Contemporary Spoliation: Productive Reuse in Francesco Venezia's Projects

ANNETTE CONDELLO
Curtin University, Perth

Abstract

From the mid-1970s onward, Neapolitan architect Francesco Venezia generated intriguing reuse projects, in and out of sync with other postmodernists of his era, and his writings on 'architectural spoils' are most influential today when regenerating cities. Venezia's work, such as Lauro Square (1976), critically interrogates Naples' pre-Christian palimpsest as spaces of spolia. He embraces the constructed landscape and luxurious spolia of the antiquity of Egypt, Paestum and Pompeii. Additionally, he embraces the complexity of Naples' archaeological remnants and modern architectural history with the unveiling of hidden poetic qualities of their fragments within Le Corbusier's writing and sketches. This paper will expand on previous research on the writings and projects by Venezia, by tracing the modern and contemporary fragmentation within his designs. The paper will briefly look at Venezia's reuse projects at Caserta (2014) and Pompeii (2015), which present important arguments for establishing and interpreting the reuse of spolia between antiquity and the modern. Projecting a new understanding on architectural spoliation, by positioning the discussion outside mainstream postmodern discussions, it argues that Venezia's meaningful projects embrace the idea of palimpsest and that contemporary regenerating of city-landscapes contribute to producing environments that eliminate wasted spaces.

Keywords

Contemporary spoliation; spolia as luxury; regenerating Naples.

Introduction

Spoils, as we know them today, are not stolen goods as such but architectural ruins. These also connote luxurious fragments, informing architectural compositions in the landscape. Traditionally, the use of spoils was associated with the arts of war. Various cultures captured them from battling cities, where they dispersed powerful gestures throughout numerous buildings, as a way of preserving significant moments of cultural significance. The powerful gestures of these fragments were designated as trophies, preserving memories. Some of these preserved memories were created from preceding fragments, from the so-called 'imperfect' buildings. Architectural spoil sources are derived from the Mediterranean modernist projects, destroyed buildings, the topography itself. These sources aid in creating contemporary architectural spoliation that inform how landscapes might be regenerated.

During the 1970s, the economic and social imbalances between Northern and Southern Italy pressured the demand for new urban configurations. These problems resulted in state commissions enabling certain architects to improve specific areas, notably the Milanese architect Vittorio Gregotti and Ludovico Quaroni, for example, participated in re-planning parts of Sicily and Calabria. The new town of Gibellina in Sicily in particular has provided other architects, specifically those architects involved in the 1980 Belice Laboratory, with ample material to appropriate fragments into new buildings.
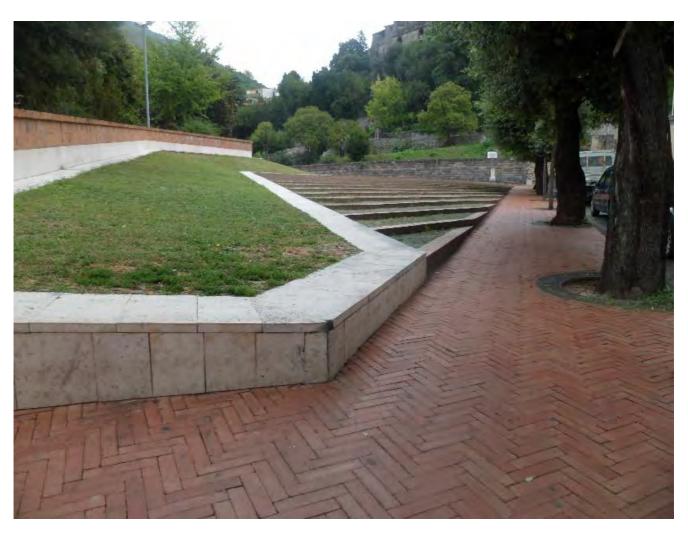
In the late 1990s, I visited Burri's enigmatic landscape in Sicily's Belice Valley as well as the

