

An American Spolia: The Other Extraction

The Impossible out of the Quotidian

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Abstract

As a way to illustrate a way to learn from ancient practices to advance radical reuse today as an alternative to extraction, this narrative offers the author's encounters and transformations of the contemporary art and utilitarian objects, civic monuments, building fragments and systems where aesthetics is the driving force behind their very existence and persistence.

Keywords: Spolia, Reuse, Recycling, Repair, Misuse, Experimental, Preservation, Core Sample, Sampling, History, Ruin, Trace, Erasure, Palimpsest, Dis-assembly

*"A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.
The story should never be made up of improbable incidents; there should be nothing of the sort in it."*

— Aristotle, Poetics

It is difficult to reflect on what may have constituted the probable, the improbable, or the impossible possibilities in the time of Aristotle. People then were more open to the idea of the omnipresent anthropomorphic gods, doling out their divine intervention into any human subject at a moment's notice. Now we can cite a number of things, mostly technological inventions (the Moon landing, the A-bombs, video phone calls, google maps, the internet itself) that were a probable impossibilities only recently—100, 50, even 25 years ago as first they appeared in popular culture (Jules Verne, for example, H.G. Wells, the Strugatsky brothers, etc.), eventually evolving into the improbable possibility and, for better or worse, into the quotidian reality. But how likely is it to replace extraction of virgin resources with radial reuse of spaces, things, technologies and techniques we have already accumulated? What do we do with the landscapes, buildings, materials, and technologies that we have built especially in the last industrial century, and those that have or are rapidly becoming obsolete? It is likely, but currently impossible – for many reasons: legislative, financial, environmental, habitual even. But perhaps the biggest obstacle to this impossibility is lack of our own imagination. And daring to imagine that an old familiar thing (building, material, landscape, etc.) can become something dramatically different while still substantially remaining what it is. We need to start believing in this kind of transformative magic.

What can the nature of attraction in reusing old things for new purposes be when it is still cheaper to level and trash a building and put up a new one, than to reconstruct an existing one? Bjarke Ingels in the beginning of his career had put forward an idea of “sustainable

hedonism” (TEDxEastSalon 2024), certainly the statement that can be situated in the realm of Aristotelian poetry, though it is yet to materialize. Decaying plants and civic structures of post-industrial cities across the globe have attracted many revelers of “ruin porn” in the late 2000’s, but since then many of the former spectacular ruins have been tamed into common and gentrified shopping malls, condominiums and restaurants—all lacking the radical transformation and discovery of new possibilities within this existing embodied resource. Something is missing in contemporary reuse. Clearly, reuse, beyond the environmentalist drive, has an aesthetic dimension. It is the human desire to create, design and appreciate those creations in some fashion¹. The re-discovery of the familiar (or vaguely familiar) in a new light is a form of creation. The ancients have practiced *spoliation* of their built environment aimed dually at pragmatism of re-using what was already available (mostly in material or embodied labor sense) and re-contextualizing the found (pillaged, removed, looted) spolia for new (political, religious, cultural) purposes. This practice, both pragmatic and aesthetic, yielded buildings that became cities, monuments that newly conceived cultural manifestations out of entirely old givens. Can there be a new *spolia*; even more specifically here, an American spolia – something dramatically new, in Graham Harman’s “emergence” (2018) sense, yet made from the vestiges of the late 19th and 20th century of industrial scale of building, growing, extracting and consuming?

To illustrate the extraction of the impossible out of the quotidian, the following are several encounters, old and recent, famous and obscure, with the transformations of the contemporary art and utilitarian objects, civic monuments, building fragments and systems where aesthetics is the driving force behind their very existence and persistence. All of these share a certain sense of poetics, and the sheer amazement associated with this dual condition of discovery of the new and the recognition of the old in a new context. Sustainable Hedonism after all, can probably exist, though it is better described as the Alternative Extraction—that of the impossible out of the quotidian.

