

Eight Repair Lessons

Commentary

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Abstract

This short commentary explores the relation between fragility, repair and hope in moments of crisis and destruction. It argues for fragility and repair rather than permanence or timelessness as modes of architectural endurance in the world, and for the ineluctable presence of hope as anchor and engine of the never fully determinate future.

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What does it mean to fix? What does it mean to fix *today*, in the wake of so much... what? Loss, destruction, the twilight (???) of some idols, the gathering force and reassertion of so many others. When the powerful head for the exits and speak openly of a life (for some) beyond the Earth, crafting new/old narratives of exception that look more and more like escape. The cry of the forlorn repairer: we thought we were getting better, we thought we were holding it together. But we were only replacing light bulbs on the Titanic all along.

First lesson of repair: thinking – drawing, modeling, building too – sits in places. I write from the travails of America, a place under radical (but *unfinished*) transformation in a time of sound and fury, where “the best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats, 1920). Landscapes burn and institutions falter, and a strange yellow haze from fires too many and too distant to recall suffuses the sky. Fragility has never felt so near-to-hand. I fear and mourn for my children. I want to say: *take heart!* I want to say: *I'm sorry*. But also ask again: what can be thought and built in *this* place, *here*, *right now*?

A second lesson of repair: our starting points are *always* broken. This isn't the field we would have picked. Not all our allies have arrived. The weather has been bad for a very long time and has seeped at least partway into our souls (more on the tricky “we” below). We are not at our best. *We are tired*. To repair will mean leaving idealism and purity behind: *this* is the landscape and the infrastructure we've got, and if we're waiting for a better circumstance (*circum-stance*: that which stands around, upholding, limiting, conditioning (Serres, 2016)), *good luck*. The question of repair is (always) the impossible-but-necessary question of action under the compromised conditions of the present. (This is its central tension and difference from design). Can tired people on a tired planet find the time, space and energy to think and build *differently*? And can we think and build *ethically*, at a time when so many norms and values have been rendered liquid, malleable or obsolete?

Repair lesson number three: fragility is *lived* (and lived *into*). Fragility is something we inhabit in the world, and repair is one of our central means and modes of habitation. This is no less true of the Good Solid Objects of buildings and infrastructures, things we have sometimes insulted and misclassified under the language of “timelessness” (strange concept and ideal!). Like the water systems of the Ballaro market (Burgio, Giunta, this volume) buildings and infrastructures (any that persist) are in an on-going state of change and evolution whose continuity and “sameness” is achieved only through an ongoing labor of thingly care that is the engine

of *both* sameness and change (Denis, Pontille, 2023). We dwell in infrastructure like a good (or bad) old house. Our houses and infrastructures are realized and enlivened through our dwelling.

Relatedly, repair lesson number four: fragility can be a guide to humility, and the distinct access to reality that humility provides (and hubris, including design hubris, occludes). Take this beautiful confession from Álvaro Siza (1997): “I have never been able to build a house, a real house” defined as “a complicated machine, in which every day something breaks down: a lamp, a tap, a drain, a lock, a hinge, a socket, and then a cylinder, a stove, a fridge, a television or video [...]” (the list continues for several paragraphs). Beyond Siza’s disarming humility, there is an important principle of reality at stake here. The house that doesn’t break is only ever an imaginary house. The city that doesn’t break is only ever an imaginary city. No one has ever successfully lived in an imaginary house or an imaginary city (though many perhaps have tried).

Repair lesson number five: infrastructures unite, and infrastructures divide. If infrastructures (an urban core, a road network, etc.) are an essential mechanism by which collectives are produced and common(i-sh) experiences shared and maintained, their modes of vulnerability and breakdown follow and reflect enduring orderings of power. When the power grid fails and the lights or networks go down (Trangoš, this issue) where (and whom) does it fail first? When budgets are tight and maintenance is delayed and deferred (as it almost universally is!), where are the corners cut, and what risks (and to whom) are tacitly absorbed? When the winds howl and the sea levels rise, whose communities are staunchly defended, and whose are allowed to go beneath the waves?

Repair lesson six: the lesson of ambivalence (or holding on and letting go). This is a point that undifferentiated discussions of sustainability, say, or circular economy, may miss. There are *all kinds* of endurances, of lines and circles, in the world: some we will want to break, some we will want to preserve. Some of the fragilities we encounter are hard-won accomplishments: it has taken work – *good* work – to make the thing vulnerable, and we should have no interest (though others might) in the effort to restore or continue it. In other cases, fragility will name a world of shared value and concern: a thing we will want and work to continue, sometimes against the entropic odds. DeSilvey et al. (2021) have named this beautifully as the tension between repair and release. When should preservation give way to letting go? What circles do we want to build and extend? What circles do we want to break or let go?

In the same way (repair lesson number seven), the political codings of repair are not fixed and consistent, even if much of my own work (see for example Jackson, 2014) has been to find value in acts of maintenance and repair erased under design-centric accounts of the world. To be an object of repair can also be to be *forcibly* fixed, to have a normative ideal forced upon you, perhaps to the level of your self or soul: you must be fixed to be saved (Sloterdijk, 2014). Many terrible acts in our recent history have

been presented as (and perhaps understood themselves to be?) a kind of repair, which in their certainty and rectitude have become vicious (Canguilhem, 1991; Shew, 2023; TRC, 2015). Conversely, to be repaired can be to *indeed* be saved – for example, through the opening of one’s self to vulnerability, suffering and a radical and world-shattering surprise. This is one description of what it is to love, and to be loved.

But amidst all this (repair lesson eight!): moments of resilience, of hope, of (re)imagining, of a wild peculiar joy (Jackson 2023). Of reposing the eternal questions: *what else could we have been? what else might we yet become?* Pronouns: *we / us / ours*: a generous, world-bending and world-entangled we, not the lonely and narrow we of fascism formed against a they that blows away like smoke in the morning.

The we itself is broken. The we itself is constantly being fixed. This we has never/always existed. This we is the only house we will ever need or build.

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