ANNETTE CONDELLO

old town of Gibellina, considered by many as one of Italy's ghost towns partly because American suburbanization simply does not seem to work there. In 1968, a strong earthquake shook Gibellina and killed hundreds of its inhabitants, turning the town into a quarry of destroyed fragments. As in many other cities in Italy damaged by natural catastrophes, wars, such as Naples during World War Two, or incompetent construction and these effects brought ruin to southern Italy's regional monumental heritage. Outlying cities developed into ghost towns. In the 1980s, a new town of Gibellina was rebuilt twenty kilometres away. Although the old town no longer exists, its buildings are covered with layers of concrete. 'The shattered houses were levelled to a uniform height, boxed in by wooden planking, and the white molten concrete poured into the mould' [Woodward 2001, 84] a well-preserved fragmentary landscape.

Over the course of more than two decades, I have researched the work and met with contemporary Neapolitan architect Francesco Venezia on a number of occasions in Naples, including Caserta. Elsewhere, I have connected Venezia's projects with the work of modern Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi [Condello, Lehmann, 2016]. Venezia won the 2019 Piranesi Prix de Rome for lifetime achievement. His entire oeuvre indeed embraces pre-Christian archaeology and modern landscape architecture informed by the Neoclassical and modern architects in unexpected ways.

Francesco Venezia first addressed the notion of the fragment in his Gibellina Museum design in Sicily, published in *Transfer and Transformation. The Architecture of Spoils: a Compositional Technique* (1985). This theoretical and practical technique is evident in his Lauro Square design (1973-1976) in Avellino, near Naples (fig. 1). Venezia's design of Lauro Square, sited outside Naples, behind Mount Vesuvius, shows a distorted perspectival fusion of both spoils and the trapezoidal form. What is construed in this particular example is the reference to the celebrated modern Casa Malaparte, located on the Isle of Capri, which in turn alludes to the Annunciata Church located on Lipari Island (Curzio Malaparte's place of Exile) Sicily. The *chthonic* implication, used as the spoliatory material presents an important genesis for Venezia's projects. His work relies on the incorporation of hidden modernist elements. The use of the trapezoidal staircase connecting to the open roof terrace could be interpreted as an assimilation of the spoliatory gestures of these two places, in which he juxtaposes them in relation to the open free plan of the spaces surrounding Lauro Square. Here one may perceive Venezia's inclusion of pre-Christian palimpsest of «expressive sediments made of sediments» [Venezia 1980, 325]. From this project onwards, Venezia developed 'the architecture of spoils' theme through a number of projects in Italy and other parts of Europe, the United States, including Australia. Such spoliatory projects have enabled Venezia to construct new platforms of meaning, which are important components relating to the contingent landscape.

To understand the components of the contingent topography, this paper argues that the discussion of spoliation centred on its contemporary presence, has been confused by inappropriate interpretations of the meaning and significance of fragmentation. A number of historical architectural examples will be discussed to suggest his valid fragmentary practice, in other words, the grounding of displaced cultural fragments (physical and gestural) in contemporary architecture. Such a practice is often derived from a critical reaction to the persistence of historical monuments and from the presence of the buried topography of towns and cities. The concern about the problem with modern and contemporary fragmentation was problematic for Venezia.

1: Francesco Venezia's Lauro Square project in Campania (https://ladyfullmetal.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/sam_2631.jpg).

And in the case of Venezia's schemes, he has deliberately included the buried topography of Naples and its environs to appeal to the occupants in how they would use or sense these spaces.

1. Spolia as fragmentation, illusion, fusion

Some scholars [Ortelli 1984, Venezia 1985, Frascari 1991; Meier 2011] have discussed spoils as a category of fragmentation in relation to architecture. While others have discussed the implications of these fragments in Italy, and elsewhere. One of the unifying issues in these studies is the incorporation of plundered *spolia* in buildings [Wharton 1995, Brilliant, Kinney 2011]. The paradoxical relation between the words 'spoil' and '*spolia*' makes this study relevant, however, the literature relating to contemporary versions of the spoliation of architecture in Southern Italy is limited. The historical significance of the plundering of *spolia* was introduced in the ancient Roman era, the meaning of *spolia* was «an entirely modern one, based on a word from the realm of art historical terminology in architecture» [Brenk 1987, 103]. Although the entire Mediterranean basin hoarded *spolia*, the ancient Roman Empire in particular displayed a passion for the incorporation of coded meanings into its

