

# Toward the Silence of Sustainable Practice: Critical Erasure in Architectural Reuse

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## INTRODUCTION

Architectural restoration frequently ensures that historic buildings remain continuously useful by sustaining some of the lasting meanings embedded in durable materials. Yet, critical engagement with adaptive reuse requires one to confront the balance between destruction and persistence, since the erasure of old buildings and the reuse of pre-existing structures both can render the past silent. Preservation as a crucial component of sustainable practice embraces residual materials, reused elements, and restituted features that are reactivated during a building's afterlife. This essay explores the reuse of buildings by analyzing *both* remembering and forgetting as instrumental components of maintaining the built past. In fact, most restoration projects result from rearranging structures, relegating some parts to oblivion and thus forgetfulness if only due to accidental loss. The dialogue between inarticulate erasure and eloquent persistence designates architectural restoration as a rhetorical process. Furthermore, architectural strategies embodying the silences of history by visibly indicating former states of ruination allude to the flaws of the past or the threats that lead to eventual destruction, both of which acknowledge temporality. Due to the materiality of architectural restoration, staving off a building's impending lapse into oblivion interjects silence as an important theme to be negotiated.

## SIMULATION AND ANCIENT RHETORIC

Eloquent materiality acknowledging time's passage stands in opposition to reconstructed architectural simulations that remake buildings from the past.<sup>1</sup> An example of a preexisting building that has undergone a process of critical reuse emerged in

2006 at the Getty Villa, the museum in Malibu where Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti completed their major interventions early in the year. They oversaw the physical reappraisal of the 1970s Getty Malibu attributed to Edward Genter, project architect from the firm Langdon and Wilson. Yet, the archeologist Norman Neuerburg orchestrated the original museum's true purpose: to represent the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, a luxury seaside estate from the first century BCE that is still undergoing archeological recovery to this day. Now that Machado and Silvetti have reconfigured the Getty, new retaining walls along the entrance paths in Malibu (figure 1) resemble the precipitous cliffs of excavated Herculaneum in which the strata remaining from volcanic flow refer to Vesuvius' eruption in 79 CE (figure 2). With this mural abstraction inspired by the material conditions of the archeological zone at Herculaneum, the Malibu pathways capture the dramatic descent down from modern Ercolano (as the Italian city is named) to the once-buried ancient city. Machado and Silvetti

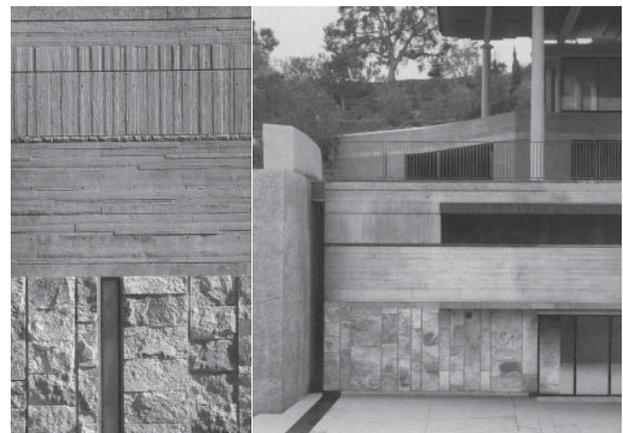


Figure 1. Malibu, Getty Villa, Retaining Walls by Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti, 2006.



Figure 2. Herculaneum. Villa dei Papiri, excavations, 2008.

alluded to the Villa dei Papiri in its original urban context without replicating the site in south Italy literally. In sum, Machado and Silvetti effectively mitigated the status of the 1970s Getty Villa as a replica that purported to resurrect an ancient luxury residence.

Machado and Silvetti rationalized the Getty Malibu site plan while adding an auditorium, a bookstore, a library, a restaurant, a study center, and a reconfigured museum. To rethink J. Paul Getty's original purpose, Machado and Silvetti thoughtfully reconsidered the precedent in Herculaneum. The Villa dei Papiri itself exhibited artworks, now on view in the Naples Archeological Museum, and the ancient estate included a library featuring more than a hundred texts of Epicurean philosophy that have been discovered in now-charred papyrus scrolls. The particularities of ancient statuary displays and the original conditions of an ancient library on the bay of Naples have not formed the direct basis of the Malibu Getty, in part because the destructive effects of Vesuvius' eruption can never be completely reversed. Thus, the Getty complex illustrates two approaches: at the 1970s museum architecture simulates the past in a complete illusion of antiquity reborn while, alternately, Machado and Silvetti confronted the dispersal of memories and

the partial silence imposed by the tragic burial of Herculaneum.

