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On-site Catalogues
Reassembling
Situating Materials

Lidia Gasperoni

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Bio

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Abstract

On-site catalogs structure situated knowledge by exploring rural and urban sites. As cognitive practices, they organize findings into a knowledge system that is – as Foucault observes concerning the emergence of natural history – a way of rearticulating the relationality between subjects and objects. In architecture, emergent on-site cataloging practices have been exploring the site specificity and potential value of materials found on-site. In this article, I will introduce the generative function of on-site catalogs as a more or less implicit way of establishing a new approach to rural and urban sites. I then go on, by means of an ethnographic inquiry, to describe three practices – Atelier Fanelsa, Studio SM/S, and Archibloom – employing on-site catalogs to gain a better sense of territories and to transform how we conceive of the objects they embody. I conclude by considering the relevance of on-site catalogs to the transformation of design practices and attitudes.

Architecture as a medium to repair, regenerate, and care for the territories of a damaged planet requires a new approach to the site. The architectural site is that part of the territory marked locally as well as connected to global phenomena within the network of material production. In the Anthropocene, the site completely changes its legacy. In light of a different relationality between human and non-human actors, site analysis requires a different level of specification to root the project in knowledge that can intersect multi-layered parameters and hybridize media practices of sensing territories. Given this perspective, site analysis should become a hybrid practice capable of encompassing different types of knowledge and methodologies that constitute the cognitive framework of the project. Site analysis should overcome both the subject-oriented interpretation of the symbolic, phenomenal appearance of places and the reduction of site analysis to merely factual and objective aspects.

In order to achieve this generative site analysis, a different theoretical focus on the architectural site is necessary. As has already been noted by Yaneva and Mommersteeg, “despite its prominent status in design and architecture, site has received little attention in architectural theory.”¹ Most contributions in site analysis are technical and professional in orientation and focus on architectural representation. The most critical point concerns the vagueness of conceptualizations of the site that reduce it to (a) generic notions such as land, territory, context, region, locality, and setting; (b) descriptions of specific projects in relation to the transformation of the site; (c) a series of technical and professional guidelines and manuals; or (d) a socially constructed dimension in the relativistic sense.

In the contemporary architectural discourse, a fundamental need to overcome the concept of the site as a neutral place, as a *tabula rasa*, has been affirmed, reversing the relationship between place and form in architecture². The critique of objecthood has fundamental implications for architectural design, understood as a self-determining spatial process that is mainly focused on the production and perception of forms³. This critique, which in the second half of

the 20th century concerned the production of architectural space as a social and cultural construct, has aimed in more recent approaches to overcome a man-made, object-centric perspective. The Vitruvian analysis of the architectural site inherently prioritizes its quality based on its suitability for architectural construction, emphasizing its functional adaptability. Krasny speaks of “binary thought in Western culture”. “Nature no longer teaches the architect. In moving the art of building towards culture, the knowledge that dwelling is part of nature is left behind and erased. Modern architecture is very often built on the *tabula rasa* claim, a deeply colonial mechanism that annihilates nature and everyone and everything that existed on and with the land before”.⁴

Rather than reducing site to generic notions such as land, territory, context, region, locality, and setting, or a socially constructed dimension, novel practices of site knowledge are urgently needed to reverse the logic between the natural and the built environment. From this perspective, relational and intersectional models emerge, in which practices create a space of mediation and hybridization. Extending the role of site analysis in the architectural project does not mean emptying architecture of its own (spatial) knowledge. On the contrary, architecture is invested with the task of hybridizing practices in a different spatial language capable of translating the complexity of knowledge extracted from the site and the architectural intervention, which, at the same time, constitutes a way of exposing the site itself. This exposure entails an architecture capable of displaying the extracted knowledge and making it the core of spatial form as a medium of regeneration. Form is no longer the point of arrival of instrumental knowledge but the generative value of the architectural project itself, which is both a practice and an epistemic artefact.

