

And the Smell of Rot Fills the Country

Reflections on an Architecture-Consuming Society

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Abstract

« And the smell of rot fills the country »

Inspired by a line from *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, this work explores the evident necessity of rehabilitation in the face of the moral, ethical, ecological and physical violence of demolition. In the first part, through a series of examples from various historical periods, demolition—seen as the counterpoint to rehabilitation—is presented as a deliberate and meaningful act. Its use throughout history reflects an evolving relationship with the built environment, increasingly treated as a consumable, perishable, and replaceable commodity. In the second part, the focus shifts to rehabilitation projects. Drawing a parallel between the rehabilitation of a building and that of a person, the reflection extends this notion into the field of architecture and construction. Rehabilitation is thus, on the one hand, a stance – an ethical, social, and environmental commitment—and, on the other, a practice, with its own tools, knowledge, and expertise.

Keywords: Demolition, Rehabilitation, Consumption

Introduction

«And the smell of rot fills the country.

Burn coffee for fuel in the ships. Burn corn to keep warm, it makes a hot fire. Dump potatoes in the rivers and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out. Slaughter the pigs and bury them, and let the putrescence drip down into the earth.

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates – died of malnutrition – because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.»

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, American writer John Steinbeck evokes the Dust Bowl years in



Fig. 1. Demolition and rehabilitation site, London (Paul Susini, 2025)

the United States, in the aftermath of the Great Depression: a time when relentless dust storms stripped the earth bare, forcing farmers to leave Oklahoma in search of survival in California. What seizes the reader is the sheer violence of capitalism—blind, soulless, driven only by the cold logic of production and profit.

Now, if we replace that Dust Bowl with today's unfolding ecological catastrophe, and the farmers' crops with our architectures—while keeping capitalism intact—the same stench of decay still lingers.

I propose, then, to shift this gaze toward architecture. To explore, through mostly French examples and broader reflections, the tension between two intertwined notions: rehabilitation and demolition. What follows is a standpoint, born from a need to bear witness—from the perspective of an architect—about the role, the responsibility, and the ethical stance embedded in the act of rehabilitation. It is, ultimately, a position.

This requires us to question how the act of demolishing has evolved, serving a system in which production itself has become the norm. And to see how rehabilitation, beyond being a relevant architectural practice, emerges as an act of resistance—as a way to restore meaning, and perhaps, a sense of humanity.

The Paradox of Demolition

Throughout history, acts of demolition have marked pivotal moments: they symbolize change through the assault on architecture—an art form that, by definition, embodies power and culture¹. Within this historical dimension, it is worth distinguishing two types of demolition, which together reveal what I would call the “paradox of demolition”.

On the one hand, there is the “undesired” demolition—accidental, criminal, or born of conflict. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar II systematically destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem;

in 1666 the Great Fire of London consumed most of the medieval city; in 1687, the Parthenon, used as a gunpowder store, exploded after being hit by a Venetian mortar during the siege of Athens. More recently, we might think of the attacks of September 11, 2001, which brought down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, or of the ongoing bombings of urban areas in Ukraine and Palestine. Demolition thus carries within it an intrinsic violence—an erasure used to wound a culture, a people, or a power.

On the other hand, there are “voluntary” demolitions—calculated, deliberate. Historically, one might recall the destruction of the old Vatican Basilica ordered by the Pope in 1505, the razing of the Bastille during the French Revolution, or Baron Haussmann’s vast transformations of Paris in the nineteenth century. In these cases, architectural historian Françoise Choay perceives a kind of “historical necessity” (Choay 2009, 286–306), born from the obsolescence and inadequacy of certain structures. She cites Freud, who contrasted the city—whose development depends on demolitions and replacements—with the human psyche, which retains all its past states. In this idea, the peaceful development of any city implies demolitions and replacements of buildings, making demolition an inherent process in the plasticity of the world, a sign of the city’s evolution.

