

A black and white photograph of a large, complex wooden sculpture under construction. The structure is made of numerous long wooden beams and planks, some of which are arranged in a way that suggests a ladder or a set of stairs. Four men are visible: one is standing on a high part of the structure, another is leaning against a beam in the foreground, and two others are standing on the ground in front of the structure. The background shows some trees and foliage.

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON

EMBODIED CULTURE

26-27 May 2026, Brussels

Call for Abstracts

submission deadline: 31 December 2025

EMBODIED CULTURE

Recent architectural discourse has been dominated by attempts to quantify material impact—embodied carbon, embodied energy, life-cycle metrics. While essential in addressing the climate crisis, this quantitative turn often renders architecture mute in relation to culture, history, and politics. *Embodied culture* is proposed here as a complement, and as a challenge: a critical and generative framework for rethinking what buildings are, what they mean, and how they come into being.

Embodied culture shifts the focus from matter as resource to matter as relation. It posits that materials are never neutral or inert. They carry within them unique histories of extraction, labour, governance, resistance, and situated knowledge. Embodied culture therefore calls for a reorientation of architectural inquiry—one that foregrounds relations over objects, processes over products, and embedded knowledges over abstract metrics. A wall is not just a structure—it is a sedimentation of norms, techniques, weathering, regulations, desires, exclusions. Landscapes are not just backdrops; they afford and resist. Regulations are not external constraints; they actively shape what is buildable. Labour is not a footnote; it is formative, even though often erased.

Drawing from feminist theory and new materialism, particularly the concept of intra-action (Barad), this symposium takes seriously the idea that buildings emerge not through linear causality, but through entangled co-production between humans, non-humans, tools, systems, and

environments. In this, it resonates with Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Tim Ingold's thinking on making and material flows, and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus as a site of embodied knowledge.

At the same time, embodied culture connects with scholarship that grounds these theoretical perspectives in the histories and practices of building: studies of labour and worker agency (Wall, Clarke, Jounin), regulation and technical codes (Lloyd Thomas, Picon), reuse and heritage (Ross, Arlotta, Ghyoot, Harrison), material traces and value regimes (Otero-Pailos, Lending, Forty, Arrhenius, Plevoets, Edensor), the circulation of materials across landscapes (Hutton, Moe, Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative), and the shifting temporalities of architecture (Abramson, Tischleder & Wasserman, DeSilvey).

Together, these perspectives open up a field where embodied culture can serve both as a critical lens, questioning existing narratives of building, reuse, and heritage, and as a tool for revaluation, opening new ways to see, work with, and care for the built world.

We invite contributions that interrogate the values, exclusions, aesthetics, and social formations embedded in the built environment. The symposium seeks historical and theoretical reflections, case-based investigations, and design research that advance this agenda—whether in the form of scientific papers or alternative formats. Contributions may relate to one or more of the seven thematic lenses outlined below.

THEMATIC LENSES

MATERIALS AND LANDSCAPES.

Extraction, circulation and cultural landscapes

A building is never just a human imposition on a passive environment. Materials bring with them situated knowledge, labour histories, and cultural associations. Stone, timber, clay, concrete, or earth participate in the building process through resistance, availability, and meaning. At the same time, landscapes are not neutral backdrops: they act as active archives of extraction, transport, deposition, and reuse. Quarries, forests, rivers, ports, and urban soils register shifting material flows, while demolition sites, landfills, and storage yards embody reciprocal relations between construction and waste. Landscapes are also culturally framed, narrated, and represented, affecting how we imagine building grounds and their histories. We welcome studies that investigate how landscapes shape and are reshaped by building and disassembling practices; how they mediate local identity, economic regimes, and ecological transformation; and how they function as both sources and sinks in the circulation of building materials. Contributions may draw on historical analysis, design research, or critical engagement with contemporary practices.

CCULTURAL TECHNIQUES

AND PRACTICES. *Embodied knowledge in everyday building*

From quarrying and scaffolding to measuring, assembling, repairing, and disassembling—building involves embodied knowledge that is transmitted, adapted, or lost. These cultural techniques are often mundane, situated, or marginal, yet they shape what gets built and what is deemed buildable or reusable. They encompass tacit skills, vernacular logics, repair practices, and undocumented methods that resist standardization, while also structuring professional conventions and collective memory. This lens invites attention to such practices not only as technical operations, but as cultural acts that reveal how architecture comes into being. How do everyday routines—cataloguing, dismantling, scaffolding, or repair—produce forms of legitimacy or exclusion? How are techniques remembered, represented, or theorized within architectural discourse, and what disappears from dominant accounts of building culture? We welcome studies that engage with cultural techniques historically or theoretically, as well as case-based analyses that foreground the entanglement of knowledge, practice, and material process.

