

DANIEL NORELL AND EINAR RODHE

CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND
KONSTFACK UNIVERSITY OF ARTS, CRAFTS AND DESIGN

FINAL STAGE

UNDER CONSTRUCTION
A REAL-WORLD FICTION

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

ANTHROPOCENE, FICTION, MODEL, REPRESENTATION, REUSE

DDR STATEMENT

Under Construction is aligned with methods commonly used within design driven research. The conception of the project has intentionally drifted between several types of research activity. It has involved design exploration, field trips, as well as scholarship of design precedents and theory. The project has been developed in relation to academic research environments as well as in close proximity to a design practice. It uses artistic inquiry as a means to formulate alternative scenarios and concepts, as well as a vehicle for dissemination of research. Artistic research can provide tangible experiences of an issue such as the flows of waste, as opposed to acquiring an understanding of the same issue through gathering of data. The experience of collecting materials by visiting demolition sites, recycling centres, and active landfills, as well as of sorting materials and assembling them, gives a visceral rather than statistical understanding of existing flows of used building materials. This process investigates reuse in architecture as a design problem rather than as a technical problem. The direct and intuitive engagement with a stock of used objects and materials has shaped the design process, the outcome of the project, as well as the formulation of more general possibilities for architectural representation and reuse.

ABSTRACT

The concept of the Anthropocene has prompted new imaginaries in architecture and design that go beyond technical responses to issues of sustainability and into critical and creative practice. Recent discourse suggests that architects and designers can intervene in this cultural condition by constructing and materialising alternative realities. Models, as means of representation, hold particular promise for such intervention, as they can accommodate both theoretical concepts and material interventions. These concerns are explored through Under Construction, a project that imagines a city that is constantly being rebuilt using a limited stock of materials. Consisting of a scale model of a neighbourhood constructed from demolition waste, the project explores how salvaged pieces of material can be situated in “real” material flows while simultaneously representing something other than themselves. The project argues that the ambiguities that the blending of the real and the fictional gives rise to can unlock new possibilities for architectural representation.

Under Construction: A Real-World Fiction

The contested concept of the Anthropocene has not only collapsed distinctions between nature and human culture, it has in addition prompted new imaginaries in architecture and design (1). In this context, the Anthropocene should be understood as a cultural condition that can address issues of form, materiality, organization, and practice, in turn tied to larger ontologies. As architect Elisa Iturbe recently has argued, sustainability “is not solely a question of technology and buildings systems, but also a theoretical question for architecture and the city, one that questions carbon modernity as an obsolete cultural and material foundation for architecture” (2). This proposition resonates with design theorist Tony Fry’s concept of “The Sustainment”, an epochal shift that “speaks to the thinking, designing, and making that has to be done in the face of this situation” (i.e., the environmental crisis) (3). The Sustainment seeks to move beyond a reductive technological framework by turning issues of sustainability into “cultural content through critical inquiry, argument, literary and visual creative projection” (4).

So how can one intervene in this emerging cultural condition? Both Iturbe and Fry suggest that architecture and design have the capacity to project scenarios and concepts. Designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby have recently referred to this as an ability to construct alternative realities: “A story or an idea becomes a constructed reality at the moment it is given form and materially embodied whether as an object, stage set or photograph” (5). By materialising fictions, design can challenge the binary of “real” and “unreal” and rethink reality as something that is continuously under production rather than something that is static and given. This mode of operation is familiar to architecture as a practice and as a discipline, as means of representation such as drawings and models refer to the real world while at the same time working as platforms for speculation. Recent discourse suggests that architectural models have the potential to be particularly effective in this regard, as they can be located “in those spaces between theoretical representation and more direct intervention into the material stuff of the world” (6). A model can go beyond representation and become a mediator that provides some insight on a material process. Because of this ability to straddle concept and material, a model can establish “a model” for alternative approaches to representation as well as for material practice.

As a meditation on these concerns, *Under Construction: A Real-World Fiction* imagines a city that is constantly being rebuilt using the same stock of materials. A city where nothing is added or taken away, where materials and elements are just shifted around and appropriated for new, sometimes unexpected uses. Exhibited at the 2019 Oslo Architecture Triennale, themed “The Architecture of Degrowth” (7), the project takes the form of model of a fictional neighbourhood, constructed from discarded materials (fig. 1). It begins with a scavenger hunt where we visit demolition



Fig. 1: *Under Construction*, 2019



Fig. 2: *Under Construction*, stock of materials



Fig. 3: *Under Construction*, flash fiction by Josefin Wangel

sites, recycling centres, and active landfills, to collect used materials such as concrete rubble, plastics, bits of plaster board, steel studs, and a sink. The stock of materials becomes a kit of parts for the design and construction of houses, streets, and squares at the scale of a model (fig. 2). This exercise involves a play with representation. Qualities belonging to the collected pieces of material, such as rough materiality and patina, reinforce a reading of them as “real” and undisguised, while the scale of the model makes clear that they should simultaneously be read as representing something other than themselves. The model establishes a fictional reality, but its construction is at the same time a product of direct interaction with the material flows that the project seeks to address.