There is no site analysis, just as there is no design, without media practices that enable the material and tangible form of the knowledge analyzed⁵. For this reason, a generative approach to the site requires media practices capable of extracting and making manifest the knowledge that the site brings more or less explicitly. The critique of the site as *tabula rasa* has thus led to the emergence of collections of different

1 Yaneva/Mommersteeg 2019: 307.

2 See Frichot 2018.

3 See Forty 2000: 256-275. The primacy of form was, as Forty (2000: 133) points out, the core of the critiques of modernism developed by Rogers (1993), who sought to reconnect architecture to historical and cultural context, and Alexander (1964), who analyzed the parameters of context, which is also the core of Frampton's critical regionalism (1983).

4 Fitz/Krasny 2019: 35.

5 For the definition of the generative value of practices in architectural design, see Gasperoni 2020.

practices both in the field of critical care and of actor-network theory employing ethnographic research as a practice of “site-ing” that “includes the work of placing and spacing simultaneously the built (a building or an urban infrastructure) and the site itself.”⁶

This article seeks to draw attention to on-site catalogs as a generative practice of site analysis characterized by specific media practices, modes of exposure, and intervention. In architecture, on-site cataloging practices are emerging to analyze the specificity of rural and urban sites. In this regard, they are epistemically productive: their aim is not to describe place and domesticate it in the design process but to produce situated knowledge as a common ground of design.

The catalog, as an organization of real, situated objects, is a means of recognizing the multiform appearance of the real. Beyond its standardization, it is – as Foucault reminds us – a practice of mediation that, in a specific taxonomy, inaugurates a space of negotiation between given, pre-established orders and different, unusual orders. Object-cataloging has a long history in archaeological, botanical, and geological practices, most famously those undertaken by Goethe, whose catalogs are spatial structures, pieces of furniture, designed ad hoc to order and display.⁷ The catalog is an operation of mediation and situatedness in which some parts of reality are selected, others left out, and others reconsidered, creating a specific *episteme*, a particular mode of designation and knowledge. In its forms and modes of transmission, it constitutes an open, reviewable model able to include its own ruptures, questioning conventional attitudes. In Foucault’s words: “On what ‘table,’ according to what grid of identities, similitudes, analogies, have we become accustomed to sort out so many different and similar things?”⁸

An Ethnography of On-site Catalogs

Before reflecting theoretically on the transformative value of on-site catalogs, this article proposes a brief ethnography of specific practices. This research emerged from collecting and analyzing images of on-site catalogs and from interviewing their creators. These interviews⁹ were based, first, on a description of the practice itself, distinguishing the stages in its development and the



Fig. 1 Niklas Fanelisa Rural Material Library

media practices employed to realize and document it. Second, they revealed the catalog's critical and subversive potential, and third, they highlighted catalogs as a means for extending design practices.

Rural Material Library by Atelier Fanelisa

Interview with Niklas Fanelisa:

27 February 2023, 9:30-10:45 am, Digital

The rural space is the archive. During a one-week workshop in August 2020 in Gerswalde, Atelier Fanelisa worked with a group of students to create a catalog called the "rural material library" (Fig. 1). The on-site catalog takes rural space as its primary object, derived from a practice to reassemble things that are present on site. Niklas Fanelisa responded to my theoretical hypothesis concerning the potential of on-site catalogs with the question: "What do you mean by 'site'?" In his

6 Yaneva/Mommersteeg 2019: 308.

7 This topic is a focus area of the research project "Epistemische Möbel. Wahrnehmungs- und Erkenntnis-einrichtungen in Goethes Sammlungen" led by Christiane Holm and Diana Stört in the framework of the BMBF-research projects "Die Sprache der Objekte" (2015-2018). See Stoert 2020.

8 Foucault 1970: XIX.

9 In this chapter, the expressions quoted without footnotes correspond to direct expressions from the interviewees.

view, site is local not only in the sense of the specific place we are able to transform, but also with respect to the network of specific places one passes through during the experience of exploring material sites.¹⁰ This walking is an interactive discovery based on the site inhabitants' deep-rooted practice of collecting and storing materials, even without knowing the functions those materials may take on in the future (Fig. 2).

