

TO MEND THE MATTER, TO CULTIVATE SYMPATHY: ON  
VULNERABLE WALLS AND EXPRESSIVE SURFACES  
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KEYWORDS

Urban surfaces, mending, new materialism, architectural matter, impermanent architecture, sympathy of things, material agency  
*Superficies urbanas, reparación, nuevo materialismo, materia arquitectónica, arquitectura impermanente, empatía de las cosas, agencia material*

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under  
it, And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a  
stone, But they would have the rabbit out  
of hiding, To please the yelping dogs. The  
gaps I mean, No one has seen them made  
or heard them made, But at spring mend-  
ing-time we find them there.”  
—Robert Frost, *Mending Wall*, 1914

This is a praise to impermanence, to the vulnerable building, to changes in stone.

This essay was born out of an interest in the lack of stability of architectural form, and the spacetime that unfolds in its encounter and investigation. As an architectural and urban historian, I spent quite some time researching what could be argued to be one of the more unstable spatial typologies of the built environment, namely, building surfaces. Skins, borders, edges, coatings, territories of inscription and regulation, surfaces are a locus of mediation and materiality, a friction-full transitional space between the built and the open.

Previously, I have argued for the political potential of surfaces to question urban property regimes and rights to visibility and spatial production, and I have even written a manifesto about *the right to the surface*, where I argued for this right as being “processual and formative [.] It seeks change and movement, not stability and permanence. It is a right to risk, not to safety. [...] A right to incoherence.”<sup>1</sup>

It is this insistent exploration of surfaces that has brought me to consider the unstable matter of architecture, the tension between our aspirational stability, and the continuously evolving matter of our built environment. In this essay, I will take my explorations of surfaces further, to focus on two encounters with precarious surface matter and the lessons they could teach.

Inspired by Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall*, I will use the concept of *mending* to read material processes taking place within buildings, which extend beyond human agency in patching and fixing damaged architectural matter. Firstly, I wish to suggest that matter has its own way of sticking together, and show how explicit instances of patched-up surfaces are exemplars for the continually altering materiality of the built environment. Secondly, this essay is a meditation on the methodology of proximity and sympathy: of *being there*, taking place, and intensifying the encounter with architectural matter. “I am with the stones”, as Dutch architect Lars Spuybroek declared.<sup>2</sup>

For this exploration, I have chosen to focus on two building surfaces that have recently impacted me by stopping me in my tracks and creating several hours of attention and close examination. One is a building in the small Tuscan town of Pistoia, in Northern Italy, and the other one is located in Lebanon, in the central Beirut area of Gemmayzeh. Despite their historical, ideological, and material differences, these two buildings are united by a visibly precarious stability, manifested in the material patches that make up their street-facing elevations. They both reveal the delicate results of past mends, of sutures and patchworks which are seamfull (as opposed to *seamless*), and which can teach us lessons about embracing instability and empathizing with the expressive matter which so aptly aspires to stick together.

UNSTABLE BUILDINGS

The first assumption I wish to challenge is that of buildings as stable, finished objects which we aspire to occupy and imagine as durable and solid. Even though we witness changes to buildings all the time, either individually or on a mass scale, the overarching Western architectural narrative is that of stability (the Vitruvian *firmitas*), of which phases

01. Sabina Andron, “To Occupy, to Inscribe, to Thicken: Spatial Politics and the Right to the Surface,” *Lo Squaderno* 48 (June 2018): 7-11.
02. Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 112.
03. See, for example: Suzanne Blier, *The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000); Tim Edensor, “Vital Urban Materiality and Its Multiple Absences: The Building Stone of Central Manchester,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 4 (2013): 447–65, doi:10.1177/1474474012438823; and Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (2007): 1–25, doi:10.1177/0263276407075954.
04. Edensor, “Vital Urban Materiality,” 448.

of transition are considered mere exceptions, to be solved, hidden, ameliorated, mended.

