

# Re-making the Exquisite Corpse Studio

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Architecture is a kind of corporeal time machine where the past, the present and the future are related architecturally through memory

Marco Frascari, *Monsters of Architecture* 1991

In the contemporary western world, architecture and conservation appear to be disjointed, in both theory and practice. This disjunction has led to approaches in *preservation*, which limit the possibility of creative intervention within an historic context. At the same time *architects* often do not view historic buildings as likely canvases for their creation, imbued as they are with a culture of 'instant' making.

So called 'heritage buildings' are treated as finished entities, which can be *artificially* separate from the present. A building once produced, after a 50-year period, enters the realm of the historic and is no longer treated as a design-object but as a history-object, i.e. a 'document' of the past. As such, the building is separate from the present. The right to alter such objects no longer belongs to the present generation. The most appropriate approach suggested is 'stewardship', i.e. a form of curatorial management of the built world.

The 'disjunction' between past and present, between conservation and design runs along this 50 year 'dead-line', where the past 'starts' and the present 'ends'.

As a way to challenge the *fictitious* boundary defined by current conservation standards between design and preservation the author of this paper has developed and applied for several years now, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, a studio pedagogy applied within architecture schools, which allows to explore the idea to rejoin *architect-*

*ture* and *conservation* into a process of 'architectural-conservation', interpreted as a form of invention and imagination, which allows for the creation of memory through the unfolding of time.

As such 'architectural-conservation' is essentially concerned with the *dilemma* of how to maintain a building's identity, while allowing changes over time. A building can change and yet be the same building. 'Time' –the other face of *change*- shapes the body of buildings, impacting their materiality and essence.

## THE EXQUISITE CORPSE STUDIO PEDAGOGY

The exquisite corpse studio pedagogy rethinks the boundary between design and preservation by exploring *meaningful* alterations, arguing that all past is present and that all making is a remaking<sup>1</sup>.

Critical questions that the students are faced with include: how can we establish a meaningful dialogue between preservation and design? How can we design appropriate alterations at one given time, for a given building, within a given cultural and geographical context? What are the appropriate representation strategies that allow igniting the dialogue between conservation and design?

The studio pedagogy explores the symbiotic relationship between preservation and architecture, embodied by the concept of *invention*. Invention does not just entail the ability to create and innovate but also to find, i.e. to discover something that is already present.

The underlying premise is that a building's life is an endless *work in progress* and not the result of 'instant' making. Architecture is not 'eternal', and

cannot be preserved *as is*, but rather, it endures time through constant change. Buildings do not become 'quasi-eternal' through preservation, but rather through a constant re-generation process. This implies that, the act of conservation that makes a building endure requires change.

The studio project is based on the making of an 'exquisite corpse', through an addition/subtraction/alteration to an existing building converted to a new use.

The studio horizon is defined from within a tradition of architectural anthropomorphism, which entails the ascription of human characters to buildings.

The lenses of the exquisite corpse collage are furthermore used to enlighten the significance of historical precedents. The 'architectural-conservation' process at renaissance St. Peter's, which is analyzed in this paper, as well as the work of contemporary practicing architects whom make of 'collage' a primary method of experimentation, within the context of renovating historic buildings, such as for instance the work of the American architect and scholar Garth Rockcastle, inspired by the work of the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) and the work of the Spanish architect Enric Miralles (1955-2000), among others, provide paradigmatic examples for an inquiry into the means and methods of this design approach.

'Architectural-conservation' is interpreted analogously to the "Exquisite Corpse", and is guided by analogous rules. The 1920's-30's surrealist *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse) game entailed that a *group* of artists would contribute to the making of a *collage*, each of them being responsible for a *fragment* of the overall body. The collage aimed at creating a *body* out of the addition of individual members reflecting the *collaborative* nature of the work, which takes place through time.

One of the essential characteristics of the surrealist game is a basic rule governing the "articulation of a body" as an orderly assemble of members (shoulders, upper body, legs, etc.) with the allowed transgression that the standard lexicon of the body can be partly replaced by random elements subverting anatomic coherence, leading to the making of a "hybrid body" (Adamorowicz 1998: 82).

