ON UNBUILDING

Overarching reflexions on Practices in Research #05 Demolitions and Deconstructions

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Demolition Stop

In modern architectural practice, the demolition of older buildings was regarded as an inevitable precursor to the construction of new, modern structures—a natural progression in the lifecycle of the built environment. However, today, this assumption is no longer universally accepted. Increasing awareness of the ecological and social impacts of large-scale demolition has prompted a reconsideration of its place in the design and construction process. Growing awareness of the ecological consequences of large-scale demolition, as well as the social implications of radically transforming built environments, has prompted a reevaluation of demolition's role within architecture. Today, more nuanced approaches are emerging that prioritize sustainability, material reuse, and cultural continuity. These strategies include partial demolition, selective removal of layers such as facades or interiors, and material recovery processes like mining and stripping.

The halt to new construction in favor of preservation and adaptation of the existing was the subject of OMA's Cronocaos exhibition at the Venice Biennale of 2010. In the aftermath of this exhibition, Rem Koolhaas and Jorge Otero-Pailos published *Preservation is Overtaking Us*, a manifesto in which they declare the dead of 'stararchitecture'- iconic new buildings which form expresses the identity of the architect- and announce

a radical shift in the architectural discipline towards preservation and adaptation of existing fabric. In recent years, the plea for preservation and discussion on demolition has only become more compelling. Diverse activist initiatives postulate a radical shift in architectural practice, redirecting the profession towards more resource-conscious approaches that prioritize adaptive and material reuse. The *House Europe!* initiative targets changes in European legislation and sets up relevant incentives to challenge the current system, favouring profit from demolition and rebuilding over environmental and social needs. A *Global Moratorium on New Construction* instigated a debate on a threshold between the necessity of halting building anew and the realities of prevailing systems and supply chains that heavily rely on finite resources and do not account for environmental impacts. Those queries were demystified by Space Caviar in a publication that unpacked carbon, resource and social costs of building, highlighting architects' responsibility for future unbuilding. Similarly, radical positions were taken upon by the contributors to the 'Byggestop' issue of the Danish journal 'Magasin for Bygningkunst og Kultur'. This publication demonstrated that stopping building and questioning the established modes of practising may lead to more attentive design processes and new typologies, materials and aesthetics.

Even if, in recent years, numerous architectural magazines showcased inspiring examples of more caring architectural approaches and Manon Mollard, Eleanor Beaumont, and Kristin Rapacki wrote in Architectural

Review that: '*(...) today it is clear that all buildings must be saved and readapted, and that the resource scarcity facing us makes hardly any act of demolition justifiable'*, this is still not a common practice. Only in Denmark are two to three million square meters demolished annually, whereas six million are built anew. Moreover, it is expected that two billion square meters of the existing building stock in Europe will be demolished by 2050. Current policies and legislation have slowly started to address this issue. The European Green Deal aims for a zero-emission building mass by 2050, which theoretically could limit demolition as adaptive reuse practices have a lower environmental impact than building new ones. On a local level, in 2023, Denmark introduced obligatory Life Cycle Assessment for all newly constructed buildings bigger than 1000 sqm2, which can potentially transform more of the existing building stock. In the future, requirements concerning environmental impacts are expected to be more demanding if it comes to resource protection. Therefore, the paradigm shift in architectural practice has already started.

The PIR5 conference showed that this shift in approach has led to the emergence of new roles and responsibilities for architects within the design and construction process. Architects are increasingly called upon to act as advocates for working with the existing', convincing clients not to pursue full-scale demolition. Secondly, architects must adopt a new design approach—what might be termed "demolition design"—which involves the careful selection of what to retain and what to remove, not

only at a structural level but also in terms of finishes and materials. Today, in adaptive reuse projects, the first act of architecture is demolition or deconstruction. Other spaces appear, new programmatic opportunities emerge. This nuanced decision-making process requires balancing aesthetics, functionality, and ecological impact. Additionally, architects now play a crucial role as managers of material flows. In this capacity, they oversee the careful dismantling and cataloging of materials, facilitating their reuse either within the same project or for future construction endeavors. This involves not only technical expertise in deconstruction methods but also knowledge of material lifecycles, sourcing channels, and supply chains. By integrating these considerations into their practice, architects are reshaping the industry's approach to demolition, transforming it from an act of destruction into an opportunity for renewal and sustainable innovation.