However, buildings are not static. They are living organisms, with life-histories made from never-complete transformations and residual materialities that entangle both human and non-human components.<sup>3</sup>

Buildings are inherited and herited, and they are comings-together and fallings-apart of material components through space and through time. Architectures move, evolve, degrade, and are the objects of ongoing change processes, despite the expectations of stability and reliability that we have of them. Writing on urban materiality and stone, cultural geographer Tim Edensor observes the macro-scale of these transformations:

In the modern urban built environment, changing social, economic, and political processes continuously cause the demolition, replacement, renovation, and reconstruction of buildings and other fixtures, producing the palimpsests and temporal collages evident in the city's materiality.<sup>4</sup>

These palimpsests are even more evident in urban environments and conditions where the material durability of dwelling spaces is not the default measure of people's attachment to place, nor is it a norm of habitation. War-torn areas, temporary and informal settlements, and self-built areas all over the world produce a diversity of typologies for construction and inhabitation which are indeed the visible result of changing social, economic, and political conditions.

Cracked buildings after earthquakes, sacrificed buildings in demolition, destroyed buildings in war and flood: natural or human-made disaster often sees these previously integral, complete artifacts turn into contorted, cumbersome, stacked boulders and spalls. The heavy rubble of traumatic destruction and the disposable remains of the optimistic, proud, aspirational constructions that met their end under circumstances where they were left defenseless. The weakened masonry, the twisted steel, the crumbling concrete, and the splintered stone that speak of the vulnerability of buildings, and of the aspirations we attribute to them.

Building is an ongoing process more than a finite object, an activation of conjoined matter into purposeful form, as was repeatedly argued by anthropologist Tim Ingold in his writings on dwelling:

Building, then, is a process that is continually going on, for as long as people dwell in an environment. It does not begin here, with a pre-formed plan, and end there, with a finished artefact. The "final form" is but a fleeting moment in the life of any feature, when it is matched to a human purpose, likewise cut out from the flow of intentional activity.<sup>5</sup>

I wish to actualize and intensify the transient condition of all built matter, to foreground this unstable condition of architecture and to acknowledge buildings-in-making and buildings-in-degradation—layered buildings and hurting buildings—as primary architectural conditions. I propose an exploration of buildings as ensembles of multiples, and as patchy, temporary collections of materials striving to enclose, protect, and project an identity through their surfaces. Buildings—as patchworks of events and surfaces that are thick with time, matter, and structural depth—are true to events and their sequence: what is missing and what was replaced, what stays exposed like scar tissue, without a right to hide, the leftover, that which endures and that which is gone.<sup>6</sup>

## MENDING MATTER

In the ongoing changes of building matter, forces of decay are constantly met by processes of repair and maintenance, which are fundamental to the functioning of cities and infrastructures.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, I would suggest that built matter has its own capacity of propping itself up and accommodating various external pressures. In other words, building intentions do not belong solely to humans; they are also of the materials and of the spaces between the materials. For example, Edensor observes urban materiality as "an empathetic conjecture, an imaginative response to often obscure and vague signs that something is missing from where it used to be."<sup>8</sup>

This empathy is developed between the material elements of the building, between the new and old stones, the bricks and the concrete, the planned and the happenstance. There is a grounding, a labored stabilizing of different material conditions, a correspondence and coming into accord between the human and non-human.

I would like to propose this coming-together as a form of *mending*, which I would define as a continuous process of accommodation and self-accommodation that embraces change and acknowledges vulnerability. Mending is a provisional arrangement of matter in the mend-space (of the building, in this case), a *seamfull* patching of built matter that rearranges itself after each human action it is subjected to. I propose to recognize mend-space as a constant condition of our built environment, which only temporarily freezes into apparent stability and desired durability. It is the unstable that is reliable, and the temporary that is permanent.

The meanings of the verb *to mend* are all expressive of a recompense or reparation, a correction

05. Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 188.

