

BRICOLEUR, MAKER, ARCHITECT

Bricolage as a way of thinking and doing

Pedro Henrique Figueiredo Magalhaes (4906209)
Chair of Urban Architecture
Graduation Studio - Spolia

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, architects must become more aware of how research methods and methodologies related to the profession. Many architects will find it necessary to elucidate their positions within the field as a pre-condition to design practice. Research then gains more importance as it works in tandem with practice to expand the established debates within the discipline. I believe that being aware of the many research methods and methodologies available is a way to strengthen one's position and discourse. Although I often feel that it can also become an exercise in rhetoric, bearing little critical content and value, failing to move on current issues within the field of architecture. I fear that research can develop into an argument that does little in the way of expanding or producing knowledge, becoming statements that support already established positions. An awareness of different heuristic techniques is also essential. That enables the researcher-practitioner to know if the technique being used is a good fit to produce the knowledge required to tackle complex problems. By being aware of different research methods, methodologies and heuristic techniques, the researcher can avoid being self-referential in his discourse while positioning himself within the discipline.

The course has also changed the way I regard to research. I now understand it as a way to produce knowledge alongside design practices, rather than something that ceases to contribute once ideas are established. That idea also frees research from being solely the first step on the design process, as I now believe it is crucial to consider its potential to continue to inform design until its representation and materialization. Furthermore, I was mistakenly considering methods as methodologies and was not aware of the many methodologies relevant to the field. The course clarified how they are not interchangeable terms, methods being the established techniques used in both research and practice, and methodology as the theoretical analysis of such methods applied to research in architecture. It has also provided me with an understanding of the overarching debates within the discipline, and the possible fields into which I can position myself in. For example, I was previously unaware of a methodology such as material cultures and was surprised by how cross-disciplinary it is.

While that opened my eyes, I was most interested in how the study of material culture adds another dimension to objects and materials. I believe approaching the study of materials from their aesthetic qualities and mechanical, structural and functional properties is the most proliferated way. Although, the study of material culture enriches the discourse by looking at the relationship between objects, materials and people. I am attuned to the idea that architects should develop a broader sensitivity to materiality and how it affects both the design and the designer.

The notion of *spolia*, for example, relates to material culture and is one of the central themes of the graduation studio I am taking part in. The term from archaeology refers to fragments of previous building cultures that have found themselves back in a new structure. These hold ideas and traces from the past, and reuse can be considered a sustainable practice which rejuvenates the old fragment and enriches our understanding of the past. Fragments are defined as parts which can be a believable promise of the whole. These are often more powerful starting points of symbolic meaning than the parts in their original setting. As manifestations of difference, they reference the original context they had belonged to.¹ In this context, reuse can refer to actual elements but also to the use of older images and motifs without involving reused materials. Therefore, there is a potential to find such fragments in both material and immaterial forms, relating to physical objects and socio-cultural practices.²

The practice of finding, collecting, composing and reusing such fragments then relates to another central theme of the studio. Bricolage is regarded as the creative process of composing new wholes and ideas from different fragments. It refers to the practice of working with whatever is available, thus

being relevant in research on everyday practices that bring context to the foreground of their interventions on the built environment. Michel de Certeau describes it as the “poetic making do”³, while the bricoleur is a skilled craftsman, a maker of montages and collages.

The notion of *spolia* and the study of bricolage provide the framework for my thesis. The context is a fragmented site in the municipality of Anderlecht, in Brussels. Bricolage, as a practice, applies to both research and design and can be studied by different methodologies. That, in turn, can enrich the discussion of contemporary practice in both urban and architectural scales of the built environment. An urban bricoleur, for instance, can be regarded as someone who learns to make do by stitching together an identity from fragmented sources.⁴ This understanding of bricolage provides another viewpoint of urban design as a practice that approaches cities differently from a *tabula rasa* approach. An urban plan informed by bricolage will deal with the contingencies of every day and with existing conditions. Bricolage can also influence inscriptive practices such as mapping, drawing and the media used to construct the narratives that describe and present buildings. Furthermore, research on material culture and everyday practices also relate to it. In conclusion, what I aim to find in my research is how bricolage can be used to frame and inform design decisions, or intentions, when working with *spolia* in architecture.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The research is theory-led, following a qualitative approach to discover the qualities of bricolage as a way of doing both research and design. Following the definitions of etic and emic research explained on Lucas’s *Research Methods for Architecture*,⁵ I believe in having been using a mix of both viewpoints throughout the work. It is etic regarding how I deal with the urban context, and how I have been developing the urban plan. In taking an etic position, this part of the research has so far been based on readings, observations, previous censuses as well as documents provided by governmental agencies concerned with the development of Brussels. On the other hand, another part of the research focuses on everyday practices of bricolage is closer to an auto-ethnography, from an emic viewpoint, which balances the etic stance adopted before. Thus, I can connect my experiences on the site to how I will approach my design. Through studying bricolage as an everyday practice, I wish to establish a link to a broader social and cultural context in which I see myself as a participant.

