

Return of excess

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Our contemporary building industry has been shaped by centuries of extractive logic. Raw matter is removed, processed, standardised, and assembled into forms that prioritise efficiency and repetition over care, culture and contextuality. These systems reward speed, predictability and scale, while suppressing the irregular, tactile and shared situated knowledge¹.

As our world's material resources become increasingly exhausted, architecture has turned toward recycling as a corrective gesture. A response framed as both ethical necessity and technical solution. Yet recycling alone rarely challenges the deeper issues of industrial production. Instead, it often reproduces them. What emerges is a globally coherent aesthetic of compromise: One that displays the act of reuse while simultaneously confining materials to a narrative of scarcity, temporariness and restraint. A narrative that does not align with the idea of creating robust buildings that can hold the fragility of lived life and last long enough to be worth its material use.

To truly surpass and hack existing systems, we must develop new strategies that elevate our beliefs about non-virgin materials – not merely their sustainability, but their cultural and architectural potential. In our work with refinement as a strategy, we research how existing materials can be treated with handheld craft and care, elevating them beyond the familiar aesthetics of recycling.

I AM REUSED²

The reused, assembled, collaged aesthetic – built from found industrialized materials and employed in a direct manner – has rapidly been accepted in contemporary architecture. It often operates as a clear visual declaration: a signifier of sustainability. In practice, however, it often becomes an add-on present for branding value, rather than an actual sign of architectural quality.



Figure 1. Illustration from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), “I Am a Monument.”



Figure 2. Reused illustration from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), “I Am a Monument.”

This aesthetic symbolises a scarce and restrained approach as an opposition to our ongoing excessive material consumption, coupled with hyper-fast development and short planning horizons. It can have resemblances to the American Klondike of the 1800s. An architecture assembled quickly from what is at hand, in response to an urgent need.

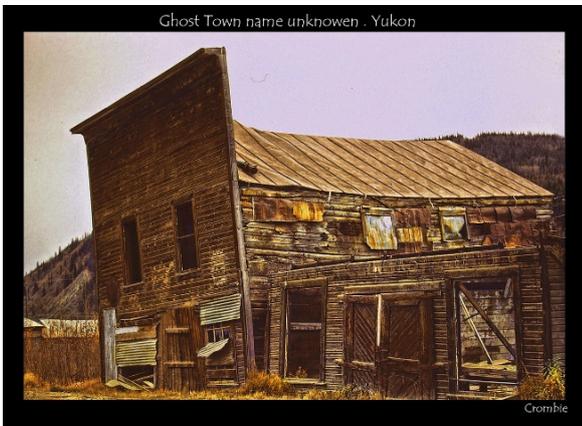


Figure 3. Ghost towns of the Klondike Gold Rush, photograph, PhotoNews.ca.³



Figure 4. CPH Village Nørrebro, Copenhagen, 2022–2023. Photograph by Sandra Gonon.

Paradoxically, this contemporary temporality mirrors the very architecture it positions itself against. Brutal honesty, when elevated to a singular value, risks becoming hollow if it offers nothing in return. No cultural resonance, no spatial generosity, no contextual specificity. The new Klondike, built from reused industrial and globalized materials, sometimes tells an honest story, but it is a story of a building culture operating at hyper-speed, rather than one of true local ingenuity born from material scarcity.

This results in an architecture with a limited range of use and development. Despite its urgent necessity in the transition away from virgin materials – and despite its role as an important eye-opener to the potentials of reuse, it remains a steppingstone rather than a destination.

We are not neglecting this past, nor dismissing the need to introduce and normalise a more collaged aesthetic. Rather, we seek to expand the narrative: from a billboard strategy yelling the need to a slower, more deliberate process of integration and refinement, capable of sustaining a complex long-lasting architectural language.

REFINEMENT AS STRATEGY

Our strategy is refinement (Danish: *forædling*). A method that, in the context of material reuse, disrupts systems of mass production by insisting on the reintroduction of handheld craft, time, and care. It elevates existing materials beyond the familiar aesthetics of recycling.

Through refinement, recycled materials are allowed to enter a new paradigm, where materials are understood as containers of lived life and as physical storytellers. By engaging with their possible expressions, surfaces, and transformations, refinement helps us approach a condition in which there is no longer something new and something old – only something lived, worked and continuously altered.

Refinement is fundamentally about adding layers or celebrating layers of time, accepting patina and weathering. Through varnish, paint, coatings, and treatments, materials have historically been made repairable, adaptable, and long-lasting. Refinement builds directly on this tradition.



