

Beyond Dying Bodies: The Set of Gravity and Likbodsprojektet

Pietro Alfano (1), Silvia Narducci (2)

Abstract

This visual essay explores fragility as a conceptual framework guiding the architectural design process, drawing on informal practices that imagine care scenarios. It focuses on architectural bodies at the end of their life cycle, exploring them as new sites for architecture. The concept of fragility as a circular transition between life and death is explored through two intertwined case studies. The first is Brent Green's movie "Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then," which depicts the DIY construction of Leonard Wood's house meant to heal his terminally ill wife, Mary. The second is Likbodsprojektet by architect Erika Henriksson, which involves a collective conversion of a mortuary room into a wooden contemplation chamber as a practice of care. As the comparison of these cases reveals, the fragility paradigm emerges from scarcity, yet presents an opportunity for reinvention. This controversial process nurtures relationships between bodies and waste landscapes while navigating constraints: being broke in a broken world.

Affiliation:

(1) Università degli Studi di Genova, Dipartimento architettura e design
(2) Università IUAV di Venezia, Dipartimento di Culture del Progetto

Contacts:

(1) [pietro \[dot\] alfano \[at\] edu \[dot\] unige \[dot\] it](mailto:pietro.alfano@edu.unige.it)
(2) [snarducci \[at\] iuav \[dot\] it](mailto:snarducci@iuav.it)

Received:

17 February 2025

Accepted:

23 July 2025

DOI:

10.17454/ARDETH15.10

ARDETH #15



Fig. 1 - Waste Land
Around Järvsö. Erika
Henriksson, Likbod-
projektet. Järvsö,
2015-2018. Courtesy
Erika Henriksson.

Rewriting a falling imagery. Another perspective

In the early years of the 21st century, Serge Latouche argued that the elevation of biological life undermines the intrinsic value of existence: “When you no longer have eternity before you, life becomes an anxious struggle against time” (Latouche, 1996: 55-56). The psychological defence mechanism of removal finds a parallel in late 20th-century consumer culture, marked by overproduction that culminated in its perverse outcome: a landscape of waste. Waste and death are the terms around which this visual essay is constructed. The images capture the construction processes of two projects, revealing their complexity and relevance through their engagement with fragility. Their focus on process is expressed through an attention to the transitional condition of deteriorating corporeal forms,



the real-world experience of waste landscape, and informal construction practices rooted in care. This narrative seeks to move beyond conventional associations of fragility with archetypes such as huts or tents, which are traditionally considered the sole guardians of the fragile. It proposed instead a view centered on processes involving waste, decline and death. As Rem Koolhaas (2002: 183) writes, “Junkspace will be our tomb”. It is from this cemetery-like terrain that architecture’s contemporary challenges emerge. In response, emergent practices are re-evaluating informal approaches. As Lange and Schaad suggest, “To begin pragmatically, architecture needs care, repair, and maintenance” (Lange, Schaad, 2022: 5). These are operations that give those who perform them a sense of gratification due to their value. These practices reinterpret waste, seen as “an antagonist

to excess” (Marini, Bertagna, 2011: 26), not as residue, but as a material driver of the design process. This is evident in practices that embrace reinvention and adaptation as valuable strategies. The ongoing crisis has led to the reactivation of a social function of architecture. It has prompted renewed attention to foundational, zero-degree construction methodologies. This is manifested through frugal and low-cost solutions (Croce, 2022: 10-11, 57), where design shifts from product to process. In doing so, it fosters what Tronto and Fisher define as a “life-sustaining web” (Tronto, Fisher, 1990: 40). Within this framework, death is engaged not as an end, but as a threshold. Learning from death rights, and according to Lynch, “Loss can be life-enhancing if it is accepted as a fulfilment” (Lynch, 1990: 38).