Rodin’s assemblages, 1900s, Musée Rodin, Paris



Fig. 1. Assemblage, Auguste Rodin, Musée Rodin, Paris, 1900s

The Musée Rodin contains several thousand artifacts of antiquity that belonged to Auguste Rodin. Most of them are smaller, insignificant, often utilitarian objects: vessels, votive figurines, fragments. The museum's curator explained the collection as a set of "shortcuts" that the sculptor used in his work, essentially as the beginnings of new sculpture; he fashioned additions to these objects or used them as fragments of his larger studies. But surely there is more to Rodin's obsession with antiquity. Perhaps it is in the past, the time, the history objectified in a pottery fragment, captured in the rough texture of its surface, its weight, its jagged edges, its often-unclear purpose but always clear, raw power. Could it simply be that Rodin was trying to capture and channel the intangible energy of these objects by surrounding himself with them, touching, working, even modifying them, thus entering the stream of time? Could it be the same sentiment that John Soane was expressing in his house full of antique fragments? The work of both Rodin and Soane certainly suggests that this "totemic stuff"² has had an influence—one much more clearly felt in the work of the sculptor, where the medium of the original objects is shared by the new work.

Le Antichità Romane, G.B. Piranesi, 1756



Fig. 2. Le Antichità Romane, G.B. Piranesi, 1756

This image of Piranesi's is of particular interest. Here the *maestro incisore* does not show "portraits" of Rome as in his *Vedute di Roma*, nor is this a (pseudo) archaeological reconstruction of the *Campo Marzio* series. This is something different, something akin, strangely, to either an image of a future utopian architecture (in this case Piranesi is looking back, but seeing forward) or the photographs of the actual antiquity, undisturbed—for example, the photographs from the 1920s of then newly-discovered tomb of King Tutankhamen, which included a warehouse and a store, a veritable attic of antiquity, piled up efficiently to save space, not tell a story. This image shows the ruthlessly efficient stacking of forms, not meaning, that produces wonderfully de-contextured juxtapositions and combinations; perhaps this is the image of the future? Some of our contemporaries, notably Jimenez Lai and his *Bureau Spectacular*, might agree.

Chest of Drawers and Chair, Met Wijnrel, Tejo Remy, DROOG, 1993



Fig. 3. Chest of drawers and chair, DROOG, Amsterdam, 1993

What can one make of this 1990's Dutch design? It is clearly not a question of necessity, nor convenience; there are no specific politics involved either. Is this purely the case of "aesthetic wonderment and admiration", a fascination with the quotidian living, and an appropriation of the mundane by "high-design"? One can argue here that there is a certain dimension of profanation or exorcism of the high design—a reaction, simultaneously against the earnest modernist effort to bring furniture, architecture, product design to the masses and against the post-modern formalized "memories" of the past. This furniture is indeed memories, but a different kind, rough, gritty, and dead-pan.

Objects of product and industrial design for Muji and others, Naoto Fukasawa, 1990s–2000s, Japan



Fig. 4. Canvas bag, Naoto Fukasawa Muji, 2000s, Japan

Fukasawa takes inspiration from common daily situations, where people, objects, and environments interact in seemingly unremarkable but fundamentally influential and formative ways. From the tactile memories of a peeled potato to a railroad clock that would look good on one's wrist to the simple action of a pull-chain associated with turning on lights (or music, as is the case with Fukasawa) to the tea bags that may as well be puppets—all these observations of daily life as it happens by serendipity or design yield products that perhaps are not always as good as naturally occurring serendipity, but are very much a commentary, a record of what normally goes unnoticed. This noting of the daily interactions of people and objects, the awareness of how the world works on the small scale, on the level of material, chance, or misuse, is the most fundamental aspect for practicing spolia, and as such should be introduced *en-masse* into contemporary design education.

