



Fig. 01: *Fragments of the Whole*, 2020, collage made by the author

SPOLIA

Fragments of Disruption and Continuity

Today, many architects frequently mention the word “reuse” in relation to the building process. It is certainly true that if the materials used on a daily basis are destined to be

exhausted, then reuse becomes a counter-trend strategy, introducing into the production cycle already-used materials in other forms and (perhaps) uses. There are many

different nuances and forms of this vision, but among all of them it is possible to identify a common thread. It is in fact the waste material that is exalted, and the possibility of giving it a new life, precisely because it has completed its own, naturally or forcibly. But what happens if the reused elements are not waste but fragments of a certain value? In this case we speak of *spolia*, corresponding to the reuse of historical material in non-primary contexts.

Although re-use of building materials has made a comeback in more recent times, the practice itself has ancient roots. Throughout history it has been associated with all those circumstances where there has been a scarcity of resources or where it has been difficult, economically, practically and in terms of transportation, to extract or produce enough building materials to carry on site. While waste architecture concentrates mainly on the practical use of each piece and on the final result that the assemblage of the pieces provides, *spolia* architecture focuses primarily on the value of the individual element. It aims precisely at the exaltation of the fragment, of the lost memory of the ancient, which would otherwise inevitably be lost or forgotten. The building in which the fragments are grafted thereby increases its value because it becomes a vessel of ancient remembrances.

Spolia architectures are evidence of the deeply felt need to assemble, or better yet, reassemble a lost or poorly perceived set of available fragments. Rome, for example, commonly known as a quarry of ancient Roman relics during the Middle Ages, has many such examples. The

basilica of *Santa Maria in Trastevere*, for instance, contains capitals from the *Terme di Caracalla*, which were reused in the structure of the church (# fig. 02). The *Casa de' Crescenzi* is a heterogeneous collection of decorative fragments, corbels, architraves and sculptures from the most disparate buildings, which historians still struggle to trace.

Regarding these past examples interpretations of *spolia* generally alternate between the ideological and the pragmatic. According to the ideological interpretation designing with *spolia* is an intentional effort to evoke some value or message from the past. In this case the reuse of artistic and architectural elements from previous empires or dynasties is described as triumphal (i.e., literally as the display of the “spoils” or “booty” of the conquered) or as revivalistic (proclaiming the renewal of past imperial glories). Pragmatic readings emphasize the usefulness of reused fragments, as raw materials were difficult to quarry. If there is a good source of old marble columns available, for example, there is no need to produce new ones. However, the most insightful interpretation of this phenomenon is precisely dictated by an integration of the two. It must be said that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but *spolia* architectures often encapsulate both intentions. It is therefore fair to think that the need for easily reusable and transportable material on the site has led to this direction, but the choice of the single fragment also suggests that the grafted element is not simply a stopgap but carries a clear message.

This method was therefore a practice in the past, but



Fig. 02: Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, 2019 (Google Earth)