06. See Blier on Batammaliba houses as architectural self-images, for a discussion of the scarring/ cicatrization metaphor in building; particularly Chapter 4, *Houses are human*.

07. Graham and Thrift, "Out of order".

08. Edensor, "Vital Urban Materiality," 448.

Figure 01. The half-arch on this building in Pistoia, Italy made me consider the agency of matter in configuring its own place, and in creating visibly “patchy” urban textures. Photo by author, September 2018.



or fix.<sup>9</sup> The verb is most often used in relation to something broken, defective or torn (especially holes in fabrics), but it also refers to restoring health or curing an injured part of the body. Overall, mending is an act that adjusts and sets right, rectifies and corrects a damaged object or situation. In fact, *invisible mending* is used to describe a technique of repairing fabrics by using threads from the same fabric, so that the result is seamless.

I am interested in *mending as a form of care-full putting together where the materials push back and make an otherwise desired invisibility, or seamlessness, be visible*: building surfaces as seam-full mends, where active materials arrange

each other and occupy together. For example, urban scholars Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift refer to “maintenance and repair” as “chief means of seeing and understanding the world”<sup>10</sup> which allow for development and innovation. In addition, I would suggest that mending involves a particular kind of rapport that is sensitive to the harmonies that are formed within the mended matter, alongside the instrumental act of repairing something damaged. Moreover, mending also entails a deep understanding of the complexities of the mending body, the textile, the building’s surface. It is an arrangement of matter that is sensitive to the affective nuances and the delicate accords that keep matter together, and is not preoccupied solely with fixing in order to restore function, like repair and maintenance.

But how can matter mend itself, and how can this process of mending help us develop an understanding of buildings as impermanent, processual comings-together of matter? Before I attempt some answers by *being with* the two buildings I chose as my examples, I will briefly discuss some approaches to materiality, things, and matter which capture the vision of this essay. New materialist literature is vast and I am well aware of my very limited approach, but I dare work on the basis of a shared ethos, not losing sight of that initial instinct that stopped me in front of the surface in Pistoia [Fig. 1] and immediately made me think, “There is something about this arch, what does it want, what

09. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “mend,” accessed March 15, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/116388?rskey=ha24Km&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.
10. Graham and Thrift, “Out of order,” 5.
11. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 165–81, doi:10.1177/147041290200100202.
12. Sabina Andron, “Interviewing Walls: Towards a Method of Reading Hybrid Surface Inscriptions,” in *Graffiti and Street Art: Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, edited by Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi (London: Routledge, 2017).

can it do”, while also having in mind visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell’s proposal about the power of images to *do* things,<sup>11</sup> and my attempts to establish a method of *interviewing walls*.<sup>12</sup> This quest therefore takes inspiration from political theorist Jane Bennett’s “vital materiality”,<sup>13</sup> anthropologist Tim Ingold’s “matter in movement”,<sup>14</sup> archaeologist Ian Hodder’s entanglements of humans and things,<sup>15</sup> and architect Lars Spuybroek’s “sympathy of things”.<sup>16</sup> These are examples of conceptual and methodological approaches coming from geography and anthropology, which emphasize the capacity of matter to act in interconnected ways, to gather, join, and correspond: “Things are not isolated and they are not inert. Things are connected to and flow into other things, always transforming and being transformed.”<sup>17</sup> Hodder further speaks of a “thingly” human existence,<sup>18</sup> while Bennett proposes “thinghood”<sup>19</sup> as a fundamental operation of world-making. Ingold describes things leaking, not being complete or final,<sup>20</sup> while Spuybroek goes even further to refer to the *feelings* of things, which “should be jungles, overgrown by relations, woven, frayed, nested and entangled.”<sup>21</sup>

In thinking about how things answer to one another in their gathering, and how matter mends itself in the built environment, I found Spuybroek’s discussion of the “sympathy of things” to be particularly inspiring.

