

# Of Both Processes and Forces: Spolia

By combining diverse subsystems *ad hoc*, the designer shows *what* their previous history was, *why* they were put together and *how* they work. All this articulation is pleasing to the mind and allows an experience of a higher order.

Meaningful articulation is the goal of adhocism. Opposed to purism and exclusivist design theories, it accepts everyone as an architect and all modes of communication, whether based on nature or culture. The ideal is to provide an environment which can be as visually rich and varied as actual urban life.

— Charles Jenks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism, a Case for Improvisation*

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The debate of Autonomy vs Contingency echoes the great Lilliput vs Blefuscu conflict described by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* over which end of a hard-boiled egg it is proper to break in order to eat it. According to the great English satirist, the conflict of “Big and Little-Endians” resulted in “six rebellions... wherein one Emperor lost his life, and another his crown”<sup>1</sup>. In the profession of architecture, divides can be equally contentions. But in the end, both sides argue about the process of conceiving and producing built form—the question is how to initiate this process. Instead of advocating for either side, we would like to propose a reflection on a phenomenon that encompasses both concerns—that of the “Autonomists” and that of the “Contingents”—and offers an alternative where both camps could find synergies.

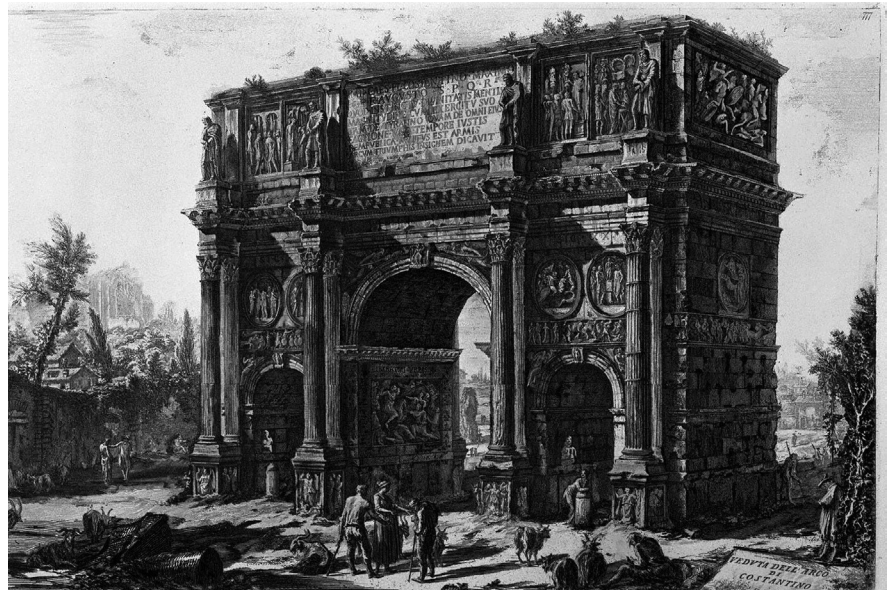
The practice of *spolia* is millennia old, dating back to Ancient Egypt and perhaps beyond, referring to using scavenged materials for new, and often unintended, purposes in constructed environment. Both extremely pragmatic and symbolically charged, *spolia* is a complex phenomenon; beyond mere recycling, it also has social, cultural, and political dimensions. Many sites, buildings, structures of antiquity were repurposed into newer edifices, not only to facilitate the production of new form, but also to claim the cultural and political heritage of the donor structures—thus, effectively re-authoring existing context. *Spolia* is now mostly considered an archaic practice in sharp contrast with today's global mainstream design culture in which the life expectancy of buildings, landscapes, objects, images, technology—and even ideas—is increasingly (and often purposefully) short. Yet *spolia* has a direct relationship with our current, emerging concerns with our environment, and the resulting interest in adaptive reuse, recycling, life hacking, and the slow movement. It is related, also, to various vernacular phenomena, like *jugaad*<sup>2</sup> in India, and the extreme design that originated in the former Eastern Bloc. *Spolia* offers a new perspective on the historic preservation debate around the conservation of particular moments in history versus the preservation of traces of the continuous historical development. Furthermore, beyond a version of recycling, the phenomenon of *spolia* can be seen as sampling of various manifestations of cultural production, dating back to early antiquity, and consistently



Figure 1: Architectural salvage yard, Scranton, PA  
photo A. Mergold.