A practice-based research methodology seems well suited to approaching the idea of *spolia* and bricolage in architecture, understanding them as both a theoretical framework and way of doing, capable of producing work that is critical and contributes to expanding the knowledge within the discipline. In the case of my research, the understanding of bricolage is underpinned by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau. I believe they can be instrumental in understanding bricolage as a way of thinking and doing, which can steer design intentions related to the use of *spolia*. The theory led approach is also in tune with a somewhat *bricoleur* attitude, as it is often cross-disciplinary, borrowing theories from other disciplines.⁶ Besides, adopting a bricoleur strategy entails reliance on a set of tools rather than a fit-for-purpose methodological strategy.⁷ Mapping, analytical drawing, analytical writing and photography are the tools chosen to explore the research question.

The urban context is studied by a type of analytical mapping, namely deep mapping, which is different from conventional mapping techniques. It challenges the empirical and representational assumptions of maps⁸ and is conceived following Doreen Massey’s definition of space. Space is defined here as a product of interrelations connected by entities that give it directions, scale, meaning, borders and difference.⁹ Deep maps are made in a way that relates strongly to bricolage and *spolia* as it is about picking up fragments and working them back into the ongoing production of spaces.¹⁰ Therefore, deep

maps are more suited to explore bricolage and urban *spolia*. From the field of neogeography, such maps are about people using and creating their maps, on their terms. This mapping technique can be used to create a map which communicates my knowledge of the space I am designing on, or for, rather than display information.

In addition to mapping, a photographic study of a type of bricolage practised in my home country, Brazil, called *gambiarra*. It is what I consider a variant of bricolage that is more affected by the scarcity of resources than others, due to its social and economic context. Brazil has a large population of people who deal with contingencies of everyday life by making use of *gambiarras* to fix or repair things, or to create adequate conditions to perform a task. Research on these everyday practices will contribute to the auto-ethnographic component of the research and is related to material culture as a way of understanding bricolage. As a *bricoleur*, I will collect fragments of everyday practices of bricolage. It will be a visual study on how people engage with the praxis and the things/fragments of everyday life. The photographic records of bricolage could then be explored by using the inscriptive practices of architectural drawing and notation. Analytical drawings of *gambiarras* and other works of bricolage could be a way of studying qualities that can be particular to this way of doing, and which can, later on, be worked back into the design practice. Although I am not sure about using analytical drawings, they could work as a way to expand my knowledge of how bricolage can also be useful in a design context.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that there are contemporary architectural practices that, while not explicitly connecting themselves with bricolage as a way of thinking and doing, operate very much following it. Practices such as Lacaton & Vassal, Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu (ADDVT) and Flores y Prats refer to notions such as making do, collage and assemblage in architecture while valuing experiences of everyday urban life as starting points for their designs.¹¹ A case study of selected projects of both these practices is an exciting way to explore how bricolage can be used to frame and inform design decisions, or intentions, in the context of contemporary architectural practices.

3. RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Deep maps offer more in the way of exploration of spaces than traditional maps. The way of making them relates to bricolage, and I believe they use it as a theoretical framework, that then starts the process of creating a content that enquires space in a new way. Moreover, deep maps can be useful in the field of architecture when taking the notion of space as a starting point for knowledge production. Doreen Massey's idea of space, as a product of interrelations connected by entities that give it directions, scale, meaning, borders and difference,¹² is used to start the process of assembling a deep map out of fragments. These pieces of information, in the form of drawings, text, photographs of spaces and things, have been collected during the research and will be curated to integrate a new whole as the deep map. The reason I chose Massey's definition as a starting point is that it resonates with my understanding of space. It is also grounded in the field of cultural geography, which complements ways of understanding space more established within the field of architecture.