Spuybroek’s 2016 *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design* is a vigorously written argument which praises ornament and Gothic architecture in digital design, underlined by this affect of sympathy which the Dutch architect defines as, “what things feel when they shape each

other.”<sup>22</sup> Sympathy refers to things that are in a process of mutual formation: they don’t just meet from the outside, but they join from within. They don’t simply assemble in a given circumstance, but they correspond from their interiority in a gathering, whereby things take shape and dissolve into each other through their inner vectors.

A wall, then, is an active process of coming and staying together. Spuybroek writes, “Sympathy is the accordance of the activity of the one with that of the other.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, a process of things corresponding with each other and adjusting to each other. Mending is therefore not just a result of humans acting on matter; it is also something that matter *does*, intransitively, in its being together (what Jane Bennett would call a “thing-power”, or ability).

I believe that tuning into this “sympathy of things” is what happened to me on the encounter with the two buildings I will describe next. Spuybroek quotes Henri Bergson’s references to intuition and affinity as models for such an approach:

We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the exterior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it. Analysis, on the contrary, is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known.<sup>24</sup>

*I am with the stones*, which does not equate with fetishizing, or even with liking them. It is rather the exploration of a companionship, kinship, a generative thinghood which comes with lessons about sticking together (quite literally) and intensifying these spaces of addition and proximity. I will turn to my intuitive encounter with the walls next, to explore the process of tuning into their precariously stacked elements, where mending is visible and useful.

## SURFACE ENCOUNTERS

Much on the new materialist literature I have discussed begins from anecdotes, encounters, and moments of acknowledging objects, spaces, or things as being more than they appear. Follow the material which is in movement and flux, archaeologist Carl Knappett encourages: your body has to move if you are to follow the materials.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Ian Hodder writes about going towards and away from things, being there with things.<sup>26</sup> Moving into the object, moving with it, adjusting your speed: “This is exactly what the method of intuition is: an expression of sympathy through a floating and modulating of attention, a specific effort of gradation.”<sup>27</sup> It is no surprise that my own encounters took place on open walking sessions in unknown environments, where I would set a pre-disposition of allowing myself to be hooked, to stop, to be there, and be with. I believe some of the best encounters are born from such a disposition, where intuition becomes the guide and matter calls in increasingly clear ways.

13. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).
14. Tim Ingold, *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, Movements, Lines* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
15. Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
16. Spuybroek, *Sympathy of Things*.
17. Hodder, *Entangled*, 41.
18. Ibid.
19. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
20. Ingold, *Redrawing Anthropology*.
21. Spuybroek, *Sympathy of Things*, 105.
22. Ibid., 109.
23. Ibid., 135.
24. Ibid., 119.
25. Carl Knappett, *An Archaeology of Interaction: Network Perspectives on Material Culture and Society*, Oxford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
26. Hodder, *Entangled*, 41.
27. Spuybroek, *Sympathy of Things*, p. 123.



Figure 02. A mismatching leftover building feature can generate enquiries about affective matter, building processes and the value of prolonged, empathetic observation. Photo by author, September 2018.



Figure 03. Matter makes itself obvious despite builders' efforts to regulate it. For example, the window bays on the left side of the photograph are set in colored render, not stone, while the top right window is merely a painted illusion to maintain an aspect of order and symmetry. Photo by author, September 2018.

I became fixated with the half arch in Pistoia on a long weekend in the Tuscan town [Fig. 2]. Traveling alone, as I often do, I passed through this central piazza many times, and took note of the many buildings that were decorated with the same striped patterns of white marble and dark green serpentine stone. A characteristic Renaissance dress for many buildings in that area, the white-and-jade-green stones have not aged with the same structural integrity, and there are indeed many surfaces where only patches, or fragments of initial classical compositions remain.