2



3

present in subsequent history; as such it is a major vehicle of the culture-formation from the ancient times to the present.

We would like to offer the possibility that spolia as a process and a cultural phenomenon embodies both Contingency (having to deal with the given) and Autonomy (the license to interpret freely), by being simultaneously engaged and dis-engaged in its context of physical objects and ideas, and by relying equally on violent innovation and reverent heritage. We would like to remark on the practices of spolia in antiquity and recent history, where (perhaps under a different name) the idea of both contextual appropriation and interpretation driven by singular authorship can be productively co-existent. The eggshell, after all, can be broken on its side.

### SPOLIA: THE LONG STORY

In antiquity, it would appear that every building entity had a chance for either reincarnation as another built form or for up- or down-cycling. The sheer amount of labor involved in hand turning a drum of a column for example suggested the idea that it was best to reuse the older element than make a new one. This is supported by the existence of a formal trade in older building elements in Rome and across the Empire continuing into the medieval times.<sup>3</sup> However it is the cultural aspect of spolia, suggested by the very name “spoils” that become even more interesting epically as the “spoliated” subjects begin to acquire new meanings. There are certainly many examples of that in Rome itself—notably the Arch of Constantine that exhibits several “reused” reliefs from the times of previous emperors<sup>4</sup> complete with the current rulers’ heads. The colossus of Rome, too, is said to have survived well into 8<sup>th</sup> century because of the same tradition of “re-heading” the statue. The very fact that today the Colosseum and the Pantheon exist is the adaptability of the whole buildings—or their ability to become spolia of the contemporary culture, religion or political regime. The most telling example of spolia for us, in way that opens other implications of spoliation, is the story of the “invention” of Venice, where the merchants and Venetian ruling class essentially decide to adopt St. Mark as the patron saint and therefore rival other Christian centers of 9<sup>th</sup> century. In order to “claim a saint,” one needed a relic—and it was literally stolen, and this spolia was delivered to Venice from Alexandria through a series of complex machinations, which became immortalized in Tintoretto’s three paintings produced in late 1540’s. To go further, additional artifacts—this time building, not body, parts—were brought to

Figure 2: *Spolia in Rome*  
photo A. Mergold.

Figure 3: Arch of Constantine  
engraving G-B. Paranesi.



4



5

Venice from various corners of the collapsed Roman Empire for the construction of the main cathedral, San Marco, in order to establish, now architecturally the mythology of the patron saint.<sup>5</sup>

