

# Contemporary *Spolia*: Afterlives of Ruins in Fragments

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The practice of *spolia* emerges as a new architectural phenomenon within the context of contemporary building design, acquiring significant relevance in both architectural praxis and scholarly discourse. The interest in the exploitation of reclaimed materials resides in the possibilities *spolia* provide in terms of establishing a link to place and local culture. The reuse of architectural pieces, in this aspect, operates as a design method,<sup>1</sup> where it does not comprise the mere relocation of a fragment, but rather the transformation of the material in its new surroundings, imbuing the piece with a new context in its afterlife.

This paper endeavors to examine the scope and extent of *spolia* employed in contemporary structures, while scrutinizing the diverse approaches within the design field. It hence seeks to propose an argument on the possibility to re-establish cultural cohesion by respecting the accumulated and heterogeneous nature of the constructed environment.

## Understanding the Concept

Within the discipline of art history, the term *spolia* refers to artefacts procured from dilapidated buildings to be integrated into novel structures, where they may uphold their original function or acquire an alternative purpose in accord with their new environment. Despite extensive studies on the subject, both the definition and the conceptualization of the term remain elusive. According to Kinney, the contemporary art historian's perception of *spolia* encompasses "any artefact incorporated into a setting culturally or chronologically different from that of its creation."<sup>2</sup> In a narrower context, the term is generally used to describe Greek or Roman architectural pieces repurposed in Late Antique or Medieval buildings, in both Christian and Islamic territories (Fig. 1). The contentious aspect among studies significantly revolves around the *raison d'être* behind the reuse of architectural fragments. The number of explanations on the rationale varies parallel to the extent of the research performed on the area, although these justifications tend to be classified as relating to economic, ideological, theological, or aesthetic considerations. It is plausible to suggest multiple reasons hold validity simultaneously, while scholars often tend to propose opposing motives, such as: cultural appropriation versus cultural relinquishment, continuity versus discontinuity, a connection with the past, identity and memory versus severing ties with historical antecedents.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the term *spolia* encompasses a range of connotations that communicate multifarious meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Within this complexity, delving into the word's original meaning contributes to a more comprehensive understanding. The Latin word *spolia* originally stands for booty seized from

1 Iida Kalakoski and Huuhka Satu, "Spolia Revisited and Extended: The Potential for Contemporary Architecture," *Journal of Material Culture* 23, 2 (2017): 18.

2 Dale Kinney, "The Concept of Spolia," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 233.

3 Ivana Jevtić, "Introduction," in *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlives of Objects, and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, ed. Ivana Jevtić and Suzan Yalman (İstanbul: ANAMED, 2018), 18.

4 Ibid.



Fig. 1: *Spolia* embedded in the minaret wall of Arslanhane Mosque in Ankara

an enemy. In ancient Rome, the exhibition of *spolia* functioned as a means of propaganda, serving to publicly communicate the victory over defeated forces. Uytterhoeven describes how objects were displayed in triumphal parades and how forums and temples were decorated with trophies,<sup>5</sup> including armors, weapons, art pieces, and even building materials like obelisks or columns, that were operating also as architectural ornaments, alluding to a context closer to the modern meaning of the word.

Notwithstanding, the modern connotation of the term refers to building materials that have been taken from previous structures, not necessarily from enemies. In this regard, the Arch of Constantine (315) marks a milestone for scholars as it is believed to be the first instance where *spolia* have been lavishly and ostentatiously employed. The triumphal arch is adorned with reliefs and statues taken from monuments of Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius,<sup>6</sup> mighty predecessors of Constantine. The common explanation of the motives behind the use of *spolia* to such a great extent resided generally in the decline of artistry and workmanship as well as economic constraints in Late Antiquity. In addition, L'Orange explained the phenomenon in aesthetic and ideological aspects.<sup>7</sup> Here, it is crucial to note that Constantine was the first emperor to officially adopt Christianity while needing to maintain his position as a legitimate leader of pagan Rome. It can be argued that it was not mere coincidence that the first extensive use of *spolia* was simultaneous with the first Christian leader of Rome, taking into consideration

5 Inge Uytterhoeven, "*Spolia, -iorum*, n.: From Spoils of War to Reused Building Materials: The History of a Latin Term," in *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlives of Objects, and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, ed. Ivana Jevtić and Suzan Yalman (Istanbul: ANAMED, 2018), 27, 30, 36, 37, 38, 40.

6 A recent article adds another predecessor to the list, arguing the frieze must have been spoliated from a triumphal monument of Diocletian (C. Brian Rose, "Reconsidering the Frieze on the Arch of Constantine," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 34, 1 (2021): 175-210). The arch, indeed, had been the topic of many controversial debates regarding the actual construction date and origin of the spoils; see Arthur L. Frothingham, "Who Built the Arch of Constantine? Its History from Domitian to Constantine," *American Journal of Archeology* 16, 3 (1912): 368-386.

