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Practices in Research Journal
Rue des Palais 153 - 1030 Brussels
T. +32 (0)2 244 44 30
info@architectureinpractice.eu
www.architectureinpractice.eu/pirjournal

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Working in Flux Circularity, Uncertainty, and the Transformation of Architectural Practice:

Notes from a plenary conversation, Brussels, May 21, 2025

Elodie Degavre
UCLouvain

Juliane Greb
UAntwerpen, Büro Juliane Greb

Tine Segers
UAntwerpen

Cristian Ștefănescu
A-Works, BAS Bergen School of Architecture

The 2025 edition of Practices in Research brought together a diverse group of architects, researchers, and educators whose work confronts the complexities of circularity and working with the as found. Under the theme *Re-mediating Practices*, the conference explored how circularity influences not only materials and construction processes, but also the instruments, cultures, and epistemologies of architectural practice¹.

Across the presentations, it became evident that circularity and practices of adaptive reuse are not merely a technical frontier—they are inevitably reshaping the nature of architectural practice. What follows is a reflection on the key themes that emerged from the concluding panel: uncertainty, archiving, collaboration, pedagogy and scalability. Collectively, they sketch a picture of a profession in transition, and negotiating new modes of working at the crossroads of environmental responsibility and cultural imagination.

¹ The conclusions of the PIR5 Conference sketch the shift in policy and practice of architecture towards Demolitions and Deconstructions in recent years very clearly, this conference continues to investigate how circularity impacts practice. Kozminska, U., & Plevoets, B. (2024). PiR#05 - ON UNBUILDING. Practices in Research, 5, 377–401. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14537154>

The unpredicted – Architecture in a state of uncertainty

One of the clearest threads across the conference was the pervasive presence of *uncertainty*. Circular practices rarely begin with a blank page; they begin with the messy, unfinished realities of existing buildings, existing materials, and existing social conditions. Many projects described a process defined less by control than by *constant adaptation*, where material availability fluctuates, structural surprises emerge once demolition and strategic removal begins, and stakeholders enter and exit the process in unpredictable ways.

Architects described working with the “uncertain self” of the building site—an entity that reveals itself gradually, in layers, and often in contradiction with expectations. Redrawing existing elements becomes an act of careful observing, design becomes a negotiation with what is already there. In this context, the architect’s role shifts from that of an orchestrator toward that of an *on-site performer*, responding in real time to new constraints, opportunities, and discoveries. Reactivity is mandatory.

Also, improvisation becomes a necessary skill—not only for architects, but for everyone involved in the execution:

clients, contractors, residents, craftspeople, and so on. Improvisation here refers to the capacity to act, decide, and design in response to conditions that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. Rather than following a linear sequence from concept to execution, architects operate within evolving circumstances—materials reveal themselves gradually, structural conditions emerge during dismantling, and social or logistical parameters shift throughout the process. Improvisation is embedded in knowledge. It relies on material understanding, construction expertise and accumulated experience, allowing architects and collaborators to make informed decisions on site. It is closely tied to observation, attentiveness, and responsiveness, turning the building process into a form of real time negotiation with the existing.

The time of architectural work stretches and shifts: it can culminate in the moment of construction, or extend into *post-occupancy* and *maintenance*, acknowledging that circular buildings live through multiple cycles of adaptation.

Circularity spreads the focus of the design and the construction process from the here and now, to *the past* to tracing resources and to *the future* to avoid obsolescence and waste. One contribution mentioned how through this lens of circularity our claim, or possible need, to being in control, of establishing a certain predictability and permanence in architecture becomes questionable. As we are pushed to reconcile with the extracted and built past as much as the future life cycles of sites, materials and buildings, things become more circumstantial, more in flux, and rather gain

what they claimed to be an almost constant temporariness that we are now often designing for.²

Circularity and working with reclaimed materials dictates us to embrace an *expanded notion of time*, where buildings are not completed but continuously becoming. What emerges is a form of practice defined by alertness, responsiveness, and humility that can span from the mindset of a bricoleur to being an expert and leading large scale transformation projects.

² Wider discussions within practice also highlight the friction between linear timelines and the cyclical temporality circularity demands. For instance the harsh realities that were discussed in depth in the Belgian magazine A+ “Circularity therefore challenges not only the profession but the entire system in which it operates—a system that has until now been governed by tight timelines, siloed areas of expertise among stakeholders, and a flow of materials closely tied to the market.” Rotor ed. (2024) Material Flows, Vol. 310, A+, Brussels.

Archiving and evaluating: Instruments for Tracking, Tracing, and Transforming Materials

If circularity requires openness to unpredictability, it also demands a very careful attention to *documentation*. Many presenters showed how their work depends on methods of archiving — maintaining a precise overview of resources, understanding the provenance of elements, and tracking the logistics of how materials travel through time.

Circular processes generate their own aesthetic language—one that is layered, hybrid, and often resistant to standardization. Presentations featured new kinds of representational documents: harvesting maps, urban mining sketches, life-cycle diagrams, CO₂ calculations, parametric inventories, and AI-generated images used to envision possibilities. They deal with evaluating the existing by calculating or reshaping the value of what is already there. They visualize *flows*, *potentials*, and *uncertainties* rather than fixed geometries.

At first glance, some of these tools seem to remove from architectural representation. Yet it is maybe precisely in these dry, tabular documents that circular practice gains

its operational clarity. They provide a way to *anticipate uncertainties*, compare options, assess impacts, and navigate constraints that would otherwise remain invisible.

