

The Materials' Catch Dream-Thinking for Architects

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Materials appear to be the stuff architects day-dream about, experiment and work with in architecture studios, building sites, prototyping labs. In both design and make, materials' specifications, their properties and performance are always an issue of much consideration that requires solid technical knowledge and thoughtful decisions. But what if materials were to be thought neither as inert entities that architects manipulate for their clients to use and check in post-occupancy evaluations, nor just as matter whose properties are to be tamed to appease architectural obsessions and then offered to colleagues (and theorists) for contemplation?

This text experiments with ways of thinking about or 'together' with materials. To do so, it takes a dream-ride to different cities to recall instances of intense personal attachments with architecture matter, two of which belong to the specific temporal category of the bygone. Architecture ruins and materials of urban pasts are of particular interest as they seem to set up catches that allure and captivate in a visceral way. Such an 'unmediated' encounter with materials has unpredictable consequences that undermine the 'meet the eye/touch the ear/hit the brain' beaten path of recounting experiences of architecture's past in our cities. Unsurprisingly, capricious side-effects emerge as soon as the process of thinking drops its academic respectability to open up to the delights of dream-thinking.

Rome

*Thinking gets
a hands-on
materials*

I am embracing a long lost building by Donatelo Bramante in Rome. My hand runs over the rough surface of the *bugnato*. Moving hesitantly at first, it feels every tiny change on the stone; it drops in the abyss of the channel-jointed blocks and climbs up one by one the abscesses of the adjacent section of the masonry. It starts to accelerate impatiently, rushing to touch the coarse finish of the material to fully grasp the rusticated surface of the Palazzo Caprini. My hand becomes a vector, it falls and rises from joint to joint frantically and compulsively until it gets a life on its own with jerks and twitches so intense that my body starts shaking. It becomes disturbing; I open my eyes, half-awake I watch my hand's spasms and burst into laughter.

I am an architect living in Ostia in winter, the most depressing seaside place ever. I need entertaining dreams to make sense and conceptualise architecture surfaces and materials, for back then I had just started my studies on a dark and deeply conservative political subject: restoration of monuments was all about the integrity of the surface and the originality of materials. I retrace the earlier part of

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the dream: I am in the company of my aged, highly-respected professor, Renato Bonelli, who is also the director of *La Sapienza's* conservation school. Three painted lines, the colours – green, white and red – of the Italian flag, run diagonally across his face. As if he were an Indian indigenous chief, he takes me on a trip on the wild surface of the palazzo. He teaches the core course of the conservation programme: *Historical and Critical Reading of Artefacts*. It's all about old school aesthetics from Plotinus to Schleiermacher's German idealism and up to the Frankfurt school. I have no clue how to read buildings and make a judgement as to what deserves to be conserved or restored. My mind cannot grasp the concepts but my hand is fully able to apprehend by touching and feeling the materials to make sense of architecture. In my sleep, thinking takes my hand as its refuge.

The thinking we do in the process of dreaming is our most profound form of thinking. It continues both while we are asleep and in waking life, it is multi-layered, nonlinear and involves viewing a lived experience from multiple perspectives simultaneously (Ogden 2010). Our dreams appear fragmentary and inconsistent but so is our consciousness and experience of reality, argues Marcus Steinweg (2017); he advocates for a philosophy of thought that enacts the inconsistency of our reality and moves away from the false security of rationality. Could dream-thinking provide a clue for this different mode of thought-process that could affect our relatedness to materials? Being an architect entails relentless thinking about materials; but thinking 'together' with materials could only emerge in the process of dream-thinking: for the glory of dreams lies in their atmosphere of unlimited freedom (Blixen 1937). This freedom may suggest a breaking through the constraints of rational thinking procedures of subtraction and abstraction.

In the Rome dream, my hand that touches/feels the material is not just the collector of information that through a complex system of nerves is transmitted to my brain to process and articulate conscious thoughts about the experience. My dreaming-hand is instead a fully functioning part of an assemblage made of the building, the stones, the carving and finishing architecture techniques, my flesh, nerves, emotions, memories. This assemblage is thinking, and its effects are manifested in muscular action: muscle spasms – first in my hand, then in the laughing grimace around my mouth – eventually triggered the waking of my brain. The assemblage's dream-thinking 'generated a living semi-permeable barrier' (Ogden 2003); it took on the blind spots of actuality and brought about a transformation. My brain overcame the temporary incapacity to think and understand concepts. I was rendered (as a conscious entity) capable of articulating by speech (mouth), or writing (by hand) architecture history's instances and materials and their particularity within a specific classificatory system called aesthetics. Dream-thinking provided an opening to the mode of thinking by assembling and viscerally connecting incongruent entities. It offered the experience of thinking 'together' with materials rather than thinking about materials. It delivered answers to questions never asked.

Athens

*Carved stones
graft death
onto the living*

Springtime high-school day excursions at the Ancient Athens cemetery Keramikos were a handy option: the school building was close to the ruins of classical Athens. We walked the distance and once inside the fence (that clear-cuts the modern city from its past), we were free to play, stroll and chat amidst the scattered stones. When tired, we reclined on large plinths. Our youthful flesh, squeezed between the cold marble and the bright sunshine, poured out reveries; a field of life-force oozed but we were oblivious of the exchange of matter taking place. Day-dreaming is a form of thinking and as every thinking, it can occur when one is able to select what to remember and what to forget; and we chose to forget that Keramikos was once a cemetery, or the plinths were remnants of graves. For us it

was just a handful of marbles we called ancient ruins.