7 Hans P. L'Orange, *Der Spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinsbogens* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1939).

that the extensive use of *spolia* applies to other great edifices for which the construction had begun in Constantine's reign, namely the Lateran Church (324) and St. Peter's Rome (360). The scene confirms that the praxis should be interpreted as a sign of continuity as well as political legitimacy. Most importantly, however, it marks a position where the cultural milieu of a civilization changes drastically. This is such a powerful turn that Kiielerich interprets the praxis as a shift from *antiquus* to *modernus*.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent to the turn, Late Antiquity and Middle Ages bear witness to the extravagant utilization of *spolia*, which often exhibit visible prominence and, at times, present a fragmented configuration featuring heterogeneous façades, as illustrated by the Arslanhane Mosque (1290) (Fig 1), or the extreme case of Casa dei Crescenzi (12th century).

The practice of incorporating *spolia* in a conspicuous and lavish manner persists until the advent of the Renaissance, marking the onset of another cultural shift. The Renaissance also witnesses the first use of the term with its modern meaning,<sup>9</sup> referring to ancient fragments taken from ruined buildings to be integrated into a new architectural context. Roman scholars in the 16th century considered the deployment of *spolia* in Late Antique and Medieval structures as an artistic decline.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the connection of the etymological root of the word to force and violence contributes to the negative connotations associated with the term. Unsurprisingly, the 16th century marks both the point in time when the term *spolia* has been coined and the moment of the condemnation of discernible reuse, taking into consideration that the layered and fragmented character of the practice is antithetical to the modern and rational ideals of the Renaissance, a period indicating the dawn of the Modern Age.

Although the 16th century marks a pivotal shift in both the deployment and the perception of *spolia*, the reuse of ancient fragments certainly does not cease after the Middle Ages: spoliated fragments become less recognizable and are transformed to be fully integrated to the new structures, marking a certain paradigm shift in the application techniques. The reused fragments in Renaissance architecture exist in harmony with the main structure, to the extent that it is hard to identify them as *spolia*. They are usually altered to conform to the design, or the building is regulated according to the reused piece. It was not until the sixteen ancient columns of the circular loggia were procured that Bramante decided on the final dimensions of the Tempietto (c. 1502), so that the columns fit perfectly and “do not call attention to themselves in the way that many medieval instances of spoil reuse do.”<sup>11</sup>

The importance of unity is also evident in Raphael's letter to Leo X, where he condemns the Arch of Constantine for its inconsistency and he recommends that design should not be perceived in fragments but rather conveyed as a whole.<sup>12</sup> In the same century, a similar approach reigns also in Ottoman architecture; the columns of Süleymaniye, although transported from distant cities such as Baalbek and Alexandropolis (Egypt), do not reveal their long journey.<sup>13</sup>

8 Bente Kiielerich, “*Antiquus et modernus: Spolia in Medieval Art- Western, Byzantine and Islamic*,” in *Medioevo: il tempo degli antichi, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Parma*, ed. Arturo Carlo Quintavalle (Parma, 2003), 135.

9 Dale Kinney, “Rape or Restitution of the Past? Interpreting *Spolia*,” in *The Art of Interpreting*, ed. Susan C. Scott (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 54.

10 Kinney, “The Concept of *Spolia*,” 233; Kinney, “Introduction,” in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 1.

11 Derek A. R Moore, “Notes on the Use of Spolia in Roman Architecture from Bramante to Bernini,” in *Architectural Studies in Memory of Richard Krautheimer*, ed. Cecil L. Striker (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1996), 120.

12 Clare E. L. Guest, “Rethinking Ornament in Classical Architecture: Spolia and Architecture as *Institutio*,” in *The Routledge Handbook on the Reception of Classical Architecture*, ed. Nicholas Temple et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 59.

13 Tanyeli and Tanyeli announce *spolia* utilization was relatively diminished in Ottoman architecture during 16th century. Uğur Tanyeli and Gülsüm Tanyeli, “Osmanlı Mimarlığında Devşirme Malzeme Kullanımı (XVI.-

In accord with the paradigm shifts described above, Magdalino<sup>14</sup> identifies three overlapping phases for the history of *spolia*. The first phase is during the Roman Empire when *spolia*, or the spoils of war were publicly displayed in honour of victories, conforming to the literal meaning of the word; the second starts with the Arch of Constantine, followed by extensive and palpable use of *spolia* in monuments during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages; the third phase — which Magdalino suggests still continues — begins with the Renaissance, and is marked by a conservationist stance towards monuments. The conservationist approach increases throughout history, therefore the phases exhibit a “gradual transition from triumphalism to museology.”<sup>15</sup>

While acknowledging the phases that Magdalino identifies, this paper presumes that the third stage does not continue. Instead, today we are witnessing another shift in which contemporary architecture moves away from museology in order to align itself with the logic of the second phase. The inclusion of *spolia* has transitioned from a frowned upon practice to an acknowledged and ascending design approach in present-day context, as contemporary architects have been increasingly deploying *spolia* to enhance the relationship of the building with the past and the cultural context, or to appropriate previous values. The employment of miscellaneous techniques in the utilization of reused fragments, as well as the increasing number of studies addressing various aspects of the issue, parallel this scene.