Through encounters and conversations, the rural material library begins to investigate the knowledge already possessed by local people, preserving these materials and understanding their material, economic and cultural histories, and values (Fig. 3). In this regard, this on-site catalog is a historically sedimented practice aimed at revealing the site's knowledge, which is a material knowledge and a space of interaction. Intellectual choices do not simply regulate this space of encounter; on the contrary, it emerges within a space of contingencies and is developed on an intuitive, spontaneous, and emotional level. The production of site knowledge attempts to name material sites and things as an operation of value recognition. As Niklas Fanelisa states, "In the past houses used to have names too" (*Früher haben Häuser auch Namen gehabt*).

A site's matter results from the interaction with materials, the locations where they were found, and the people who collected and stored them. Each site is, in this sense, extended to the rural place as a crossroads of interactions; the materials themselves refer to the local and global network of material production. And it is precisely the processes of production that emerge locally in this interactional space, revealing a value that has hitherto been implicit in conservation practices. This interaction conceals an ethnography within the field, in which those who have preserved these materials and objects have narrated their material, economic, social, historical, and affective value. After observing and interacting with the field, the rural material library shapes the extracted fragments into a spatial configuration, through which the implicit, embodied knowledge contained in these material objects is exposed and shared. In making these objects visible, the library creates a field of new observations and sharing. The implicit, embodied knowledge gleaned from exploring and walking in the rural



Fig. 2 Niklas Fanelisa



Fig. 3 Niklas Fanelisa

space is reassembled and shared with the participants in the workshop. Narratives are described and shared, and new narratives are mapped. In this phase, architectural knowledge plays a crucial role in reflecting and recognizing the constructive potential of the collected materials. This reflection also grounds the production of new objects to be reinserted into the local context – such as fences, scaffolds, and furniture for local agents.

The practice of the rural material library is understood as an open production practice. “Its opposite,” explains Niklas Fanelisa, “is the practice of the hardware store (Baumarkt).” The latter is a place where the catalog is standardized and aimed at consumption and reproduction. Unlike this type of catalog, the rural material library is a site-specific, alternative catalog that produces new features in which the primary motivation is to search for what is missing and not yet given. The library is not directly functional and consumable; it is primarily a practice of “not throwing away.” It is the product of a search and, simultaneously, of a selection in which material objects become components of a new assemblage. As Niklas Fanelisa points out, it is difficult to understand this operation “with conventional design logics.” They are not superimposed logics but emerge from place; with them, place is co-constituted and co-contextualized.

As an on-site catalog, the library does not aim to generate buildings. Still, it spans the various scales of architectural construction, dealing with rural landscapes, construction materials, and artifact production. As an aesthetic practice of environmental analysis, reflection, and transformation, the catalog has its own architectural specificity, configuring new conditions and modes of architectural practice. In doing so, it specifies novel uses, functions, and material values for architecture with a social, economic, and cultural impact. It produces tangible effects, or, as Niklas Fanelisa emphasizes, “evaluable criteria” (*bewertbare Kriterien*) on a social, cultural, economic, and political level that can change the local context by creating space for new economies. Such catalogs generate other values essential in considering the built environment, defining a different scale of values concerning the potential of the materials present in the area and their imaginative force.

10 See Fanelisa 2024.



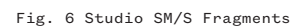
Fig. 4 SM/S Catalogue

Circular Design with Discarded Materials by STUDIO SM/S (HCU Hamburg)

