

## Inside the Hollow Core: Re-assembling the Undone City

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More often than not, the industry of demolition and its accompanying labor is regarded as peripheral to the final execution of an architectural project. Kevin Lynch, in *Wasting Away*, remarks that, "Demolition is usually an afterthought, a minor event between site acquisition and new construction."<sup>1</sup> This observation is especially astonishing given that *un-building* is a significant undertaking, requiring a combination of careful planning and brute physical force. The removal of a building frequently necessitates heavy machinery or explosives, imposing wreckers, cranes, and grueling human labor; yet it may also be sensitive and systematic, particularly in dense urban environments or when contaminated sites are involved. Regardless of the site or scale of the project, the willful undoing of the built environment is a form of sanctioned self-destruction, contributing to the loss of collective memory and amounting to an editing of our built history. Over the course of a demolition project, time-worn patterns of inhabitation, embedded in the material fabric of the building, are exposed and eradicated. With crushing severity, demolition obfuscates these physical traces. The space of this destruction is one in which rates of decay are accelerated and changes over time are intensified. In the process, new landscapes are formed and re-formed. Materials are pushed, pulled, sifted, and stilled. As an instrument of progress, demolition propels the city forward. It turns a blind eye to the past and pushes the city toward its next new face.

### PROJECT HISTORY

From 2003-2005, I earned a living as a laborer on demolition and renovation projects in Buffalo, NY. This labor entailed the gutting of often vast inte-

rior spaces, clearing out the insides for future re-inhabitation. While removing walls, floors and ceilings, sorting materials, and disposing of waste, I was struck by the quantity and quality of material that was bound for the landfill, much of which was marked by richly layered textures, patterns, and surfaces. Through negotiations with property owners and contractors, I began to recover discarded materials from demolition sites and to accumulate this waste within available empty spaces. Accordingly, many of the buildings within which I worked as a demolition laborer were transformed into centers for the storage of debris (often, the very same debris removed during a day of paid labor). In assuming responsibility for the waste, I provided an economic incentive to contractors who were able to save on waste removal costs. For the property owners, my presence was an appreciated security measure within buildings often plagued by vandalism.

The transitional storage spaces subsequently have functioned as sites for re-assembling the salvaged materials and for staging public exhibitions of *re-organized urban remains*. Working with the standard tools of a contractor---screw gun, jig saw, caulk, sander, drywall screws, house paint and brushes, new aggregates of urban waste have been continuously re-made. Materials have been cut, layered, marked, cut, layered, and marked again. A range of sprawling, sculptural environments have taken shape within the interiors of neglected buildings, installations of debris whose transformations are ongoing. Steady employment on demolition crews has been instrumental in providing a limitless supply of discarded materials and in facilitating access to vacant city properties. Contacts with property owners and developers have led to other

space-clearing and debris-generating endeavors, and thus, demolitions and renovations occurring peripherally around the city have begun to feed material to the centers of collection.

As an alternative approach to renovation, this work shifts demolition from a destructive operation to one of constructive possibilities. Doing and un-doing become symbiotically related activities. Normative building systems are broken down, releasing the potential energy stored within static walls. Mundane building components such as acoustical tiles, wood paneling, and carpeting yield new organizational structures and material hybrids. Discarded and neglected matter becomes the medium for projecting environments of continuous material transformation. Each project is an ongoing endeavor, continuing to evolve as material is shifted to new sites, as additional refuse is salvaged, and as assembled material collapses. Responding to the walls, floors, and ceilings of the host spaces and to the subtle nuances of natural and artificial light, many of the resulting installations have been site-specific. At the urban scale, the work has also been specific to place, enabled by the excess waste and emptiness that saturates the post-industrial urban environment.