### Literature

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to present an extensive view of literature, it is crucial to mention two ground-breaking papers before discussing studies on contemporary architecture. Even though the concept has been scrutinized since the 16th century, it was not until the paper published by Esch<sup>16</sup> in 1969, that the practice has been recognized as an artistic statement, and the aesthetic and the iconographic scope of reclaimed materials became widely acknowledged.<sup>17</sup>

Another important milestone is the distinction between *spolia in se* (material) and *spolia in re* (virtual) introduced by Richard Brilliant.<sup>18</sup> His perspective expanded the field to the realm of virtual objects, styles, ideas, construction techniques and contributed to the widening the scholarly debate.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the obvious increase in the number of studies following the two articles, a large part of the publications still discusses the concept in terms of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The interpretation of the term regarding contemporary praxis is relatively new and a certain

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XVIII. Yüzyıl),” *Sanat Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4 (1989): 24.

14 It is worth quoting the whole paragraph: “The history of the culture of *spolia* falls into three clearly defined though overlapping phases... The first corresponds to the expansion and hegemony of ancient Rome, which coined the term *spolia*, and elevated the triumphal display of loot into a way of life and an art form. The second phase begins with the Arch of Constantine, and is characterized by the increasingly widespread and systematic reuse of building materials, with conspicuous display of sculptured elements, in the later Roman Empire and its successor states, both Christian and Muslim. The third phase began in the Renaissance and is still with us. It has been marked by an increasingly conservationist approach to the monuments of the past, and by gradual transition from triumphalism to museology in the collection and exhibition of the imported ancient art.” Paul Magdalino, “Epilogue: A Meditation on the Culture of *Spolia*,” in *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlives of Objects, and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, ed. Ivana Jevtić and Suzan Yalman (Istanbul: ANAMED, 2018), 343.

15 Ibid., 343.

16 Arnold Esch, “Spolien: Zur Wiederverwendung antiker Baustücke und Skulpturen im mittelalterlichen Italien,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 51, 1 (1969): 1-64.

17 Kalakoski and Huuhka, “Spolia,” 14.

18 Richard Brilliant, “I piedistalli del giardino di Boboli: spolia in se, spolia in re,” *Prospettiva* 31 (1982): 2-17.

19 Kinney, “Introduction,” 2.

part of literature is still limited to publications in German and Italian. The most extensive study on the field is, indeed, a very recent book in German, by Hans-Rudolf Meier.<sup>20</sup> The monograph examines the field in a larger context, reviewing materials from Antiquity to the present. The author classifies meanings and interpretations, objects, materials, and effects, and finally discusses *spolia* as a form of design approach, making a novel contribution to the field. In several of his other published works Meier evaluates the subject in terms of ornament and place,<sup>21</sup> mimesis,<sup>22</sup> memory,<sup>23</sup> and meaning.<sup>24</sup>

There are several case studies focusing on different regions. Biagia Bongiorno's article discusses the subject in post-war Berlin<sup>25</sup>, while Benedetto Todaro interprets the term in the Italian context as a means of connecting with the past, alluding to ruins and their afterlives.<sup>26</sup> Kalakoski and Huuhka discuss the subject within the Finnish territory, focusing on the study of timber structures.<sup>27</sup> The authors also present a wider contemporary context, discussing the term as a design tool and alluding to its relevance in heritage preservation.

By the same token, Rabaça evaluates contemporary *spolia* in terms of an awakened historical consciousness, aligned with the open character of the architectural work that allows for multiple interpretations.<sup>28</sup> Bie Plevoeets explores the subject in relation to heritage conservation,<sup>29</sup> presenting a comprehensive literature study that examines sources in terms of context and purpose of reuse.

### Framing the Concept

Prior to delving into the topic in the contemporary context, it is imperative to differentiate *spolia* from other forms of reuse. One may well argue that reuse is a practice as old as the history of construction. There is evidence that the pillars from dismantled structures have been reused in other enclosures in Göbeklitepe,<sup>30</sup> one of the oldest construction sites in history. What distinguishes *spolia*, in this context, is the cultural connotations and the deliberate demonstration of materials; *spolia* attract attention through conspicuous use.<sup>31</sup> In this regard, Magdalino defines the practice as "reuse with value added and articulated."<sup>32</sup>

20 Hans-Rudolf Meier, *Spolien: Phänomene der Wiederverwendung in der Architektur* (Berlin: JOVIS Verlag, 2020).

21 Hans-Rudolf Meier, "Spolia in Contemporary Architecture: Searching for Ornament and Place", in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

22 Hans-Rudolf Meier, "Inkorporierungen: Spolien als Instrument der Mimesis in der Gegenwartsarchitektur," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 79 (2016): 396-409.

23 Hans-Rudolf Meier, "Vom Siegeszeichen zum Lüftungsschacht: Spolien als Erinnerungsträger in der Architektur," in *Bauten und Orte als Träger von Erinnerung. Die Erinnerungsdebatte und die Denkmalpflege*, ed. Hans-Rudolf Meier and Marion Wohlleben (Zürich: Publications at the Institute for the Preservation of Monuments, 2000).

24 Hans-Rudolf Meier, "Bewegte Architekturglieder: Spolien," *MAP* 10 (2019): 1-6.

25 Biagia Bongiorno, *Spolien in Berlin nach 1945: Motive und Rezeption der Wiederverwendung von Fragmenten* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2013).