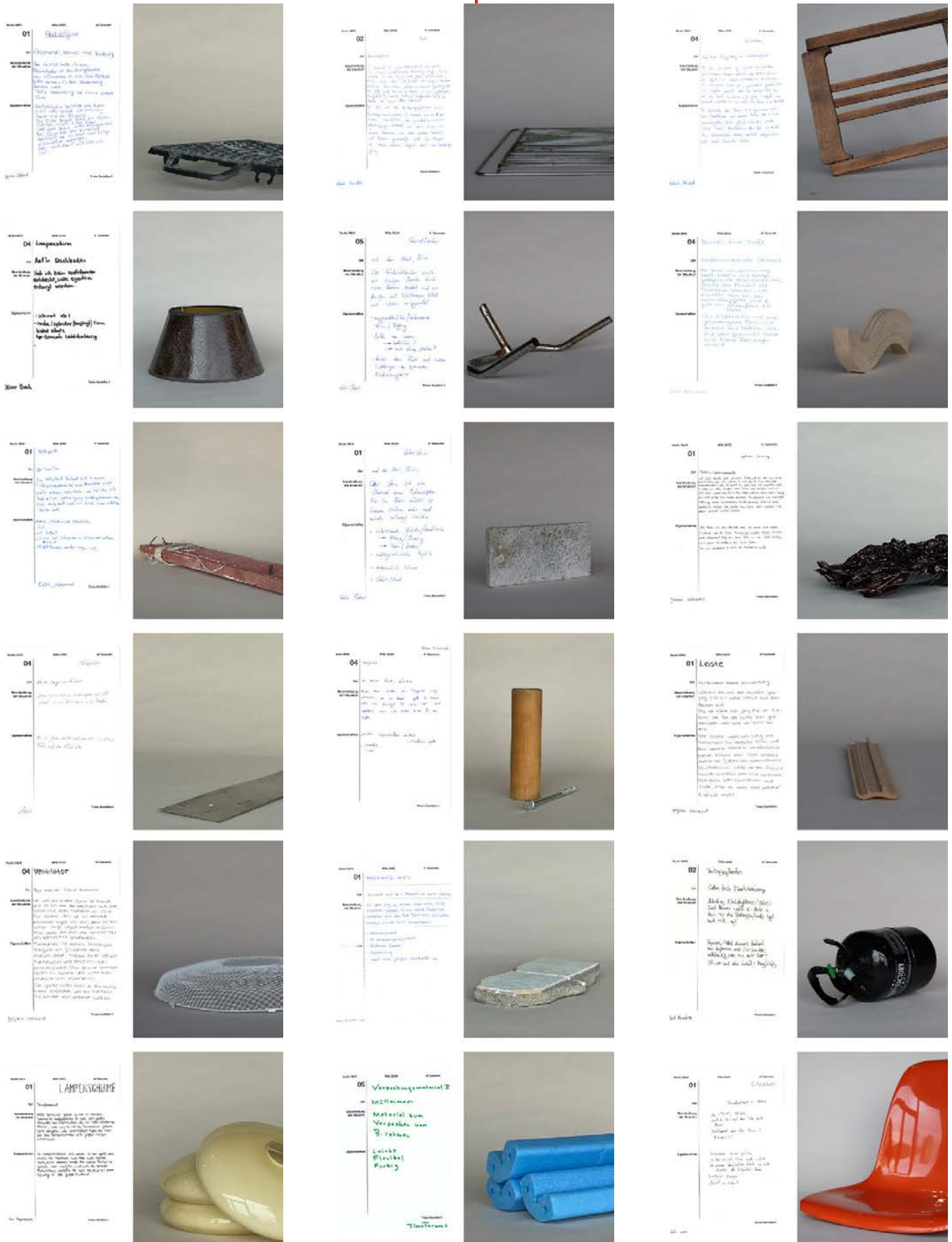
Interview with Tim Simon-Meyer and Daniel Springer: 2 March 2023, 3-4:30 pm, Digital

The urban space is the archive. In Studio SM/S's experiment, collecting is the beginning of an educational experiment in urban space. The crucial aim is to inaugurate a different way of thinking about the value of materials that are already present on site. Students are invited to walk around with "open eyes," searching for materials that Tim Simon-Meyer and Daniel Springer define as "fragments of the urban context." Again, these are objects that, at first glance, may appear to be rubbish but which, through a more attentive and probing approach, can shift from being fragments to being pivots in a creative circularity, acquiring a different value (Fig. 4). The seminar is divided into distinct

It is an aesthetic, an “alternative ‘poetics of construction’”¹¹ that aim to design, despite the hardship, beyond the image. This suspension is



11 See Frampton (2001).



an experimentation with the contingency of what is given and available and what is necessary to achieve a specific artifact that is designed prior to establishing the material context.