Mindful of Leon Battista Alberti's observation, that "when we see some other person's building, we immediately look over and compare the individual dimensions, and to the best of our ability consider what it might be taken away, added or altered, to make it more elegant"<sup>2</sup>, the students are challenged to look at the building as an incomplete body, where new members need to be added.

The design process is corporate in nature, i.e. it entails a *plurality* of authors. The question of continual change should be addressed as a design issue rather than merely as a preservation issue. The building in question is treated as an open-ended *work in progress* –i.e. an exquisite corpse, where old and new elements are collaged in the three-dimensionality of the physical fabric and in the fourth-dimensionality of *Time*.

A building is born in-time and undergoes *continuous* editing–i.e. series of additions and subtractions– engaged quite literally in a dialogue with the pre-existing building "fragment(s)".

The 'time-lapse' between additions generates the surreal character of the re-formed hybrid-body. The hybrid-body is the result of the juxtaposition between old and new elements, determining architectural *heteroglossia*, rather than unity of style.

The paradigm for architectural making, is that a building's *fabbrica* (fabric) is an 'unfinished-collage', thus providing the students with a critically revisited model for 'architectural-conservation'.

The design process is treated in the studio not unlike the 'exquisite corpse' game, where *several* authors are responsible for the result. In the initial design phase, the students are asked to produce an 'exquisite corpse', designing a first addition/alteration morphing an existing building. The 'exquisite-corpse (studio)' is structured as both a rule and a transgression.

*Rule:* from within an horizon of architectural anthropomorphism, the students are asked to construct a body/building collaboratively, each participant substituting for a body part another image, constituted of cut-out images glued onto paper.

In a second phase students are asked to *exchange* their projects and drawings, and continue working

on “some other person’s building”, in a process of adding/altering the exquisite-corpse.

In this phase of development the students offer an appreciation/critique of each other’s work. During the pin up leading to the exchange, a significant ‘body-part’ added is ‘frozen’ and, changes in the form of additions/subtractions/alterations in the following (2<sup>nd</sup>) project will be possible only in portions of the building that have not been frozen. Freezing equates to deeming a portion of the addition worthy of preservation.

### DRAWING THE EXQUISITE-CORPSE

In this studio major emphasis is put on ‘drawing’, with a preference for hand-drawing and hybrid representations. Drawings have a key role in the process of change. The phenomena of ‘conservation’ and ‘change’ are first manifested in the materiality of architectural drawings, which become the primary resource material for an investigation into the transformation processes, which relate to the life of a building.

The drawing is the ‘physical place’ where the conflicts of the ‘traumatic’ transformation are initially expressed and find resolution. This studio addresses the dilemma of how to rejoin through representation the already existent with the projected.

The retrospective and prospective character of the design process can be experienced through the intermediacy of the drawing in the present. By means of the drawing the gaze can be directed in two directions in time allowing the pre-existent to be engaged in a dialogue with the future design; something that does not happen in today’s practice where as-built -in the form of measured drawing of the existing conditions and/or orthographic photographs- and design projects are kept separate.

Design drawings should *rejoin* these two temporal conditions through metaphoric transparency. Looking in two directions in time the drawing allows for a real transformation of the building, which entails continuity of identity.

Collage techniques are encouraged, using various mediums and techniques, from hand-drawing to hybrid representation techniques, entailing the use of both analog and digital tools. Students are en-

couraged to think of drawing as “multi-temporal”<sup>3</sup>, i.e. as a Janus, looking in two directions in both space and time.

Often the recto-verso condition of the support offers a way of establishing a visual relationship between the preexisting building (i.e. the past, represented on the verso) and the future building (i.e. the future, represented on the recto). Alterations and additions are made visible through collage techniques in the media of drawings and models.