26 Benedetto Todaro, "Spolia nel Progetto Contemporaneo," in *Il reimpiego in architettura: recupero, trasformazione, uso*, ed. Philippe Dillmann et al. (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2008).

27 Kalakoski and Huuhka, "Spolia."

28 Armando Rabaça, "Spolia and the Open Work," *Footprint* 16, 2 (2023): 41-46.

29 Bie Plevoeets, "Heritage in fragments: on Spolia and Other Forms of Preservation of Architectural Fragments Through Reuse," *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 23, 3 (2022): 145-159.

30 Oliver Dietrich and Jens Notroff, "Beginning Social Complexity During the Early Neolithic of Upper Mesopotamia: a View from Göbekli Tepe," last modified July, 18, 2017, <https://www.dainst.blog/the-tepe-telegrams/author/obdietrich/>.

31 Meier, *Spolien*, 207.

32 Magdalino, "Epilogue," 342.

Greenhalgh<sup>33</sup> argues reuse is generally only pragmatic and bears no other meaning. When the employment of old materials is due to economic constraints, the origin of the spoliated object becomes of minor significance. This perspective is particularly valid in terms of contemporary building practices where an extensive salvage market operates. Companies such as RotorDC dismantle buildings to employ their fragments in new structures, while other firms recycle demolition waste to obtain new materials. These attempts, including the complete dismantling and recycling of an object to the extent that it becomes unrecognizable, are motivated by the desire to execute sustainable and eco-friendly constructions, rather than attaining symbolic connotations.

The Frederiksbjerg School (2016) by Henning Larsen Architects, which is constructed from reused bricks reclaimed from demolished historic buildings around the neighbourhood, illustrates this standpoint well.<sup>34</sup> Despite exhibiting patina and subtle variations in hue and texture, discerning that the bricks have been recycled is an arduous task, as they have been skillfully reworked to align with the overall design.<sup>35</sup> The primary incentive here remains the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In this case, even if the fragment remains intact, it is visually unidentifiable as *spolium*, since the definition of the term entails the celebration and reconceptualization of the material.<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding, environmental considerations have been occasionally manifested through façades, whereby *spolia* serve both as the instrument and the expression of ecological preoccupations. The Kamikatz Public House (2015) by Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP incorporates assorted windows reclaimed from nearby abandoned houses, creating a patchwork-like design that eloquently conveys their redeemed context. The reason of the project primarily resides in the town's ambition to become a self-sustainable recycling community. Nevertheless, windows are prominently displayed on the façade as a form of artistic expression, emphasizing their reclaimed state. The architects confirm the deliberate expression as they declare they wished the reclaimed windows "would serve as a lantern of hope to shine upon the town struggling with a declining population."<sup>37</sup>

Besides deliberate expression of the fragment, the previous lives of the materials as well as the condition and context of their original setting are all important factors to consider when designating a fragment as *spolium*.<sup>38</sup> The Chicago Tribune Tower (1923-1925) comprises around 150 architectural pieces, collected from famed monuments across the globe, including the White House, Reims Cathedral, or Great Wall of China, embedded on the exterior walls at ground level.<sup>39</sup> Wharton suggests they cannot be considered as *spolia* in the classical sense, given that the buildings from which the pieces are taken are still intact.<sup>40</sup> This instance reveals that labelling fragments as *spolia*, at least in its modern sense, requires that the "donor" building be in a state ruin, even without any implication of force and violence, as in the original meaning of the word.

33 Michael Greenhalgh, "Spolia: A Definition in Ruins," in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 75-76.

34 ArchDaily, "Frederiksbjerg School / Henning Larsen Architects + GPP Architects," last modified November 16, 2016, <https://www.archdaily.com/799521/frederiksbjerg-school-henning-larsen-architects-plus-gpp-architects>.

35 Ibid.

36 Kalakoski and Huuhka, "Spolia," 13.

37 ArchDaily, "Kamikatz Public House / Hiroshi Nakamura & NAP," last modified April 19, 2018, <https://www.archdaily.com/892767/kamikatz-public-house-hiroshi-nakamura-and-nap>.

38 Meier, "Spolia," 225.

39 Annabel J. Wharton, "The Tribune Tower: Spolia as Despoliation," in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 184.

40 Ibid., 193.

## The Contemporary Context

The interest towards the utilization of reclaimed materials in 20th century architecture initially resided in the critique of modernism, with an awakened consciousness of history, place, and identity. Kinney posits the logic behind *spolia* is coherent with postmodernism and outlines the areas of intersections as “fragmentation, historicism, memory, authenticity, authorship, and appropriation.”<sup>41</sup> A reasonable interpretation would be that by postmodernism she implies the architectural philosophies denouncing austere modernism rather than the architectural movement deriving meaning from historicism and pastiche. In another paper, she supplements her view by stating “*Spolia* ... resonate with prominent themes of postmodern cultural criticism, such as appropriation, *bricolage*, historicism, the fragment, and ruin.”<sup>42</sup>

One can extend the list with ornamentation,<sup>43</sup> aesthetics, context, identity, place,<sup>44</sup> and architectural expression. The fourth phase, identified at the beginning of the article as per the phases defined by Magdalino, identifies a complex stage that does not adhere to a unified design strategy but rather encompasses diverse approaches with different intentions and implications. The scrutiny of contemporary structures incorporating *spolia* suggests the motivation for reuse often stems from the pursuit of *genius loci*, the reverence for local memory, the perplexity ensuing from the encounter with ruins, the aspiration to preserve built heritage, and the celebration of context, be it through local references or the narrative of the building *per se*. It can be suggested that buildings typically exhibit multiple design approaches, where connotations and design strategies intertwine.

