ALTERNATE ENDINGS: A User’s Manual for Architectural Reuse
Northeastern University, School of Architecture
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“The future is but the obsolete in reverse.”
Vladimir Nabokov, Lance, 1952.

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What is the shelf life of a building? Vitruvius reminds us in De Architectura that one of the founding principles of good architecture is “fuirmitas”, often translated as “solidity” or the ability of a building to endure change. Against this axiom, urban development since the beginning of the 20th century has relied on relentless cycles of construction and destruction around a newfound understanding of buildings as financially and materially expendable. Caught between architecture’s desire for permanence and its susceptibility to obsolescence, how do we come to terms with the afterlives of buildings?

The demolition site is one of the contemporary city’s most compelling forums for public debate and urban speculation. Removed from everyday cycles of economic development, it poses an open-ended question on how we as a society should manage our own material traces - from intervening within existing buildings to creative approaches to deconstruction and material reuse. According to a report conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) last year, the state of Massachusetts currently recycles less than 30% of its construction and demolition waste, with the rest consigned to the landfill. Furthermore, the logistics through which recovered building materials are redistributed is often opaque, taking place through informal, haphazard networks. With speed and profit as the driving factors, the ways in which buildings are dismantled, cataloged and redeployed presents an untapped design challenge.

By recasting the architect in the role of the demolition contractor, this studio proposes to radically rethink the distribution networks and spatial politics of contemporary demolition practices in the US in search for opportunities for speculative design thinking. Together students will research alternative approaches to architecture’s final act: from emerging second-hand markets centered around material exchange, to community interventions within stalled sites, to experimental approaches to adaptive reuse and historic preservation. We will examine the city’s aging building stock in search for loop-holes and opportunities to develop new models of architectural expertise centered around the re-appropriation of existing urban fabric.
The semester’s research will be divided into a series of phases. First we will begin by familiarizing ourselves with both the history and the current landscape of global demolition practices - centralized and decentralized, formal and informal. We will then apply this knowledge to the Boston context through site visits and mapping exercises in order to understand the city’s own demolition networks - from large scale recycling operations to neighborhood initiatives. Together we will select a series of sites in and around the city as our test cases, considering the civic context and economies of scale associated with each site - looking back to the consequences of large scale urban renewal projects from the late 50s, and forward to the contested fate of Boston’s many brutalist monuments. For each site, we will speculate on the material, programmatic and economic futures of its structures through time-based approaches grounded within a philosophy of impermanence. Finally we will develop this research into a set of scalable protocols in the form of a user’s manual of best un-building practices for architects, city officials, preservationists, and urban scavengers alike. The document will also serve as a collective resource for the spring semester, when students will build off one of the case studies to develop their own speculations for an “alternate ending” for Boston’s architectural inheritance. Final projects can take the form of either site specific proposals or siteless strategies/systems.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS:
- The Boston Landmarks Commission
- DOCOMOMO, New England Chapter
- Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP)
- C&D waste recycling operations in the Boston area: TBD
- Autodesk (facade scanning/material cataloging software, etc.)

SAMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY:
- Rem Koolhaas, Preservation is Overtaking Us, (GSAPP Books, 2006).

FURTHER REFERENCES:
- Rotor, Rotor Deconstruction: https://rotordc.com (Brussels, Belgium)
- Archeworks + Port Urbanism, Wasted Market: https://archeworks.org/project/wasted-market/ (Chicago, IL)
- Curt Gambetta, The Assembly of Trash: http://assemblyoftrash.net (Buffalo, NY)
- T+E+A+M, Detroit Reassembly Plant: http://tpluseplusaplusm.us/reassembly.html (Detroit, MI)

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