Reuse Strategies: from accepting ambiguities to rethinking how we build.

During the PiR5 conference, it was visible that those careful approaches resonated with the architectural practice, resulting in the diversity of always respectful, often humble and sometimes playful attitudes that embraced the unexpectedness and unpredictability of adapting,

reusing and adjusting. The presented interventions were developed from a careful reading of encountered spaces and attentive examination of found elements, their registrations, classifications and assessments. Oftentimes, built situations were not clear. Existing structures were built, demolished, extended and appropriated over time. 'As found' elements were imperfect and broken, carrying embedded traces of time, wear and tear. However, most of the showcased projects accepted those conditions, developing standpoints that trespass the conventional differentiation between the old and the new, preservation and demolition, etc. and that account for current needs, environmental impacts and in-built resources. Architects played with ambiguities embedded in over-time building layers, constructive errors and frequent adjustments, embracing hybrid solutions and open-ended and iterative processes. Balancing between multiplicities of internal and external factors led to a more pronounced understanding of claims that ask for 'not building' or 'doing just what is needed'. Designers engaged with entangled histories and utilised available resources but also questioned current norms of 'good design' and typological standardisation.

This renewed view on the practice of demolition gave rise to a series of adaptive reuse strategies in which the act of removal can be an act of creating generous space, open for new uses. Partial demolition can create new connections between spaces, or blur boundaries between public and private spheres. Rethinking boundaries between interior and exterior can have an impact on how spaces are used throughout seasons. For example, having an un-climatised

interior 'buffer' between the climatized interior core and the unclimatized exterior. Removal of layers can also be a means to change the meaning of the building, for example changing its aesthetics and atmosphere. Careful inquiry into projects presented at the PIR conference shows a plethora of adaptive and material reuse strategies with diverse terminologies, hierarchies and centre points. However, they relate to refraining approaches and systematic rigours, developing critical principles and questions guiding transformation processes. Most of them aimed to retain, restore, reverse, repair, reinterpret, redistribute, reapply, and repurpose to rethink transformed structures, spaces and building elements eventually. Some focused more on surgical interventions in the existing buildings to prolong their life cycles, like what happened in the reconversion of the steel company building into a musical complex in Seraing by atelier chora[1]. Others, for example,

Construction site of the musical complex in Seraing, atelier chora.

1 Marchal, Émeric, and Xavier De Lanève. "OM Musical Complex: Aesthetics of Technique in the Conversion of Modern Heritage." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 271-293, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14537026

interventions by RE-ST[2], examine current uses of available spaces, optimising them to question the need to build anew. Sometimes, more future-oriented circular agendas were introduced, for example, in the impact factory Mechelen designed by WIT Architecten[3]. Their proposal of retaining the existing building not only reapplied site-specific elements but also redistributed reused ones from local demolition sites.

Similarly, a more prominent interest in circular approaches promotes resource-oriented design strategies that favour urban mining, material reuse and closed-loop thinking. The recirculation of building components and materials

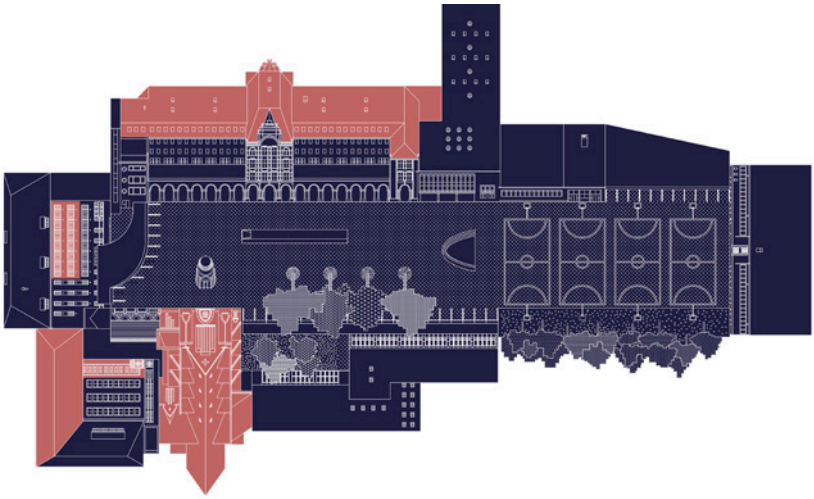


Diagram indicating the underused spaces of the Hoogstraten Klein Seminarie school, RE-ST, in collaboration with baukuh