### *Genius Loci*

If the introduction of *spolia* to contemporary practice dawned with a critique towards austere modernism,<sup>45</sup> primarily as a way of restoring the lost connection with place and local culture, the works of Dimitris Pikionis and Carlo Scarpa during the 1950s and 1960s, which seek to show respect and adapt to their place and culture in context, constitute a propitious outset for tracing the use of *spolia* in present-day architecture.

From 1954 to 1957, Pikionis undertook the construction of a pedestrian pathway leading to the Acropolis of Athens. He employed lintels, clay tiles, stones, obtained from demolished neoclassical buildings in Athens, combined with a modern material — concrete. The outcome, resembling an abstract collage, does not infuse a predetermined order on the layers of the past,<sup>46</sup> but seamlessly incorporates itself into the pre-existing historical context without causing any discordance, merely contributing an additional stratum to the existing realm. The path elicits profound sensations of local continuity by embracing the historical strata and venerates the *genius loci* by means of the incorporation of old fragments. Lynch identifies such materials as “fragmentary reminders”<sup>47</sup> that facilitate the materialization of “time-deep areas.”<sup>48</sup>

With regards to fragments, Scarpa emerges as another prominent practitioner.<sup>49</sup> Described by Frascari as the “master of fragmentary architecture, or *architettura di spoglio* (architecture

41 Kinney, “Introduction,” 1.

42 Kinney, “The Concept of *Spolia*,” 234.

43 Meier, “*Spolia*.”

44 Ibid.

45 Kalakoski and Huuhka, “*Spolia*,” 26.

46 Stylianos Giamarellos, *Resisting Postmodern Architecture: Critical regionalism Before Globalisation* (London: UCL Press, 2022), 157.

47 Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1976), 57.

48 Ibid., 57.

49 Rabaça, “*Spolia*.”



Fig. 2: Marble portal placed at the entrance to the *Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia*

of spoils),”<sup>50</sup> Scarpa’s mastery is evident in his method. He does not simply generate a sum of fragments,<sup>51</sup> but rather sews them together to achieve spatial coherence. Despite the intricacy of the design, the viewer attains comprehension of both the pre-existing and novel components in a harmonious reconciliation. Each individual element integrated to the context is adeptly situated within its new environment, which enables the user to occupy all historical layers simultaneously. When one stands in the court of Castelvecchio in Verona (1959-1973), the space alludes to the accumulated nature of Mediterranean towns, eliciting a feeling of familiarity upon the viewer.

During the construction of the entrance of *Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia* (1966-1972), Scarpa made the decision to place the marble portal of the refectory of Tolentini convent on the ground, transforming it into a basin (Fig. 2). Rabaça interprets this act through the lens of symbolism, positing that it conveys a message pertaining to the ideas of threshold and depth.<sup>52</sup> The veiled and enigmatic messages Scarpa conveys with the way he utilizes the fragments is what connects his works to the polyvalent character of the praxis of *spolia*.

It is not coincidental that both Pikionis and Scarpa are architects from the Mediterranean basin. Alluding to Scarpa’s cross-cultural references of uses, one remembers his famous quote, “I am a man of Byzantium who came to Venice by way of Greece.”<sup>53</sup> It is a geography where translocation is an inherent habit, a place where not only fragments, but also artists relocate, carrying the vestiges of their previous settings.<sup>54</sup>

Another mutual feature of the two architects is their later affiliation with Critical Regionalism. Coined initially by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre and later elaborated by the writings of Kenneth Frampton during the 1980s, it includes the critique of the pervasive and homogenizing hand of technology and universalization. Instead, it advocates for adherence to the local context and to the unique character of place while maintaining a modern position.<sup>55</sup> The heterogeneous environments designed by both architects can be perceived from this perspective.<sup>56</sup> The employment of reused fragments presents a striking contrast to the uniformity of homogeneous development in terms of its capacity to imbue the built environment with the complexity and contrast<sup>57</sup> that render the change, or progress, visible.<sup>58</sup>

### Memory

In reference to contrasts, Francesco Venezia, another architect from the Mediterranean, emerges as a notable figure. His projects in Sicily during the 1980s, a museum and a *hortus conclusus* in Gibellina, and an open-air theatre in Salemi, which he built with Marcella Aprile and Roberto Collovà, employ the detritus left behind by the Belice earthquake of 1968.

The utilization of ruins establishes a meaningful connection with the historic legacy and the memories of the stratified urban environment. Indeed, the deployment of ruins serves as a way to connect with the very soil that created them by its tectonic movements. A column shaft,

50 Marco Francari, “Carlo Scarpa in Magna Graecia: The Abatellis Palace in Palermo,” *AA Files* 9 (1985): 3.

51 Ibid.

52 Rabaça, “Spolia,” 46.

53 Kenneth Frampton, “Carlo Scarpa and the Adoration of the Joint,” in *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996), 305.