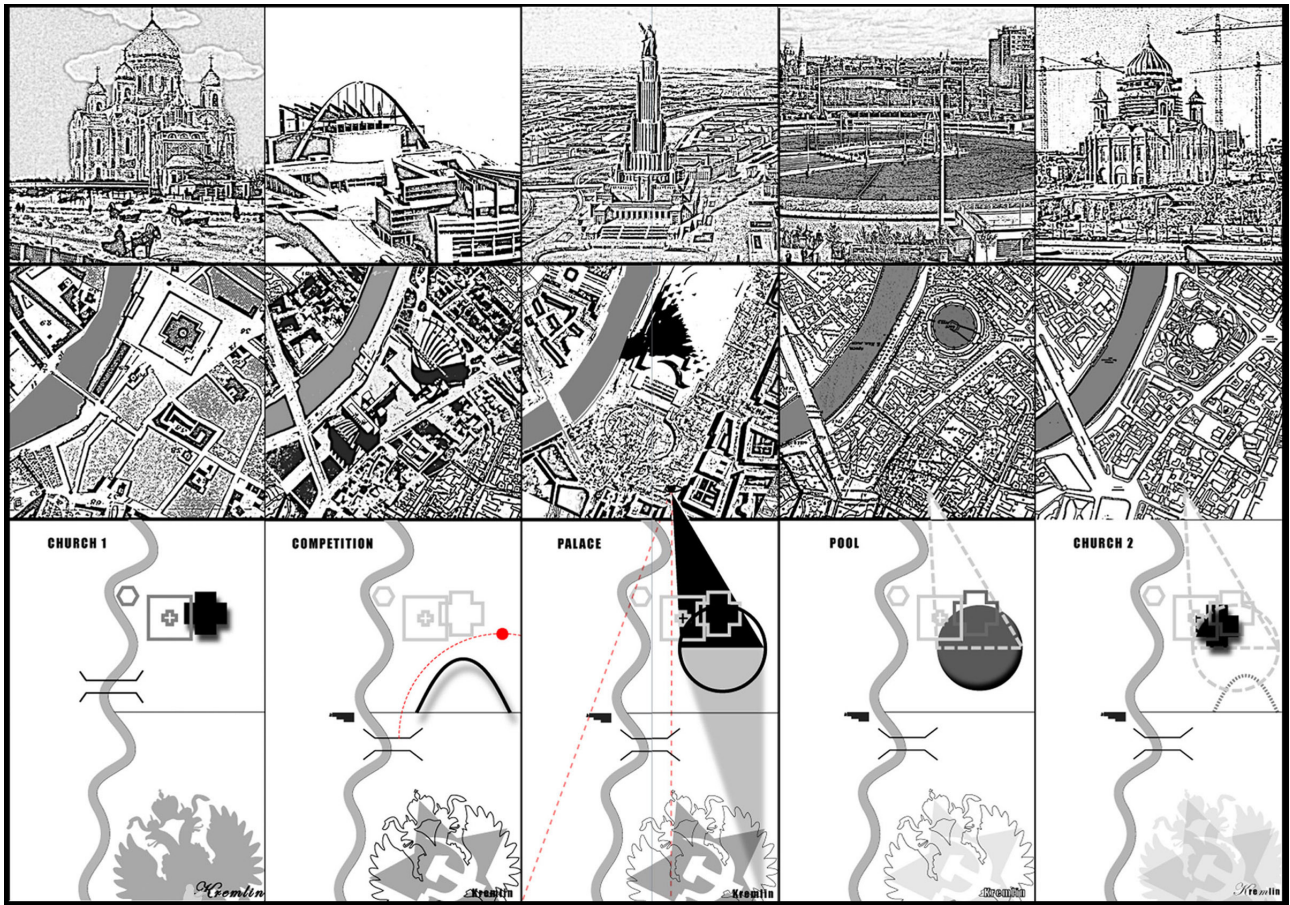
What follows is the strangest series of metamorphoses that for us establishes spolia as the activity of rediscovery, and often, of misinterpretation, of architectural objects and processes on a whole new level. In 1453, after the fall of Constantinople, Moscow emerged as the new (orthodox) Christian power. At that point, a need for a new proto-church was felt and emissaries were sent all over the Christian world to find a building worthy of imitating and a builder worthy of constructing it.<sup>6</sup> Somewhere in Venice the Russian embassy was introduced to Aristotele Fioravanti, a Bolognese engineer, who was said to have designed cathedral of San Marco itself (and that's in the late 1460's!) and to have modelled it on the Old Temple of Jerusalem. An absurdity indeed, yet the attraction of San Marco's eclectic Byzantine spolia was compelling enough, and as the result in 1474 the new Russian proto-church of the Cathedral of Dormition was built in the Kremlin. That church was then proclaimed the classic Russian ecclesiastic architecture for another 400 years, until after the war of 1812 and the great fire of Moscow a call for another proto-church/monument was made.<sup>7</sup> The story of this new church is not particularly important here (though formidably impressive, interlaced with various metamorphoses, and it is still directly related to the Cathedral of Dormition).