2 Minten, Dimitri, and Tim Vekemans. "To Residue: Tactics for Not-Building and Activating Wanderspace." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 41-65, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536760

3 Verstraete, Brecht, Miet Vanheeswyck, Samuel Klein, and Bob Geldermans. "Impact Factory: Reconciling Demolition and Deconstruction Practices with Circular Building." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 19-39, . https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536731

avoids their demolition and prolongs their life cycles within buildings they were sourced from or relocated to new projects. Adaptive practices create opportunities for *direct reuse* of reclaimed elements, which can be used almost 'as found' for the same function, often requiring only cleaning and repairing. Sometimes, salvaged items are assessed as unsuitable for planned use because of structural, functional, aesthetic or fire-safety reasons. However, they can still be *rethought*, adjusted, processed and reused for a new purpose within the same building or in another location. Those acts of reassembly and appropriation define the work of gruppe-

When the concrete cutoffs are upcycled as found, the concrete tiles transform from generic to unique shapes, gruppe-aja

aja[4]. Their projects, developed in open-ended processes that embrace the unpredictability of waste streams, unfold around available resources. Their means-oriented way of working, which relies on hands-on testing, accepts the current state of encountered matter to find suitable strategies of patching and fitting in, carefully curating salvaged components for new functions.

Most of the time, resources found on-site are limited and cannot fully meet the demands of transformation projects. But those new additions are frequently not entirely new. Sometimes, they are constructed with reclaimed materials *locally harvested* from demolition companies, waste collection points, storages of reused building parts and

KURA project, Niklas Fanelsa, © Zara Pfeifer

4 Hyttel, Alberte, Julie Lecuelle, and Amalie Holm. "The Architect as Curator of Reclaimed Materials: A Visual Essay about a Methodology." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 219-243, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536995

ongoing demolitions to lower the overall environmental impact of new constructions. However, this can also be achieved with the use of new *biogenic materials* that are not only characterized by low embodied carbon but also have a high potential to be reused or biodegraded in the future, as visible in Niklas Fanelsa[5]'s regenerative building practices, that account for future impacts and waste streams, favouring ecological and reusable materials.

This forward-looking perspective is intrinsic to closed-loop approaches that aim to anticipate inevitable construction waste streams generated by the maintenance, repair and deconstruction of designed buildings. Following this line of thought, all buildings become material banks, temporarily storing components that, in the ideal scenario, would be dismantled and reused in new developments. However, for that to happen, it is necessary to consider the end-of-life scenarios for new additions in the conceptual phase of the project development, designing them for future reuse. New constructions should not only be *designed for disassembly* that allows for their time- and cost-efficient systemic dismantling after the initial building life cycle ends. They also need to ensure easy *identification, separability, and salvageability* of their elements to enable maintenance and repair, counteracting overtime value loss due to usage.

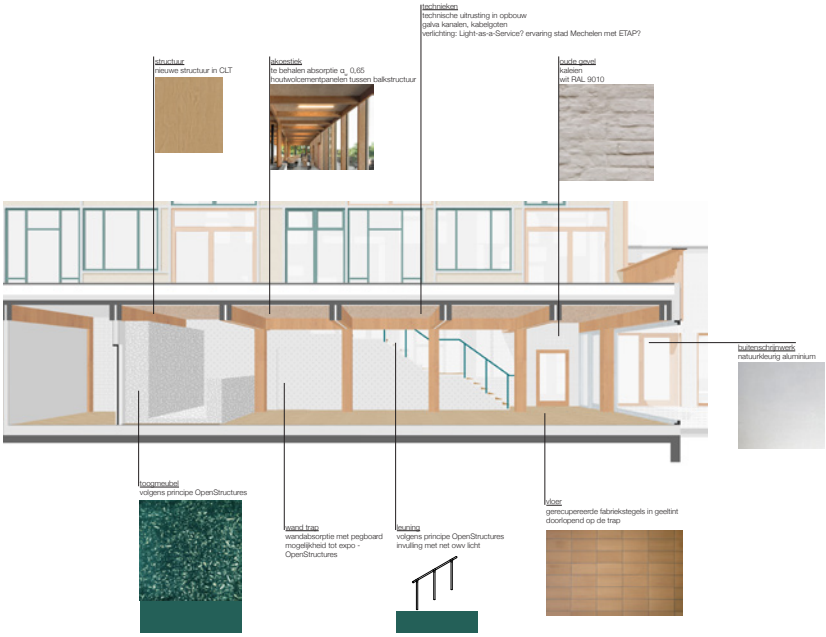
These strategies have prompted a shift in aesthetic sensibilities. Demolition has stylistic consequences, influencing adaptive reuse practice in general, even