The archeologist Norman Neuerburg recreated a lost, unrecoverable architectural marvel in the 1970s with the pristine Getty Museum when he glossed over the erasure that volcanic destruction had imposed upon the Villa dei Papiri. After the onset of exploratory digging by amateur archeologists in the 1740s, Herculaneum was crisscrossed by a confusing array of tunnels due to the piecemeal probing by some of the military engineers working under the Bourbon monarchs who reigned in the bay of Naples.<sup>2</sup> An English visitor described eighteenth-century Herculaneum's ancient city as a maze produced by the web of tunnels originally designed to extract sculptural masterpieces. "They have satisfied themselves with cleaning [the city] out like a mine by leaving a number of pillars to support the roof, which otherwise would be in danger of falling. In most cases, they have filled up the houses which they had already gutted of whatever was curious with the rubbish they took from adjacent ones. And after wandering some hours with torches, I cannot say I was able to form a distinct notion of the situation of houses, streets, or anything."<sup>3</sup> The early methods of digging, in other words, prevented one from understanding the ancient city. Removing statues disturbed that which Vitruvius had called *decor* or the appropriate type of ornament for a building; Vitruvius uses the term *decor*—roughly meaning "decorum"—to designate a temple whose delicate outlines are in keeping with the dedication to Venus or to characterize an elegant vestibule that fits appropriately onto an equally elegant interior.<sup>4</sup> A corollary application of Vitruvius' concept of decorum ties together a statue with its place of display, deemed as appropriate to the building's owner or to the building's function.<sup>5</sup> Vitruvius only gestures toward the importance of artworks for understanding decorum as the theory of appropriateness in architecture, which the mining of Herculaneum to extract masterpieces has indeed diminished even further.

Decorum according to Vitruvius reflected the character of the one who owned the villa; yet evidence suggests that in real practice the decorum of statues on display alluded to history in order to actually shape an individual's character. A full-blown glimpse at the intellectual life of Herculaneum emerges from the rediscovered library at the Villa

dei Papiri. The charred fragments of papyrus scrolls uncovered there feature works of Epicurean thought, particularly the Greek writings by the Epicurean author Philodemus of Gadara, together with other anonymous texts including one recounting the adventures of a loan shark. A detailed plan of the Villa dei Papiri indicating the tunnels dug out by a team supervised by an eighteenth-century explorer Karl Jacob Weber indicates where the scrolls were found (figure 3). An epigram found in Herculaneum written by Philodemus states that, "Piso can learn from Homer about correct monarchies;"<sup>6</sup> this accompanies a text describing how a ruler can draw upon the knowledge of poets and scholars. The recipient of the dedication was Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesonius, the father-in-law of Julius Caesar, whom we are almost certain lived in the Villa dei Papiri. Philodemus also praises a roster of Hellenistic rulers, from Ptolemy II Philadelphus to Philetærus of Pergamon and Antiochus IV Epiphanes, all of whom were represented in statues recovered from the Villa dei Papiri. The architecture of the Villa dei Papiri must have supported rhetorical practices that pegged decorum as a theory regulating the implied silences of the mute statues representing Hellenistic rulers while the papyrus scrolls vocalized Philodemus' thoughts. This astounding correlation between decoration, architecture, and intellectual context revises the connotations that Vitruvius imposed upon decorum from that which passively reflects culture to that which presents the didactic philosophical rhetoric that molds the propriety of the owner. Evidently, some of the decorative program for the Villa offered specific forms of instruction to Piso, including that a ruler should operate with a city council as did the Hellenistic kings represented in the villa in portraits. In ancient Herculaneum, the decorum of a luxurious villa actively sustained culture by offering up political history as philosophical erudition. By contrast, the 1970s Getty villa—which explicitly took on the mission of educating together with preserving artworks—silenced the instructional role of the artworks that in ancient Herculaneum presented ethical lessons. The architectural strategy of the 1970s Getty did not admit to the silences that history imposes and implicitly denied that the ancient Villa dei Papiri remains partly hidden. Indeed, the Getty's active harm to the original context of artworks resulting from the improper acquisition of illegally excavated sculptures has now been proven in Italian law courts.<sup>7</sup>