### DEMOLITION CULTURE

As the American urban landscape has continued to adjust to the global re-distribution of its former centers of manufacturing, the post-industrial frontier has become recognized as a terrain of re-programming opportunities.<sup>2</sup> The phenomena of the shrinking city repositions the *tabula rasa* as a falling and crumbling, but not quite blank, slate. Such transitioning environments not only offer unique possibilities for the innovative re-use of abandoned and derelict structures, but also for establishing new relationships between organizations, individuals, and the places they inhabit. Within the post-industrial urban milieu, a climate of rampant vacancy, neglect, and demolition persists concurrently with one of speculation, renovation, and adaptation. Within the substantial infrastructures of such environments, the secure foundations of large empty warehouses contrasts with the loose and malleable remnants of upturned urban fabric, the by-product of so many ongoing renovation and demolition efforts. This combination of rigorous disruption and re-invigoration offers tremendous

potential for re-seeding fields of vacancy and neglect and for cultivating creative synthesis.

Within many de-industrialized cities, high rates of vacancy, perceived blight, and the desirability of shovel-ready building sites have resulted in a culture in which the demolition of existing structures has assumed a role of importance that is nearly equal to that of new construction efforts. In the Rust Belt city of Buffalo, NY, it can not be over-emphasized the extent to which this culture of demolition has saturated the public consciousness. The mayor of the city is now boldly touting Buffalo's aggressive "5 in 5" plan to demolish 5000 properties in 5 years.<sup>3</sup> With over 10,000 properties currently on its demolition roster, the city has applied for federal funding in order to supplement the cost of razing derelict structures. Current development efforts on the city's waterfront have stalled while officials debate not what will be built, but what will be removed and how. With increasing frequency, demolitions of contested properties are suspiciously undertaken on Friday afternoons; wrecking balls begin to attack these structures while tired motorists speed home to begin their weekends and city officials and activists are out of reach. On the Buffalo/Canada border, even the Department of Homeland Security has taken to un-securing the foundations of homes; the proposed demolition of an astounding one-hundred properties within one of the city's oldest neighborhoods is moving forward for the sake of a larger border check-stop.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that this demolition culture has spilled increasingly into the private domain. Recently, a former assemblyman in Buffalo, with intonations of Isaac's sacrifice, has attempted to leverage city officials by threatening to demolish his own beloved, historic house so that his associate may receive preferential treatment from the permit office.<sup>5</sup> This same property owner, after retreating from his sacrificial threat, later announced his plan to move the historic house into the area threatened by the Homeland Security Agency, thereby leveraging the demolition of his property on the fate of the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> This example is a testament to the public's recognition of demolition as an instrument of power, and to the willing exploitation of that power for personal ends as well as for an assumed public good. Such power has been exercised with increasing frequency of late, as private property owners, unable or unwilling to

upkeep properties, have resorted to demolition by neglect, in-action that accelerates their bid for a "shovel-ready" site. Announcements of falling facades and roofs have therefore become common newspaper headlines as buildings spontaneously cave-in and roof tiles and cornices plunge unexpectedly to the sidewalks of city streets.<sup>7</sup>

The pervasiveness of demolition in Buffalo is further evidenced by the recent emergence of a citizen-led demolition movement. A mother of a fire-fighter injured while battling a blaze in an abandoned house has begun an ambitious "take down a house" campaign, urging the public to make private contributions to the cause of citywide demolitions.<sup>8</sup> The ever-growing demolition roster has also spurred the emergence of a grass-roots building deconstruction group that is currently focused upon the dismantlement of abandoned properties and the salvaging and sale of re-usable materials.<sup>9</sup> Within an environment so saturated with dilapidated structures, Buffalo ReUse has been able to extend the mission of building deconstruction into a wide variety of community re-vitalization programs, ranging from youth mentoring to job training to art education. The problem of vacant and derelict houses has constituted a core issue around which this social enterprise group has built an extensive network of community support.

### WASTE + EMPTINESS

Within the aforementioned culture of sanctioned destruction, construction debris must surely be the city's most substantial undocumented product. The abundance of pending demolition projects positions the city on the brink of a significant urban transformation. Waste and emptiness have been brought to the fore. The projects that I have undertaken in Buffalo to date collectively propose a means of re-inhabiting these conditions. They are projects that re-imagine the environment of post-industry through the features of waste and emptiness, the vary attributes for which such places are least revered.