Kindling the domestic flame in the backyard. The wood house as architecture

“Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then” is the first stop-motion feature film by experimental filmmaker Brent Green, depicting the true story of Leonard Wood, a Kentucky hardware store clerk. In the 1970s, Leonard tries to cure his wife Mary’s cancer by transforming their house into a phantasmagorical healing machine. After her death, Leonard continues building obsessively for two decades, depleting his resources and energy. Eventually, he falls from the roof, moves into a nursing home, and sells the house to cover care expenses. Green visits the house before its demolition and is struck by the contrast between its normal exterior and random interior filled up with rooms (Green, 2012: 8). He perceives Leonard’s efforts as an exceptional sacrifice: his relentless activity stresses the loss – of resources, energy, and ultimately his wife – which, according to Bataille (1985: 118), must be as great as possible in order of that activity to take on its true meaning. Leonard’s house is a sacred structure shaped by grief, an anti-monument embodying both life and death. Inspired by this, Green mirrors it: he rebuilds the house full-scale in his Pennsylvania backyard, then demolishes it once again, embracing Leonard’s kind of crazy ambition (Green, 2011). The act is constrained by resource limitations, which makes it intense: Green rescues the building materials from the landscape of waste he has access to, made up of tumbledown barns and abandoned farmhouses. This underlines architectural perspectives that speak the language of fragility as the fragmentary aspect of a whole, not avoiding its collapse but focusing on its stages of life. The film examines a fragile practice resonating with contemporary architectural discourses, in which design draws inspiration from an eroded, collapsed, and decayed world, rather than from novelty, growth, or progress (Jackson, 2014). This flexibility of a DIY project challenges the rigidity of ordinary space to confront the transience of bodies: “You have to build your own world. Everyone does it” (Green, 2011).

How a threshold space became a contemplation chamber.

The (cord)wood house as architecture

An abandoned 19th-century mortuary shed, originally built in response to the spread of leprosy, to store corpses during winter, when the ground

Fig. 2 - Installing a Moon on the Stage of Gravity. From the Set of the Film. Brent Green, Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then. 2010. Courtesy Brent Green.

Fig. 3 - Building the Landscape of Gravity. From the Set Of The Film. Brent Green, Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then. 2010. Courtesy Brent Green.