Hence the paradox: demolition may appear both as a deliberate practice, historically rooted in the metabolism of the urban fabric—forming a necessary counterpart to construction—and as a violent act, an instrument of terror and war. Though their intentions differ, their forms remain identical; the violence, both physical and moral, is analogous. The forces required to undo what holds built matter together are the same, regardless of motive. These two branches share a symbolic ambition: to strike architecture is to alter an image, a representation. From this paradox, we must question what might be called the “migration of the value of demolition”.

Architecture and Consumerism

The duality previously described becomes more complex with the industrial revolution, and even more so in the period between the two world wars, when a profound shift, «a true mutation» (Choay 1962, 276–291) takes place. While demolitions linked to warfare increase significantly (both because of the scale of conflicts and the advancement of weaponry), deliberate demolitions also multiply, as a consequence of the acceleration of production techniques. From then on, they no longer follow the historical logic identified earlier: demolition is now absorbed, even theorized, within the framework of modern architecture. This *tabula rasa* lies at the heart of what historian Françoise Choay calls the «sophism of demolition»³ (Choay 2009, 286–306). While this reflection takes shape through architectural theory, it is equally essential to place it within a broader context: the evolution of lifestyles and, in particular, of consumption.

With the rise of industrialized construction techniques, buildings become standardized. Prefabricated elements—floors, walls, façades—reinforced and prestressed concrete, all seemingly liberated from the constraints of site and context. Typologies multiply, repeating themselves endlessly. This observation may seem general, even caricatural, yet it reveals a profound transformation in our relationship to the built environment. The prefabricated house stands as the ultimate expression of this shift: «The house thus comes to present itself in a universal form, which renders it an anonymous object. For the first time in history, it becomes an industrial product» (Choay 1962, 276–291).

Demolition, in turn, evolves: once a process serving the adaptation and improvement of the city, it becomes a mechanism within the speculative model of consumer society—an urban gesture mirroring the logic of disposable goods. Buildings are no longer demolished out of necessity or convenience, but because the market cultivates and rewards waste for the sake of profit, consciously choosing, as Guien (2021, 18–54) puts it, to «deny the intrinsic value of the world».

Yet the true consecration of this mutation lies not in the act itself, but in the way it is perceived. The construction industry achieves the remarkable feat of transforming an inherently violent act—what we have called the “paradox of demolition”—into a celebration, a spectacle. Demolition becomes ritualized. The destruction of Pruitt-Igoe (Fig. 2), broadcast on television, is emblematic: not only the death of modern architecture (Jencks 1977, 9), but the consecration of the death of architectures themselves. A kind of memento mori of the built world.

Choay (2009) also evokes the Ise shrine ritual, in Japan (Fig. 3), which involves the ritual reconstruction of a building every twenty years on the adjacent plot. This practice serves both to preserve traditional construction techniques and to fulfill the ritual requirement for the renewal of the building’s elements. The demolition we examine here thus appears as an even more exaggerated ritual celebrating material opulence, the capacity for unrestrained construction, and the unscrupulous waste that accompanies it—see, for example, the demolitions of casinos in Las Vegas and their firework display.



Fig. 2 (Left): Televised demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Complex, Saint-Louis, Missouri (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development / Public domain, 1972). Fig. 3 (Right): *Shikinen-sengu* (traditional ritual of reconstruction of Ise sanctuary), Ise sanctuary, Japan (Public domain, 1953)

Paradigm shift

As previously discussed, demolition has historically been part of the very process of constructing the city (Choay 2009). Yet it is now impossible to consider it without confronting the contemporary paradigm of climate challenges. The reflection thus unfolds within a new framework: that of the Anthropocene³. Indeed, the building sector is one of the world’s largest consumers of energy—accounting for nearly one-third of global demand—and one of its major producers of greenhouse gases, responsible for thirty-seven

percent of global CO² emissions (GlobalABC 2024, 9–10). The rising concentration of these gases, driving climate change, alters our relationship with the world itself.

One could then extend Choay's reflection (2009) and identify a new "sophism of construction" which overturns the supposed superiority of new buildings over existing ones. Within the Anthropocene framework, new construction appears less relevant than the adaptation of what already exists. This becomes even more striking when new construction follows prior demolition.