Sustained by an excess of discarded building materials and by the availability of empty spaces, this work functions as a model for urban re-inhabitation on at least two levels. First, the projects establish an organic model of urban restoration that is inseparable from the city and its life networks.

This model is one which co-ordinates the forces of production with those of destruction, linking affiliations of property owners, demolition crews, and contractors in the sustained re-allocation of material resources, waste, and space. As waste streams of the city flow directly to pools of available open space, loosened peripheries are absorbed by new solidifying centers. Accumulations of material are propelled toward new uses and new forms. Fragments of debris accrue into masses of thickened, stratified matter. A city of continuous renovation emerges, a city whose walls, floors, and ceilings are in constant mutation. Installed within vacant city sites, constructed with urban debris, facilitated by urban contraction, the assemblages have been a direct response to a particular urban context. Even as the projects have assumed a variety of manifestations-- from compressed and stratified surfaces, to free-standing objects, to temporal installations--*place* forms the core of this work.

Emerging from this organic model is a second, more subtle, urban proposal. It is a proposal for a city that is delineated by the surfaces, spaces, colors, textures, and contours of re-assembled remains. This is a city whose territories are marked by cut and painted matter. Through *agglomerate urban drawing*, a city of fragments begins to emerge. Layers of re-organized material establish new boundaries and centers, openings and closings, passages and flows. Lines of wood lath, planes of plywood, and points of nails emerge from demolition's dust to draw the city's new face. Amalgams of acoustical tile, carpet, and plaster coalesce as textured terrains. The parallel grooves of wood paneling define expansive horizontal fields. Hollow core doors establish a light, porous and cavernous, yet solid and stable ground. Cuts, cracks, gaps, and fissures permeate the stratified surfaces. Dark holes become places of passage. Solid aggregates emerge through dense compaction, raw and rough edges splinter away, while broken windows frame the fractured views. Embodying new apertures, trajectories, hidden and revealed moments, these accumulations of marks constitute a new set of urban itineraries. They describe the character of the city's networked systems, the means by which it might be traversed, and the sensations its engagement might evoke. A network of *undone* spaces, places, and events give this *drawn city* form.

Not only the production of the work, but also the terms of its public engagement have been informed by the surrounding environment. The collection and re-assembly of material within a historic downtown property has led to scrutiny by diverse and unexpected audiences, including almost daily visits by out-of-town real estate investors. One project was forced to be dismantled when a realtor's touring clients expressed difficulty in separating the re-organized debris from the surrounding space, and thus could not adequately gauge the space's dimensions. In an uncanny occurrence, the first public exhibition of this work (work that is sustained by environmental change) was itself precipitated by environmental disaster: The most destructive snowstorm in Buffalo's history paralyzed the city on the night before the planned event. Due to a driving ban, those outside the city limits were legally prohibited from attending. Thus, the viewing of the re-assembled city fragments was, by law, restricted to those living within the city and was most accessible to those who walked the city's eerie tree-fallen streets.

### SELECTED WORKS

Thus far, the foundations of this work have been elaborated upon in terms of context and idea. The following analysis provides a specific description of selected projects undertaken. Ranging from compressed surfaces to immersive installations, the pulse of the work expands and contracts from pictorial space into constructed environments.

#### 1. *laminated walls*

Consisting of stratified layers of hollow core doors, wood lath, and wood paneling, these amalgams of wall are characterized by compressed surfaces and excavated apertures. Materials are continually cut and re-cut, covered and re-covered, assembled and re-assembled. Within the cracks and fissures, interior layers are revealed. Bound with dry wall screws and sealed with house paint, disparate elements are solidified into uniform fields. Each work is regarded as an isolated moment within a cycle of continuous transformation. Drawing from the synthesis of pigment and wall in the historical precedent of fresco painting, painting and architecture are unified as a single body.



earth. discarded building materials, drywall screws, house paint. 2003.