To use “real”, salvaged materials for the model becomes a way to engage reuse in architecture as a design problem, rather than as a problem of legislation, codes, or logistics. One of the most persistent architectural conventions is to consider abstract space before material entities. Building elements and materials should be subservient to a larger whole. This approach is aligned with a view on the world that is inherited from industrialism, in which any materials could be sourced anew and moulded into shape indefinitely. The design of *Under Construction* flips the order around by departing from an already established stock of materials. Objects and chunks of material take priority over organisation and composition, and each piece for reuse comes with a set of qualities – a character – that may be amplified, subverted or altered. Depending on the relation between the context of the original structure and that of the new structures, the reading of the reused objects may oscillate between the original object and a building element in a house, at scale. In exploring how meaning and associations undergo change as objects are transferred from one context to another, the project draws from historical approaches to reuse in architecture, such as *spolia* and *ad hocism* (8). The act of design unfolds in the encounter with a specific and limited collection of materials.

The *Under Construction* neighbourhood centres around a local market crowned by a soft, sculptural roof, or an upside-down porcelain sink, depending on the gaze of the viewing subject. As a further response to principles of reuse and recycling, each one of the five houses in the neighbourhood is constructed from a single type of material (fig. 4). This corresponds to thinking of materials in terms of fractions throughout their lifecycle, something that significantly increases possibilities for disassembly and recycling. The model is complemented with a flash fiction in the form of a short narrative with a building as subject (fig. 3). Integrated into the model, the flash fiction tells the story of an abandoned shopping mall that transforms into a series of mixed used buildings. It narrates how a building might experience the process of being dismantled and reassembled into new structures.



Neither dystopic, nor futuristic, *Under Construction* imagines an alternative urban condition shaped by a scarcity of raw materials and energy – a city where reuse and redistribution has replaced endless extraction and demolition. Upon reflection, *Under Construction* suggests some more general possibilities for representation as a vehicle for speculation in the age of the Anthropocene. By playfully blending the real with the fictional, and the abstract with the material, the project argues that in this new age it may no longer be possible, nor desirable, to separate these binaries from each other. Models, as a means of representation, can thrive by intentionally exploring the slippage between the manifestation of an idea and chunks of material that come with a real-world genesis.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by C-ARC at Chalmers University of Technology, Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design, Future Architecture Platform, and the Oslo Architecture Triennale. *Under Construction* was designed by Daniel Norell and Einar Rodhe, with a flash-fiction by Josefin Wangel.

Endnotes

1. E.g., Turpin, Etienne (Ed.) (2013): *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.
2. Iturbe, Elisa (2019): "Architecture and the Death of Carbon Modernity", in *Log 47*, pp. 10-24 (p. 23).
3. Fry, Tony (2003): "The Dialectic of Sustainment", in: *Design Philosophy Papers* 1, No. 5, pp. 289-297 (p. 290).
4. Fry, Tony (2003): "The Voice of Sustainment: An Introduction", in: *Design Philosophy Papers* 1, No. 1: 41-48 (p. 47).
5. Dunne, Anthony, and Fiona Raby (2018): "Design for the Unreal World", in: *Future Fictions in Art and Design*, Z33 House for Contemporary Art, pp. 48-65 (p. 58).
6. Hunter, Matthew C. (2019): "Modeling: A Secret History of Following", in: Zeynep Çelik Alexander and John May (Eds.), *Design Technics: Archaeologies of Architectural Practice*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 45-70 (p. 46).
7. "Enough: The Architecture of Degrowth". Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019, <http://oslotriennale.no/en/aboutoat2019>
8. Spolia see e.g., Brilliant Richard, and Dale Kinney (Eds.) (2011): *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, Ashgate Publishing. Adhocism see Jencks, Charles and Nathan Silver (2013): *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, Cambridge: The MIT Press; originally published by Doubleday & Company, 1972.

All images by the authors.

Fig. 4: *Under Construction*, single fraction houses, 2019