5 Fanelsa, Niklas. "With and Within: The Collaborative Practice of Kura Workshop." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 145-165, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536891

new construction. This trend can become problematic when the aesthetic of "roughness" and visible reuse is commodified and detached from its original purpose. In some cases, newly built projects mimic the unfinished, raw look of adaptive reuse, incorporating elements with visible signs of decay or historical materials, not as a true act of sustainability, but rather as a superficial design gesture to evoke nostalgia. This can result in projects that use reused elements merely as aesthetic markers, exploiting the visual language of reuse without engaging in truly responsible practices. By replicating the look of reuse without engaging with its deeper ethical, environmental, or social implications, the architectural profession risks undermining the genuine value of these strategies, turning them into mere stylistic trends rather than a meaningful contribution to the discourse on sustainable design.

Tactics and Methods: noticing, harvesting, adjusting and future-proofing.

In light of the evolving role of the architect in the context of demolition and adaptive reuse, it is imperative that a variety of methods and tactics be integrated into the design process. This was a central theme at

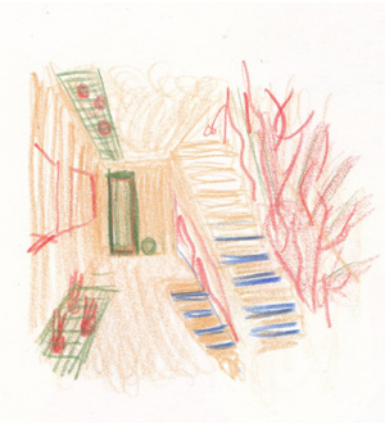


Page from the Impact Factory spacebook, a collection of standardized images of each prominent or typical room in the interior, WIT architecten

the PIR 5 conference, where numerous presentations were devoted to experimenting with, developing, and evaluating new strategies to support these emerging responsibilities. It has become evident that there is a need for a distinct vocabulary to facilitate communication of these innovative approaches. The terms “dismantling,” “deconstruction,” “disassembly,” and “decomposition” have now become part of a broader architectural discourse in which the value of preservation and adaptation is acknowledged alongside the need for renewal.

It is also essential to consider the role of drawing in this context, given its long-standing centrality to architectural practice. However, a new category of drawings is

emerging, particularly those whose purpose is to analyse and map the existing structure in its original state. Such drawings serve as analytical instruments, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the optimal course of action with regard to retention, removal, or repurposing, thereby informing the decision-making process. Those processes are often driven by and remain in reciprocal relations with self-imposed strategic rigours (Belt[6]), guiding questions (RE-ST[7]) and matrixes of circular goals (WIT[8]), allowing for their progressive verification (vvv+Carton123 [9]). Overlays, revaluing, reinforming and redrawing guide those iterative processes and multi-layered documents that keep track of the demolished,



Evolution of architectural drawings: precision and atmosphere built iteratively, vvv+Carton123

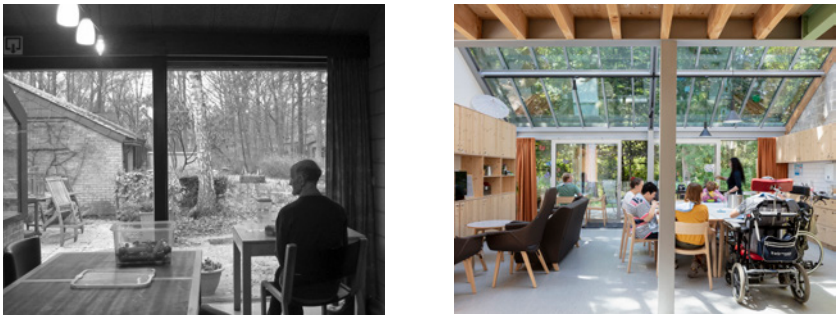
6 Luthringshausen, Bernhard, and Evelyn Temmel. "Retrofitting and Repairing: Principles of Demolition." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 309-319, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14537041