Then, in 1931, some years after the collapse of the Russian empire and the orthodoxy, this site becomes the stage for the international competition for the Palace of the Soviets. On this site the church of Christ the Redeemer through a series of mis-appropriations still traced its origin to the Venetian affair of the mistakenly dated San Marco and its compelling byzantine spolia. Christ the Redeemer was then promptly blown up to make room for the new Palace, and a number of international architectural luminaries along with the Russian architectural Avant-garde competed for the new super commission. Le Corbusier hoped to win<sup>8</sup>, having worked on projects in Moscow already. Instead a team lead by Italian-trained Boris Iofan was declared winner, and spent the next decade developing the building and eventually breaking ground, pouring the foundations, and going up several stories at the offset of WWII. The new Palace was conceived as the Soviet answer to the American skyscraper, and several soviet architects were apprenticed to US firms to learn the way of making these new building types.<sup>9</sup> Yet the new Palace was also influenced by the context of the Kremlin's historic towers and churches nearby, so the progression renderings for the project looked

Figure 4: *San Marco, Venice*  
photo A. Mergold.

Figure 5: *Dormition Cathedral, Moscow*  
photo A. Mergold.





6

more and more like hybrids (spoliations, perhaps?) of the Empire State Building and metal-clad domes of the Russian churches (and San Marco for that matter).

The next chapter in this long trail of events occurred in the early 1960's. By then the taste for grandiose buildings was tempered after Stalin's death in 1953, and what was built of the Palace of the Soviet prior to WWII has been already deconstructed to recycle the steel for weapons and tanks during the war. Perhaps, not an example of spolia per se, but definitely one of material recycling. The resulting empty grandiose foundation pit, on a site near the Moskva River was simply and logically re-appropriated into a large circular open-air swimming pool—and this strange, yet very popular program existed for another 30 years. Rem Koolhaas has a poetic story in SMLXL dedicated to the Palace of the Soviets and its aftermath. There he refers to the pool in the following way:

The pool becomes positively Roman: arena, absorber, social, condenser, great emancipator, connector—undeniably fabricator of a community... The evaporation of the actual building infinitely enlarged its possible programs.<sup>10</sup>

Though we have come a full circle to the Roman origin of the metamorphoses (or re-appropriations) of building parts, types, programs and appearances, all what the romans would see as both acts and artefacts of spolia, the story of that site is not over. In 1996, the copy of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was rebuilt on site, over the old pool that now became the foundation for several levels of parking below. It is now again the largest church in Russia—with its image and its idea recycled through a complex yet unrelenting succession of context-driven and autonomously generated architectural events, while the original salvaged pieces from the 1931 demolition still adorn the yards of Dosnkoi Monastery and the Schusev Museum of Architecture nearby.

Figure 6: *Palace of the Soviet site, 1890's-1990's, A. Mergold.*



8



9

### SPOLIA: A SHORT CASE STUDY

If spolia is both an autonomous object and a contingent act, then let us consider the projects produced by the students of Cornell Architecture for a graduate seminar on spolia (Arch 4506/6506, Cornell Architecture, Aleksandr Mergold, instructor). After several probes into current and ancient manifestations of spolia, students were asked to consider two subjects for an exhibition: one was the collection of antique plaster casts, assembled by Cornell's first president Andrew Dickson White<sup>11</sup>, and two, the recently completed Milstein Hall, designed by Rem Koolhaas and OMA.<sup>12</sup>

The A.D. White plaster casts in their current state are, over a century later, the artifacts in themselves, largely fragmented and in dis-use, highlight the changing contemporary perspective on the canons of antiquity and western civilization, as well as new frontiers of adaptive reuse of existing artifacts, buildings, landscapes and even theories. Unique in their own right, these plaster casts (some of their originals were lost in WWII) embody a rich aesthetic, intellectual and cultural history of the University, the study of fine arts, and the western civilization. The new Milstein Hall is also an artifact. The form of the building, partially dictated by its site, the abutting existing buildings from 1912 and 1882, and partially by its overt references to various other architectural canonical buildings and forms, produces an extraordinary space. As a consequence of both the formal complexities of the building and various governing codes and ordinances, there are multiple liminal, residual, and ambiguous spatial fragments that question the traditional understanding of building use.

The students were asked to respond to these two entities, the objects and the site; and produced an exhibition, titled *Fragments and Moments*, exploring the relationships between discarded objects, imbued by complex and multiple meanings though devoid of recognizable form, and the liminal spaces, resultants of larger aesthetic and conceptual concerns that carry formal meaning but loose the programmatic value. The results were strangely symbiotic—some produced a heightened awareness of the objects, others of the site and several were successful in synthesizes entirely new experiences where both objects and site were [mis]used to the point where the contingency and autonomy were no longer in contention, but in a strangely re-assuring harmony.