54 Here, I would like to recall the Turkish—curiously it is the only language (as GoogleTranslate tells) that did not adopt the word *spolia* to define reused fragments—word “*devşirme*” that both stands for *spolia* and non-Muslim subjects converted to Islam at a young age and educated in *enderun* (palace school) to attain important positions in the state.

55 Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 16.

56 Frampton, “Carlo Scarpa,” 305; Giamarelos, *Resisting Postmodern Architecture*, 167.

57 or contradiction, if one has to recall Venturi.

58 Meier, *Spolien*, 214.

a capital, and a column base, reclaimed from the remnants of the old Carmine convent, are partially embedded in the pavement of the stage of the Salemi open-air theatre. The fragments act as reminders of the destruction wrought by the earthquake with their position in the state of ruin.<sup>59</sup> Tadarò interprets the design approach as a form of reconciliation between artefacts and nature, signifying the confluence of history and contemporaneity.<sup>60</sup>

Although it is evident that the work of Venezia pays homage to *genius loci*, the connection to the memory of the past plays a more crucial role in his post-disaster constructions, while they illustrate the efficacy of deploying *spolia* as a means of surmounting the tragedy of ruins.<sup>61</sup> They reclaim not only the building material, but also the integrity and stability of the past, in order to retrieve the town. After all, the fascination with *spolia* initially resides in one simple question: what to do with the ruins of the glorious past?

### *Ruins*

Simmel identifies an inherent conflict in life, which imbues cultural forms, or artefacts, with an endless dynamism.<sup>62</sup> As “the forces of life erode every cultural form which they have produced,” eventually, artefacts fall into ruins.<sup>63</sup> The supremacy of natural forces prevails over human interventions, thereby precipitating the emergence of other forms to supplant previous ones.<sup>64</sup> Ruins, accumulated by life and progress, serve as reminders to humanity of the triumph of natural forces over its creations.<sup>65</sup>

When humanity is faced with the remnants of its past, it must deal with them to overcome the agony of defeat against nature. *Spolia* emerge as a method of mastering the ruins, transforming them into a triumph of humanity over nature once again. In this respect, Tadarò suggests, “from the protracted practice of acknowledging, valuing, and reusing every minute fragment, we can exorcise the inexorable accumulation of ruins.”<sup>66</sup> *Spolia* emerge as a way of reversing the direction of time that had corrupted matter, seeking to recover lost integrity in the form of resurrection.

The overabundance of *spolia* in Medieval Mediterranean can be evaluated in this light. Greenhalgh<sup>67</sup> notices that during the Middle Ages ruins were present in many formerly Roman cities, referring to them as “ruinscapes.” In such a context, justifying the integration of *spolia* in new monuments can be considered a method of addressing the presence of remnants and, consequently, an attempt to connect with the glorious Roman past.

If the deployment of *spolia* is considered as a means of managing architectural remains,<sup>68</sup> the inevitable question arises: did all *spolia* come from ruins? Brandenburg<sup>69</sup> argues that *spolia* were obtained from edifices that were already dilapidated, a view supported by Kalakoski and Huuhka, who posit that “plundering a salvageable building for *spolia* would have implied a

59 Rabaça, “*Spolia*,” 48.

60 Tadarò, “*Spolia*,” 240.

61 *Ibid.*, 238.

62 Georg Simmel, “The Conflict of Modern Culture (1918),” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 76.

63 *Ibid.*, 76.

64 Georg Simmel, “The Ruin (1911).” *Hudson Review* 11 (1958): 379.

65 *Ibid.*, 379.

66 Tadarò, “*Spolia*,” 238; translation is mine with the help of AI.

67 Greenhalgh, “*Spolia*,” 81.

68 Meier, *Spolien*, 212.

69 Hugo Brandenburg, “The Use of Older Elements in the Architecture of Fourth- and Fifth-Century Rome: A Contribution to the Evaluation of *Spolia*,” in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).



Fig. 3: Erimtan Museum (Photo courtesy of Dilara Gökçen Paç)

Fig. 4: Klostergarten residences (Photo courtesy of Michael Heinrich)



complete disregard for those values.”<sup>70</sup> With regard to the Arch of Constantine, Kinney suggests “it is possible that all of the reused ornaments came from structures destroyed before the reign of Constantine; in that case, their placement on the Arch could be seen as an act of artistic piety.”<sup>71</sup> Kinney’s perspective implies that it is plausible to construe reuse as a means of rescuing the monuments from falling into oblivion. In Late Antiquity, this motive might be a prevalent standpoint, as West Roman Emperor Majorian declares in 458: “for what cannot be restored in any way should at least be used to decorate some other public building.”<sup>72</sup>

Comprehension of *spolia* as a means of salvation from ruins is also a prominent theme in current architectural practices, where the deployment of old fragments acts as a form of heritage conservation.

