum Ghent is the only museum that took pieces for its collection: a series of signage plates custom-designed by Wabbes and a series of fragments from the restaurant by Gevers. The objects have not been exhibited up to the present day. The signage plates hold a value as individual objects, but the fragments of the restaurant—a table, wooden bench, and metal plates and wooden branches that together formed a subdividing element for the restaurant space—have limited value as independent objects. Moreover, the selection of the pieces only happened after the interiors had been dismantled. The museum did not have any documentation of the original setting of the elements except for a few low-quality pictures taken during the decomposition of the building.[8] A comparison of the pieces in the collection with the pictures of the interior taken by urban.brussels, however, shows that most of it can be traced back to one section of the restaurant interior (Figure 7 and 8).

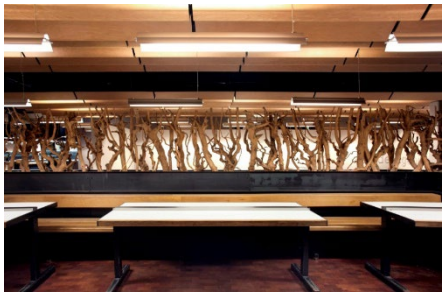


Figure 7 (left): Fragments of the cafeteria by Christophe Gevers in the collection at Design Museum Ghent. © Design Museum Ghent
Figure 8 (right): Cafeteria before decomposition. Photo by J. Van Hevel. © urban.brussels

Design Museum Brussels did not include any pieces in its collection at the time. However, Lhoas & Lhoas, the office responsible for the museum's design in 2015, integrated several

[7] Four Belgian museums with 20th century design collections were contacted in the context of this study: Design Museum Ghent, Design Museum Brussels, Centre d'Innovation et de Design Grand-Hornu, and the Art and History Museum Brussels.
[8] Telephone conversation with the curator of Design Museum Ghent on February 17, 2021.

lighting fixtures from the Generale Bank into the foyer, offices, exhibition rooms, and depot.[9] The reused fragments were standardized but good quality lighting fixtures—though not the most significant and unique design features of the bank. The motivation for reuse, in this case, was primarily pragmatic. The budget for this project was very tight, and the reclaimed material came at a low price. The reused pieces were primarily valued for their functionality, while the ecological motivation and cultural value were of only secondary importance.[10]

3/ Reuse as ensemble

The ambition to reuse some of the former interiors as an ensemble was realized in the Abattoirs de Bomel, a design project conducted by Rotor. As stated by Rotor:

> *The resto-bar of the Abattoirs … has been furnished with elements taken from the cafeteria of the former BNP-Paribas-Fortis Bank headquarters in Brussels, a late 1970's design of Christophe Gevers, famous for his restaurant designs. This allowed for the conservation of this unique ensemble which would otherwise have been destroyed as the former headquarters are now being demolished.*[11]

The reused elements are limited to furniture such as tables, benches, and stools. Other elements, such as lighting fixtures, decorative sculptures, graphic (almost pop-art-like) wall decorations, and a mirrored panel dividing the space, were not reused or imitated; neither was the striking pinkish color of the walls. Nevertheless, these elements are crucial in (re)creating the original atmosphere. The wooden suspended ceiling panels have been reused in one part of the cafeteria but do not shield the installations that remain visible; the original integrated lighting was not reused, but suspended lighting fixtures were installed underneath the ceiling panel (figures 9–

[9] In the exhibition rooms, the lighting fixtures were replaced by museum lighting in 2018 to better preserve the collection. Email correspondence with Design Museum Brussels, February 17, 2021; interview with Pierre and Pablo Lhoas (Docomomo Belgium and Lhoas & Lhoas Architects), March 25, 2021.
[10] Interview with Pierre and Pablo Lhoas (Docomomo Belgium and Lhoas & Lhoas Architects), March 25, 2021.
[11] www.rotordb.org, accessed March 4, 2021.

11). Although Rotor explicitly describes this project as a conservation of the unique ensemble designed by Christophe Gevers, the new interior composition fails to preserve or recreate the ensemble value of the original interior as a whole. Instead of emulating a fashionable 1970s interior, the fragments may be read as "vintage" objects in the new composition, transmitting an aura of nostalgia. Alternatively, they may be read explicitly as second-hand, creating the impression of a low-profile, alternative, partly informal cultural hub.