In this sense, a productive tension is highlighted: between *abstraction*—the ability to zoom in and out and anticipate on uncertainties —and precision, the capacity to measure, catalogue, and redraw from the “real” and existing.

This tension requires to look at resources with new eyes. The ability to have a strong understanding of materials and construction processes affords a know-how that can enable the possibility to improvise. The ability to abstract, forgetting to view something for what it can become through acts of translation, of abstraction, displacement of recontextualization and translation change its meaning. As part of this new way or ways of seeing, several ideas or concepts were referenced such as “*as found*” in the sense of Alison and Peter Smithson “the art is in the picking up, turning over and putting with.”³ or regarding the “*making*” from Tim Ingold who uses the paper clip as a simple length of wire that can be unravelled and bent, representing how the world is made of materials and possibilities that are not fixed but are shaped through our engagement with them, much like how his theories about “making” and the relationship between humans and their environments are

dynamic and generative rather than static.⁴

³ Smithson A. and P., ‘The “As Found” and the “Found”’, in David Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group. Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press), pp.201–202

⁴ Ingold, T. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge

Entangled Practices: Beyond Specialist Knowledge

Circularity also reshapes how architects collaborate. Several projects presented involved forms of *non-specialist knowledge* and *situated knowledge*⁵, reflecting the increasing complexity of adaptive reuse.

Workshops with residents, participatory design sessions, engagements with demolition and dismantling teams, collaborations with artisans, and partnerships with material brokers appeared across the sessions. These forms of entanglement acknowledge that architectural knowledge alone is insufficient for navigating the circular economy.

Circular projects become shared endeavours in which architects act as: *mediators* between actors, *interpreters* of material histories and *translators* of the potentiality of materials and resources, *facilitators* of workshops and collective decisions, *listeners* to communities with lived experience of the place and *negotiators* of compromises between ideal scenarios and on-site realities. These might

⁵ Haraway, D. (2013). *Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective* 1. In *Women, science, and technology* (pp. 455-472). Routledge. was mentioned in some of the presentations and recognizes all knowledge being partial and shaped by the observer's specific, situated perspective. This viewpoint also means an architect's role, attitude or position is anchored in a history, culture, and physical body, embracing and accountable for partial, embodied viewpoints.

have been among the less visible tasks of architects – working on circular projects or not – that are now explicitly brought to the front.

From the perspective of how circular architectures are received, residents' expertise also appears to be enhanced. Reused and reusable materials increasingly carry meaning. They link past or present uses to future possibilities, creating emotional and narrative layers that shape how inhabitants experience their environments. Several speakers emphasized the affective dimension of circular architecture: materials are not simply reused for efficiency, but for the stories they bring with them. The use of circularity also entails a new approach to building maintenance, a shift in the long term relationship with materials.⁶

In the built work this results in aesthetics expressing the visible sum of disparate parts, the layering of multiple histories, hybrid structures combining old and new, uneven degrees of permanence, details shaped by availability rather than intention. These outcomes challenge conventional ideals of cohesion or purity. They also foreground an emerging *ethics of aesthetics*: the architect makes choices about what to reveal, what to disguise, and what to celebrate which can become critical acts of communication. How do we negotiate these decisions with clients and contractors? With users? With regulations?

⁶ Pauline Lefebvre insightfully highlighted this in her contribution to A+310. Rotor ed. (2024) *Material Flows*, Vol. 310, A+, Brussels.

Pedagogy: Teaching attitudes

If students are to work with uncertainty, availability, and material histories, then the *teaching environment* must also be reconsidered. But how can one teach improvisation, inventorying, and tactical moves, in a discipline that, until now, has most often been religiously taught following a classical design strategy—from sketching to, only at the very end of the process, its actual construction?

Learning increasingly unfolds in direct engagement with construction sites, material inventories, and ongoing transformations, where design decisions are tested against logistical, technical, and social constraints. Instruments that have long remained peripheral to architectural representation—such as logistical spreadsheets, inventories, and on site documentation—prove to be central instruments for organizing work, negotiating feasibility, and coordinating actors. Rather than aiming for refined formal outcomes from the outset, training emphasizes the capacity to respond to constraints, adjust intentions, and work productively with what is already present. Design processes may therefore begin not with a fixed programme or site definition, but with the careful assessment of available materials, existing conditions, and potential reuse streams. Developing such modes of practice requires cultivating expertise that combines material knowledge, on

site responsiveness, tactical improvisation, and an ability to operate across interconnected systems.

Such questions point to a broader transformation in architectural pedagogy. Instead of privileging abstract form-making, education might embrace *resource-based design, temporal thinking, and collaborative processes*.⁷

Concepts such as *vital materialism*⁸—which positions matter as active, relational, and influential—were brought up in several presentations and are finding resonance in architecture schools. They help reframe materials as more than resources: they are participants in design. This shift illustrates the growing convergence between architectural practice, ecological thinking, and contemporary philosophy.

Training the next generation in terms of circularity requires teaching them not only the right skills, but also certain attitudes: attentiveness, adaptability, humility, care, and a willingness to engage with the complexities of materials and their histories.

⁷ As educators like Charlotte Malterre-Barthes argue, reforming architectural schools may be necessary if we are to shift the discipline toward building less—and differently.

⁸ Bennett, J. (2020). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.