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# Why Re-Place?

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Why, as a culture, do we tend to privilege the conception and making of new things, or places, over the chance to modify or remake existing ones? Making new is not intrinsically more challenging than remaking, amending, or renewing. Nor is the result routinely more appealing or longer lasting.

Does realizing the new require more effort? Does it involve more complexity? Not necessarily. Often it is more challenging or complex to redo a thing or place than to make something new. And in absolute molecular terms, everything and everyplace can *only* be remade, recycled, reassembled, reconfigured, or renewed. When we make, we

merely move, process, and assemble material that already exists (physically or in our minds)—we make something or someplace into *another*, which we may or may not call new.

As well, the more new we make, the more waste and disruption we produce. So why give new things and places a higher status? Why assign greater acclaim to those who give rise to them? Perhaps it has to do with pride and clarity of authorship: in making the new there is greater ego satisfaction, less need to share the accomplishment with others. Or perhaps it is a way to privilege the present over the past.

If this be the case, is this what we want as the legacy or driver of our culture? I do not believe it is. Thereby was this theme section of *Places* born, motivated by a desire to awaken the potential of shifting our cultural bias away from exclusive authorship, ownership, and the present, toward the value of seeing and practicing the ethical and creative potential of shared renewal and re-*placement*.

**Above:** Forum of Augustus, north exedra (medieval balcony of Casa de' Cavalieri di Rodi and Ghibelline windows of fifteenth-century residence for Barbo family). The tradition of reuse extends back through the Renaissance rediscovery of the ruins of antiquity. Photo by Phil Jacks.



### Virtues of Re-Placement

To overcome the cultural myths that restrict us from fully seeing and embracing renewal, it is helpful to start by assess more completely the real costs and consequences of our throwaway economy and cultural preference for the new. Simply put, all the disciplines responsible for designing, planning, and stewarding changes to the physical world (architecture, landscape architecture, interior and industrial design, public art, planning, preservation, and real estate development) need to do a much better job meeting our profound present global realities. Namely, we need to think and practice in ways that are more environmentally aware, more enlightened about heritage, and more concerned with a deeper understanding of (and need to collaborate with) each other.

This is certainly easier said than done. These issues are ubiquitous today, yet little real progress is being made to meet or overcome the obstacles or agendas they present. And even where some of us may cherish and advocate one of the above values, it is rare to see all three balanced and integrated in creative ways.

What we try to explore in this section is that remaking places can be a creative liberation and affirmation of progressive cultural values. It is in the *re-placing* of places that we will arrive at the most keen and fertile insights into how our current isolated modes of operation and segregated discourses have failed us. The section explores how

many of our disciplinary and professional assumptions (*new*, *exclusive*, and *solo*) are unable to address the cultural richness and complexity we can and should be attending to. What these essays and featured works share is the confidence and curiosity to pursue strategies of generative and expansive re-placement.

Meaningful places tend to share at least three qualities. First, they are unique to a specific location. Second, they are a reflection or embodiment of shared or constituent values. Third, they live in time; and the broader the reach they embody, the better. This may be why the very idea of place, and place-making, is sympathetic to what we focus on here as the living, shared, and circumstantial qualities intrinsic to acts of re-placement and regeneration.

When we consider and attend to all that we should, to make the most of a place, it is not only the material state we

**Left:** At Open Book, a center for reading, writing, and book arts in Minneapolis, a series of found, amended and intervening architectural and artistic gestures were collaboratively choreographed to create a reflective space for public use between programmed activities.

**Right:** This primary stair, linking the main public levels of Open Book was proposed as a bridge between dualities: book/stair, linear/circular, material/conceptual, first/second, etc. Its spine rotates to orient, disorient, and reorient the actions it supports. The etymological and literary play of words on the open “pages” relates to the architectural play of elements and experiences.

attend to, but the many associative (or cognitive) properties and the ways a place performs by minimizing harm and maximizing benefit. Yet, while the primary historic literature on place and place-making has underscored its interdisciplinary nature and shown preferences for relevant indigenous or organic solutions over controversial, transformative, or radical ones, the authors featured here explore a broad range of alternatives, not just to be different, but to open promising channels for further exploration.

**Visions of Re-Placement**

In the first essay in the section, Philip Jacks reminds us how long the adaptive reuse and re-placing traditions have been with us—essentially since time immemorial. While it is now fashionable among today’s urban elite (even if still contested by our more strict preservationists), adaptive reuse has a long, pragmatic, and philosophical tradition to build upon. Furthermore, many of our most cherished, reconstructed places are complex, layered open books of dynamic cultural, political, and social processes that have been the fortunate result of many acts of re-placement over time.

Rome, the focus of Jacks’s essay, is an exemplar of these processes. Thinking today about Rome, one can’t help but imagine how much less the city would be should it have been “protected” by the equivalent of the Secretary of the Interior’s standards during any one of its many historic chapters, restricting its evolution and richly complex condition.