Figure 9 (left): Recomposition of the cafeteria by Christoph Gevers in the Abbatoirs de Bommel by Rotor. © Abbatoirs de Bommel
Figure 11 (right): Cafeteria before decomposition. Photo by J. Van Hevel. © urban.brussels

4/ Reuse in public buildings

In addition to the reuse of lighting fixtures in the Design Museum Brussels, two other public projects were identified in which fragments of the Generale Bank were integrated. In the public library of Sint-Pieters-Woluwe, Plus Office integrated suspended ceiling pannels by Jules Wabbes in the lecture and reading room (figure 13). The decision to integrate the panels was taken only at the end of the design process. Parallel to this project, Plus Office designed the exhibition *bMa –Man of Thoughts*, which took place at the Generale Bank in September 2014, only a few months before demolition began. As such, Plus Office was informed about Rotor's dismantling of the interiors and decided to reuse the bank's ceiling panels in the library instead of the standardized suspended ceiling panel initially foreseen. They describe integrating the Generale Bank's fragments as an ecological act and a means of heritage preservation. The municipality, which had other Jules Wabbes pieces in the interiors of the townhouse, saw this

as a unique opportunity. However, the library's design was not adapted according to the integrated fragments.[12]

The offices of the social housing association Zonnige Kempen (Westerloo), designed by Rotor, include several suspended ceiling pannels by Jules Wabbes and a decorative tree in white and green laminate marquetry by Christophe Gevers (figure 12). In the back office, they reused granite tiles. Nearly all materials in the interior were reclaimed from elsewhere. The interior is a compilation of fragments of different origins; however, it is not experienced as such. Instead, the interior feels like a coherent ensemble.

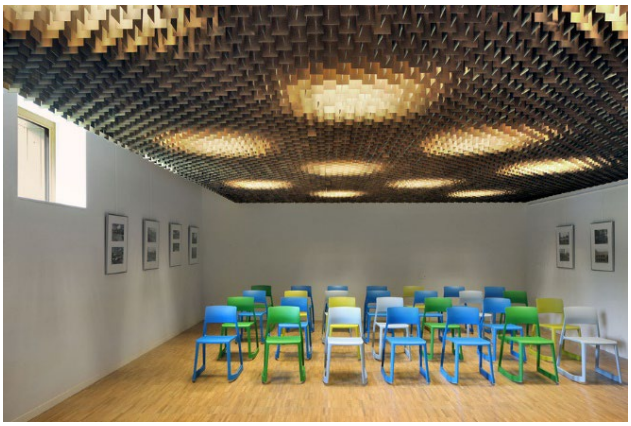


Figure 13 (right): Library De Lettertuin, Sint-Pieters Woluwe by Plus Office; suspended ceiling (Jules Wabbes) from Generale Bank.

5/ Fragments on the market

Elements that were not reused in one of the previously described modes have been offered for sale. Some of the furniture and a selection of fragments were sold by a Brussels auction house specializing in 20th-century Belgian art and design. The largest share was sold directly by Rotor DC through their webshop and hardware shop in Brussels. The webshop enables searching not just by the type of material but also by the building of origin. In recent years, Rotor has taken part in the decomposition of many iconic modern buildings and interiors in Belgium that were renovated or demolished, including the WTC towers and North Station in Brussels and the Book

[12] Interview with Nathan Ooms (Plusoffice), March 12, 2021.

Tower in Ghent, which was designed by Henry Van de Velde. The origin of the materials obviously affects their market value.

Rotor explained that one of the challenges they face is deciding how far to decompose the elements. A door with a handle and signage plate, for example, has a lower market price than when the three elements are sold independently, while its "heritage value" is higher when combined.[13] However, evidence shows that some elements that initially formed an entity have been separated for commercial reasons. One example is a lighting sculpture, designed by Christophe Gevers as a central element in the restaurant, which was constructed out of several freestanding vertical elements that were then sold by an auction house as individual pieces.[14]

Although there is no detailed record of all of the building's sold fragments, Rotor kept track of some elements that other Belgian architects and interior designers reused. A selection of these projects has been published as "good practices" on their website. In Glacier Gaston, Lionel Jadot has reused ceiling panels from Wabbes' and Gevers' interiors (Figure 14). The interior designed by Jadot is an eclectic collage of reused materials and objects of all kinds. It gives the space a lively and informal, almost bohemian atmosphere currently fashionable in retail design.