architecture. Other cities of course left extensive remains, which were later transferred and reused in new structures, such as the Arch of Constantine in Rome (312-315), a renowned example of accumulative *spolia*. This process of hoarding, accumulating fragments within a permanent wall erected round a building (or near a quarry), rather than the sense of the accumulation of fragments hidden away for future use, continued through to the Middle Ages. Ancient *spolia* from various sources were prized and hoarded in architecture; the presence of a number of cultural sources in a single building.

George Hersey points out, for instance, that at ancient Paestum, south of the Bay of Naples, many terra-cotta statuettes of the goddess *Hera* were found buried in the earth around the Temple of Neptune [Hersey 1995]. These were returned to the goddess and this occurred on the site of the temple, or on the site where the new building was to be erected. For Hersey '*exuviae* (spoils) had to be honoured so that the spirits of the dead would not trouble the victors [Aeneid, II.5ff., II.83ff.]. Trophies, like sacrificed victims, also involved reconstruction [Hersey 1988, 2-9, 20]. Clearly, there was some form of transferral of significance in *spolia* used in religious building. It is within this context that the buried 'trophies' within architecture must be understood.

Following on from Hersey, Annabel Wharton has described the 'space as spolia' as the public display of destruction [Hersey 1995, 99]. This type of space is evident as a trapezoidal or 'skewed' spaces, such as Venezia's Laura Square (1976) design. In terms of modern and contemporary fragmentation, Vesely notes that it is «like an unwanted guest, a by-product of the deep tendency in the evolution of modernity» (1996: 111). The incorporation of lost fragments prompts me to explore the reuse of luxurious fragments, preparing space as *spolia* of this absence, or as a mark of loss of the departed divinity in this paper.

The validity of the terms 'spoil' and '*spolia*' was not questioned after the Middle Ages, as they ceased to play an expressive part in architecture [Raff 1995]. «The Renaissance revered the antique monuments too much simply to plunder them, and the Baroque had little use for the material remains of the Middle Ages» [Raff 1995, 70]. One important factor is that both the Renaissance and Baroque eras appeared to have absorbed the *spolia* into an 'illusion.' Here the theory of the fragment changes. Architects opted for a more deviant measure of distorting space by using representation as a sign. Literal devices included overt decoration and unusual configuration which occurs in the complex staircase of the Sanfelice Palace in Naples by the architect Ferdinando Sanfelice, concealing past architectural styles [Gambardella 1993]. In creating masses of fragmentary confusion these building elements opened up new forms in architecture, affecting the built landscape.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, historians dismissed the term 'spoil' for it's being used indiscriminately. As Marco Frascari notes, «neoclassical critics gave a negative connotation to the[e] architecture [of spoils], calling it fragmentary» [Frascarini 1991, 23]. Similar to Kinney's suggestion of Vasari's sense of 'forlorn ruins,' Frascari's explanation of spoils as being fragmentary impactions or conceptually compacted entities is perhaps closely linked to a more apparent characteristic, the practice of 'demonstration.' Through illusion, fragmentation was eclipsed from the panoply of surviving Classical models into a controlled manner of disarray. The act of spoliation therefore creates architectural and landscape 'illusions', fused into new productive forms or 'convulsive solutions.'