#### 2. *landform events*

This set of projects was developed on an active demolition site over the course of 16 days. While employed on the site, I was responsible for clearing 1500 sq. ft. of interior space. Over the course of the demolition, walls, floors, and ceilings were removed from the interior. Materials designated to be saved were taken to adjacent storage locations while the remaining debris was cleared from the premises. Each night, after the day's labor had ended and the crew had gone home, I returned to the site where I collected and re-assembled the materials that had been removed during the day. The resulting installations were subsequently photographed under the light of construction lamps, then dismantled and the materials returned before the next work day began. These works describe a series of landscape features that emerge within the entropic conditions of the undone environment. They are not static spaces or objects, but moments that solidify and dissolve in space. Disorder rules during the day, while order is asserted at night.

branches



caves



*the night (excerpts)*. discarded building materials on an active demolition site. 2004.

### 3. *encrusted jewels*

The encrusted jewels are iconic signs embedded within environments of dynamic, explosive energy. They embody the union of pristine object and wild field. Each encrusted jewel is a point of origin, a preserved center that radiates outward while simultaneously condensing the periphery into the core. Crystallized by the intensities of surrounding forces, they are balanced by ruptured edges and splitting frames.

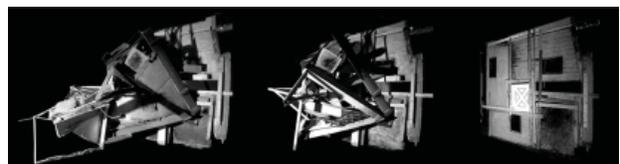


home. discarded building materials, drywall screws, house paint. 2006.

### 4. *growth mask*

A parking lot attendant booth and seven porch columns are dissolved into an organic flow of raw materials that unfolds in space and time. The evolutionary trajectory of the re-constituted artifacts is defined by a material economy of salvaged fragments, ignoring neither splinters of wood, nor shards of glass, nor sawdust. As this mask of growth evolves, forces of instability are suspended and intensified. The pictorial field expands outward from the flattened face, maintaining equilibrium as economies of matter are balanced with those of form and space.

### 5. *lost places*



post-hut. one parking lot attendant booth and seven porch columns, drywall screws, house paint. 2005.

The lost places are apparitions of desire and loss. They embody past and future aspirations or fears. Appearing as archetypes, they are found within the overlooked, the everyday, and the mundane. They evoke the passage from dark to light, or from light to dark. Their apogees and nadirs are the most absolute and resolute of limits.

### The Continuity of Collage



tower. discarded building materials, drywall screws, house paint. 2005.

The potential of collage to transcend temporal limitations is well-documented, ranging from the experiments of El Lissitzky to Kurt Schwitters, to Friedrich Kiesler.<sup>10</sup> Each of these artists utilized collage based techniques in order to propose environments of infinite extension in space and time. Continuity, by definition, is characterized by an uninterrupted flow, suggesting a field in which any single element is indistinguishable from that which surrounds it. The work that I have outlined above seeks to expand upon the idea of continuity by drawing upon the resources of a specific urban environment. In uniting the destructive act of demolition with the regenerative act of restoration, the work establishes continuities between opportunity and limitation, waste and abundance, fragment and unified whole. The installations that have been realized to date are as much defined by their context as they are set apart by it, transforming the purported

deficiencies of abandonment and destruction into unique environmental assets. Collage, a medium of recombination and synthesis, is ideally suited to pursue this aim. Within the waste-strewn context of the post-industrial city, the synthetic medium of collage collects, condenses, and re-organizes. It becomes a tactical strategy for assimilating the environmental effects of economic decline, re-using the neglected, and renewing the forlorn. Cycling the debris of urban infrastructure into waste-born nebula, the work proposes new flows of matter, modes of organization, and atmospheres of incessant change. Discarded everyday remnants delimit the boundaries of the void's imperfect aperture, making visible the city's hidden signs. In the process, painting, sculpture, and architecture find renewed, interdependent form.