In Pharmacie Emilie, architect Nathalie De Leeuw reused several fragments from the Generale Bank and other buildings (figures 15–17). She selected these fragments for their high quality and unique characteristics as an alternative to new materials. She was looking for a suspended ceiling system that was light-transmissive and could characterize the space. The beauty and craftsmanship of the ceiling panels design by Wabbes were to her feeling unique and unavailable in new materials. The reused fragments formed the basis for the design. As she bought the last lot, which was insufficient to cover the entire space, she had to redesign the ceiling and combine the reclaimed elements with different, new panels. The new materials and

[13] Interview with Lionel Devlieger (Rotor), January 21, 2021.
[14] http://www.cornette-saintcyr.com/, Christophe Gevers lots 213–219, accessed March 9, 2021.

colors used in the pharmacy were selected to fit the ceiling. Hence, the composed interior is an elegant ensemble of new and reclaimed materials, integrating older interiors' fragments. The ceiling forms the central piece in the design, which by some observers might be read as a piece of heritage, by others as a beautiful design feature.

The selection of the reclaimed materials was made in close collaboration with her client, who appreciated the materials' quality and expression without initially considering their origin or potential heritage value. In addition to the ceiling panels, they also bought granite tiles, a large panel with a Mediterranean landscape from the restaurant, and some Val Saint Lambert glass tiles that did not originate from the Generale Bank. Although they did not yet know if or how these fragments would be integrated into the design, the owner was willing to take the risk because the elements were sold for rather low prices. For the architect, using reclaimed materials required extra effort to locate them and adapt the design accordingly. Nevertheless, she explained that the intensive process in close collaboration with the client led to a unique design to which both she and the client feel very personally attached.[15]

The process of distribution is ongoing. A large share of the granite tiles currently stocked in Rotor's warehouse will be reused in the renovation of the former Philips building—another postwar tower in Brussels where Rotor operates as a circular building consultant.[16]

[15] Interview with architect Nathalie De Leeuw, March 12, 2021.
[16] Interview with Lionel Devlieger (Rotor), January 21, 2021.

Figure 14: Glacier Gaston (Brussels) by Lionel Jadot; reuse of suspended ceiling elements from interiors by Jules Wabbes and Christophe Gevers.

Figure 15 (left): Interiors Jules Wabbes Generale Bank before decomposition. Photo by J. Van Hevel. © urban.brussels
Figures 16 and 17 (center & right): Pharmacie Emilie (2019), Brussels, Nathalie De Leeuw; suspended ceiling (Jules Wabbes).

The fragmented interior—A modern form of *spolia*?

The case of the Generale Bank is not unique—there are other examples of modern buildings that integrate older fragments. The reused fragments are mostly decorative stone elements or (vernacular) wooden features such as doors, window frames, or even entire timber-frame structures; several authors have drawn a parallel between modern forms of material reuse and the ancient practice of *spolia* (Brooker and Stone 2011; Devlieger 2017; Frangipane 2016; Kalakoski and Huuhka 2018; Meier 2011; Wharton 2011). Although this association clearly

applies, the comparison is also problematic as the type of fragments, their integration in modern construction, and their meaning in a new context profoundly differ from that of ancient *spolia*.

Initially referring to "spoils of war," the Latin term *spolia* originates in the public display of war trophies—confiscated statues and bronzes—in the victor's city to symbolize triumph in ancient Rome. The term was adopted in the 16th century to describe marble artifacts found in a context that was not original (Kinney 1997). Initially, the term only referred to marble fragments spoliated from one site and explicitly featured in a new architectural composition at another location. However, the term *spolia* has been used more broadly (Esch 2011; Greenhalgh 2011), including the unmarked reuse of raw materials such as less precious stones or (ancient) bricks (e.g., Stewart 2020), the reuse of wooden elements (Kalakoski and Huuhka 2018; Meier 2011), or even the in situ reuse and adaptation of an entire building (Brooker and Stone 2011; Frangipane 2016).