Furthermore, deep maps are not only the concern of geographers and cartographers, as modern maps have been.¹³ They incorporate the idea of counter-mapping, which aims to map spaces and territories counter to dominant power structures, using the map as a tool of discourse.¹⁴ Modern maps, in contrast, have prioritized accuracy in representation and description of space. This relationship is interesting and invites exploration into other means of mapping space in cities, as a tool of discourse relevant to urban design. It would be interesting to know how the deep map approach, when applied to

a specific urban context, can provide a depiction of space which can be considered accurate and useful, informing design decisions and intentions.

In addition to deep mapping, the photographic study on common bricolage variant of *gambiarra* is interesting and relates to De Certeau's take on practices of every day. I see it as a way of collecting information that can support my discourse as a whole. Nevertheless, there is the risk of this study becoming self-referential and adding little value to the discussion of bricolage in architecture. I should seek to relate it to how the idea of making do, central to bricolage, relates to social and economic contexts in which scarcity prevails. By showing this practice, I aim to highlight how two types of *bricoleur* attitudes, that might be similar but operate in different ways. The maker of *gambiarra*s contends with economic restrictions and scarcity as a pre-condition. Meanwhile, in other practices somewhat influenced by bricolage-thinking, attention to economic restrictions and contextual contingencies. This transitions to the case-studies of architectural practices that adopt such an attitude. For this, the theories on bricolage laid out by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel De Certeau will serve as a point of reference.

A series of case studies on selected projects of ADDVT, Lacaton & Vassal and Flores y Prats can assist in finding out how bricolage as a theoretical framework and way of doing relates to their positioning within the field. This mode of enquiry is standard in architecture, and different tools can be used to analyze the selected case-studies. I believe analytical drawings can help me understand the principles of bricolage that are at play in work these contemporary architects. On the other hand, I am not convinced that plans, for example, would be the right choice for this endeavour. Alongside analysis of actual built structures, I will study bricolage as it is used to describe and represent architecture in their designs. Furthermore, it is worth looking at their discourse, studying their available publications and lectures and finding out how it found its way to their representations, descriptions and constructions of architecture.

The case of Flores y Prats is interesting, as both partners have established, since starting the practice, that projects would be drawn by hand to investigate a site, context, and the act of drawing itself.¹⁵ This practice is used to develop designs, while detailed digital drawings are made to describe and represent the design once construction information leaves the office. Their drawings are intricate and consist of different layers of information that, when juxtaposed, provide a rich depiction of space, made by both partners' hands. Their drawings, composed of fragments, becomes a whole that enquires space in a way that is different from traditional architectural drawings. Their bricolage-like way of working through drawings is fascinating to me. Furthermore, their approach to reuse projects hints at the notion of *spolia*. The past of existing structures is rehabilitated, rejuvenated and edited, becoming part of a new architectural composition.¹⁶ The Sala Beckett building, for example, is one that has found its way back into current structures, while bearing references to bricolage and *spolia*.

Lacaton & Vassal also position themselves in close affinity with ideas of bricolage in their positioning within the field. It comes to the fore on how they value working with the existing, everyday practices of city dwellers and doing more with less.¹⁷ This is explicit when Jean-Philippe Vassal mentions, during a lecture, a fascination with the idea "of using fragments of the reality to create a new imaginary".¹⁸ ADDVT is attuned to the same discourse of dealing with contingencies, while the aesthetics of the designs hint at bricolage more explicitly than the other two previously mentioned. Indeed, there are more architectural practices to be studied. These three were chosen because for being located in Central Europe, and for having developed and built a substantial body of work which is relevant to the research.

4. POSITIONING

The research I am conducting relates most strongly to material culture, as it is referred to in the study of *spolia* and bricolage in architecture. Material culture offers a lens for looking at bricolage as a process of production, not only of things and objects, but also architecture. *Spolia*, as fragments curated, composed and reused by the *bricoleur* enrich the discussion of reuse while relating to the study of such artefacts. These fragments are regarded as starting points, inviting the practice of bricolage as a means of thinking and designing new architectures. The idea of studying how architecture develops concerning materials and how architects react to them resonates with me, and I believe the research benefits from being positioned within this body of knowledge. In Eireen Schreurs' lecture, which presented what was an entirely new field for me, I was struck by a newfound curiosity on materials. Though I have always had interest objects and materials, I was unaware of material culture as a body of knowledge to which I could substantially relate to.