However, this wall was particularly unique, and I had trouble understanding it: what happened, when, that had led to this crooked, interrupted, flaunty feature. A building defect, archive of a different structural age of the building, evidence of a mistake or negligence. It seems that new windows were added and the original stone was replaced in the process along the vertical lines of all window bays. This is visible in the pretend-stone texture around the windows, of which this partial arch is a mismatched leftover. The other accessible elevation of the building (albeit from a narrow street, not a central piazza) displays a similar patchwork of stone and render, with the latter under better camouflage [Fig. 3]. There is even a painted window on the top right side of the façade, to maintain the aspect of symmetry and order. This made me imagine the effort and skill that went into creating this disguise, but it also made me empathize with these materials which more readily stay true to themselves, than to humans' harmonizing efforts. True textures overwhelming their imposed forms, materials in synchrony with each other, sticking together by their own rules. Disobedient matter winning.

In Beirut, however, the sense of dense coagulation and stability that characterized the Italian wall is lost. In a city of excess and precarity, where the built environment is pulled between bullet-ridden fabrics of elegant Ottoman and French colonial buildings, and slick, new gated developments, it is difficult to find one's footing. All for the better, I would dare argue, as this confusion generates room for transformative encounters, one of which was with this building in Gemmayzeh, on a main east to west axis of the city [Fig. 4].

The building, partly destroyed by shelling, was closed with concrete blocks in a quick, probably emergency fix, leaving a large exposed patch of concrete masonry units alongside several visible bullet holes biting away at the existing render. This type of architectural aggression is not uncommon at all in a highly militarized city that underwent 15 years of civil war between 1975 and 1990, and several destructive episodes since (one of which was the post-war reconstruction itself).<sup>28</sup> This building, solid enough to stand after losing more than half its façade, arrested me in awe and sadness. The massive hole filled so hastily (but sticking together!) was just like a patched wound, which gave me a distinctive impulse to cover it up, protect its privacy, restore its integrity. A gutted, battered building, which is helpless in covering its scar, but empowered in standing up and teaching lessons about material vulnerability, precarity, and resilience.

These two buildings are both made from *seamfull* mends, which do not conceal the structural changes that brought them about. The initial encounter with the mended matter made me feel like an architectural voyeur, deploying an inappropriate gaze and developing a fixation over a space that I was not supposed to have access to. It is precisely this type of access that attracted me to these seemingly susceptible buildings: a gaze behind the scenes, an unexpected backstage pass, a moment of intimacy that goes beyond the habitual showings of architectural matter. Changes, fixes, and intermediary states are not supposed to be visible: yet these buildings, like many others (once you start seeing), remain graciously open and vulnerable to scrutiny. While they are powerless in hiding, refusing, or counteracting human gaze, these buildings also demonstrate resilience in becoming, falling apart, and sticking together, like all built matter around us.

To conclude, I will turn to architectural historian Sylvia Lavin's metaphor of "kissing architecture", to express the type of sensibility this essay was born out of and I hope it can contribute to. Based on the kiss as a softening, fluidifying action, Lavin elaborates on what she calls an intensely affective cultural project for architecture, which "could simply and with devastating generosity slip itself on and over the old medium of architecture and its even older sensibilities of authority and autonomous intellection".<sup>29</sup> What we are left with instead could be an instinctive resonance with built matter, an architectural kinship, a relaxation into process and impermanence, and a renewed praise for the generous offerings of architectural surfaces.