Remaking of urban places in U.S. cities is also laced with the potential to tell richer and more complex stories than many mayors, chambers of commerce, or well-meaning preservation commissions are comfortable embracing. As Angel David Nieves argues, these sometimes unflattering and contradictory stories should not be excluded from the embodied city, but should reflect the complex realities found at the crossroads of memory and place. Doing so often creates new challenges for political interests and for the agents of more conventional, less controversial, histories. As part of the revaluing of places across the American



**Above:** Work on the Media Loft for a corporate client in Minneapolis featured a combination of found and new materials.

**Opposite left:** A small, semi-private third-floor addition is reached by a stair that both permits and confounds access as it links literal and conceptual worlds.

**Opposite right:** Because the lease required structural amendments to be reversible, sections of the old wood-plank floor were salvaged and re-displaced to a new multistory wall opened through the interior. The sections were collaged with other found building fragments, revealing the story behind this effort to bring daylight into a created space.

cultural landscape, communities and cultures that were once resigned to the invisibility of their sorted pasts can specifically benefit from new and more profound understandings in the hands of enlightened heritage professionals.

Nieves also reminds us that ever-present opportunities (surges in immigration and other urban influxes) have simultaneously brought new expressive and material opportunities to areas of cities latent with the hidden histories of prior marginalized groups. How these conflicts are resolved and opportunities seized, could open a new vision of America’s urban remaking and replacing.

The section then moves to the work of one of two artists we present, whose sensibilities and explorations hold useful lessons. Rose’s grandfather, an architect, was the designer of many early-twentieth-century public theaters, including the celebrated Palace Theater in New York, constructed during the heyday of vaudeville. Rose’s re-presentation of his grandfather’s richly detailed drawings, combined with images of the structures as they remain today, attempts to

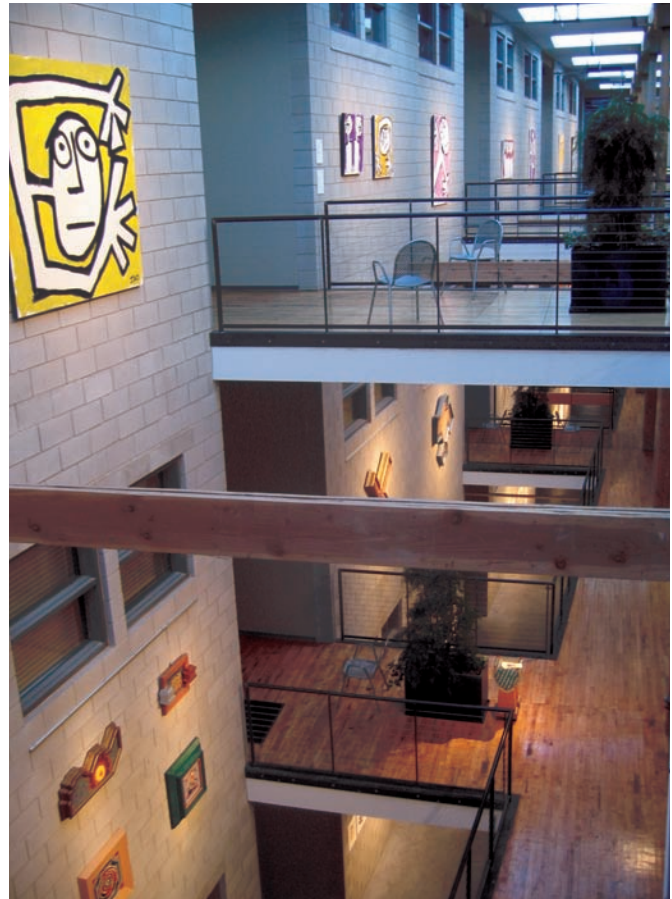


show how meanings associated with buildings and places both shift and remain, unavoidably, over time.

In commenting on this work, Arthur Danto elaborates on the philosophical and psychological processes involved. He reminds us that reinterpretation and reevaluation are part of the experience of time itself, present in all places, real and represented, remembered or imagined—whether resulting from a sense of loss or melancholy, or produced out of hope or a love for beauty.

The next essay, by B. D. Wortham-Galvin, begins by exposing the superficial claims by designers, planners, and developers that their projects embody “a sense of place.” Her concern is that this phrase is too often little more than a buzzword to create support for the eradication of existing patterns of settlement and for the displacement of older residents, whose presence is no longer valued. Her article examines how notions about places are deeply affected by what people want to believe about them—to the extent this may eclipse what they really are.

“Making place is not just about physical creation and destruction; it is also about observation, narrative, association, and ritual,” Wortham-Galvin writes. In this way, she points out that all places are “remade,” guided by the motives and ideologies of those claiming authority over them. To understand the dynamics of this process, she further argues, it is useful to examine entirely fictional built environments, such as that of the ubiquitous “Springfield,” the imaginary town inhabited by the characters in the television show *The Simpsons*. Selected works by our second featured artist, Karen Wirth, who frequently collaborates with architects on larger-scaled projects, follow. Wirth makes a habit of situating her art in the larger environments they serve and reflect. Among her peers, Wirth is known more as a book artist than an installation or public artist. But she has also accomplished a range of work, at a variety of scales in diverse circumstances, that exposes her views and practices of collaboration, embracing, reflecting on, and reinterpreting existing buildings and urban contexts.