LABOUR, TOOLS AND AGENCY. *The social and material organisation of work*

Buildings are produced, repaired, and maintained through labour—yet many forms of labour remain invisible or undervalued. Who gets credited for building work? How do workers articulate and command agency? Who disappears from narratives of design or reuse? And how do techniques, skills, and the material organisation of work shape what is socially and materially possible? The visibility and valuation of labour are profoundly affected by the impact of tools and machines, as well as by the technical and material organisation of work. Mechanisation, prefabrication, or new assembly logics may enhance efficiency but obscure certain skills, while others gain prestige through their association with innovation. We invite contributions that highlight these dynamics—whether in employment and working conditions, wage relations, worker representation, migrant workforces, hazardous sites, informal economies, gendered labour, or cooperative modes of organisation. We also encourage analyses that foreground labour not only as mental and bodily effort, but also in terms of its material and cultural impacts—how work shapes constructions, enables or limits reuse, and influences how buildings are valued, maintained, or dismantled.

REGULATIONS AND BUREAUCRACIES.

*Codes, norms and the politics of
building*

Often seen as neutral constraints, regulations and codes are in fact powerful shapers of embodied culture. They define what counts as legal, safe, or valuable, thereby influencing the material and social composition of buildings. Regulations do not remain abstract; they are inscribed in materials, assemblies, and techniques, prescribing how things may be built, reused, or maintained. In doing so, they embed cultural values and power relations in the very fabric of the built environment, legitimising some practices while rendering others invisible or impossible. At the same time, regulatory frameworks are themselves shaped by, and emerge out of, changing material and social conditions: new technologies, shifting labour practices, ecological concerns, or political priorities all leave their mark on what becomes standardised or permitted. This lens encourages critical analyses of norms, standards, permits, building codes, and the diverse organisations that sustain them. We invite contributions that examine how regulatory regimes evolve, how they stabilise or unsettle embodied practices, and how they mediate between regulation, labour, design, and reuse.

MATERIAL TRACES AND VALUES.

Patina, obsolescence and contested worth

Embodied traces of use, time, or alteration—such as patina, wear, patchwork, or residue—may acquire cultural, economic, ecological, or heritage value, or conversely become stigmatized as obsolete, banal, or toxic. How do different regimes of value—beauty, utility, scarcity, authenticity, age, or danger—intersect and compete in shaping what is preserved, reused, or discarded? The emergence of obsolescence, for instance, transformed notions of age value, while industrially produced elements raise questions of standardization, durability, and disposability. Increasing scarcity or awareness of embedded toxicity may equally shift perceptions of worth. Value regimes are not stable: they are negotiated by institutions, markets, professional cultures, and publics, and they can conflict or overlap across contexts. We invite contributions that interrogate how such regimes emerge, operate, and transform over time, and how they shape the cultural, material, and social lives of buildings and fragments in both heritage and circular practices.

METACULTURAL OPERATIONS.

Bridging material culture and heritage practice

If embodied culture shifts attention from matter as resource to matter as relation, then the practices through which those relations are made visible, reframed, or obscured can be understood as metacultural operations. Such operations occur across a wide spectrum: reuse, commodification, downcycling, artistic intervention, heritagization, collecting, archiving, digital abstraction, aestheticisation. Each operation negotiates how materials are remembered or forgotten, celebrated or disqualified, fixed in meaning or opened to reinterpretation. Architectural fragments offer a particularly rich case. As fragments move from one context to another, their cultural meanings are actively renegotiated: they may be reframed within narratives of resilience or identity, sanitised through the erasure of labour or conflict, reclassified by institutions, or turned into commodities and aesthetic products. Yet fragments are not passive—material traces and physical properties may resist or complicate these overlays. We invite contributions that investigate how metacultural operations mobilise and contest embodied culture, whether in heritage conservation, everyday reuse, artistic practice, or material care.

TEMPORALITIES AND AFTERLIVES.