Geographers Harriet Hawkins and Elizabeth Straughan argue in their defense of surfaces that "textures and densities are not just things to be seen and described, they denote co-constitutive materialities with an ontological role in the making and shaping of human and non-human being."<sup>30</sup> Building surfaces are of different times and solidities, they are diverse, uncertain, susceptible to indecent looks, aggression and affection, and further change, change, change. As Sylvia Lavin so eloquently put it:

28. See, for example, Mona Fawaz, "Neoliberal Urbanity and the Right to the City: A View from Beirut's Periphery", *Development and Change* 40(5), 2009: 827–852; C. Nagel, "Reconstructing space, re-creating memory: sectarian politics and urban development", *Political Geography* 21(5), 2002: 717–25; Gruiă Badescu, "Beyond the Green Line: Sustainability and Beirut's post-war reconstruction", *Development*, 2011, 54(3): 358–367; Howayda al-Harithy, ed., *Lessons in postwar reconstruction, case studies from Lebanon* (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

29. Sylvia Lavin, *Kissing Architecture* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.



Figure 04. This crudely-patched façade on a Beirut building is further evidence for the foundational role of patches in keeping together the built environment, and the underlying productive operations of mending materials. Photo by author, November 2018.

A kissing exterior surface then, a surface that performs an entanglement of architecture with another, that pushes architecture out beyond its own envelope to risk exploding into something else, that—to select just one of many possibilities of what can happen to an exterior—entices fluttering where there is usually just fixity, permits the building that remains behind and within the lot line to outperform itself.<sup>31</sup>

Approached with appropriate curiosity, these two buildings have indeed “outperformed” themselves through their friction-full surfaces, in the time we

spent together to densify, intensify and acknowledge the complications of their surface-space.

## CONCLUSION

The walls I discussed here, as many (all?) others, are examples of matter articulating together, creating correspondences and expressive formations. They are evident works of addition, or the vibrancy that holds everything together: a wall not as a sum of its stones, but as a sum of the operations that put them there, the different temporalities of these operations, and the ensuing sympathy of otherwise disparate matter.

I am used to writing about surfaces additively, where matter stacks and surfaces thicken with layers of graphic inscriptions. Here, however, there seems to be a bonding condition made distinctive by its *uncovering*, as there is no protective coating to keep structural operations out of sight. Therefore, a consolidation takes place not in the depth of the surface, through stacked material layers, but in its

30. Elizabeth Straughan and Harriet Hawkins, *Geographical Aesthetics: Imagining Space, Staging Encounters* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 213-14.

31. Lavin, *Kissing Architecture*, 38.

*breadth*, in the total span of these building façades which reinforce themselves in their harmonious arrangement of mending matter.

The thinghood of the half arch in Pistoia was so intense, that it exceeded the vision of the architects and laborers who modified that façade. The arch was too stubborn to ignore, and it ended up holding its ground: crooked, broken, yet triumphant. None of these buildings are architecturally remarkable or otherwise notable, but it is in their mundane, low-key occupation that I found the most inspiring sources. The stubborn materiality that creates temporary networks of sympathy and affinity, the building matter that makes do, the vulnerability which liberates our expectations of architecture. Matter doing its thing, with or despite us, breaking and mending, adapting and collaborating. Patching the gaps, mending the wall, only to return and find it has shifted once more, much to the delight of this curious and empathetic observer.

I believe the concept of mending can be taken further to study the self-determination of built matter to stick together and re-take its position in a permanent state of flux. Surfaces occupying surfaces, pushing in, suturing, and speaking of the processual formation and de-formation of that which we desire to last.

Finally, there is a note to be made on my own positioning in this process. It is without doubt that the observations of this essay were foremost based on the unusually displayed matter of these two surfaces, just like they depended on me recognizing it. This capacity of recognition was partly developed through years of interest in surfaces and forming an empathy with these spaces; but it is also down to cultivating an instinctive, more than an analytical disposition for these and other encounters.

Most importantly however, I believe the key to developing caring thoughts about architectural (and other) matter is in being there, spending time together, creating imaginary dialogues, and intensifying the milieu between the viewer and the viewed (does the wall look back? what does it feel?). Such a prolonged, insistent presence can consolidate a rapport of care with these surfaces and other built matter, which is one possible response to Lavin's affective cultural project for architecture. A change in positioning which involves becoming minor and taking interest in the resourceful mending capacity of the built environment, which can teach us about mending our human entanglements in similar ways.

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