In addition to sharing her work, Wirth includes a short essay describing her approach to form-making, which progresses by answering a series of questions: “what is its content, where does this come from, who is the audience, what is the context, what does it mean?” We can see these as useful lessons for all the practitioners and teachers of our overlapping disciplines.

As a flipside to the discussion of re-placing in Rome, and a final contribution to the theme section, the architect

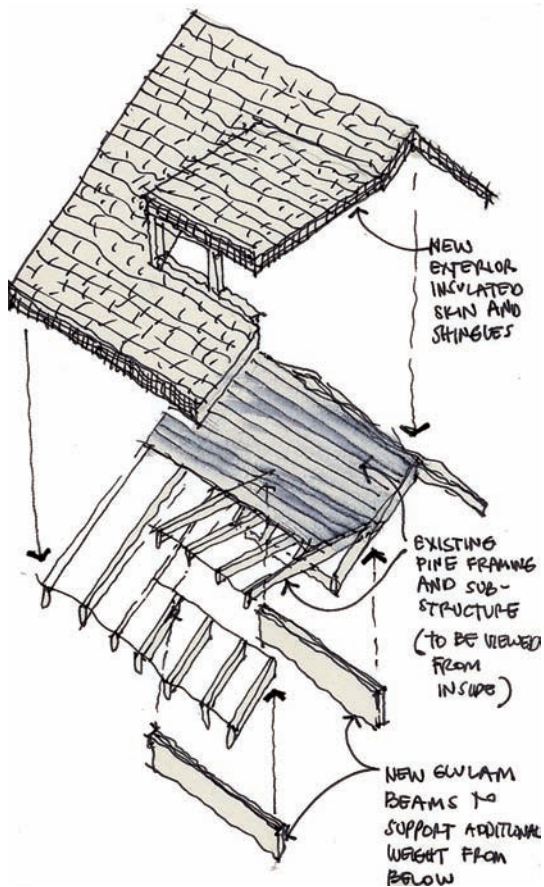
**Above:** At the 801, a project in downtown Minneapolis, new concrete-block walls were interlaced with the original timber frame of this former industrial warehouse to create live/work residential spaces. The walls provide spatial segregation, structural freedom, and fire safety. They also permit the interior “street” to serve as both an open circulation corridor and an art gallery.

**Left:** Much of the waste of the selective demolition was redeployed for sculptural and material effects, like these garden fragments.

**Right:** Artwork along the interior street.

Carl Elefante exposes the difficulty of applying traditional preservation and renovation techniques and sensibilities to works of the Modern Movement. Both the heralded “monuments” and the more ordinary structures produced by modern architects of the last three generations have frequently been constructed of inexpensive and less enduring materials. Now that most of these structures need renewing, new kinds of decisions and opportunities are needed to guide the remaking of these structures. For some, new hybrid images should be possible where restoration is less appropriate or beneficial.

Elefante underscores that these decisions are rarely simple, and require an evaluation of technological, social/economic, and artistic/formal concerns. The need to make such difficult decisions will increase for architects and preservationists in coming years because a large part of our current built environment consists of such buildings, and the need to retain and further harvest their value is critical in cultural, economic, and ecological terms.



### One View of Re-Placement

As a complement to the other essays in this theme section, and as a way of demonstrating in tangible form my struggles and explorations with these same issues, I have illustrated this introduction with some examples of my own recent professional work. Frankly, I relish the challenges and obstacles of working in existing buildings and contexts. Rarely do I choose to neutralize or diminish to a marginal or subservient status found attributes; and rarely do I strive to emulate the context's distinct characteristics. Rather, I value the possibilities of expanding, creatively engaging, and even inverting the embodiment of stories that places can hold.

These design techniques are more akin to the twentieth-century art practice of collage, where the copulation of seemingly disparate elements creates compound associations and meaning, enlarging their interpreted and experienced qualities. I find that the embodiment of narratives, whether real or imagined, partial or complete, reflective

or prophetic—whether of my mind or someone else's—matters less than the value of the presence they provide for engagement and re-placement.

All images are courtesy of the author.

**Above:** Ellingson/Bend Residence, St. Croix, Minnesota. This design emerged as an alternative to the clients' original intent to build a new house. Skeptical at first of the reuse process, the couple discovered attributes tied to a forgotten history of activity in the house. These could never have been created anew.

**Left and top right:** The old attic framing, the original building's bones and skin, was sandwiched between a new high-performing insulated roof and new glulam support beams to create a narrative surface linking the remodeled structure to its past.

**Below right:** Scratchmarks on the floor indicated where beds were once moved repeatedly by children. Elsewhere, in a hidden concrete mantle, the footprint of one of the owners as a child was found beside the paw print of a family pet. This was exposed, instead of being hauled to the dump.