In the educational sphere, this type of approach also means renegotiating the competence inherent in the aesthetic judgment of the form abstracted from the material context; it entails including the contingency of this context in the design process, the product of which is, on a formal level, open and out of control. From this perspective, the catalog is not a classificatory method, nor does it aim at an always accessible and replenishable completeness. On the contrary, the catalog is a practice in which values are overturned and renegotiated, even from a radical intersection of scales in which the found object is potentially the nucleus of a project on an architectural scale (as in the project for the Biogasanlage Zinnwerke)¹² – which also arises from the catalog of materials collected on urban sites and deriving from demolition sites. The transition between different scales also implies a revision of the way materials are regulated legislatively and economically. First and foremost, it involves a reconceptualization of the new as a value that is not drawn from the formal sphere but from material aspects, reorganized and revalorized by the catalog. This practice has the potential to reread the urban context as a built environment that is also a place of discarding, excessively questioning the way things surround us.

Make Roma by Archibloom¹³

Interview with Margherita Erban, Alberto Marzo, Francesca Melissano, Luca Petroni and Maria Pone: 7 March 2023, 4-6 pm, Rome-Monti district

The soil is the archive. The suspension of form is the first act of Archibloom's multimedia practice in the project Make Roma, an exhibition with public talks in September 2020 (Fig. 8). This project is rooted in the embodied capacity of walking among urban boundaries and soil edges, influenced, among other things, by Stalker's and Francesco Careri's conception of walking as an "aesthetic act, penetrating the territories of chaos, constructing an order on which to develop the architecture of *situated objects*."¹⁴ This penetration is necessary to overcome a conventional image of the city, mapping hidden



Fig. 7 Studio SM/S Artefacts



Fig. 8 Archibloom Exhibition, Foto: Flavia Rossi

stratifications that embed “cracks, breaks, disconnections, and fragments” beyond design logics that patch and mend, “simulating a physical and metaphysical continuity” within the city.

The first practice of Make Roma is the model (Fig. 9). On a scale of 1:10,000, it represents a section of metropolitan Rome that starts from the geographical center of the city (Tiber Island) and extends to the volcanic foothills of the Alban Hills, the Sabatini Mountains, the Apennines, and the sea. The model is, in fact, an artifact that aims to go beyond a conventional and immediately recognizable representation of Rome by materializing the hybrid concreteness between nature and culture that makes up the ground. The model abstracts the soil from the buildings and becomes a horizontal – apparently smooth – surface or skin, where the architectural impact is visible on the striated ground, which is an archive of footprints and territorial traces, including the effects of buildings on the soil.¹⁵

The model creates a dispositive for experiencing the city anew, exploring its objective and subjective, real and fictional, entanglements. The model also materializes the interconnections between scientific practices already embedded in the architectural site analysis – such as the detailed reconstruction of contour lines – and practices linked to the cultural and artistic imagination, overcoming the idea of the city as a set of iconic places. The model “makes it possible to look at the ground”; it reshuffles these levels, parameters, and visions by disorienting, “perturbing” the observer, who cannot see the model except by finding new landing points.