PLANCH™, a furniture system, Austin + Mergold



Fig. 5. PLANCH™, a furniture system, Austin+Mergold

PLANCH™ is a product of urban construction waste: plywood and EPS foam are widely used in building and site construction. Because it is relatively brittle, and relatively cheap, huge quantities of EPS end up in landfills during construction and after demolition; there it would remain for centuries. The motivation for designing PLANCH™ is to remediate this situation. A planter-bench (or “PLANCH”) utilizes the compressive strength of foam, and makes for a cheap and quickly made exterior furniture. But first and foremost, it combines potentially toxic chemical products with a potentially cleansing plant. Phyto-remediation is one way to deal with vast quantities of toxins that we produce daily. While this is not a closed self-remediating system by any means, PLANCH™ visually juxtaposes the toxic and safe, banal and unique, manmade and natural in desperate search for balance and coexistence.

National Library of Slovenia, Jože Plečnik, 1931, Ljubljana



Fig. 6. National Library of Slovenia, Jože Plečnik, 1931, Ljubljana

Some would consider Plečnik a proto-postmodernist, and at least in the case of the National Library in Ljubljana, it is a quest for memories found in fragments. Though the fragments here are implied, or fabricated, the presence of the ancient Roman city of Emola is very palpable in Ljubljana. The building, then, is a relic of time passing, not unlike the Arch of Constantine, admired not for its intended result, but as the palimpsest of cultural evolution.

City Hall, Ragnar Östberg, 1923, Stockholm



Fig. 7. City Hall, Ragnar Östberg, 1923, Stockholm. Emma Bormann, Austrian, 1887-1974. Stockholm City Hall. Soft-ground etching in blue ink on wove paper, 1897-1974. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; Williamstown, Mass.

One can also invoke the City Hall of Stockholm, where the building was built over a decade but designed to look as if constructed over a millennium. It was the precursor of Scandinavian National Style, seen in the later anthropological study of Liselund (Møller, Rafn 1918) where the small Danish estate was designated a prototype of national style and documented at face value, with all the wear and tear of a 200-year-old building. This documentation seems to have been taken as gospel, and subsequent Scandinavian architecture has often been characterized by formal peculiarities and misalignments not normally found in new construction.

Roman bust cut from a column capital, AD 79–96, Princeton Museum of Art



Fig. 8. Roman bust cut from a column capital, AD 79–96, Princeton Museum of Art

This is a fragment of transition, of spolia as process—the act of dissolution of a (public, presumably) building into a (public, presumably) portrait. This is also, now, a fragment, a chip of a memory—that of building and person, fused into one—a conceptual caryatid. It is not entirely clear whether there was a political motivation here, or if this was a purely opportunistic act. But this bust can also be read as evidence of the anthropomorphism in architecture, where column capital = head, column shaft = body, etc.

Vodka Pavilion, Alexander Brodsky, 2010, Tarusa



Fig. 9. Vodka Pavilion, Alexander Brodsky, 2010, Tarusa

This may appear to be a straightforward recycling of old factory windows (taken off during demolition) into a quirky little pavilion. But this is also about aura—that of the old factory window, and particularly of the whitewashed kind. Whitewashing is done to let in light while preserving privacy, or suspense, or just separation of the inside from the outside. In the former Soviet Union, the whitewashed window was an everyday sight—with those on the outside wondering about the secrets on the inside and those inside feeling detached in their own sunny world. Reuse of rough industrial material does not have to yield a rough, industrial result. This delicate, vulnerable shell has managed to preserve both the magical aura of a sunlit interior and the dread of the battering ram.