Figure 8: Owen Smith, *Spolia*, 2014

Figure 9: *Fragment*





## ENDNOTES

- 1 from *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift, 1726
- 2 Jugaad refers to an informal subculture in India of making do with little in incredibly creative ways, for example where entire vehicles are assembled of gardening implements and lawn-mower motors, or bicycles are used for turning generators, sharpeners, motors, or building elements are constructed of discarded everyday items like bottles and cans,
- 3 As described in "Spolia: A definition of Ruins," p. 87, Michael Greehalgh, *Reuse Value*, ed. R. Brilliant, D. Kinney, Ashgate: 2011
- 4 As described in Jacks, Philip. (2008). *Restauratio and Reuse: The Afterlife of Roman Ruins. Places*, 20(1), 10. Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/66n5329v>
- 5 The affair is wonderfully described in Hollis, Edward, *Secret Lives of Buildings*, "Theft", pp. 47-67, London: Portobello Books, 2012
- 6 For speculations about Aristotele Fioravante's origination in Russia see p. 74 in Zemtsov, S. M., Glazitchev, V.L., *Aristotele Fioravanti*, Stroizdat: Moscow, 1985
- 7 p. 270 in Kirichenko, E., *Khram Khrista Spasitelya v Moskve (Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow)*, Planeta: Moscow, 1992
- 8 see Cohen, Jean-Luis, *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR: Theories and Projects for Moscow, 1928-1936*, PAFPress, 1992
- 9 Most notable is architect Vyacheslav Oltarzhevsky, who spent a decade in New York City
- 10 See p. 825, Koolhaas, Rem, *SMLXL*, Monacelli Press, 1995
- 11 Cornell's first president A.D.White amassed an impressive collection of plaster casts of antique sculptures (over 800 pieces) during his stay in Europe (Stuttgart) in the 1870's. The collection was housed on campus in various buildings (notably Sibley, Tjaden, and Goldwyn-Smith Halls, esp. Temple of Zeus Café, 1960;s). In late 1990;s because of various renovations collection has been moved several times, severely damaged and eventually lost in the fast real estate of the University. Recently it has been re-discovered by the faculty members in the Department of Arts and Sciences and is now in the process of cataloging and re-organization.
- 12 "Since its opening in 2011, Milstein Hall has been transforming education and training by stimulating inventiveness and interaction through its interior and exterior spaces. Designed by Rem Koolhaas and OMA, the 47,000-square-foot building includes 25,000 square feet of flexible studio space that connects to Rand and Sibley halls, and a 250-seat, state-of-the-art auditorium that functions as a central events location within the college." From Cornell AAP website

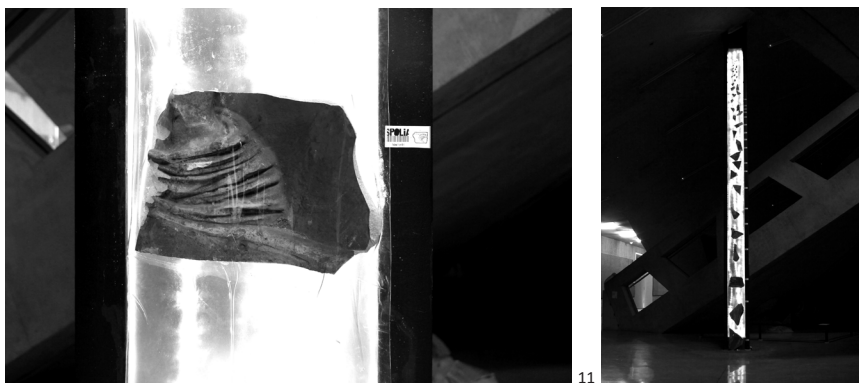


Figure 10: Ross Amato, *Spolia*, 2014

Figure 11: *Fragment*

Figure 12: Vincent Ahn & Lucia Lee, *Spolia*, 2014