The ground and thus the model represent a “potential archive of findings”; they are the inaugural moment of exploring the city by creating a series of “core drilling,” a new excavation in which real and fictional objects generate a catalog of findings. This is another level of the project, displayed statically in the exhibition through vertical panels and dynamically on the table (Fig. 10). The table is a device, mobile and performative, that is central to forming a catalog of objects found through practices of walking the city. The catalog also includes invented objects found elsewhere, imagined, real, and verisimilar. They show the explorations and contradictions of their discovery. The excavation, as an exploratory



Fig. 9 Archibloom, Model, Foto: Flavia Rossi



Fig. 10 Archibloom, Exhibition, Foto: Flavia Rossi



Fig. 11 Archibloom, Operation of Scanning

experience in which places re-emerge from the context of their official narrative, puts the fragments on an equal footing. This same “treatment” of fragments creates another level of cataloging through the third leading practice from the project, which involves scanning the objects (Fig. 11). This act of scanning breaks all semantic hierarchies and constitutes a novel perspective on the fragments’ existence. At the same time, this rupture represents a revalorization of material and immaterial objects reassembled within the catalog. This multimedia practice – from the mappings to the model, the findings, and the scanning – expands the “working table” on which design is carried out. It invites you to think about the city and possible scenarios. From this perspective, the catalog is a means to imagine the morphological complexity of urban fragments and to understand the ground as a bearer of knowledge rather than a *tabula rasa* on which to invent.

Renegotiating the Legitimacy of Sites

On-site catalogs overcome the logic of using a given set of construction materials to realize artifacts in specific contexts; instead, they generate artifacts from the archive of the already-produced world. At a time of profound reflection on resources, in which the hardware store model seems to need reassessing with respect to the

¹² See details of the summer school organized by Matthias Ballestrem, Johanna Schmeißer, Tim Simon-Meyer und Joao Quintela at www.baunetz-campus.de/news/zirkulaer-denken-die-biogasanlage-zinnergie-8160329.

¹³ The project Make Roma was developed in collaboration with Lorenzo Di Stefano and Roberto De Crecchio.

¹⁴ Careri 2017: 25.

¹⁵ For the distinction between smooth and striated space, see Deleuze / Guattari 1987: 474-500.

multiplicity of potential forms, the on-site catalog appears as a crucial critical practice whose subject is the hardware store as a catalog based on an archive that is no longer sustainable, the production traces and environmental impact of which are written in the lower case. This critical approach to maintenance is the pivotal aspect of the German Pavilion exhibition *Open for Maintenance – Wegen Umbau* geöffnet from the 18th International Architecture Exhibition at the 2023 Venice Biennale. The description states that it “is not an exhibition. It is an action framework for a building culture beyond the prevailing model hinging on the exploitation of resources and humans.”¹⁶

On-site catalogs are practices of materialization that contribute to reversing the way the site is conceived in relation to its adaptation to architecture, questioning the multiple and transscalar entanglements of design, production, and use. They traverse specific practices of walking in multiscale spaces – from that of the soil, to that of the object, to the architectural artifact, to the urban and rural scale. These spaces are archives of materials that have the potential to become alternative ways of constructing. In this regard, specific archives need the catalog to realize the shift from their messiness to the construction as a way to narrate and recontextualize their stories, values, and adaptations. Catalogs thus have a specific epistemological impact: far from being a mere means of classifying, dedicated to the control and homogenization of phenomenal reality, they represent a constituent and productive act in which phenomenal reality is recognized in all its fullness.

A relational and intersectional approach involves returning once again to the way we understand experience, which – as Foucault states – “does not reveal the continuity of nature as such, but gives it to us both broken up [...] and blurred, since the real, geographic and terrestrial space in which we find ourselves confronts us with creatures that are interwoven with one another, in an order which, in relation to the great network of *taxonomies*, is nothing more than chance, disorder, or turbulence.”¹⁷

In this sense, catalogs are research practices of sensing and expressing site specificity. At the same time, their knowledge production is a

spatial matter, adapting and experimenting with media practices that can potentially extend architecture's capacity for sensing sites.¹⁸ In the specific case of on-site catalogs, experimental media practices constitute a new means of accessing a particular site. On-site catalogs constitute the site. They generate tangible but also immeasurable effects from the context in which they operate. Ishigami's interweaving of aesthetic practices and written reflections is a prelude to a catalog that poses the question, "How can the potential of architecture be expanded?" by trying to be "conscious of the exhaustive gradations of space"¹⁹ that architecture first explores and then contains. On-site catalogs have the potential to become a media practice that extends the working table of architectural design, repositioning it with respect to its capacity for environmental constitution.