Durability, decay and architectural time

Embodied culture is never static. Buildings, elements, materials and assemblies evolve through weathering, repair, adaptation, appropriation, abandonment, or reuse. Their durability is not an inherent property but the outcome of ongoing relations—of maintenance, labour, regulation, and care. In a time when different forms of obsolescence coexist and are often evaluated through quantitative measures of lifespan or performance, this lens seeks alternative ways of understanding time in architecture. What are the many processes by which constructions are made to last—not just on their own, but thanks to many agencies over time? To what extent can liminal spaces—abandoned, unfinished, fragmented, or in ruin—play an active role in reshaping architectural practices and perceptions of time? We invite contributions that explore these temporal dimensions of building culture, whether through historical analysis, theoretical reflection, or case-based research.

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

We welcome contributions from scholars, designers, and practitioners engaging with the cultural layers of the built environment in the broadest sense.

Submission of abstracts (approx. 300 words) takes place via the online form available on the project webpage: www.vub.be/arch/project/embodiedculture. Abstracts will be reviewed for relevance to the theme, originality, and clarity of argument. To ensure blind peer review, abstract texts must not contain identifying information. Author names, affiliations, and a short résumé should be provided separately through the online form. When submitting your abstract, please indicate whether you intend to present a traditional paper or propose an alternative format (e.g. video essay, documentary fragment, interview, round table, object-based talk, workshop). For questions or to discuss the suitability of an alternative format, please contact the organizers. All abstracts and submissions must be in English.

If accepted, authors will be asked to submit a short paper of approximately 2,000 words, or an equivalent contribution in the chosen format, by 31 March 2026. A template will be provided. Presentations (traditional or alternative) will be scheduled in 15–20 minute slots.

A PDF with abstracts and papers will be shared with all participants. In addition, we aim to publish a more substantial selection of contributions in the form of an edited volume or journal special issue (details to follow).

TIMELINE

Abstract deadline:	31 December 2025
Notification of acceptance:	31 January 2026
Paper submission:	31 March 2026
Final decision:	30 April 2026
Symposium (Brussels):	26–27 May 2026

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More information via <https://www.vub.be/arch/project/embodiedculture>

NETWORKS & PARTNERS

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH NETWORK 'READ.ADAPT.REUSE' (As Found)

This symposium is part of the Scientific Research Network 'Read.Adapt.Reuse' (As Found), supported by a grant from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). The Network brings together researchers from a wide range of disciplines, including architectural design and theory, interior architecture, construction history, material culture, heritage conservation, landscape architecture, and urban design. What unites them is a shared interest in developing innovative methods for reading and interpreting the cultural layers embedded in the built environment, and for activating both its tangible and intangible traces.

Recognizing the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the built environment, the Network advocates for integrated and creative approaches to working with the as found—the existing architectural fabric. Its goal is to foster exchange across disciplinary boundaries, enabling the circulation of perspectives, concepts, and findings. By doing so, the Network seeks to generate synergies and develop new methodologies that more effectively connect interpretation with transformation in the context of adaptive reuse. More information about the Network, including past and upcoming events, is available at: <https://www.uhasselt.be/en/onderzoeksgroepen-en/arck/trace-heritage-adaptive-reuse/as-found-network>

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH PROGRAM 'RE-BUILDING BRUSSELS'

The interdisciplinary research program 'Re-Building Brussels (1695-2025): the construction sector as an engine for social inclusion and circularity' aims to deliver insights in the long-term dynamics that shaped the relationship between urban construction and its ecological and social impact. The project examines the ways in which —and the reasons why— material reuse and the labour market have evolved in Brussels since the beginning of modern urban growth in the eighteenth century until today.

The program is funded by Vrije Universiteit Brussel (2021-2026) and builds upon the VUB IRP program (2016-2021) 'Building Brussels. Brussels City Builders and the Production of Space, 1794-2015'. It unites researchers from three research groups at Vrije Universiteit Brussel: Architectural Engineering, Social History of Capitalism, and Cosmopolis – Centre for Urban Research.

EXCELLENCE OF SCIENCE RESEARCH PROJECT 'CONSTRUCTION HISTORY, ABOVE AND BEYOND'

This project explores the potential of Construction History as a historiographical field by placing it in dialogue with three other domains of historical inquiry: Colonial History, Legal History, and Planning History. By comparing sources, methods, concepts and cognitive interests across disciplines, the project seeks to strengthen the historical grounding of Construction History while simultaneously demonstrating its relevance to broader historical debates. Focusing on 19th- and 20th-century building knowledge and practice in Belgium and its former colony, the project pays particular attention to the often-overlooked actors, material traces, and other forms of knowledge that have shaped the built environment. More information via abch.be.



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