### *Heritage Preservation*

Contemporary architects frequently utilize *spolia* as a way of addressing the loss of architectural heritage on the building site. The reused fragments, in this case, are signs that stand for the absence of demolished edifices and act as a way of preservation of their values and iconography.<sup>73</sup>

Designed by Ayşen Savaş, Can Aker and Onur Yüncü, the Erimtan Archaeology Museum (2011-2015) incorporates stones retrieved from three ruined 18th century buildings that were dismantled to make space for the museum (Fig. 3). The new building not only reuses the stones in their original location, but also mimics the outlines, fenestrations, and masonry techniques of the former structures. In this way, it appropriates the local building techniques, which may well be identified as *spolia in re*. The street façade poses another instance of virtual *spolia*, mimicking the neighboring buildings and Ankara citadel, where spoliated fragments had been embedded in the walls. The museum alludes to neighboring *spolia* in reverse, incorporating new concrete material in the masonry of reused stones. With these traits, the edifice introduces an unorthodox approach to *spolia* utilization while blurring the lines between “preservation, restoration, conservation, and reconstruction.”<sup>74</sup>

The museum addresses an essential issue in building design, the process of redefining the meaning of historical constructions and components by means of new interventions.<sup>75</sup> Architects confronted with this problem while working with ruins or buildings on the verge of demolition frequently exploit *in situ spolia* to preserve the iconographic meanings on the site. In the Klostergarten residential complex (2009) by Hild und K Architekten, neo-Romanesque windows of the demolished refectory were integrated into the new façade to create a coexistence between the old and the new (Fig. 4). With their anachronistic presence, the reused windows convey a sense of continuity and redeem the grief of the lost edifices. In this aspect, the design approach, labeled by the architects as “an unusual procedure in contemporary monument preservation,”<sup>76</sup> illustrates the “compensatory” aspect of *spolia* which work as “compensating for what is lost at the moment when something new is created and calming the minds of those who want to mourn over the loss.”<sup>77</sup> This design approach invokes the works of Venezia, endeavoring to preserve the memory of a lost edifice.

70 Kalakoski and Huuhka, “Spolia,” 15.

71 Kinney, “Rape or Restitution,” 57-58.

72 Cod. Theod. Nov. Majorian IV; quoted from Gregorovius 1978, 106; quoted from Meier, *Spolien*, 209.

73 Meier, *Spolien*, 208.

74 Ulf Meyer, “Spolia in the Wall,” June 6, 2019, <https://www.world-architects.com/en/architecture-news/reviews/spolia-in-the-wall>.

75 Rabaça, “Spolia,” 62.

76 HildundK, “Klostergarten Lehel,” accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.hildundk.de/projekte/wohnungen-am-klostergarten/>

77 Meier, *Spolien*, 213; translation by the help of AI.

In the present context, the Utrecht Town Hall (1997-2000) by Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue stands out as a striking building, displaying the architects' intention to preserve the cumulative character of the building in an unusual way (Fig. 5). The existing town hall was already a conglomeration of different styles and structures, incorporating reused windows and fragments from previous structures, that formed over a period spanning 700 years. The design decisions of Miralles and Tagliabue manifest in the façade as a re-composition of reused materials, reminiscent of a collage. The exposition of former materials ensures that the accumulated nature of the building is preserved and expressed. The architects reconceptualize the fragments to communicate the intended message of the novel construction, highlighting the palimpsest-like nature of the building and acknowledging its historical and cultural value. The architects' deliberate exposition of fragmented elements on the façade bestows an ornamental character to reused pieces, thereby endowing the building with a distinctive status among the projects discussed in this paper. Moreover, the deconstructivist language of the building illustrates how the utilization of *spolia*, propelled by akin motives and intentions which are the preservation of history and the recreation of the contextual narratives in this particular instance, operates in diverse architectural movements.

### Context

As evidenced by the Utrecht Town Hall, *spolia* are commonly employed as a means of celebrating or expressing the context. The extension of the European Council Building (2005-2016), undertaken by Philippe Samyn, serves as a noteworthy illustration of public communication through the implementation of *spolia* (Fig. 6). Samyn transformed the existing L-shaped structure into a cube by inserting two new façades that have a double skin, of which the outer layer consists of 3000 wooden-frame windows procured from various demolition sites around Europe.<sup>78</sup> Resembling a patchwork, the windows have obviously been reworked to fit the design, as evidenced by their consistent colors. They serve as symbolic representations of the diverse cultural backgrounds within European civilization, while their transformation into a harmonious whole might act as a metaphorical reference to national identities transforming in favor of a common European culture. Consistent with this view, one can infer that the façade design embraces a more unifying approach, in contrast to the fragmented façade of the Utrecht Town Hall.

Within contemporary architecture, architects frequently benefit from the local culture to create a context for the novel construction. Illustrating this instance superbly, The Collage House (2015) by S+PS Architects adeptly appropriates the local architectural language. As the name suggests, the dwelling is a collage of recycled materials, fabric waste, old cement tiles and wooden moldings. The front façade consists of reused windows and doors reclaimed from demolished houses in the city while the terrace harbors a small pavilion surrounded by 100-year-old columns. The deployment of recycled materials in an aesthetics of agglomeration enables the new structure to connect with the intangible aspects of the culture it inhabits, as the *spolia* allude to the collage-like and eclectic language of the informal settlements in Mumbai.<sup>79</sup> Evoking the design approach in Ermitan Museum, the building coins a new aesthetic language that mediates between the formal and informal cultures of its setting, while adapting to the regional context.