The catalog is a structuring architecture. By structuring, the catalog brings phenomenal reality into abstraction through a classification principle that transforms the complexity of the entire system and allows for epistemic orientation. As a practice of openness, the catalog breaks with the conventional order of representation and inaugurates possible fields of interpretation and action. On-site catalogs contribute to specifying the situatedness of meaningful spatial orders that – as in the case of the "typologies of incommensurability" described by Rainer Hehl and Ludwig Engel – "can no longer be formulated through theory but must be expressed in relation to spatial settings that have set off actual events."²⁰

In their reciprocal relationship with scientific, territorial, political, economic, and cultural inquiries, on-site catalogs have the potential to extend the field of signification of practice, encompassing the temporal dimension of narrating and overcoming the rigid separation of spatial scales and thus of human and non-human scales. Reversing the logic of designing a reproducible artifact for a community beyond the material conditions contained in the site, on-site catalogs question the possibility of producing something from the archive of the discarded fragments of a specific territory. On-site catalogs extend that field of mediation, which, as Foucault reminds us, reveals order and then subverts it. This transformation depends on specific practices that change the

16 Anne Femmer et al. 2023: 3.
17 Foucault 1970: 147f.

18 An "experimental media practice" is characterized in media-agency-theory as serving two main functions. The first is to extend the semantic field of architecture by broadening its effects and including epistemic dimensions that have hitherto been excluded, marginalized or forgotten. The second function is to realize this extension through a specific development and adaptation of techniques and embodied practices that have the potential to become research and design methodologies. See Gasperoni 2022.

19 Ishigami 2008: 119.

20 Hehl/Engel 2019: 125.

scope and efficacy of form production and the values that we address through them.²¹ This exploration takes place through the development of specific media practices that result from adapting sedimented techniques and experimentation with hybrid and novel techniques. In this way, these practices question how design creates objects from standardized, prevailing material knowledge and the connection between objects and local communities.

With regard to the working table on which design is developed, on-site catalogs question the standardization of practices and experiment with archaic practices such as oral storytelling (in the case of Atelier Fanelisa), sedimented practices such as material analysis (in the case of Studio SM/S), and digital practices such as modeling and scanning (in the case of Archibloom). These media practices do not aim to shape form in the first place; instead, they aim to grasp the constructive potential of materials located within a specific territory. Similar to design practice, it is precisely media practices that mediate the transition from the reality of perceived phenomena to that of constructed phenomena. What changes is the statute of representation, as its formal primacy as a principle of order and instrumentalization of the material components of the artifact are bracketed.

On-site catalogs are genuinely fictional and productive – a practice with specific tangible effects in renegotiating the legitimacy of objects as part of the catalog. And today, at a point where the Anthropocene has once again brought dichotomous and reductionist views of the cognitive act to the point of crisis, a new epistemological space emerges, in which objects and the practices of their perception, reassembly, and production can be renegotiated. What Foucault describes as an archaic sense of history seems to belong to this approach to phenomenal reality, a sense that “is not the desire for knowledge, but a new way to connect things both to the eye and to discourse.”²² This archaic sense seems central to those practices that try to extend the effects of architectural practice, unlearning the conventions and barriers of standardization through design and construction. They produce strange objects that are not standardized or easy to categorize – like Haraway’s “unfinished Chthulucene.” In

addition, they “must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.”²³

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- ²¹ For instance, images can be interpreted from a more or less epistemic perspective, highlighting their constructive-epistemic value. An interesting example is the interpretation of Alexander von Humboldt’s natural paintings as diagrammatic artefacts with a generative epistemology, in which the construction of knowledge fits into a specific media practice. This aspect could be further investigated through the critical lens of constructivism, considering the experimental (Rheinberger 2021) and formal value (Latour 1999 and 2013) of the natural sciences.
- ²² Foucault 1970: 131.
- ²³ Haraway 2016: 57.