2. Architectural Spoliation as 'Convulsive solutions'
In *Monsters of Architecture,* Marco Frascari elucidates the term 'the architecture of spoils'. «every architectural piece echoes other pieces into infinity, weaving the fabric of the text of

culture itself» [Frascari 1991, 22]. He argues that all these elements have meaning; they possess an appropriate method for manipulating architecture, in contrast to the post-modern puzzle of forms. In pursuing a discourse on the *architettura di spoglio,* I refer to 'monstrosity' (or distortion), which enables the construction of a meaningful architecture unified by specific detailing, 'the margins or joints,' which enable a passage of meaning [Frascari 1991, 22]. Discussing the derivation of the grotesque from the word 'demonstration,' Frascari argues that 'monsters' are conceptual juxtapositions of architectural figures, which reveal or demonstrate. His lucid analysis of the issue of demonstration analyses old and new concepts of bodily fragments in relation to the constructed world. He argues that «it is in the margins or joints that the misplacing of meanings produced by the spatial measure of the existing constructions become a physical expression of a meta-basis of a passage to the other in built form» [Frascari 1991: 45; and Tafuri 1987]. Frascari's interpretation of spoils is considered herein forming the basis to trace the shift in the transformation and reuse of other buildings, since «the building elements are compelling demonstrations of how we inhabit the world» [Frascari 1991, 89-109].

Manfredo Tafuri offers an insight into what I perceive as contributing to the idea of palimpsest as contemporary spoliation. He argues that the first generation modernists, such as Mario Ridolfi and Ernesto Rogers, evoked the gravity of history in a fragmentary manner. The gravity of unanalyzed works, preceding both classicism and modernism, forms the basis for an understanding of the contingent agendas between the fragmentary qualities of *trapezia,* or the skewed plans of building projects and their immediate sites. In re-constructing new grounds and buildings, the problem with the residue of architecture is a result of the 'crisis of fragments' [Tafuri 1989]. When Tafuri referred to the 'formal residue' of architectural works of the Roman School in the 1970's, he described them as being «tempered by angular, empty, distorted, and convulsive solutions» [Tafuri 1989, 122-23]. Venezia's architecture predetermines a quality of 'attentive appropriation.' This quality is manifested in his appropriation of cultural residuum; the deployment of the 'angular' produces 'empty' traces in his residual compositions.

Tafuri's reference to 'convulsive solutions,' could be ascribed to Venezia's commencement of his contemporary *spoliation* phase of works. A detailed image of the Gibellina Museum, demonstrating the old and new fragments, is placed on the cover of Tafuri's book *The History of Italian Architecture 1944-1985* (1989). This is evidence of his appreciation of transformative architecture. Tafuri denies the possibility of creating grand plans and utopias, and this cover presents the conflict of *spolia*, the interval between the old and new fragment, as an architectural summation of Italian architecture. This detail expresses visible separations between *spolia* that evoke the political fragmentation hindering construction in Southern Italy. The conflict of *spolia*, paralleling the absence of a stable cultural ground, resonates in Venezia's separation of fragments. His design process 'holds' a work apart, as an impacted construction process. This *Italian* architectural fragment follows Venezia's dictum: that the architecture of spoils should «separate[e] that fragment which belongs together, and [join] what was separate» [Venezia 1985, 103].

The divergence of interpretation parallels Vesely's discussion of the ambiguity of the fragment. In relation to the gestural configuration of a space, he suggests that it's «power depends entirely on the metaphorical articulation of the space. I am a little reluctant to accept his statement that communicative space generated by positive fragments [...] has the capacity to hold together a plausible solution and a series of possible ones» [Vesely 1996, 120]. Vesely further notes: «the fact that the process of restoration is often based on the

ambiguity of negative and positive fragmentation, that it has to be sometimes provocative and even violent should not surprise us» [Vesely 1996, 120]. This statement may apply to Venezia's works in the sense that they demonstrate positive and negative aspects of culture, fabricated into new spoliatory projects, as enigmatic fragments.