### POSTSCRIPT: TOWARDS THE DRAWN CITY

The drawn city begins with an accumulation of densely layered marks. These marks are collisions, erasures, near misses, and chance encounters. On the surface, hopes and fears assume solid form. The contours of the drawn city reveal the intricacies of line: spaces collect within the ground's fine teeth. No city can emerge without an initial gesture: a direct and immediate response is necessitated by the void. The initial act invites further responses, some calculated and others unpredictable. The resulting amalgam is not a design. It may resemble the spider but it is much more the web. Strands of thought held taught with apparent precision, a work in progress, a home spun and spun again.

The drawn city is an assemblage of many drawings. Planes accumulate to produce volume. Points expand to open the field. Lines coalesce to carry the blood. The limits of the drawing are its surroundings. The floor is a trap and the ceiling a ruse. Walls are boundaries not yet crossed. The frame is a pulsating body— it expands to make a room. Upon the first mark, the drawn city is ever changing. Dark to light, sharp to soft, thick to thin, empty to full, the drawing makes a weave. Windows, doors, wood, and plaster solidify in between.

Separating the drawing from the city becomes impossible—skin structures skin and bone wraps bone. Everyday fragments swarm the new body. Liberation and submission are rendered with the

same tone. The drawn city is suspended at the pinnacle of its rise. From this vantage point, the ideal view unfolds. Crystalline gems, rough and raw amalgams, compacted visceral domains. Manufactured landscapes unspoiled by humankind. Flora and fauna made of glass. Caves carved with the psyche's imprints. Shadows moving among expansive, vacant terrains. Entrances are hidden, though passages are plentiful. To emerge is difficult, though movement occurs with ease.

Within the residue of obliterated spaces, the new face of the city emerges. This is a city of mutated matter. Its image is drawn with cut lines. Thick with dust, it is unceasingly covered and revealed. It is a densely layered topographic body—raw, rough and immediate. Scratched and torn, its splintered walls rupture our thin skins. It is a dripping grotto, an enchanted forest of gnarly, twisting limbs. As its broken shells are celebrated, the city cries its perfect tears.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Lynch, Kevin and Michael Southwick. Wasting Away. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990.
2. for information on the Shrinking Cities project, see: <http://www.shrinkingcities.com>
3. source:City of Buffalo, archived press releases of Mayor Byron Brown. [http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/Mayor/Archive\\_Press\\_Releases/Leadership/2007Archives/August2007/MayorBrownAnnouncesAggressive5In5DemolitionPlan](http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/Mayor/Archive_Press_Releases/Leadership/2007Archives/August2007/MayorBrownAnnouncesAggressive5In5DemolitionPlan)
4. source: Preservation League of New York. [http://www.movetheplaza.com/f/PLNYS\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](http://www.movetheplaza.com/f/PLNYS_Press_Release.pdf)
5. "Bid denied, Coppola will sue to raze Pan-Am house." Tom Buckham. Buffalo News, November 2, 2007.
6. "Coppola's Pan-American House Pawn in New Game ; Plans to Move It in Try to Save Peace Bridge." Brian Meyer. Buffalo News, February 2, 2008.
7. "Fall From Grace." Peter Koch. Artvoice. August 2,2007. [http://artvoice.com/issues/v6n31/fall from grace](http://artvoice.com/issues/v6n31/fall%20from%20grace)
8. "Moving Buffalo Forward: Policy Briefs from the Brown Administration.' Vol.1, No.1 August 2007 [http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1\\_2\\_1/Mayor/PublicPolicyPublication/5in5\\_DemoPlan.pdf](http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/Mayor/PublicPolicyPublication/5in5_DemoPlan.pdf)
9. for more information on Buffalo ReUse see: <http://www.buffaloreuse.org>
10. see: Lissitzky-Küppers, Sophie. El Lissitzky: Life,

Letters, Text. New York: Graphic Society, 1968.

11. Phillips, Lisa and Dieter Bogner. Frederick Kiesler. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, in association with W.W. Norton, 1989.