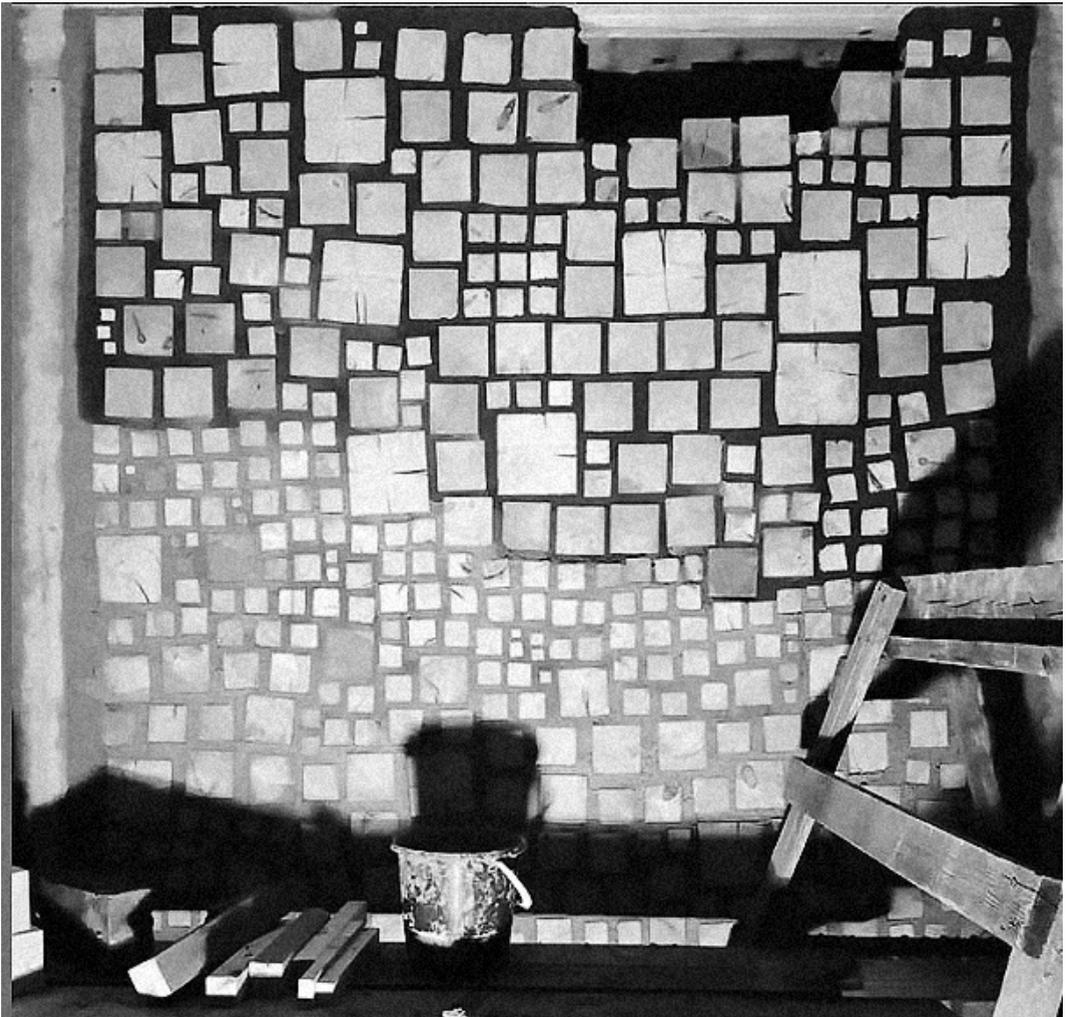


Fig. 4 - A New Cordwood Wall under Construction. Inside the Project. Erika Henriksson, Likbod-sprojektet. Järvsö, 2015-2018. Courtesy Erika Henriksson.

was too frozen for burial (Henriksson, 2023), became the catalyst for a collaborative therapeutic construction project. Led by architect and researcher Erika Henriksson alongside two residents of a drug rehabilitation centre in Järvsö, Sweden, the project transformed the shed into a contemplative chamber for the clinic's residents. The construction site itself became a space of engagement, fostering relationships between individuals and their surrounding environment. The structure is composed of masonry constructed from inexpensive raw materials, with pieces of firewood held together by mortar (Hagman, 2012). Once dry, the mortar causes the wooden wall to behave like traditional stone masonry (Fig. 5). This accessible and low-cost technique, called cordwood construction, has survived industrialisation for 200 years and is still used by DIY builders today (Hagman, 2012: 153). Exposed cordwood walls display unique aesthetic qualities, despite their historical link to poverty and low-cost housing. In Sweden, cordwood construction was often concealed behind plaster or wood to avoid its association with hardship (Hagman, 2012:



Fig. 5 - Inside The Likbodsprojektet. Erika Henriksson, Likbodsprojektet. Järvsö, 2015-2018. Courtesy Erika Henriksson.

Fig. 6, 7, 8 - Knocking the Mortuary; Taking Care of the Construction; Ongoing. Inside the Project. Erika Henriksson, Likbodsprojektet. Järvsö, 2015-2018. Courtesy Erika Henriksson.

Fig. 9 - Building of the Construction Site. Erika Henriksson, Likbodsprojektet. Järvsö, 2015-2018. Courtesy Erika Henriksson.

