

Guillaume Habert: What buildings do?³

As Thomas Gieryn would argue, buildings “keep the weather out? Make money for architects and contractors? Walls to hide behind? Display wealth or good taste? Sites for productive labour and entertaining leisure? Establish ownership? Store stuff, or sell it? Prevent some people from coming inside? Prevent others from leaving? Buildings do all that, and much more.”⁴ Anna Heringer in her statement argued that she did not necessarily want her buildings to last, but rather that the knowledge to build them last, which echoes Nigel Thrift's characterization of buildings as simultaneously made and capable of making.⁵ In term of materials, this sentiment questions the intimate relation that exists between the process of building material production (with often harmful consequences) and the consequences of using these materials in society (with all potential benefits). It also requires us to reconsider our aim of providing materials and structures that would last forever without maintenance. In fact, a lack of maintenance leads inevitably to the loss of local know-how that is otherwise kept alive while maintaining buildings.

This question of maintenance is an already known key aspect in historical building preservation as it is often stated that maintaining historical buildings also allows for maintenance of cultural capital and building technique.⁶ Applying this view to the newly built environment or the common building stock – and considering that materials used in buildings have a strong relationship with local stabilisation of social life – questions our perspective on the function of materials and of the building itself. Do the amount of materials used and their expected service life make sense? How much material and know-how should we invest when we build our homes or when we build other iconic structures? For instance, how much material should we invest when we build for god (see image)? In this church built in concrete, less than 50 years were needed before major refurbishment due to steel corrosion was needed. The well-known Djenne Mosque in Mali is refurbished every year as part of a tradition celebration. And the building technique for the roman structures which stood through two millennia, was lost for more than one thousand years and even now is still subject to debate.⁷

These brief questions on the appropriate amount of materials that we want to invest – considering the function of the building or the intimate relation between a very long service life of material and the loss of know-how once the building is done – is an argument against a dematerialization done without considering the associated immaterial flow of knowledge. Shrashtant Patara's proposal of De-, Re-, We- materialization suggested that an effective de-materialization could be achieved when reduction of material used is attained simultaneously with gains in knowledge of how to build communities. These communities are the “we”: he argued for an increase in the distribution of packets of intelligence in order that we-materialize.

³ Thomas Gieryn, “What Buildings do,” *Theory and Society* Vol. 3 (February 2002): 35-74

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nigel Thrift, “On the determination of social action in space and time,” *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* 1 (1983): 23-57

⁶ Uta Hassler, “Long-term building stock survival and intergenerational management: the role of institutional regimes,” *Building research and Information* 37 (2009): 552-568.

⁷ Marie D. Jackson, “Material and Elastic Properties of Al-Tobermorite in Ancient Roman Seawater Concrete,” *Journal of American Ceramic Society* (2013): 1–9.



Church in Montrouge, France (source: Google streetview).