This is the case in a design drawing co-authored in the Fall of 2007 by Judy Sue & Jordan Batti, 1<sup>st</sup> year Master Students at RISD. An ‘as-found’ color orthographic photograph of the back elevation of the George C. Arnold building in downtown Providence, 100 Washington Street, Rhode Island, is collaged on the verso of a Mylar polyester film (Figure 1). New design elements are outlined in graphite and ink on the recto condition of the translucent plastic sheet. The new *cuts*, slicing through the building’s body allow for the insertion of new semi-permeable and opaque piercing volumes, integrated in the story of alterations narrated by this wall, allowing a simultaneous reading of its multiple transformations.



Figure 1. Judy Sue & Jordan Batti. 1<sup>st</sup> year Master students RISD.

The result is the merging -through the clear Mylar medium- of the faded photograph of the existing building, in the verso condition, with the collaged additions in the recto. Bristol board paper cut outs are used to block out transparency when new design element are added, hiding portions of the old firewall.

The firewall, like a St. Sebastian is pierced through by arrows, analogous to the foreign bodies inserted through this building to create new pathways,

essential to the new sculpture gallery program. The back-wall is interpreted as a phenomenological palimpsest, carrying all the traces of its transformations.

Transformation marks and new additions/alterations form a contiguous imagery, reminding of the work of contemporary American photographer Victor Landweber, and his 1989 Recto/Verso photograph overlays.

### INVENTORY OF THE BUILDING: COLLAGED ANAMNESIS

The students are encouraged to research the building's history, survey the site and produce interpretive collage drawings, which demonstrate the archeological layers of the building's history, highlighting the timeline of chronological changes and the presence of literal and metaphoric architectural fragments from different time periods.

Drawings, photographs, print clippings, newspapers, other publications and the building itself become all valuable resource materials collected in order to construct a collaged understanding and interpretation of the building's body and history.

The students are asked to provide a 'visual' narration of the building's history, one that can be read into the materiality of drawings and images rather than into a verbal text.

This aims at assuring a thorough communication of the complex narration of the building's history. The students rely primarily on drawings and visual imagery, being mindful of the fact that this is the principal way of communicating architectural ideas.

In collecting visual and textual evidence the students are encouraged to work in groups. In a panel documenting the changes of College Street Building, one of RISD's oldest campus buildings dating from 1935, designed by J. Ellis Jackson of Jackson, Robertson & Adams, a group of master students –Mary Bomba, Victor Serrano, Lauren Gueli, Sybil Bloomfield- have chosen to represent a linear narration of the historic events, which unfold from left to right in chronological order, thus determining the order with which newspapers print clippings, drawings and photograph etc. are collaged to form a visual narrative (Figure 2).

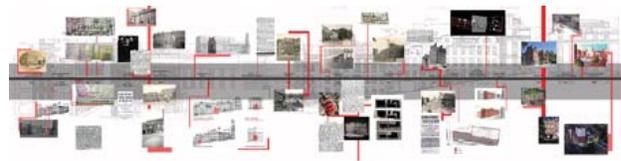


Figure 2. Mary Bomba, Victor Serrano, Lauren Gueli, Sybil Bloomfield. RISD.

A digital layering of old plans and blueprints, dating from different time periods (1823 & 1935), has been prepared by the students to show the multiple site's histories and architectural iterations, demonstrating that change is an essential part of College Street Building, and that the present identity of its fabric, owes much to previous buildings on this site, such as the demolished Franklin House Hotel (1823) by John Holden Greene. A significant fragment of this building –north and west walls- had been *metaphorically* retained. After having been taken down the entire building, the two walls were rebuilt as an exact replica reusing the original bricks, to preserve College Hill's streetscape.

As part of the process students are also asked to prepare a set of survey drawings such as floor plans, elevations and sections of the building, which will undergo change. When 'as-found' drawings of the building are available, students might either transfer or collage such drawings on the verso of a Mylar film and layer their additions/alterations on the recto condition, highlighting time-layers by differentiating the renderings on either side.

The transparency of the paper allows for a multi-temporal reading of the drawing and a dialogue between past and present, which happens in the materiality of the support, mimicking the physical alterations that the building undergoes.