In terms of complying with the local context, Chinese architect Wang Shu emerges as a notable figure. When the Pritzker Award was granted to him in 2012, Lord Palumbo aptly posited that his architectural work was "timeless, deeply rooted in its context and yet universal."<sup>80</sup> One of the

78 World Architects, "Samyn and Partners," accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.world-architects.com/en/samyn-and-partners-brussels/project/european-council-and-council-of-the-european-union>.

79 ArchDaily, "Collage House / S+PS Architects," last modified April 24, 2016, <https://www.archdaily.com/786059/collage-house-s-plus-ps-architects>.

80 Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren, "The Reluctant Architect: An Interview with Wang Shu of Amateur Architects Studio," *AD Architectural Design* 82, 6 (2012): 123.



Fig. 5: Utrecht Town Hall

Fig. 6: European Council Building





Fig. 7: Ningbo History Museum

design methods that assists the architect in accomplishing this task is the utilization of *spolia* in combination with modern materials such as concrete, steel and glass in his designs. The façade of his Ningbo History Museum (2008), which is fashioned from bricks and tiles reclaimed from dilapidated or demolished vernacular buildings around China, exudes an impression of a stratified geographical layer (Fig. 7). The aesthetic presentation of the conglomerated façade relies on the use of a traditional construction technique of vernacular Chinese architecture, called the *wa pian qiang* (clay-tile wall) method, involving the construction of a wall with tiles, bricks and stone, which grant texture and colour variety to the surface (Fig. 8).<sup>81</sup> As *spolia in re*, this technique, which Shu interprets as “a way of preserving time,”<sup>82</sup> initially included collecting debris to reconstruct damaged buildings affected by typhoons in the region.<sup>83</sup> The other method Shu uses is *zhu tiao mo ban hun nin tu* (bamboo-strip concrete mold), in which concrete is cast with a bamboo mold so that the patterns of the surrounding nature are imprinted into the modern material.<sup>84</sup> The building, in this aspect, integrates both tangible and intangible heritages of the landscape it inhabits. For this, museum director Qian Lu praises the architect’s “exemplary cultural continuity and the vigor with which he has recovered the tradition.”<sup>85</sup>

The Ningbo Museum serves as a notable illustration of how *spolia* concurrently entail heritage preservation, connection to place and local culture, appropriation of building techniques and materials, all while facilitating a new construction to harmonize with its new environment. The Ningbo Museum revives the architectural visions of Pikionis and Scarpa, integrating a new stratum, while demonstrating exceptional adaptability to the palimpsest-like context of the urban environment.

81 Ibid., 125.

82 Ibid.

83 Plevoets, “Heritage in fragments,” 152 and 155.

84 Denison and Ren, “The Reluctant Architect,” 125.

85 WikiArquitectura, “Ningbo Historic Museum,” last accessed April 24, 2016, <https://en.wikiarquitectura.com/building/ningbo-historic-museum/>.



Fig. 8: *Wa pian qiang* method, Ningbo History Museum

## Conclusion

Several instances of reuse discussed throughout the paper in the context of contemporary architecture demonstrate the interweaving of different motives in the employment of *spolia*. Pertaining to the *raison d'être* behind the reuse of architectural fragments, it becomes virtually unimaginable to distinguish memory from place, meaning from context, or heritage preservation from the utilization of ruins. In the contemporary context, the deployment of *spolia* retains its role as a carrier of meaning, serving as a conduit for the transmission of historical and cultural memories. In this capacity, it operates as a pivotal mediator between the modern world and the stratified patterns of the existent urban realm, generating social cohesion through the articulation of the architectural space. Moreover, the praxis operates as an alternative way of heritage conservation and exhibits ways of communicating with the existing structures while implementing new constructions. Integration of previous building elements offers a new aesthetic within present-day architecture in which fragmentation, heterogeneity and complexity are celebrated. Given these characteristics, one could argue that the contemporary focus lies on the manifestation of the practice of spoliation rather than the reuse of the material *per se*.

In the traditional sense, reused fragments served both as means of continuity and disruption during the onset of cultural turns. Amidst the ongoing globalization and technology-induced homogenization of the world, *spolia* offer an opportunity to forge connections with the past and bridge the gap between the historical and the modern. Despite their historical role in severing ties with previous cultures in the pre-modern world, they now serve as tools to establish and enhance the connection with the local cultures, places, time, and layers of history in today's society, hence operating in the opposite direction. The historical connotations of force and violence, traditionally associated with *spolia* in accord with the etymological origins of the term, fade as contemporary reused fragments are involved in restoring rather than "spoiling."

Upon revisiting the three phases identified by Magdalino - launched by the exhibition of trophies in the Roman Empire, followed by the lavish employment of *spolia* in the construction of the Arch of Constantine, and culminating with the coining of the term and condemnation of the practice during the Renaissance - the contemporary context reveals the emergence of a

fourth state. The current phase departs from museology to effectively utilize *spolia*, imbuing them with multifarious connotations. Although contemporary practice encompasses different approaches in terms of the implementation and conceptualization of *spolia*, it embraces and celebrates reuse as a design strategy, employing it to restore meaning in architecture and connect with the stratified urban environment.

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