In the face of the necessity to question the very act of building, several architects and thinkers now call for a halt to demolition—and even to construction itself. Architect Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, in *A Moratorium on New Construction*, proposes several avenues for rethinking architectural practice. She highlights the far-reaching repercussions of construction choices: the omnipresence of transformed and imported materials, the exploitative labor conditions linked to their extraction, and the enormous carbon footprint these processes entail (Malterre-Barthes 2025, 95–122).

A simple yet profound truth thus emerges: the need to see the existing built environment as a resource—as the embodiment of efforts, materials, and energy already spent—something we must respect and revalue, if we are to avoid a fate already in motion: «If we dig precious things from the land, we will invite disaster» (Reggio 1982). To change the paradigm, then, is to invert our gaze upon construction itself: «the new is the old» (Legouis 2023, 13–14). It is to adopt rehabilitation as a stance, a conscious, ethical position within the act of building.

Etymologies: Rehabilitation as a Stance

The French word *réhabiliter* (to rehabilitate) originates in the judicial lexicon. It refers to the act of restoring someone to a state, to rights, to privileges once lost, as in the case of a person wrongly condemned. Implicit in this notion is an erroneous or premature judgment—a misreading that demands correction. Leon Battista Alberti himself likened demolition to a crime, *injuria* (Choay 2009). This crime can be understood as an insult, both to the building as symbol—and we have seen how deliberate such an attack can be—and to the building as work: the tangible embodiment of human effort. An intellectual effort—of architects, draftsmen, engineers—and a physical one—of craftsmen, masons, laborers.

In the context of the Anthropocene, the building carries yet a third essential dimension: it embodies an energetic and material effort. It is a reservoir of resources, of carbon—contained in the cement that forms its foundations, in the bricks that shape its walls, in the energy required to fire and assemble them.

In this sense, rehabilitation might extend Choay's reflection borrowed from Freud: architecture could be compared to a psychic organism, capable of combining temporalities, of uniting past, present, and future. Rehabilitation acknowledges what a building represents not only symbolically, but also materially: as a vessel of matter, energy, and carbon footprint. The English term *adaptive reuse* expresses the discipline's ambition in a less metaphorical, yet equally precise way: to adapt and reuse, rather than abandon and start anew. Within this perspective, buildings escape a consumerist gaze; they are no longer treated as disposable objects, nor confined by the notion of obsolescence. Appearing in dictionaries only in 1973 (Wong 2023, 6–7), the term itself reflects its context: a linguistic and conceptual response to a historical condition, born of necessity—the need to name a practice that redefines architecture's role within a world aware of its own limits.

A Non-Standard Architecture

Rehabilitation thus proves to be a field of architecture in its own right. It is, in itself, a way of rehabilitating the discipline. In French, the word *réhabiliter* is sometimes shortened in professional jargon to *réhab'*—a term that, in English, evokes rehab, or detoxification. A fitting image for a field addicted to the comfort of standardized products, to demolition as a new beginning. Rehabilitation, in this sense, becomes an act of detox—an affirmation of architecture's ability to escape consumerist logic, to consider instead the constellations (Pihlmann, Dickinson 2025, 24–72) that compose an existing building: its materials, its spaces, its history, its transformations.

Through this circumvention of standardization, attention turns particularly to French examples, drawn from the author's own experience in the practice of rehabilitation on this territory, where architects are actively mobilizing. In 2024, the Syndicat de l'Architecture launched a petition calling for the inclusion of rehabilitation in the 1977 French architecture law—a strong gesture toward giving this practice a formal, legal framework. A few days later, the prestigious Équerre d'Argent was awarded to the firm Devaux & Devaux for their rehabilitation of the upper station of the Salève cable car in Monnetier-Mornex, originally designed in 1932 by architect Maurice Brillaud.

Within this movement, several fields of derogation emerge: derogations from urban planning regulations, through the principle of acquired rights, where preserving an existing building can allow for greater site occupation than current zoning laws would permit for new construction; derogations from certain safety codes, such as fire regulations, when justified; or from thermal regulations, among others. The challenge lies in achieving a delicate equilibrium—a form of reasoned disobedience. «The built fabric is destined to mutate in character and texture; it resists, or refuses, the demands of modern, technocratic, or administrative norms» (Possompès 2023).