Structures reduced to the state of ruin, especially the ones associated with the material traces of history, have been celebrated since systematic archaeological excavation in Rome and Athens made the remote past tangible in 19th century. Chunks of materials were the object of much speculation by archaeologists, who strived to understand how those remains were once assembled to make a 'whole'. Fragments of matter were reflected and, more often than not, acted upon, cleaned, purified, moved to museums. When deemed adequate, they were completed to better tell the story embedded in matter. Archaeology was a mesmerizing new discipline and, as it is well known, its devoted followers included the inventor of psychoanalysis. Freud was enchanted by archaeology's alluring techniques of excavating, unearthing, recovering long-forgotten past structures. He

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linked psychoanalysis to the archaeologists' painstaking working through fragments of materials and their awareness that knowledge of the past is doomed to remain incomplete and open to interpretation. Freud's study room was filled with archaeological material (antiquities). His analysis of an archaeological novel generated his theory of repression by which something is at once made inaccessible and preserved. As formulated in his essay 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' (1907), the repressed material can always return, often unexpectedly in dream-thinking and it has the potential to be turned into transformative thinking. In *Gradiva* a long-dead girl carved on a marble stone withholds and releases the forcefulness of life.

I dream I am an architecture tutor amidst a group of students. We must work together on an assignment set by the school's *strega*, the witch-protector of Venice. The task is to think through and re-design material traces of history in a city. The topic sets me off on a familiar nervous negativity and I listen to myself rushing into the usual depreciating comments on such an outdated task. My argumentation dissects the 80s conservative neoliberal politics intertwined with conservation policies that led to architectural 'mummification' of cities. But the need to design something and start from somewhere is there, and it is a task that cannot be ignored or delayed. And then in my dream, I recall Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, that I had visited again at the National Gallery in London the previous evening. There it was a painted canvas whose frontal viewing offers worldly objects and subjects of achievements in full display and just a little haunting hint of something that demands to be deciphered. I followed the ritual as any other visitor in the gallery; I moved to the right of the painting to retrieve the correct perspective, and the image of a floating skull emerged, a ghostly presence at the heart of life's memorabilia. In a flash, in my dream-thinking, the connection was made. The ruins that appear incomprehensible, a mass of stones in the midst a fully-functioning city: could they be seen from a different perspective? Can they appear in open view as the material enclaves of death trapped in the bursting-with-life 'organism' of a city? How can we re-design cities so that the material instance(s) of death (the gap – the absence of life, that is usually softened under the guise of the term monument) could be viewed as clear as in the ambassadors painting? A sense of euphoria overtakes me; it feels as if I have grasped the entry point for a project. I wake up into the joys of architecture invention. My negativity resolved by the architectural potential of designing a visceral connection with material remnants of past structures.

"Every experience – whether a waking perception, a memory or a dream – has the quality of something hidden (held secret) by what is perceived and of something revealed by what is hidden (in being *almost* secret)" (Odgen 2003). In my day-dreaming I return to the Keramikos' excursions

and to the memory of a seminal book on the epigram of the funerary marble statue of *Phrasikleia Kore*. It reads: “*Kore* (maiden) I must be called evermore; instead of marriage, by the Gods this name became my fate.” (Svenbro, 1993, 19). Svenbro makes this a paradigmatic case to argue that writing on funerary stones were read aloud, since there was no practice of silent reading in antiquity. We, the school girls – *kores*, maidens – strolling, sitting on funerary stones and reading aloud the letters carved on them, were unaware of lending our voice to the dead to speak and tell their stories. Those carved stones were grafting death onto the living. This was not just a visual and oral appropriation of our bodies to establish a fleeting comeback-to-life of the dead; we were instead part of an energy field of assembled matter of teeming flesh, swarming voice, past writing techniques, reading habits, euphoric expectations, carved plinths and sun rays.

Here is the architectural task my day-dreaming/dream-thinking offered: is there a way to design cities in which the material traces of the past are not just monuments of which we read about in books or hear by tourist guides or apps? Can those ruins (black holes of memory) be accommodating an architectural visceral, remembering where the configuration of the material deploys an almost aggressive and instant borrowing of life?

London

The glass valley

bridges

the abyss

When I arrived in London in the 90s, I kept stumbling on the city’s crooked pavements. It took a while to adapt my footing and get used to the irregularities made by tree roots and other invisible underground forces that pushed up the rectangular slates covering the sidewalks surface. I dreamt of smoothness and an excess of it. London, in my dream back then, was made of glass buildings in strange twisted shapes. Its inhabitants seemed to enjoy being engulfed in the complex transparent structures and looked at ease with the fact that the city was a glass valley over a gaping abyss. Life was incubated in pockets of smooth glass and a feeling of impending geological risk was its breeding material. The dream had the ingredients of magical thinking – an invented reality to substitute external conditions. It took hints from the then brewing collective hallucination of architects on the technology and use of glass in architecture projects. In a few decades, London was to turn the architects’ hallucinations of magical-thinking into a fully active transformative mode. “In transformative thinking, one creates a new way of ordering experience that allows one to generate types of feeling, forms of relatedness, and qualities of aliveness that had previously been unimaginable.” (Odgen 2010).

Sometimes, when the architect’s body thinks it is a cage for wild dreams, an urge comes to the fore: to experiment with re-assembling building materials, flesh matter, thinking, feelings, memories, aspirations, and transform long-solidified living arrangements. Last night my dream-thinking’s humble focus was on the architecture hygienics of the bathroom: a place of softness designed with hard materials. I dreamt instead of red velvet imprints on my shower tiles.

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