This is the case with a sets of orthographic drawings produced by a 4<sup>th</sup> year student at RISD. Lauren Gueli, transferred with a clear blender a black and white photocopy of the 1935 blueprint plans and sections to scale, on the verso of a Mylar sheet. The drawing medium carries the *imprint* of the original building. She then flips the support to initiate the design process on the recto. Subtractions are executed in the mode of literal cut-outs of the support, and additions are layered in, and made distinguishable, by the use of red ink (Figure 3).

In another example a group of 4<sup>th</sup> year Carleton students –Amanda Conforti, Josee Labelle, Bridget Lok, Jimmy Lee & Omar Ashkar- have chosen to make visible St. Bridget's history –a roman catholic church in the Byward market in Ottawa, recently sold and in process of being converted into Irish Cultural Center- through a series of cards, each of which narrates a fragment of the building's history.

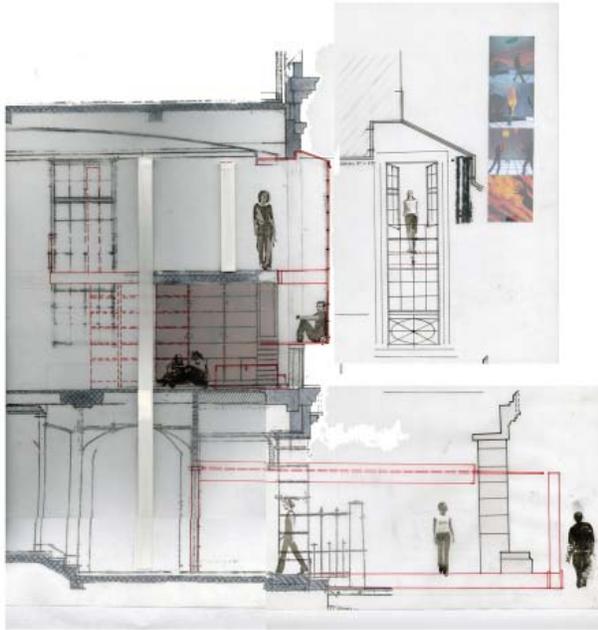


Figure 3. Lauren Gueli. RISD.

The building is a heritage site and is protected by an Ontario Heritage Site conservation easement. The new proposed program as 'Irish cultural center' and 'performance space' is one for which the building demonstrates a natural propensity. The 1889-90 church, constructed by the Irish-Catholic community in Ottawa, and designed by architect John R. Bowes (1852-1892) provides remarkable acoustics, ideal for musical performance, theatrical plays, as well as lectures. The buildings' scale and materiality provide a warmly reverberant space. The church was built entirely with the use of solid timber with the exception of the exterior load bearing walls made of limestone.

The students are asked each to investigate a specific 'memory' concept, and develop their own understanding, beyond the everyday common knowledge of memory as inventory of things past, to discover that the making of memory is a creative process.

In Christian culture, for example, 'memory' has always had both a retrospective and a perspective character (Belting 1997). Past and future are dialectically interconnected through memory. 'Change' is viewed as a natural and necessary part of the life of communities and buildings. To sustain the memory of the past of St. Brigid's church, one is challenged to think creatively in the present.

Amanda Conforti's based her project on the concept of 'double consciousness', inspired by the reading of an essay by British neurologist Oliver Sacks, titled 'The Landscape of his Dreams' (1995). In this novel the author elaborates on the special kind of memory of one of his patients Franco Magnani, an artist whom experiences vivid recollections of his remote past in the Italian city of Pontito, to the point of being equally aware of both past and present in a sort of 'dream state'.

This concept is translated by Amanda firstly into a conceptual model (Figure 4) which is essentially a self-portrait. In this piece, she reflects herself in a series of mirror fragments placed onto an outward looking glass window, of which she is taking a photograph.