The richest examples of *spolia* are undoubtedly found in Rome, a city developed through an accumulation of historical layers. The earliest precedents date to the reign of Constantine, including the Emperor's Arch (315 AD), which features a frieze composed of reliefs originating from the arches of his predecessors, and early Christian basilicas like the Lateran (313–318 AD) and old Saint Peter's (320 AD), with columns and capitals salvaged from early Roman pagan buildings. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods, the use of *spolia* was pervasive. A strong case is the church of Sta. Maria in Trastevere, rebuilt from its foundation in the 12th century by Pope Innocent II. The nave of the church includes 18 pre-medieval capitals, eight of which can be traced to the libraries of the baths of Caracalla (Kinney 1986).

As the ancient *spolia* were marble fragments, they were highly durable, often originating from quarries that had become inaccessible or been depleted by later eras, and crafted with great skill. Basic features and traces of weathering of the *spolia* were usually preserved, but the fragments were often slightly repaired or recarved to fit in (Waters 2016). The *spolia*, mostly columns and

capitals, were used as a structural element in the new composition. The structural logic of the new building was virtually the same as the building from which the spolia originated, even when built several centuries later. In that sense, the reuse of modern materials significantly differs from the reuse of ancient marbles. Modern construction methods and materials such as prefabricated steel or concrete do not usually allow for the structural integration of separate, reclaimed elements. Industrially produced fragments can typically not be "reshaped" in comparison to solid materials like stone. Moreover, standardized features, which were not custom-designed for a particular building or interior, do not have a clear link with their original context but instead refer in a more general way to a specific bygone epoch. Hence, they tend to generate a sense of nostalgia and risk becoming "fetishized" vintage objects in a modern context.

Reuse of fragments—heritage conservation or incentive for demolition?

In principle, *spolia* were recuperated from buildings on the verge of or that already collapsed or those scheduled to be demolished in the context of urban renovation. A legal rule put into force by the emperor Majorian in 458 AD stated that if a public monument was beyond repair, its *spolia* had to be reused in a public context, visible to the city's residents, to preserve "public elegance" (Alchermes 1994). This rule has frequently been interpreted as a heritage conservation measure *avant-la-lettre*, aiming to preserve the historic city's spirit and urban identity (Alchermes 1994; Devlieger 2017; Karmon 2011). Parallel to this argumentation, the decomposition of the Generale Bank's interiors has been framed as a form of heritage preservation.[17] The explicit aim to integrate its fragments in public buildings and museum collections recalls ancient ambitions to use *spolia* as a source of "civic pride."

[17] https://www.montagneduparc-warandeberg.be/project/patrimonium, accessed 09/03/2021; interview with Lionel Devlieger (Rotor), January 21, 2021; interview with Loraine Beckers (BNP Paribas Fortis), March 9, 2021; Devlieger 2017.

However, as soon as the use of *spolia* became common practice in late antiquity and the demand for ancient marble increased, tension arose between demolition out of necessity versus demolition to provide materials for new construction. Legal measures to regulate and control the spoliation of old structures and the integration of *spolia* in new construction were put into force from the 5th century onwards and adopted and improved in the following centuries (Karmon 2011; Kinney 2013). Today, most countries have regulations to protect significant historic buildings and interiors and prevent them from demolition. However, in the case of interiors designed as an ensemble or *gesamtkunstwerk*, which include both immovable and movable elements, protection and preservation processes have been more challenging (Klingenberg 2012; Plevoets and Heynickx 2016). The decomposition of interiors into fragments or "*spolia*" to be reused in other projects, on the one hand, has potential as an experimental conservation strategy; on the other hand, it also risks serving as an easy incentive for demolition. Although the revenue of the sales of fragments may only exceed costs for decomposition for precious materials from interiors by renowned designers or iconic buildings, it will in nearly all cases be more cost-efficient compared with preservation, restoration, and maintenance of an interior in its totality—especially when taking into account the economic value of the cleared building plot. The careful dismantling of a building into fragments can quickly become an ecologically and culturally motivated pretext for demolition.

On the other hand, the careful decomposition of postwar buildings and interiors, as applied by Rotor, does contribute to a heritage conservation discourse on a different level. The time, energy, and care given to the decomposition and reuse of postwar architecture and interiors reverse the dominant value system, which is largely ignorant of or negatively predisposed toward buildings from the recent past. Hence, critiques of the failure to preserve this heritage as fragments serve as a broader critique of the frequent demolition of the heritage of the recent

past and the common failure to develop appropriate adaptive reuse strategies for this type of buildings.