7 Minten and Vekemans, "To Residue", 41-65.

8 Verstraete et al., "Impact Factory", 19-39.

9 Contribution by vvv+Carton123 to the Practices in Research conference at C.I.II.III. IV.A (Brussels) on the 27th of May 2024

retained, relocated and reused matter. Furthermore, they are instrumental in conveying design concepts and inhabitation scenarios to clients and other stakeholders (Hannigan-Cooke[10] and vvv+Carton123[11]). Moreover, 'before and after' images that juxtapose encountered



Monnikenbos project, existing and new situation, UR architects. © Photography new situation Michiel De Cleene

situations with redesigned spaces are often used for the same purpose: to visualize subtle and perhaps unnoticeable alterations (atelier chora[12], UR architects[13]). Nevertheless, there are examples of projects that are moving away from an overreliance on drawings, particularly in the initial stages of design. In contrast, architects are adopting a hands-on approach through the use of mock-ups and on-site coordination, with a particular focus on the social interactions that underpin successful adaptive reuse, such as local networks and real-

10 Cooke, Anna, and Damien Hannigan. "Relative Density: Building Dialogues." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 195-217, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536939

11 Contribution by vvv+Carton123 to the Practices in Research conference at C.I.II.III. IV.A (Brussels) on the 27th of May 2024.

12 Marchal and De Lanève, "OM Musical Complex", 271-293.

13 Vande Keere, Nikolaas, and Regis Verplaetse. "Strangely Familiar: Dismantling a Clustered Care Complex into Separate Dwellings for People with Mental Disabilities in Monnikenheide-Spectrum." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 323-333., https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14537061

time communication. Moreover, prototyping and material testing inform material reuse practices that, learning from ad hocism and bricolage, employ methodologies based on what is at hand. Those exercises in iterative sampling, fitting in and disregarding depend on available resources and most of the time require physical testing instead of speculative drawings to develop viable solutions. In some instances, drawings are only produced at the conclusion of the process for regulatory purposes, which represents a notable shift in how architects approach the design and communication of these projects. Gruppe-aja[14], for example, illustrates how on-site collaboration and direct

The Case 1 project explores the interplay between reusing salvaged materials and valuing the existing architecture. The flooring is made from leftover bricks from a nearby factory, gruppe-aja

14 Hyttel, Lecuelle, and Holm, "The Architect as Curator", 219-243.

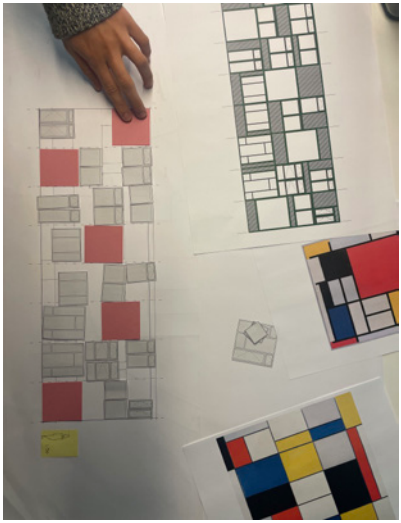
engagement with materials and stakeholders can be just as integral to the process as traditional design tools. Their practice also shows how material sourcing becomes more of the focus in architectural practice.

As opposed to standard practices that rely on standardized catalogues of building materials, there are no such documents for reclaimed elements. Thus, material inventories and lists of salvaged materials are being created to map out available resources on-site or

List of salvaged beams, organised by section, length and construction anomalies, Self-Office

in its vicinity. Those practices build upon well-known concepts of harvest maps (oogskaart.nl, opalis.be) and established practices of urban mining developed by Rotor or Superuse, who salvage discarded matter from demolition sites and companies, waste collection points, production surpluses and usage redundancies. At the PiR5 conference, we could observe similar engagements which reutilized resources found on the site of architectural interventions after previous listing, assessing, adapting

and relocating to find new functionalities, for example, the lists of salvaged beams organized by their dimensions and constructive anomalies in the refurbishment of the old watermill in Catalonia by self-office[15]. There were also cases of external sourcing, like windows salvaged from a nearby demolition site in the Mechelen factory by WIT Architecten[16].