In this condition neither her self-portrait nor the depiction of the space outside the window, are



Figure 4. Amanda Conforti, 4<sup>th</sup> year. Azrieli School of Architecture. Carleton University.

complete, however through a visual synecdoche we perceive both images as if they were whole. Amanda portrays herself looking in two directions in space, providing a visual embodied experience –i.e. a non-literal figurative cognitive structure (Johnson 1987: 5)- of the concept of looking in two directions in time simultaneously.

She then translates this conceptual piece, into an architectonic experience when new elements, i.e. the present of the building, and past ones, are designed to be perceived concurrently. The experience of the present building is intertwined with that of the past.

Her design allows for multiple readings and multiple narratives to take place simultaneously within the building's body, giving way to a state of double consciousness.

An added *screen* inspired by traditional choir screens in catholic churches, is inserted as a new

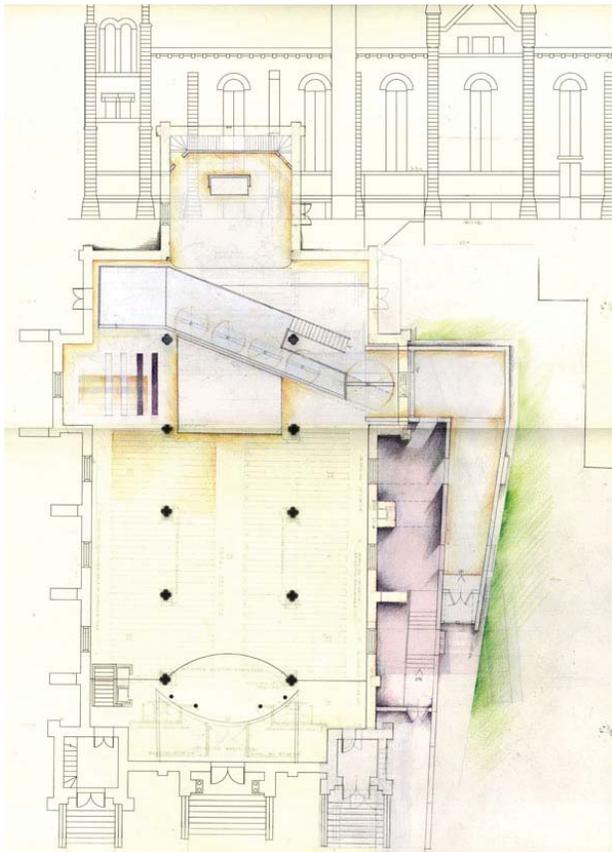


Figure 5. Amanda Conforti, 4<sup>th</sup> year. Azrieli School of Architecture. Carleton University.

element, to divide the interior space into two main areas: a museum of the former church and a performance space, providing not just spatial but also temporal orientation. The museum part towards the apse, contains the most sacred portion of the church, such is the main altar, and also a crucifix affixed onto the last of the right columns of the main nave.

Performance portion and museum portion are divided by a *permeable* wood screen, which allows for sound and sight to permeate through, facilitating a state of double consciousness (Figure 5). While in the museum one could still see/hear the performance happening on the *other* side. Vice versa while on the performance side of the space, one can still perceive the presence of the apse/altar.

Through a synecdoche play one can interpolate the reading of an incomplete image of the past and perceive the totality of it.

The screen is configured as a raised platform, which constitutes -on the performance side- the stage and *scenae frons* of the performance, and -on the museum side- an entrance and a way to gain access to the elevated crucifix, allowing contemplation *ad faciem* of this iconic piece, an experience that was not formerly possible.

The treatment of the *seams* of the exquisite corpse, the explorations of the joints between the fragmented body parts, reveals the design dialogue between past and future building.

The "body", i.e. the anthropomorphic model, after which the "re-making" is modeled, is not just the "human body" *per se* but rather a "corporate body" of Zeuxian origin<sup>4</sup>. The 'corporate body' –i.e. a plurality of persons within one body and within time- survives by means of continuous substitutions of single individual members while maintaining its identity. Architectural "renovation" -hinged on the concept of "corporate body"- is justified by the theory that nothing can be perpetual if not by way of "substitutions" (Kantorowicz 1957: 294-95, 308).

