

**SPOLIA MENTALE<sup>1</sup>**  
*A tale of liberated objects (& territories)*



<sup>1</sup> The title intentionally juxtaposes the latin plural nominative noun with the Italian adjective.

<sup>2</sup> During an interview carried out with the architect for this article, Hachez explains that —after having tested multiple solutions for the new fireplace—the literal copy of the basement window was the only convincing one.

As we step in the spacious living room of the “*Ermitage*” house and look to the left, a yellow and imposing presence —a fireplace— instantly catches our attention. It greets us with elegance and mystery, reflecting warm light from sleek —yet common— yellow bricks. Two tall and slim figures stand at both sides, sharply equipped with wooden slats (as well-polished belts and shoes); not clear if to protect or equip the “place” of the fire. Within a somewhat solemn atmosphere, the three figures seem establishing a dialogue and build an intimate — yet mysterious — tension. The empty space feels inhabited, beyond us... we are called to approach. A closer look mixes disorientation with familiarity while recognizing the sequence and dimensions of bricks in those of the building’s façade’s basement windows<sup>2</sup>: the fireplace becomes familiar —yet displaced— a service window turned fireplace, a fireplace disguised in a service window, a shifted and “re-signified” copy, a double.

‘I hope I’ve stayed attentive’ remarks Hachez with a quote, ‘The way we look at things is how we decide to act in this world’<sup>3</sup>. Her unintentional —thus natural— interest in exploring the role of displaced/copied/reversed objects in space, of playing with them through the project, interestingly activates an inedited and

refreshed “sense of place”. Through “shifted” objects the project draws on the mystery of the ordinary, builds unconventional assemblages becoming unexpected tools for imagination. An invitation to “look without fear”<sup>4</sup>, to welcome a playful disposition to space discerning what we are “able to see” from what we “choose to see”, where objects become mediators and amplifiers, revealing new spatial and cultural orders. The necessity to develop a sharp ability to look (and think), becomes key to this (design) process, deeply rooted in an archeological understanding and description of the existing. Carefully recognized and displaced objects mobilize new images, metaphors, and analogies, they build witty visual frames of reference through disturbingly familiar design solutions.

An attitude recalling wicked theories of common (overlooked) “objects” becoming “Things” through unexpected interaction with human bodies and minds (B. Brown, 2001). Through break downs or unusefulness (M Heidegger, 1968), misuse or alternative use (R Malewitz, 2012) or simply by being attentively looked upon (B. Brown, 2006), within “Thing Theory”, objects shed their conventional role to become “visible”, “present” in new ways. They enable the viewer to “think” and “look through them” (S. Turkle 2007; C. Jencks 2008) while —sometimes— “looking back” (J. Lacan 1964). Circumstances in which the “*Ermitage*” fireplace could take part in a Belgian tale of gradually liberated objects in which displaced fragments of everyday life acquire unprecedented agency (Latour, 1987; 2007) to transform our imaginative capacity and sense of place. A tale of (in)animate objects enabling human subjects (individually and collectively) to form/transform their imagery (A. Appadurai, 1985). A tale on the power of objects in modifying minds and (thus) spaces, to shed encoded values eluding our full understanding.

But to be “seen”, to produce “enchantment”, objects need some kind of manipulation, displacement, they need to enter otherwise the world to produce “critical encounters”<sup>5</sup>. Unusual close ups, awkward vantage points, inverted orders, shake and ‘invite the viewer to discover the world for himself’, as if the act of “seeing” opened up unexpected possibilities to investigate reality. René Heyvaert becomes almost literal when hooking a “plastic tube” on a roof of a common brick house to re-signify not only the object itself but the whole structure sheltering it, and —by resonance— the surrounding landscape. His disturbing objects become —in a strangely way— part of the architecture by keeping their “otherness” and autonomy.

Collected, reused, reintegrated, re-signified and re-signifying objects entering the architectural space to redefine, disturb, provoke... nothing new for the romans which seized the spoils of

3 In her conference *The way we look at things* (SCL\_ARCH, 2018) Aurelie Hachez quotes Wolfgang Tillmans (M. Herbert, “Wolfgang Tillmans Interview”, *ArtReview*, 21 July 2014)

4 With reference to the exhibition (MOMA New York, 2021) and poetics of Wolfgang Tillmans.

5 Term used by Paul Robbrecht in relation to the work of Raul de Keyser and in occasion of the exhibition “The things I see” (Brussels 2010-11). In his paintings fragments of a banal environment — alienated from their context— are brought to the fore to become ‘critical presences’.

6 “A negotiated urban environment that has slowly emerged through a multitude of architectural interventions that add pieces to the ‘territory as a model’, that contribute to the concept of a ‘cobbed-together yet balanced’ city.” D. Sommers on Belgium (M. Van Den Driessche, 2021)



war (fragments of —often monumental— constructions) from the enemy and incorporated them in public buildings as “spolia”. A practice still well mobilized within middle age or renaissance where architectural fragments are still integrated with eloquence and visual power in buildings’ facades, gradually “cleaned up” by modernity. An intriguing and well-studied concept —*spolia*— expanded over time from the skillful reuse of materials up to the virtual act of signifying fragments, concerning (also) the reuse of concepts, motifs, and visual formulas (R Brilliant, 1982). Spolia is about finding (new) value in what is already there, about how it can acquire new meanings by being slightly transformed or relocated. It concerns stratification, adding layers to a story regaining sense and vitality, juxtaposition of eventually unrelated elements, “reloaded” within new trajectories.

In times in which (new) construction is openly and structurally put into question (Malterre Barthes, 2024) and within an extensively urbanized (without urbanism) “territory of fragments”<sup>6</sup> — Belgium— (M. Van Den Driessche, 2021; B. Grosjean, 2010) the ability to wisely reinject/reload/re-activate/re-signify obsolete vestiges of exhausted cycles, seems extremely promising. A timely skill concerning not only domestic/interior spaces but also open, public and collective ones, towards an “architecture as urbanism” attitude, from the territory/in the territory.

Within the *Biezewiede garden city’s* 1920s plan and spaces, Hachez’ *Jubel* project is eloquent in this regard. Through the injection of unusually irregular and miss-aligned window frames or the acceptance of sudden breakdowns and interruptions in mouldings and cladding, an archetypical (mute) facade is turned into an a-typical one, allowing not only light and singular perspectives to enter the private sphere but also the public one to be reactivated, revitalized. What if this attitude and skills were expanded and well selected fragments deliberately and systematically reinjected within larger (less dense/less valuable) portions of the territory (towards a “city-territory as a mine” or “city-territory as renewable resource” perspective and ambition)?

Within Andrea Branzi’s radical and visionary glimpses on XXI cent. architectural futures and passionate call for “weak, diffuse and reversible” transformations, (A. Branzi, 2006) objects were already the “new protagonists of the urban ad territorial scene” (A. Branzi, 2010) and the project —above all— a matter of thought (*una cosa mentale*).

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