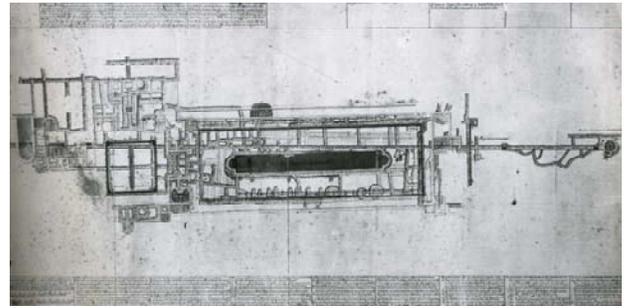


Figure 3. Karl Weber, ground plan and tunnel diagram, Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum.

### STRATA

The conditions of layering that Machado and Silveti imposed on the retaining walls in Malibu repositioned the 1970s museum by proposing excavated layers as indices of archeological procedures. Material traces of history and the silence imposed by the burial of an ancient city offer conditions that the visitor to Malibu now experiences while negotiating the site; walking around the museum subjects the 1970s building to some of the erasure that Herculaneum experienced much more severely two thousand years ago. Silveti wrote, "after identifying archeology as the characteristic image to pursue in the design of the villa . . . , [the analogy with an excavation] was an operational system like a grammatical framework."<sup>8</sup> Placing the 1970s Getty Villa in a context that borrows an approach from archeology at once references the persistence *and* diminution of matter over time. Indeed, Machado and Silveti embrace archeology because it implies the coexistence of lasting memories and forgotten oblivion that old material embodies. Inspired by the historical assumptions of archeologists, Machado and Silveti critiqued the 1970s Getty that remade antiquity as if the destructive ruptures of the centuries had not intervened. Insisting on registering the effects of erasure on history allowed Machado and Silveti to credit materials with documenting the past and simultaneously rendering it silent. As Silveti stated, "the site seemed to illustrate . . . the very act of archeology, not through a literal representation of such activity, but through the experience of the site and its contents."<sup>9</sup>

Restoration that instigates a process of remembering combined with criticism that prompts forgetting implies that architectural reuse engages

with the methodological underpinnings of history. Sustaining the architectural past does not simply see history as a repository of precedents for new buildings. Rather, the methodological engagement with how we understand the past insists upon looking at the earliest evidence, whether a written source or a material remnant, in order to conduct analysis. Eventually, history takes on the form of a representation. But, architectural restoration is only one of many forms of historical representation.

### SPOLIA

Architectural history presents an important theoretical premise in the act of reusing preexisting architectural elements, known by the Latin term for spoils: *spolia*.<sup>10</sup> A late antique and early medieval approach to building highlighted the act of restoration by arranging recycled architectural fragments from different sources. The fourth-century restoration of the Temple of Saturn in Rome functions as a case in point, since the surviving colonnade includes columns of solid pink and grey granite placed upon a heterogeneous array of bases and featuring reused columns that support a frieze that was flipped so that the former sculptural reliefs were hidden (figure 4). A blank side of the temple's frieze provided a surface on which to inscribe, "the Senate and the people of Rome made restitution for a destructive fire."<sup>11</sup> The inscription attests to the restoration, for which the structural techniques imply a date as late as 380 CE and which would make this the last pagan religious structure in Rome to have been restored to its role as a temple. Once restored, the temple overcame the ravages of a destructive fire. The use of *spolia* also functioned as a persistent tribute to paganism during the late fourth century when traditional rites were threatened with oblivion due to the progressively restrictive legislation passed by Christian authorities.<sup>12</sup>

The heterogeneity of *spolia* exposed at the Temple of Saturn seems to have rendered honor to contested paganism, since in the fourth century restored honor was a greater achievement than the mere maintenance of status. An example to illustrate this point appears in a text written on a restored statue base from late antique Rome; unfortunately, the statue itself has disappeared. A surviving statue plinth celebrated the legal restoration of honor to Nicomachus Flavianus the Elder. Flavianus' rehabilitation occurred posthumously in



Figure 4. Rome, Temple of Saturn.