Figure 5. Example of wood graining (Danish: *ådring*), Malerfag.dk.⁵



Figure 6. *La Biennale di Venezia – The Ramp*, Summa cum Femmer. 2024⁴

Layers are added to enhance aesthetic value, but always in ways that simultaneously improve durability and heighten tactile qualities. Each layer becomes both protection and expression. Through a range of refinement acts, we explore how materials can transition from a found aesthetic toward something beyond recognition – toward ornament, richness, and architectural presence. Historically this has, at times, had even greater value than valuable materials, like the tradition of graining (Danish: *ådring*), where cheap panels were painted into looking like exotic wood.

In an industrialised world, how could we achieve this?

THE PAVILION

Within the framework of the greenhouse, a mass-produced archetype, suitable for reuse, the pavilion plays with the stereotypical hierarchies of the house: plinth, wall, lintel, eaves, and ridge. Each element represents a different opportunity and degree of refinement, historically shaped by technical constraints, cultural expectations, and patterns of use.

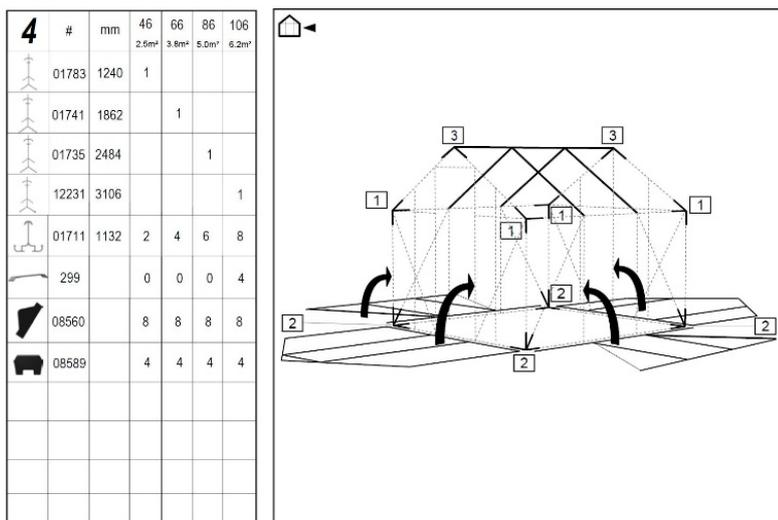


Figure 7. Greenhouse assembly guide, unknown source.

This framework creates an industrialized grid to host the refined materials, an order to the chaos. As seen in Otto Wagner’s Karlsplatz Pavilion, where the structure is assembled through ranges of refined materials within a rigid and legible framework. Degrees of refinement correspond precisely to function and expected wear: the plinth is coarse and roughly worked, while materials become increasingly fine as they move away from daily contact, culminating in purely ornamental floral paintings on marble slabs. ⁶



Figure 8. Otto Wagner Pavilions at Karlsplatz, Vienna, Austria. 1899
Photograph, Wikimedia Commons.⁷

Although not constructed from reused materials, Wagner's way of treating materials aligns closely with what a refined use of today's industrial material surplus might look like.

Like the Karlsplatz Pavilion, almost dressed as a palace, we seek to refine the greenhouse into something more. Through the use of borrowed elements from our archetypal language it can become a kiosk, a house, or even a small palace.

This introduces a sometimes-lost complexity: what was found, and what is new? What is original and what is added?

The refinement of the materials themselves becomes the story. The working, sanding, layering, and reworking produce a *quiet excess* of intent. Every material, every element becomes an opportunity. It is not about abundance for its own sake, nor about denying material restraint. It is an insistence that reuse does not have to manifest modesty, temporariness, or visual apology. Through refinement, excess becomes careful rather than careless – complex rather than honest.

Notes

¹ Haraway, Donna (1988): Situated Knowledges: “*The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3

² Modification of : Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

³ PhotoNews.ca, “Ghost Towns of the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush,” accessed 15.01.2026.

⁴ Summa cum Femmer, “La Biennale di Venezia – The Ramp,” accessed 15.01.2026, https://summacumfemmer.com/041_rampe/.

⁵ Malerfag.dk, “Ådring,” accessed 15.01.2026, <https://malerfag.dk/aadring/>.

⁶ Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to This Field of Art* (Vienna, 1896; repr., Santa Monica, CA: Getty Research Institute, 1988).

⁷ Wikimedia Commons, “Otto-Wagner-Pavillon am Karlsplatz,” accessed 15.01.2026.

BIOs:

A part of Sum is the studio of Philip Lütken (b. 1996), Emilie Boye Kjær (b. 1993), Laurids Bager (b. 1995), and Christian Schmidt (b. 1994), founded in Copenhagen in 2024. The studio experiments with collective processes in architecture through a range of projects: alternative housing types, nature facilities, biogenic construction, experimental transformation, and radical material reuse. They strive to create architectural coherence and spaces that can hold the diversity, fragility, celebration, and seriousness that life consists of – always with a playful commitment that celebrates the everyday and the small details (part) that enrich the larger whole (sum).