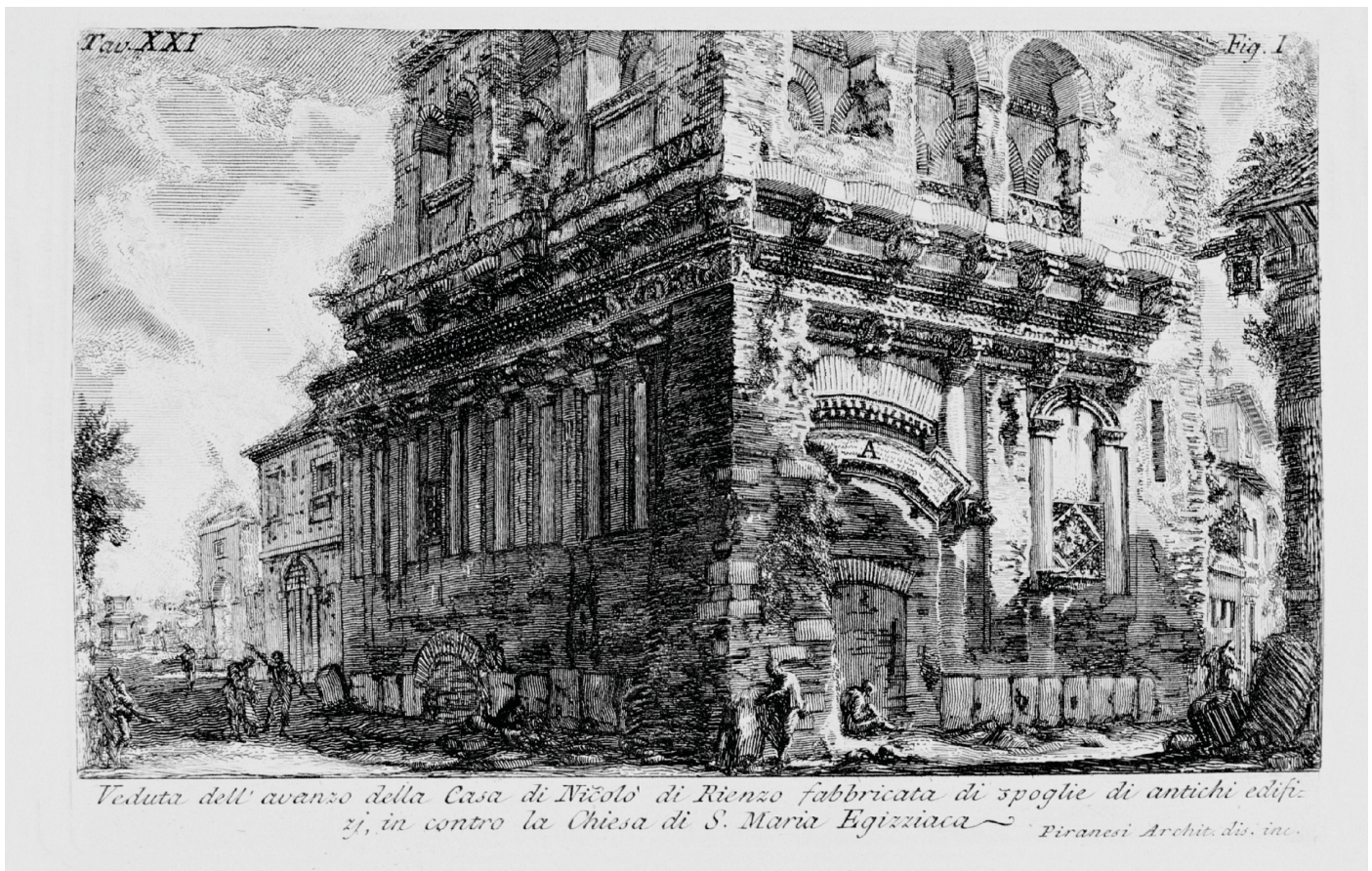


Fig. 03: *Veduta dell'avanzo della Casa di Nicolò di Rienzo* (View of the Casa de Crescenzi), Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1756

can it today be considered as a way of “assembling” buildings, considering that we have a different sensitivity and level of consideration towards historical, or at least noteworthy, buildings within the fabric of the city?

Regarding the action of spoliation, it would nowadays be easily pointed at as a violence towards an historical piece, as an old structure would be stripped like a victim of an aggression. When the building is not forced by circumstantial events, such as demolitions or permanent modifications, to be a victim of time and disappear, this activity could result in thoughtless acts of violation of ancient building. The famous expression “quod non fecerunt Barbari, Barbarini fecerunt” (lat. what the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did), which has become notorious in mass culture for vandalism in general, originally refers to the stripping of the bronzes of the *Pantheon* to make cannons. However, in the case where fragments would be lost or destroyed, spolia can be seen as a positive concept when reusing them in a new context means perpetuating their memory, preserving them, and making them usable for posterity, and thus transmitting a value to the community. They are mean of innovation, preservation, and continuity.

Is it therefore possible today to preserve a fragment, which highlights the uniqueness or a peculiarity of an old building or part of it, and incorporate it into a new one? How then can the values of the original construc-

tion be maintained through the physical transfer of some of its components into a new architectural whole? The first issue that arises concerns the authenticity of the individual element, its authorship, and its distinctiveness in the new context. Although in the past there was almost no sensibility regarding the themes of preservation and conservation or even about the concept of built heritage, today the historical values of the fragments must be enhanced.



Fig. 04: Villa Medici, Rome, N. Bigio, A. Lippi, B. Ammannati 1564-1580, Xilography by G. Barberis, 1894
Reused fragments, coming mainly from Hortii Luculliani, Rome

Nowadays, in order to be appreciated and reported for the historical value of the original building, spolia must function as documentary evidence. It must also be possible to distinguish the fragments from their new context, because camouflaging them into new architecture would then prevent the observer to easily recognize them, and to appreciate their historical quality and value. In fact, one can think to harmonize the old with the new context in search of a result that is not disjunctive-or at least less disturbing as possible. However this vision would then on the one hand make the spoila difficult to understand and on the other let the new building sink in the ocean of historical forgery. The *Villa Medici* in Rome, for example, incorporates ancient roman effigies and decorations into the façade, including garlands from the *Ara Pacis*, in order to be contemplated from the garden upfront. However, to these “real” spolia are juxtaposed some fakes, resulting in a complex but homogeneous ensemble charged with valuable references, but undistinguished. The historical fakes become on the one side a symbols of appropriation of antiquity, but on the other they disguise the originals, which lose their testimonial value, as they are no longer recognizable in the fragmentary assemblage.

In order to achieve a meaningful artistic composition that synthesizes the past with the present, spolia must not be disguised. They cannot be assembled together for the pure desire to achieve the whole, or stylistic unity. These observations are in accord with contemporary preservation ethics, which require that replacements and new additions to old fabric be distinguishable so that historical evidence is not falsified (ICOMOS, 1964: Articles 9 and 12).

References

- Greenhalgh M. (1999) *Spolia in Fortifications: Turkey, Syria and North Africa*, in *Ideologie e pratiche del reimpiego nell'alto medioevo*, 46, Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo
- Kalakoski, I., & Huuhka, S. (2018). Spolia revisited and extended: *The potential for contemporary architecture*, in *Journal of Material Culture*, 23-2
- Payne A. A. (1998) *Creativity and bricolage in Architectural Literature of the Renaissance*, in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 34, pp. 20-38, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Pictures

- Fig. 01: *Fragments of the Whole*, 2020, collage made by the author
- Fig. 02: Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, 2019 (Google Earth)
- Fig. 03: *Veduta dell'avanzo della Casa di Nicolò di Rienzo* (View of the *Casa de Crescenzi*), Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1756
- Fig. 04: Villa Medici, Rome, N. Bigio, A. Lippi, B. Ammannati 1564-1580, Xilography by G. Barberis, 1894