Raff has discussed the practice of spoliatory architecture in both historical and contemporary contexts. He compares the meaning capacity of this ancient practice with what he sees as the superficial assemblage or manipulation of elements in contemporary examples of fragmentary architecture including Venezia's Gibellina Museum. Raff disregards any positive resolution of this ancient practice in contemporary architecture, dismissing the practice as some post-modern *pastiche*. He overlooks the diverse meaning of Venezia's compositional technique of *spolia* in the museum. Raff contrasts these and earlier examples, in determining the meaning capacity of ancient *spolia.* The architecture of spoils is «a strangely superficial conception of the historic monument (preserving) only a part of an older building, often the facade, while the rest is demolished and replaced by a new structure» [Raff 1995, 71]. Despite his dismissal of Venezia's technique, he considers this work to be a «secular architectural relic» [Raff 1995, 71], one that takes up again the medieval process of *spolia*, previously rejected by neoclassicist critics as a culture of disembodied fragments.

3. Productive reuse as contemporary architectural spoliation

I would argue that Venezia's work is not fragmentary in the pejorative sense used by the Neoclassicists, but is an attempt to reconstruct a pertinent image of the ground. I consider Venezia's engagement in diverse modes of preceding buildings and other landscapes provide the anchorage for new platforms of architectural meaning. The museum clearly demonstrates the awareness of the problem of the transferred fragment, through this juxtaposition of old and new *spolia* within its interior/exterior walls. Out of these ambiguous fragments Venezia creates grounded constructions. As he has mentioned, certain pieces of material are selected from nature or from other buildings. Certain materials and ideas are transferred and 'attentively appropriated' into new contexts, rather than being merely manipulated into a *pastiche* of elements. Francesco Venezia makes references to the gesture of the *spolium* and trapezoidal spaces in many of his projects.

In terms of how his projects are articulated, Venezia alludes to 'aplomb' strategies by poetically describing what he refers to as a «compromised equilibrium» [Venezia 1989, 209]. He compares a frieze from the Temple E of Selinunte, Sicily, noting the oblique lines of the figures that made the tangle of imagery in each metope with Le Corbusier's 'elongated contours' in the Capitol of Chandigarh, India, and the complex at Firminy, France. Revealing its conflicting gestures, the metopes at Selinunte enabled Venezia to use this poetic idea: «a kind of opposition, of conflict took the form of narrative» [Venezia1989, 209]. Venezia has integrated other projects by Le Corbusier as a way of encompassing the 'compromised equilibrium' of his buildings. Venezia analyses of Le Corbusier's projects and writings question the chthonic platform, which becomes a crypt, but one which cease to be a shelter. Venezia also questions the sketch of the Church of Tremblay (1929): «how could it be possible that a person attentive to the measure of all things could think about arranging the altar and the benches of a church in the bottom of a shaft, leaving an immense space totally useless» [Venezia 1988, 18-19]. In this way it is possible to determine the meaning capacity of gauging the physical topographical levels of the 'hallowed' ground of a particular project in its relocation. This 'hallowed' characteristic of the ground and its opposing settlements from different cultures are contrasted with previous displaced grounds. Sedimentary layers

comprised of remnant cultures become integrated with other buildings and create the space for consideration of the contemporary spoliation of his more recent projects, namely the Caserta Cathedral hypogea (2014) (fig. 2 and 3) and temporary pyramid at Pompeii (2015) (fig. 4) and other projects in Campania.

2: Caserta Cathedral hypogea and 3: pergola by Francesco Venezia (2014). Cistern of accrued ancient and modern sediments. Photos by: Annette Condello.

Conclusion: regenerating spoliatory city-landscapes

When considering the regeneration of architectural spaces, Allen Weiss' book *Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture* (1998) raises an important awareness pertinent for today's landscape treatment. This is especially the case with respect to landscape's historical, modern and contemporary management. Weiss noted the frustrated management of *The Spoils of the Park: with a few leaves from the deep-laden note-books of a wholly unpractical man* (1882) pamphlet within American Landscape design Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park design in New York in the context of Versailles, France. Rather than treating it as a forgotten and marginal discourse, Weiss discusses Versailles garden as a central park, central to landscape architecture discourse. Referring to Olmsted, Weiss notes that 'in 1857, eleven citizens of New York were asked to prepare for the transformation of a broken, rocky, sterile, and intractable body of land, more than a mile square in extent, into a public ground, to stand in the heart of a great commercial city. Olmsted's pamphlet was partly a report on spoils as public benefits that corrupted politics.