151). However, paradoxically, the visual value of this traditional technique tends to emerge only in its ruinous state, just before disappearing (Szewczyk, 2007: 126). Likbodsprojektet (2015-2018) sparked a remarkable collaboration among various contributors, all generous in offering discarded materials: firewood was sourced from recycling centres and local sawmills, sand from a nearby quarry, and clay from roadworks and private land. Even the chamber's floor was built using reclaimed bricks from a ruined structure and a burnt house, embodying a continuous cycle of decay and renewal. Henriksson's focus lies on both the lifecycle of materials and of the structure itself. The process becomes an open-ended, evolving engagement: "breaking through one wall, at the same time getting ready to start to build up new ones, curious to see which relations, situations and encounters the process will lead to" (Henriksson, 2022: 203). Ultimately, Likbodsprojektet reveals that the tension between life and death is not exhausted. It is renewed by the entry of one into the other, reciprocally, through a clever material practice that, in the paradigm of fragility, is an opportunity for language.

Embracing fragility. Being broke in a broken world

The modest scale of both projects proves advantageous when it comes to navigating resource scarcity, as it enables the re-evaluation of informal material supplies and construction techniques. This methodological approach enables a critical reflection, resistant to easy dismissal. As Pier Vittorio Aureli argues "The creative act is thus the act of 'making a world', that is, making our own living conditions acceptable in any given situation." Yet he also warns that, "Doing more with less is precisely what capital demands of us: [...] because creativity becomes more productive when our 'given' conditions become harder and more unstable" (Aureli, 2013: 111). This dilemma is embodied in Brent Green's movie, as financial constraints strengthened his creativity. In addition, trauma, understood as a meaningful lived experience worthy of transmission (Giglioli 2011, 8), is central to the two projects presented here. Architect Henriksson conceives construction as a therapeutic process for those involved in executing it. Her practice, rooted in care and direct engagement, parallels that of filmmaker Green, who traces Wood's lifelong building project as a response to his personal loss. Both projects embrace fragility as a tool for navigating the passage through life. In doing so, the unexpected enters the project first as a constraint and then as the sediment of a new measure. Operating at the margins and orienting the gaze towards everyday practices rekindles spatial desire within environments marked by profound trauma. To grasp the concept of scarcity (Goodbun et. al., 2012: 14), or the opposite issue of excess abundance, we must focus on the unequal allocation of available resources. This involves rethinking aesthetic considerations and employing architectural techniques to foster alternative discussions. We should reconsider how things are made, how they are distributed, how they are used and what happens at the end of their life cycle. It is essential to invest as much effort into the design processes as we do into the final products. This process-based approach is embodied

Fig. 10 - The Tower,
the House and the
Pick-Up. Brent Green,
Gravity Was Every-
where Back Then.
2010. Courtesy Brent
Green.

Fig. 11 - Comparing
the Scale of the Two
Houses. Brent Green,
Gravity Was Every-
where Back Then.
2010. Courtesy Brent
Green.

Fig. 12 - The Wooden
Frame of the House.
Brent Green, Gravity
Was Everywhere
Back Then. 2010.
Courtesy Brent
Green.





by “Build of Site,” Denmark’s pavilion at the La Biennale di Venezia 2025, curated by Søren Pihlmann. The occasion of necessary restoration work is exploited by exposing the open body of the pavilion and displaying elements from the dismantling process, without hosting any additional installation. Typically regarded as waste, the subsoil here takes on design value. In this way, the exhibition becomes a field of experimentation, where the process itself is revealed as a means of sharing specialised knowledge. According to valuable Kevin Lynch’s valuable lesson (Lynch, 1990), learning to waste away means learning to perceive continuity in flux, trajectories, and transformation. Since life consists of growth and decline, the act of repairing and transmitting the world is as significant as using or creating it.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to architect and researcher Erika Henriksson for sharing her knowledge and engaging in a constructive exchange of ideas about her work. Furthermore, we would like to express our acknowledgements to filmmaker and artist Brent Green for his interest in our work and for providing us with invaluable behind-the-scenes material from his film. Your contributions have enabled us to undertake an investigation of shared themes and to develop a unified narrative thread. We would like to express our sincerest gratitude for your willingness to share your expertise with us to build a novel cross-plot.

Fig. 13 - The House
for Mary. A Frame
from the Film. Brent
Green, Gravity Was
Everywhere Back
Then. 2010. Courtesy
Brent Green.

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