The "fragmentary" character of each intervention underlines the "collage" nature of the architectural process, where a *multiplicity of authors*- are responsible for the *collaged assembly* of parts.

This process is revealed by the surrealist painter René Magritte (1898-1967) in "The Eternal Evidence" (1930); the painter's process is one of selecting and appropriating different body parts in composing the whole (see fig. 4.19), based on Zeuxis's heritage; parts which however do not perfectly "fit" together, revealing the inherent problem of combining different body parts together<sup>5</sup>. Magritte makes visible the invisible process of creation of the "corps exquis", in which the body is a "composite" generated by a number of body-parts sequentially added

The "edge-joint" is a *threshold* articulating the moment of passage between body parts, forming the composite.

### COMPLETING THE STORY

A critical revisiting of the concept of conservation might add to our understanding of it as a form not just of preservation but also of *invention* and *imagination*. The studio pedagogy –based on the exquisite corpse game– intends to inform a critical editing of the notions of architecture and conservation in present practice, and propose an alternative cosmologic paradigm for inventions in existing fabrics, narrowing the gap between the two, towards a rejoined practice of 'architectural-conservation'.

The historicity of a building seems to be defined –by contemporary standards– in numerical terms; for a building to be considered historic, and be treated according to specified standards of preservation, restoration, etc., it should be at least '50' years old. The *disjunction* between past and present, conservation and architecture runs along this 50 year-timeline, where the past starts and the present ends.

The U.S. Department of the Interior's definitions of preservation, restoration, rehabilitation and reconstruction –currently in use by municipalities in the U.S. (endnote 12) proposes a philosophical approach to conservation as mono-directional gaze, looking towards the past. *Restoration* – according to the prescriptive definition provided by the standards– attempts a reversal of time; by unraveling history it aims to go back to a previous moment in the building's life, to recapture a previous appearance.

Conversely, it is proposed here to rethink 'architectural-conservation', as a meaningful dialogue between past and future, to allow for a renewal of essence and continuity of identity, embracing change, rather than denying it. Architecture should be no longer conceived as an object-of-time, but rather as a *means of representing it*.

Re-introducing the concept of hybrid-body –through the lenses of the exquisite corpse– as the result of multiple authorship, in present practice, might provide a paradigmatic model to retune contemporary architectural sensibility when dealing with the dilemma between design and preservation in the process of transforming existing buildings.

The retrospective and prospective character of the architectural-conservation process can be experienced through the intermediacy of 'collage-drawings' in the present. 'Collage-drawings' offer not just an image of the past but also a pre-figuration of something that will be. The architectural-conservation drawing is to be interpreted as the place where the 'multi-temporal' dimension of architecture can be experienced as memory of the past and revealer of future presence.

### ENDNOTES

1. Goodman, Nelson. "Ways of Worldmaking". Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.
2. Leon Battista Alberti. "On the Art of Building in Ten Books", 1997 [1452], Preface: 4.
3. Goffi, Federica. Carlo Scarpa and the Eternal Canvas of Silence. ARQ, vol. 10, n. 3-4, 2006: 291-300.
4. For a discussion of the influence of the myth of Zeuxis in "...painting, rhetoric and history..." in antiquity see Barkan (1999).
5. In this painting Magritte alludes to Zeuxis' game of adding body parts from *different* models. To emphasize this, Magritte select a different view-point for each body part, emphasizing the complexity of fitting together the parts, which belong to different bodies (Paquet 2000: 53). Philippe Comar also affirms that the process of "assembling" body parts originates in Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*, where the Greek philosopher (ca. 428-ca. 348) "invents an anthropological fantasy to explain the evolution of the human body [...] early humans he says were bisexual and double in all their parts. As a punishment for overweening pride, Zeus, lord of the Gods, cut them in two and scattered them. Since then, each human has wandered the earth, yearning for its other half and striving unceasingly to regain its shattered unity" (Comar 1999: 39-41).

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