Impact Factory project: Steel window frames being reclaimed from a nearby demolition site in Mechelen. Storage of the window frames and design excercise for positioning of the reclaimed frames in the front façade, WIT architecten

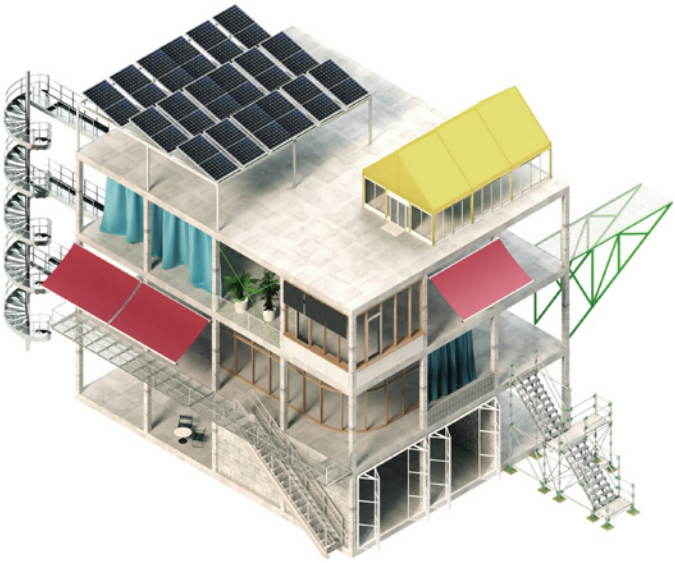
The interest in responsible material sourcing that favours proximal resources resonates with the practice of Niklas Fanelsa[17], who explores the concept of the bioregion, mobilizing locally available biogenic resources, craft

15 Fernàndez, Eduard, and Laura Solsona. "Revealing the Act of Building: Architecture as a Process." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 121-131, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536836

16 Verstraete et al., "Impact Factory" 19-39.

17 Fanelsa, "With and Within", 145-165.

skills and communities. This closed-loop thinking, which considers the longevity of building elements, informed by the famous concept of Shearing Layers, employs design for disassembly principles and favours reversible construction systems and adequate detailing. Those objectives are often integrated into the design process in the form of circular guidelines and matrixes, setting up directions for the exploration of solutions and the relevant interdisciplinary collaboration, for example, with the window producer in the WIT Architecten[18] project. Most of the time, those guides ask for a clear separation of more permanent elements, such as the building structure



Conceptual representation illustrating the distinction between a load-bearing structure (*Hardware*) and flexible architectural solutions (*Software*) that enable required functions and create necessary environmental conditions, Artem Kitaev

18 Verstraete et al., "Impact Factory", 19-39.

and fluctuating ones, being functionalities – represented in Artem Kitaev[19]'s (KOSMOS) concept of Hardware and Software Architecture.

Future-proofing is represented in the usage scans, a method developed by RE-ST[20] to map out underused spaces and propose temporary, interim, and reversible uses in the long run. The usage also informs the work of architects from vvv+Carton123[21], who utilize theatrical terminology of props and scenes and refrain from premature material and aesthetic choices to visualize the livability of their designs, showcasing diverse inhabitation

"Find and replace", an AI generated image providing an alternative to existing designs, like here in Filip Dujardin's picture of de vylder vinck taillieu's Huik house in Antwerp, Marius Grootveld

19 Kitaev, Artem. "Reinterpreting the Existing: A Critical Review of Hardware and Software in Architecture Design Principles as a Strategy for Adapting Existing Built Stock to Evolving Needs." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 95-117, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14536818

20 Minten and Vekemans, "To Residue", 41-65.

21 Contribution by vvv+Carton123 to the Practices in Research conference, 27.05.24

scenarios. Veldwerk Architecten[22] experiment with new generative models and AI co-designing to expand existing patterns of representation and reuse in an unexpected but existing way.

Circular Agendas in Architectural Education

Following the developments in building practice, adaptive reuse is becoming an increasingly important part of architectural education, particularly in Europe and beyond. Several schools now offer specialized master's programs focused on adaptive reuse, such as those at UHasselt in Belgium, the Rhode Island School of Design in the USA, the Manchester School of Architecture in the UK, and Yasar University in Izmir, Turkey. These programmes focus on balancing new interventions with preservation of the existing, often operating within a heritage context. A critical aspect of this educational shift is the integration of the "as found" survey into the design studio curriculum. Students are encouraged to engage deeply with the existing conditions of structures, yet this often requires a more extended design process, which can be challenging to accommodate within the confines of a semester-based academic calendar.