In the literature and references, I have found positions which I adopt myself. The architecture I want to make is one that is grounded on the reality of the context. Therefore, bricolage as a mode of thinking becomes relevant when looking at the problematics of design. It becomes an attitude towards the existing and how one deals with its contingencies. Furthermore, bricolage-thinking can also be seen as the counterpart of a linear approach to design. Instead of starting by looking at culture, site and context, the opposite route can be taken. The *bricoleur* studies the context first, understanding its potentialities and limitations. Afterwards, he decides how to work with existing fragments until a new whole is made. Culture is then enriched in the process, addressed in how the *bricoleur* respects the existing situation as well as in the fragments (*spolia*) that compose the new reality. This position, which I argue for, contrasts with *tabula-rasa* approaches to contemporary architectural and urban design.

I want to develop bricolage as a theoretical framework and practice that supports the strategies of reuse in dealing with the existing (*spolia*). I believe there is a lot to gain from incorporating the notion of *spolia* into the discourse of reuse, enriching it and expanding the existing building's cultural and social value. It opposes thoughts of fixity while offering a new and meaningful life to what is found in cities. Nevertheless, I fear to fall into the trap of translating visual motifs related to bricolage literally into architecture. That would weaken my argument, as bricolage would become an aesthetic device to give an impression of reuse, rather than creating new and meaningful wholes. For this reason, I wish to understand and position myself closer to the way of working of established practitioners such as Lacaton & Vassal, Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu and Flores y Prats.

I found that bricolage as a way of thinking and doing allows the designer to address different aspects of architectural practice. By being in tune with the existing and with material cultures which are relevant to specific contexts within which practice unfolds, bricolage points to a new way of practising architecture. It is one that respects the world as found and invites a re-reading of the practice of building. It regards it as an act of continuous accumulation. Designing starts from the existing situation, which is seen as culturally and materially rich platform to be studied. The working of fragments into this platform has the potential of redirecting development, paying respect to history, enriching the existing, and adding new layers of social and cultural meaning.

I regard myself as a practitioner who, under the effects of bricolage-thinking, makes drawings, collages, models, writings and images, all of which composing an architecture that draws inspiration from the context to arrive at a concept. The development of my position within the discipline comes from a fascination with making and the incorporation of bricolage as a way of thinking. Furthermore, I

argue that design should stem from found realities and a careful study of everyday practices, simultaneously offering reverberations of the past and potent future imaginaries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 Barry. Bergdoll and Werner. Oechslin, *Fragments Architecture and the Unfinished: Essays Presented to Robin Middleton* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 43.
- 2 Eireen Schreurs and Leeke Reinders, "Handout Urban Architecture: Graduation Lab 2019-2020," n.d.
- 3 Les Roberts, "Spatial Bricolage: The Art of Poetically Making Do," *Humanities* 7, no. 2 (June 2018): 43, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7020043>.
- 4 Roberts, 5.
- 5 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, 2016, 10.
- 6 Lucas, 14.
- 7 Roberts, "Spatial Bricolage," 3.
- 8 Maureen Engel, "Deep Mapping: Space, Place, and Narrative as Urban Interface," n.d., 215.
- 9 Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London ; SAGE, 2005), 9, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0657/2004094666-t.html>.
- 10 Roberts, "Spatial Bricolage," 5.
- 11 Lacaton & Vassal, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Twiz-dw9-e4>; Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu, accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQfhBOsecNo>.
- 12 Massey, *For Space*, 9.
- 13 Engel, "Deep Mapping: Space, Place, and Narrative as Urban Interface," 215.
- 14 Engel, 218.
- 15 A. T. Editor, "Barcelona Bricolage," *Architecture Today* (blog), April 26, 2017, <http://www.architecturetoday.co.uk/barcelona-bricolage-2/>.
- 16 Editor.
- 17 Lacaton & Vassal.
- 18 Lacaton & Vassal.