431 CE following the memory sanctions he had suffered for having conspired in a pro-pagan rebellion in 394.<sup>13</sup> After Flavianus' death and after an intervening period of thirty-five years, the erased public inscriptions that once honored the pagan upstart underwent a reversal. For instance, on one statue base, excerpts of a letter establishing the legality of Nicomachus Flavianus' rehabilitation are inscribed. Atop once-erased lines, the new inscription about restituted honor designates the restoration of memory as more honorable than a simple act of preservation. Material signs alluding to the reversal of fortunes are physically presented in the palimpsest on the reused plinth. The text turns to the overly dignified prose of post-classical Rome to document that restored status is the pinnacle of achievement. "To defend against mankind's lot the dignity of men renowned and eminent in the state when corrupted to some extent by interpolations and to recall the recollection of a deceased man to eternal fame may be regarded as a correction, so to speak, of his fate, which is considered as a preliminary judgment and the greatest supplement of a man's worth."<sup>14</sup> Thus, just as restituted honor is the optimal precondition for eternal fame, so does building restoration presuppose persistent reverence, at least according to the historical values set forth in late antiquity. Restoring individual honors

in an inscription on a statue parallels a building restoration by valuing the legibility of restitution, since preserving evidence of former ruination illustrates the historical process of overcoming forgetfulness. Restitution exhibits its distance from the original, which was achieved by the late antique reuse of *spolia* or the rewriting of inscriptions on a palimpsest plinth. Both maintain the material traces of silent oblivion to which history adds a voice.

Early medieval spoliaion witnessed for example in the church of S. Maria in Cosmedin in Rome features reused materials, configuring a provocative dialogue between memory and forgetfulness. The basilica's colonnades feature heterogeneity in the array of mismatched capitals, columns, and bases. These materials explicitly embody the inheritance from the past, while the reassembly rejuvenates the reused fragments. For a south Italian bishop named Paulinus of Nola overseeing a church building project in the city of Cimitile close to Naples, the reuse of preexisting architectural elements indicates that rehabilitation is a productive process. His statements about his own project at the Basilica Vetus of St. Felix just after 400 are indicative. "That which was old is seen to stand for the new. For it was on ugly pillars in a colossal row: now, supported on columns, the construction of which was a change for the better, it got an increase in space and light, and having cast off its old age, it took on renewed youth."<sup>15</sup> The silence of fragmented, ruined, and reused pieces is overcome by refabricating them into something eloquent and new.

While I am not arguing that Machado and Silveti explicitly studied late antique *spolia* and inscriptions, there is evidence that they engaged with the material conditions that govern how audiences today view history. The reconfigured Getty Villa restitutes honor to ancient architecture not by replicating it, but by alluding to the post-classical belief that time imposes erasure together with the potential for renewal. One of the interventions by Machado and Silveti that reveals their perspective on how materiality partly purges memory is seen in the staircase leading to the second floor from the east side of the peristyle courtyard at Malibu. Using the veined and pale yellow marble known as *amarillo triana*, the architects alluded to the Roman use of materials without excerpting an antique approach (figure 5). Indeed, juxtaposed with the existing colonnade from the 1970s museum, the Machado and Silveti

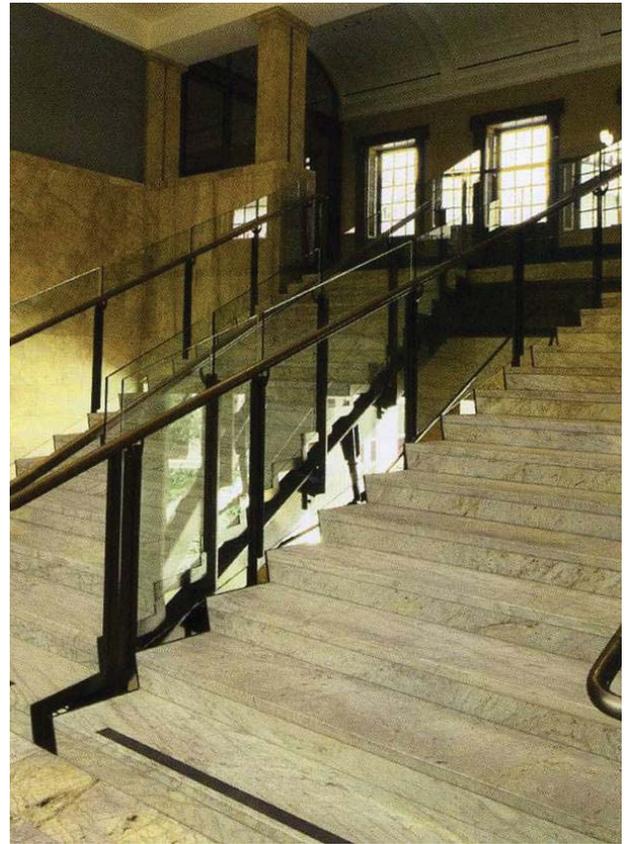


Figure 5. Malibu, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silveti, Getty Villa, staircase adjoining peristyle courtyard, 2005.