Rehabilitation is therefore also a form of resistance to standardization, and an embrace of the anecdotal, the singular, the accidental qualities born from the constraints of the existing: «escaping the relentless tide of standardized, market-approved housing, to live in strange, vast, and generous spaces appeared as an attractive solution for our generation» (Druot 2009, 66). The well-known example of the Tour Bois-le-Prêtre by french architects Frédéric Druot and Lacaton & Vassal perfectly embodies this idea. An architecture born from a period of mass standardized production becomes the site of reinvestment. The costs of demolition and reconstruction are redirected into transforming and improving the existing structure. A constellation of small gestures that together make housing personal again, imbued with character, memory, and possibility (Ruby, Ruby 2007, 15–23). As Druot (2009) writes, intervention on the existing represents «the rare territory capable of opposing a market strategy with a strategy of cultures adapted to people's pleasures». Recently, architects Julien Le Mentec and Marine Le Roy worked on the rehabilitation of a 1930's building in Paris, the Murat social housing complex. They made use of the attic rooms on the top floors, whose spaces were constrained by the sloping rooflines, grouping them into atypical apartments with generous proportions and high-quality materials, combining reclaimed floorboards, preserved flooring, and carefully executed repairs where partitions had been removed. The project thus overturns the traditional role of the attic servant rooms and their cramped spaces, demonstrating the ability of a century-old building to

transform while asserting its singular character.

Another project beautifully illustrates this spirit: the Vialle de Grillon (Fig. 4), the adaptive reuse of the ruins of a southern French village into social housing, carried out by Georges-Henri Pingusson and his students in the 1970's. The project preserves the remaining external stone walls and the diversity of their openings—twin windows, cross-mullioned frames, and more. On the inner side of the village, the architect reused the fallen stones, recasting them into a site-mixed cyclopean concrete, reinvesting the available material with new meaning. The resulting walls merge modern expression and local matter, creating a singular vibration. Inside, spaces weave a dialogue between the rational clarity of modern language—walkways, elongated openings—and the medieval heritage of the preserved masonry.



Fig. 4. Le Vialle, rehabilitation of ruins into social housing in Grillon, France, by architects Georges-Henri Pingusson, Philippe Alluin and Jean-Paul Mauduit, completed in 1980 (Paul Susini, 2023)

Conclusions

Architecture finds itself at a pivotal moment: the notion of demolition has seen its meaning evolve, pushing to the extreme a certain paradox inherent in the act of demolishing. Once regarded simply as a component of urban evolution, it has been elevated to the status of a ritual—one that celebrates a kind of indifference toward what already exists. Yet the shift in global priorities—marked by the emergence of a climate emergency that is itself a consequence of this unrestrained consumption—places architecture within a new paradigm. It now bears the responsibility of valuing what is already there, not only because this makes sense in terms of carbon footprint, but also because what already exists carries an emancipatory dimension.

To rehabilitate appears as a way of giving meaning, to a world that can sometimes seem to lack it, in the face of an imminent and already unfolding environmental crisis. It is also about giving meaning to architecture itself, which, caught up in this world of production, may find an answer in the consideration of what already exists. To rehabilitate is therefore to empower—both architecture and the architect.

Rehabilitation appears as a way—another way—to practice architecture, and prevent the smell of rot from filling the country.

Notes

1. See, for example, Vitruvius's *De architectura*, Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, Aldo Rossi's *The architecture of the city*.
2. Françoise Choay identifies three sophisms: the sophism of creation *ex nihilo* (the idea that one can create without taking into account the past, the context, or references); the sophism of demolition (demolition is sometimes presented as necessary without acknowledging the loss or negativity it entails); and the sophism of preserving the past (wanting to preserve everything, often in a spirit of museum-like memory, without accepting that the passage of time also implies transformation, surpassing, and renewal).
3. Anthropocene: the most recent period in the earth's history, when human activities have a very important effect on the earth's environment and climate (Cambridge Dictionary).

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