4: Francesco Venezia's Temporary pyramid within the Roman amphitheatre at Pompeii (2015) (https://divisareres.cloudinary.com/images/c_limit,f_auto,h_2000,q_auto,w_3000/v1441351538/js7rf8buug6byah3rqqy/francesco-venezia-andrea-jemolo-stolen-from-death.jpg).

5: Curtin University Masters of Architecture student project by Jayesh Soul (2020) from the 'Regenerating Naples' Design Studio run by Annette Condello; an experimentation with Francesco Venezia's spoliatory city-landscape.

There was «a relinquishment of the spoils of office in the proposed work» [Weiss 1998, 51]. What are the derivations of Olmsted's landscape spoliation? How did American land art affect the Italian environment in the 1970s and 80s, specifically through Alberto Burri's earth-insertion in Sicily?

A contemporary spoliatory practice has allowed Venezia to re-conceptualize his city or landscape intentions and attitudes toward pre-existent materials and sites to be regenerated. This type of practice has also necessitated him to clarify his own intention towards incorporating his regeneration process to ground objects. Contemporary architectural spoliation reveals the interrelation between material conditions and human aspirations, as evident in the author's 2020 'Regenerating Naples Design Studio' experiment (see figure 4), rather than simply manipulating the traces of the spolia as displaced 'compositional material'.

Bibliography
BRILLIANT, R., KINNEY, D. (2016). *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine,* Oxon, Taylor and Francis.
CONDELLO, A., LEHMANN, S. (2016). *Sustainable Lina: Lina Bo Bardi's Adaptive Reuse Projects,* Springer Publishers.
CONDELLO, A. (2015). *Wilful forgetting: luxury, ethics and fascist architecture*, in «*Archithese*», n. 4.
CONDELLO, A (2003). *Architectural Spoils: Francesco Venezia and Sicily's spogliatoia,* in *Constructing Place,* ed. by Sarah Menin, London, Routledge, pp. 286-296.
FRASCARI, M. (1990). *Monsters of Architecture: Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
GAMBARDELLA, C. (1993). *L'Architettura delle Scale: Disegna, teoria e tecnica*, Genova, SAGEP Editrice.
HERSEY, G. (1995). *Essay in Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*, edited by G. Hersey, P. Matvegevic, Aperture Foundation.
MARZO, M. (2018). *Francesco Venezia - L'azione del tempo*, in «Firenze Architettura», n. 21 (2), pp. 92-101.
MEIER, H.R. (2011). *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, edited by R. Brilliant, D. Kinney.
ORTELLI, L. (1984). *Architecture of Walls. Francesco Venezia's Gibellina Museum*, in «Lotus International», n.42.
RAFF, T. (1995). *Spolia - Building material or bearer of meaning*, in «Daidalos», vol. 58.
TAFURI, M. (1989) *History of Italian architecture, 1944-1985,* London, MIT Press.
VENEZIA, F. (2014). *Gli hypogea della cattedrale di Caserta/ The hypogea of Caserta Cathedral*, in «Domus» n. 982.
VENEZIA, F (1985). *Transfer and transformation: the architecture of spoils: a compositional technique*, in «Daidalos», n. 16, pp. 91-104.
VENEZIA, F. (1980). *La medaglia e il suo rovescio*, in «Lotus International», n. 28.
VESELEY, D. (1996). *Architecture and the ambiguity of the fragment*, in *AA The idea of the city*, edited by R. Middleton London, Architectural Association, pp. 109-21.
WEISS, A.S. (1998). *Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture*, Princeton Architectural Press.
WHARTON, A.J. (1995). *Refiguring the Postclassical City: Dura Europos, Jerash, Jerusalem and Ravenna*, Cambridge, Wickham.
WOODWARD, C. (2001). *In Ruins*, London, Chatto & Windus, p. 84.

Interview
CONDELLO, A (2014). *Interviewed Italian architect Francesco Venezia in his studio in Naples*, (Video-recorded Friday 13th June - Unpublished).