staircase interposes a purposeful discordance both with the material practice and the classical system of a late Republican luxury villa. The failure to adhere to an ancient architectural grammar belongs to what K. Michael Hays has called the "unprecedented realism" of Machado and Silveti, because the reality of the referent is clear in the cases that Hays analyzed.<sup>16</sup> But the recently produced staircase is interesting for presenting an oppositional system that works by way of contrast to the classical orders in the rebuilt peristyle courtyard at the Getty Villa. Even in late antiquity, *spolia* disrupted the rules of classicism by means of variegated heterogeneity. Both the post-classical *spolia* and the twenty-first century staircase undo the underlying ancient architectural grammar. In each case, materiality evokes the inarticulate collapse of grammar and the silence imposed by erasure. Superimposing discordant materials does present us with a historical process, but this representation of the past admits that it both preserves and erases. Restora-

tion provocatively sustains memories while critically admitting that these lacunae reauthorize silence.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has looked to the eloquence of materials as paralleling the historical judgments expressed in architectural strategies of restoration. To be sure, the 1970s Getty Villa glossed over the memory purges that have textured how we perceive the past. After reopening in 2006, visitors to Malibu have experienced how Machado and Silveti asserted the potential for oblivion inherent in the materials from the past. By acknowledging history as a rhetorical practice, they have sustained both the 1970s Getty Villa and the critical theories that can be applied to sustaining culture.

## ENDNOTES

1. For museum architecture that simulates a historical context, see Jean Beaudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss et al. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 21-49.
2. Christopher C. Parlsow, *Rediscovering Antiquity: Karl Weber and the Excavation of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Stabiae* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13-46; 77-106; Carol Mattusch, *The Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum: Life and Afterlife of a Sculpture Collection* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 33-51.
3. A. Lumidsen, *Remarks on the antiquities of Rome and its environs*, London, 1812, 477, from a letter written in Naples dated 18 April 1750 (quoted in Parlsow, *Rediscovering Antiquity*, 35).
4. Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* 1.2.5-6.
5. Tim Antsley, "The Dangers of Decorum," *Arq: Architecture Research Quarterly* 10 (2005), 130-139.
6. Dedication of Philodemus, *On the Good King according to Homer*, in P. Herc. 1507.
7. Elisabetta Povoledo, "The Getty Agrees to Return 40 Antiquities to Italy," *New York Times* August 2, 2007.
8. Jorge Silveti, "The Getty Villa Reimagined," in Jorge Silveti and Marion True, *The Getty Villa* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2005), 132.
9. Jorge Silveti, "The Getty Villa Reimagined," 136.
10. Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome* (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2003); Dale Kinney, "Rape or Restitution of the Past? Interpreting Spolia," in *The Art of Interpreting*, ed. S. C. Scott (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995), 53-62.
11. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin, 1863-present), 6. 937: "senatus populusque romanus incendio consumptum restituit."
12. Helen Saradi-Mendelovici, "Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 47-54.
13. Charles W. Hedrick, Jr., *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 1-88.
14. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6.1783: "Clarorum adq(ue) inlustrum in rep(ublica) virorum adversum casus condicionis humanae interpolatum aliquatenus adserere honorem et memoriam defuncti in lucem aet[ernam] revocare emendatio quaedam eius sortis videtur, quae praeiudic[ium sum]mumq(ue) [supple]mentum virtutum existimatur." Translation from Hedrick, *History and Silence*, 2.
15. Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 28. 199-203: "quae fuerant vetera, et nova nunc extare videntur; nam steterant vasto deformibus agmine pilis; nunc meliore datis eadem vice fulta columnis et spatii cepere et luminis incrementa depositioque situ reducem sumpses inventam." Trans. from M.F. Hansen, *Eloquence of Appropriation*, 258.
16. K. Michael Hays, *Unprecedented Realism: The Architecture of Machado and Silveti* (New York: Princeton Architecture Press, 1995), 213.