Sural Ark, Austin+Mergold

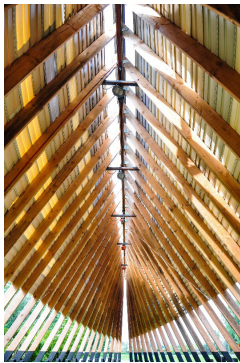


Fig. 10. Sural Ark, Austin+Mergold

Sural Ark grew from an engagement with the local American vernacular as well, though this time it was a contemporary material (vinyl siding) that was the focus of investigation. Vinyl evokes a range of reactions—from fascination with its ease of use, low price and low maintenance to abhorrence for its appearance, deception (it is made to look like wood) and environmental impact (because it so inexpensive it is often more economical to demolish it with the building rather than de-install and reuse, and much vinyl siding ends up in landfills). Thus, as a material it is extremely controversial, though equally ubiquitous—the project was therefore an attempt to argue for other uses, ways of repurposing and aesthetic possibilities for this mundane product.

Unistrut system, Charles Attwood, 1926, Chicago

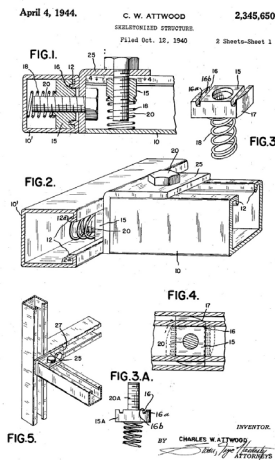


Fig. 11. Unistrut system, Charles Attwood, 1926, Chicago

Oculi, Austin+Mergold & collaborators

The *Oculi* grew from a fascination with the American grain bins that we had re-discovered



Fig. 13. *Oculi*, Austin+Mergold

in Central Pennsylvania. The grain bin, patented over a century ago, is one of the few successful examples of design for dis-assembly architecture. It is a fascinating industrial object with a distinct form (and phenomenological impact that rivals that of the Pantheon's interior) that clearly embodied technological inventions of its time and translated into an impressive manufacturing base that allowed for quick, inexpensive and voluminous mass-production of these buildings in the 20th century. Yet except for Buckminster Fuller in the 1940's, these (now mostly obsolete) building systems and the underlying infrastructure of production have not been considered a resource. *Oculi* is a proof of concept that 20th century systems (the Butler Bin and the Unistrut) can become relevant again in the 21st century.

In conclusion, looking over the examples above, it starting to be evident that even more human than search for a discovery, is the search for amusement. Though Aristotle dismissed Comedy as a lower genre, parody is only mentioned in his *Poetics* as a subversion of the tragic epos using similar verse into a lighter context. It has been further suggested³ that parody, or re-situation of the existing texts, ideas, etc. in a new context, has been the way forward for development of literature at large: Harry Potter, for example, as a parody of the New Testament, which in itself may be the parody of the Old one. If parody indeed has been propelling the creation of new literature, perhaps we can consider parody in architecture as well? Can radical de- or re-contextualizing of existing, recovered, found, salvaged elements (be it materials, systems, building components or even entire structures and landscapes) be the driving force of discovery, amazement and amusement in our new daily environments? After all, the ancients did not make as much of a distinction between the art disciplines as we do now—and that is something else, in addition to radical reuse, that we can relearn from them. And we can turn our familiar mundane routine world into a new and exciting, environmentally conscious and an ever so slightly ironic version of itself? Because a small dose of irony and amusement is a good antidote to grandiose self-importance—both in architecture, and in life in general.

Notes

1. In their recent *Are We Human?* Mark Wigley and Beatriz Colomina make an argument that «we are completely suspended in design» certainly now but also from the very beginning of humanity (Colomina, Wigley 2016, 25).
2. «With the revolution achieved human affairs will become located in the full radiance of enlightenment. Such again and again has been the revolutionary presumption: and, deriving from it, again and again there has ensued an almost predictable disillusion. For, whatever the abstract height of the rational project, the totemic stuff has simply refused to be expunged. Merely it has discovered for itself a new disguise: and in this way, concealing itself in the sophistications of freshly invented camouflage, it has invariably been enabled to operate quite as effectively as ever» (Rowe, Koetter 1978, 120).
3. Dmitry Bykov, a renown poet and literary critic living in the US now, has expressed that idea in his lectures.

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