Nachleben—The meaning of the fragment in a new ensemble

For many years, the study of *spolia* focused on the origin of the fragment rather than its meaning within a new composition. The use of *spolia* has been seen as a motive to preserve the aura and craftsmanship of earlier epochs or, in a more negative tone, was interpreted as a sign of artistic decline—a pragmatic architectural strategy resulting from a shortage in resources and the loss of craftsmanship in late antiquity. In the early 20th century, the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl was the first to describe the use of *spolia* as a genuine architectural innovation in which the *spolia* is a carrier of meaning that is transferred to or appropriated in a new architectural ensemble (Kinney 1997; Riegl 1985 [1901]).

Building on Riegl's approach, a theoretical body of work was established on *spolia*, its motives, and meanings (e.g., Brilliant and Kinney 2011; Elsner 2000; Esch 2011; Krautheimer 1980; Stewart 2020). The meaning of *spolia* in classical architecture is somewhat ambiguous. Firstly, *spolia* could be used to serve a political goal. Comparable to the original exposure of war booty, spoliated fragments of the buildings of rivals or predecessors may have served to illustrate triumph. More often, however, the *spolia* carried a more positive meaning: to show one's affinity with and to build further on the legacy of well-respected and successful predecessors, e.g., the Arch of Constantine. Secondly, the use of *spolia* could have an ideological meaning. The reuse of fragments of early Roman, pagan buildings in early Christian architecture aimed to transfer metaphors of Roman imperial power to Christian forms (Stewart 2020) or to transfer or neutralize its spiritual powers (Esch 2011). The use of pagan elements and iconography became a typological characteristic of early Christian architecture (Elsner 2000; Kinney 2013). Thirdly, aesthetic considerations were also at stake since the high quality of the carving of

marbles dating back to the heyday of the Roman Empire was not available in the later eras (Esch 2011).[18]

Today, the politics of material reuse in contemporary architectural practice is likewise ambiguous. The meaning of the reused fragments of the Generale Bank differs significantly among the various new settings. In most of the projects described above, the reused fragment could easily be replaced by another material without significantly altering the tectonic or aesthetic concept of the building or interior. Pharmacie Emilie is perhaps the only exception, as here, the ceiling panels by Jules Wabbes did form the centerpiece of the design and strongly determined the layout and aesthetic concept of the interior.

Despite the many tensions addressed above—object versus ensemble, economic versus cultural value of the fragment—the decomposition and reuse of fragments holds great potential as an innovative strategy for the conservation of historic interiors and an inventive and sustainable design strategy for new interiors. The combination of fragments of different origins potentially creates a rich and multilayered composition in materiality, ornamentation, and historical associations. Although its full potential might not have been realized in this case study, an initial investigation offers exciting insights into the practical and conceptual process behind modern forms of material reuse.

In art history and theory, the term *Nachleben* refers to the survival of an image or motif in a form that is not an exact representation of the original but rather a metamorphosis into something new (Richter 2011). The relationship between the process of decomposition and the reintegration of fragments with heritage conservation is a complex one as the reused fragment

[18] The techniques to carve and transport granite elements were rediscovered in the late 15th century. This revival of former craftsmanship also steered the reuse of ancient granite fragments in Renaissance architecture (Waters 2016).

may survive, but no longer simply as itself; the meaning of the fragment is altered, appropriated in a new context.

The case study here described shows the potential as well as pitfalls of the strategy of decomposition as a means to conserve historic interiors: on the one hand, the legacy of designers, the craftsmanship embedded in individual objects and features, and the functionality of specific elements can be transmitted to future generations through fragments; the original ensemble value, on the other hand, is challenging to preserve. However, as illustrated in some of the projects described above, the loss of the original ensemble can lead to new compositions in which the fragment(s) may serve a different functional or aesthetic role. For example, in the Pharmacie Emilie, the reused fragments steered the interior design and, more specifically, the choice of materials. Hence, the fragment not only serves as a decorative element or tangible reference to the past but as a source of inspiration for the new design of which it is part.

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