EAHN Thematic Conference 2027: Architectural Salvage (Ghent, 15-18 Sep 27)

Ghent University, Sep 15–18, 2027
Deadline: Oct 5, 2026

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The Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at Ghent University and the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Liège invite submissions for the conference on Architectural Salvage: Histories of Commerce and Guardianship.

The event is part of the thematic conference series of the European Architectural History Network (EAHN).

I think we have two distinct syndromes because we have two distinct ways of making a living, no more and no less. [...] First, we're able to take what we want – simply take, depending of course, on what's available to be taken. [...] But in addition, we human beings are capable of trading – exchanging our goods and services for other goods and services, depending, again, on what's available, but in this case what's available for exchange rather than taking. Moreover, available for exchange by voluntary agreement, the essence of trading. [...] I've come to think of the two moral syndromes as survival systems, worked out by long experience with trading, on the one hand, and taking, on the other. (Jacobs, 1992: 51-52)

In the past decades, archaeologists and historians have gathered a growing corpus of sources documenting sites where building materials have been used more than once. These instances of building material reuse are found in virtually all cultures, and seem traceable to the dawn of architecture itself, as testified by the "second hand" stones of Stonehenge. In fact, academic interest in the history of spolia and architectural reuse is by no means a recent concern, yet the questions surrounding it have evolved considerably. Initially approached through an essentially symbolic lens, the practice has, over the past fifteen years, become the subject of significant historiographical renewal. The salvage and trade of reused materials have proven to be a recurrent and constitutive feature of construction industries. Within a more or less regulated market, these activities involved a variety of actors, whose identity, business models, and modes of operating can (in certain cases) be documented in varying detail. This conference aims to focus on such instances, in the hope of arriving at longue durée observations, across civilizations and building cultures, on what makes thriving building reuse economies possible.

To study the interactions between commercial actors and market rules, we propose to borrow from a late 20thcentury analysis by the Canadian American author and urban studies pioneer Jane Jacobs. In Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics (1992), Jane Jacobs distinguishes two moral systems or 'syndromes' that govern human

activity: the commercial syndrome, rooted in trade and economic exchange, and the guardian syndrome, tied to protection and governance. Referring to the Greek origin of the word 'syndrome', meaning 'things that run together', Jacobs contrasts two clusters of symptoms that characterize a given condition. While precepts on competition, novelty, and enterprise define viable commerce, virtues of loyalty, tradition, and prowess delineate proper guardianship. Guardians and merchants often oppose each other, yet their actions are intertwined. Dynamics of guardians and commerce dominate processes of building and urbanization throughout history on numerous levels: heritage laws shape and influence markets, technical innovation often precedes new regulation, and policy can support or hinder industriousness. From Antiquity to today's attempts at a circular economy, this duality persists, revealing how architectural fragments and salvaged materials oscillate between reusable commodity, cultural artifact, and waste.

This conference proposes Jacobs' dichotomy as a lens to study practices of salvage and reuse of building materials, and the contrasting professional attitudes of the actors driving these endeavors. Framing architectural salvage through the tension between commerce and guardianship provides tools to address some of the persistent problems and dilemmas raised by practices of component reuse in past and present alike. This premise builds on a triple observation:

- Practices of salvage and reuse are fundamental to fostering a more circular building industry, but the role of its economic actors and drivers, both private and public, is underestimated and only partially understood.
- Architecture history offers a rich reservoir of examples of such practices with a wide variety of business and governance models and their productive interdependencies.
- Defining what makes thriving salvage networks requires the untangling of these business and governance models and the corresponding professional roles and morals.

The reuse of architectural fragments and materials has always been a part of demolition and construction processes. It was made possible by a multitude of actors – artisans, salvage traders, commissioners, public officials, etc. – taking on roles within the commerce-guardianship force field. If commerce drives exchange by voluntary agreement, guardianship imposes frameworks (regulatory and other) to contain its excesses. Laws were written, at least from the late Roman Empire on, to preserve building components and encourage their reuse. Guardian institutions such as heritage councils, preservationists, and policymakers have long scrutinized the trade of architectural fragments, framing it alternately as a threat to cultural integrity or as a tool for conservation and ostentation. By situating architectural salvage and reuse within these competing moral syndromes, the conference seeks to move beyond linear narratives of production and consumption, toward a critical understanding of the mechanisms —both mercantile and regulatory— that shape the afterlives of architecture.

We welcome contributions across different global geographies and time spans that run from Antiquity (800 BC) till the 21st C. While we don't necessarily ask individual papers to take a longue durée approach to their topic, the purpose of the conference is to encourage papers to collectively help discern patterns emerging across different ages and geographies. We are interested in papers that offer a compelling case study or stakeholder analysis, yet we also encourage researchers to approach the guardian-commerce dichotomy from a more conceptual or theoretical position. The focus should be on the actors and the protocols of salvage and reuse rather than

solely on the building materials involved. Of specific interest are the shifting equilibria of the guardian-commerce forcefield and the tensions that structure it. Contributions might address – but are not limited to – the following topics:

- Moments of systemic rupture in which established economic arrangements are abruptly destabilized – like tectonic plates – for instance through war, conquest, or large-scale societal transformation, prompting the reorganization of markets and the emergence of new administrative, legal, or discursive frameworks.
- The economic dynamics within reclamation dealer networks, their relationships with demolition contractors, architects, commissioners, and the diverse valorization mechanisms through which salvaged materials change hands, such as theft, spoliation, (public) auction, donation or sale.
- Instances where entire buildings, derelict or not, are being dismantled for the sale of their components, since they reveal a lot about urban conditions, political positions, the nature of economic opportunities, and the way in which actors respond to these opportunities.
- Moments when the geographical scope and logistical conditions of circulation are reconfigured, whether expanded or contracted, due to emerging opportunities (e.g. new transport networks and infrastructures, newly accessible procurement markets) or new constraints (e.g. import taxes, embargoes, military blockades).
- Administrative and legal frameworks structuring the storage, quality control, legal status, heritage protection of salvaged materials, ... and the actors operating within them.
- Instances of ‘syndrome tinkering’ (as introduced by Jacobs with the extreme example of the mafia as a ‘monstrous hybrid’), where traders assume guardian roles, and institutional guardians adopt commercial strategies and transgress their proper ethos, whether driven by prestige, pragmatism, or sustainability imperatives. This may also include the often ambivalent positions of collectors, curators, and museums, whose motivations and practices can traverse and destabilize the boundary between both syndromes.

Theoretical or methodological reflections that can guide our thinking on any of the above topics are equally welcome, as are alternatives to Jacobs’ commerce – guardianship dichotomy. This conference will favor proposals that explicitly ground their topic in the specific socio-economic realities and socio-technical regimes in which architectural salvage and reuse practices unfold throughout history. We invite proposals that include: an abstract of no more than 400 words, an academic bio of 150 words, and one image (with caption). This conference aims to foster dialogue across disciplines — architectural history, archaeology, critical heritage studies, legal history, cultural anthropology, urban studies, cultural economics, circular construction scholarship, etc. — in an effort to establish a better understanding of the moral, institutional, cultural, and material complexities associated with reuse in an era of ecological urgency.

Scholars from architectural history, archaeology, heritage studies, legal history, archeology, urban studies, cultural economics, circular construction, and related disciplines are encouraged to submit abstracts: https://architecturalsalvage.ugent.be/en/submit-abstract

For further submission details, please visit: https://architecturalsalvage.ugent.be/en

Reference:

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