Furthermore, new educational programmes dedicated

22 Contribution by Marius Grootveld (Veldwerk Architecten) to the Practices in Research conference at C.I.II.III.IV.A (Brussels) on the 27th of May 2024.

to the practice of reuse engage with circular agendas, exploring the theme on the building system, component and material levels. One of them is initiated in the 2018 IKE master course at the ZHAW Institute of Constructive Design in Switzerland. The programme focuses on building regeneration strategies and reclaimed components, engaging with ongoing demolition situations and on-site material sourcing to employ real salvaged elements in 1:1 mock-ups to familiarize the students with demolition processes and the realities of dismantling. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the registration and documentation of the existing resources, developing systemic databases that are usually lacking for those unstandardized entities.

Similar agendas are driving the work of Studio 3 at the Aarhus School of Architecture, which predominantly explores the potential of buildings that are planned for demolition or perceived as not worth keeping. This positioning instigates a discussion on the value systems that are currently ruling the construction industry. Thus, employed methods are expanded to understand complex material ecologies and opportunities for systemic intervention while developing high-quality adaptive reuse projects that balance between inputs from value mapping and forward-looking agendas of planned unbuilding. The employed approaches merge architectural methods of drawing, rendering, model making and 1:1 prototyping with the ones borrowed from other disciplines, e.g. fiction writing, movie making, board gaming, scenario thinking and ethnographic engagements.

The complexities surrounding material reuse in adaptive reuse projects present even greater challenges, requiring students not only to design with salvaged materials but also to understand the logistics, structural integrity, and sustainability implications of these decisions. This requires rethinking traditional educational models to better prepare future architects for the intricate realities of adaptive reuse in practice. Replicating the complexity of on-site decision-making, however, in a classroom setting remains a challenge. In response, many schools have introduced

Workshop held in 2021, Camille Fauvel, Tiphaine Abenia, © Camille Fauvel and students

"Design & Build" studios, where students engage in hands-on construction projects, simulating real-world adaptive reuse scenarios. Yale University has been pioneering this approach since the 1970s. An example of such Design & Build studio presented at the PiR5 by Tiphaine Abenia

and Camille Fauvel[23], was the *Projeter ensemble,* an annual one-week workshop for students in architecture, civil engineering and landscape architecture of the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. Each year, students maintain, repair and rebuild the structures that were built by the students of the preceding year(s). Doing so, the project does not only highlight the importance of maintenance and working with the existing, but also taps into the discussion of the amount of waste produced by our educational system in the form of models, prints, mock-ups, etc.

Final reflections on plural positions and collective practices

Demolition, deconstruction, disassembly – the reflection on unbuilding seems to dominate architectural debate at the moment when we can no longer dismiss the consequences of our constructive actions. The postulates to stop building promote reuse, which now becomes not only about heritage preservation but also about the buildings that seem not worth transforming. New practices in adaptive and material reuse care about the spatial qualities of redesigned buildings, layered details, and existing histories, as well as about in-built resources

23 Abenia, Tiphaine, and Camille Fauvel. "Subtractive Strategies for Architectural Persistence: The Land of Thousand Dances." *Practices in Research #05: Demolitions and Deconstructions*, 247-269, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14537019

and broader ecosystems that they appertain to. This manifests in the plurality of attitudes, strategies, tactics and methods that rethink current modes of architectural production to prolong life cycles of what is already there: always keeping as much as possible, sometimes surgically removing obstructing parts, often adding reversible elements. Architects are not only authors of designed buildings anymore – they build on previous designs, uses and anticipate the ones yet to come. This collective authorship seems extremely distant from the star-architect dispositions of a few decades ago, and it is hopeful for the uncertain future that perhaps can only unfold when we act together.

PiR5 conference presented multiple examples of those responsible engagements. It also showed how the ‘as found’ and means-oriented approaches affect design processes and the role of the architects. We not only design but also spend time noticing, reading space, registering, cataloguing, accounting impacts, sourcing, testing and developing materials while caring about users’ needs and existing communities. This requires agility, new skills and adequate workflows. And a lot of convincing: new questions and ways of working ask for significant adjustment in how we practice, educate, collaborate and motivate our design decisions.

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