



STATE OF CERAMICS

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Architectural Ceramics: *Boom and Bust Brick*

a discussion guide by Sam Dodd

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Topic

By tracking the lifespan of a brick – one of architectural history’s most durable building materials – we can also track how hegemonic systems of power are produced and reproduced over time. Consider two examples from the history of American building:

Euro-American settlers moving westward across North America often plotted their settlements directly overtop Indigenous earthen mounds. Written accounts tell of the settlers’ intention to build their courthouses, jails, and schools out of bricks to ensure that such structures would survive multiple generations.

In 1978, the New York Times reported on “great neatly stacked piles of weathered red bricks stand[ing] by the railroad tracks that hug the Mississippi River.” The bricks had been salvaged from 19th century manufacturing sites in St. Louis – once proclaimed the Gateway to the West – and were being shipped to “places like Savannah to restore historic buildings and to Texas to make patios for the new houses springing up around Houston.”

As part of the series about “Architectural Ceramics,” this State of Ceramics will take up the brick to question how claims to place come to belong to some people but not others, and how “boom-and-bust” economies leave their mark in the built environment. To do this, we’ll focus on the dynamic qualities of bricks used in the history of American building, asking how they have settled, shifted, and otherwise moved within fluctuating geographies produced by unstable social valuations.

What is it about the affordances of brick – its materiality, its production, its form – that worked so well to emplace America’s violent myths and spatial imaginaries? How might those of us who work with ceramic objects take up the same old brick without reifying the same old structures? Are other futures made possible by the brick we can hold in our hands? In this session, we will grasp at some dynamic bricks to ask where they’ve been and imagine where else they might go.

Readings and Selected Quotes

Primary Sources

a selection of historical texts demonstrating the ways that bricks have circulated in discussions of American futures and pasts.

"On the Architecture of America," *The American Museum* (October 1790): 174-176.

"The evil in our architecture lies principally in this – that we build of wood. Bachelors only ought to build of wood – men who have but a life estate in this world, and who care little for those who come after them. Those who have either children or a wife to leave behind them will build of brick."

J.E. Price, "How Clay was Found Three and a Half Miles Under the Ocean," *Brick* (January 1902): 29-30.

"Will the time ever come when the fast-multiplying millions of human beings shall cover the face of Mother Earth so thickly with brick buildings that clay deposits will fail to meet the demand for material for structures, streets, etc.? In many places this plastic bounty of nature is represented only by holes, out of which wealth has come, but into which it cannot be put back."

Robert Reinhold, "In St. Louis Even the Old Bricks are Leaving Town," *New York Times* (July 9, 1978): E5.

"Great neatly stacked piles of weathered red bricks stand by the railroad tracks that hug the Mississippi River. It is said they are shipped to places like Savannah to restore historic buildings and to Texas to make patios for the new houses springing up around Houston. Having taken so many of its people and jobs, the so-called Sunbelt is not even carting off St. Louis itself."

Barbara Costas-Biggs, "Walking Past Abandoned Houses, I Think of Eric," in *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*, edited by Daniel Skinner and Berkeley Franz (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 20-21.

"The ears that heard hooves on the brick that sleeps under pavement are long gone."

Secondary Sources: on bricks

a selection of interpretive texts about the history of brick-based building and architecture.

Eladio Dieste, "Some Reflections on Architecture and Construction," *Perspecta* 27 (1992): 186-203.

"For our architecture to be truly built we must understand our materials and their possibilities. It is not enough to use brick because we like its texture or because it is a material for of reminiscences. Because, although these qualities are not worthy of our rejection, the material possesses many more qualities, and the risks of these kinds of

reductions are greater today than ever before. Modern technology has apparently given us the possibility of doing anything, and we can use any building material as a stage designer uses cardboard. The economic risks that this practice entails are not immediately visible, but the long-term consequences could be disastrous.”

Hannah Higgins, “Brick, 9000 BCE,” in *The Grid Book* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 13-32.

“In the Babylonian creation myth, God turned men out like bricks from clay molds. It was men who built bricks into walls. The first grid, the brick wall, easily evokes associations with the human body. The wall of handmade or hand-molded clay bricks, which is any clay wall made before the nineteenth century, has a rich and varied surface texture, like skin. The bricks seem to swagger up and down in undulating zigzag patterns; the wall pulses with dents, furrows, and bulges. In time, a brick wall will seem to breathe as the brick cells cohere in a unified field of vertical and horizontal, shifting like a tectonic plate. The much vaunted “warmth” of brick walls comes from their relationship to their makers—a human warmth that is added to the real warmth of fired bricks.”

Christina Schwenkel, “Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam,” *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013): 252-277.

“Although often ignored or seen as ordinary and banal, bricks, I argue, are symbolic cultural objects that convey complex messages and ideologies about cities and the people who build, manage, live in, and experience them. Bricks matter—politically, materially, and affectively, for a political economy of material affects, catalyzed by the state, was crucial to postwar nation-building and the production of new socialist citizens... In this article I show how bricks came to represent utopic objects of desire, or “clusters of promises,” in Lauren Berlant’s terms, that unleashed the imagination and gave shape to an engaged politics of hope and belief in future betterment, even as such attachments belied a state of compromised possibility, a condition that Berlant identifies as “cruel optimism.”

TK Smith, “St. Louis: Navigating the Brick City,” *Art Papers* (Fall 2018/2019). [Available online.](#)

“Brick signifies spaces in St. Louis in ways that street signs and wrought iron gates cannot. It can reveal how cities such as St. Louis are built, and continue to develop internal and external boundaries. The racial, social, and economic histories of St. Louis are transcribed onto the brick, demarcating within these boundaries a history of access and rejection, investment and divestment. The investment in and quality of a structure’s upkeep can be the defining characteristic that labels space as hood or historic, safe or dangerous, dilapidated or full of character.”

Secondary Sources: on the weight of history

a selection of interpretive texts about writing history, material studies, and the interrogation of power systems

Jane Blocker, "History as Prosthesis," in *Becoming Past: History in Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1-29.

"Here I begin from the position that history writing is always a creative act, that we imagine the past whenever we write about it, and that imagination is one of the special provinces of art.

As an art historian, I am most intrigued precisely by the creative voyages that are charted in answer to the contradictions of history, the ways in which history is always and by definition a matter of imagination, a matter of remaking. For that reason, I have determined to consult artists on the question of making history. I follow them, watch them work, and see myself implicated in their methods, not because I believe they have all the answers to the question of history's impossibility, and certainly not because I believe they are somehow immune to the errors and bias that plague history more generally, but because their work allows me to think creatively about my own practice, to embrace impossibility as potentially generative."

Jedediah Purdy, "This Land is Our Land," in *This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 1-28.

"The world we've made is heavy with all the power that built it – all the literal coal firing and oil burning, and all the mastery over human time and strength, all embedded in these roads and buildings and fields and atmospheric carbon levels.

One serious estimate puts the mass of the global "technosphere," the material habitat that humans have created for themselves in the form of roads, cities, rural housing, the active soil in cropland, and so forth, at thirty trillion tons, five orders of magnitude greater than the weight of the human beings that it sustains. That is approximately four thousand tons of transformed world per human being, or twenty-seven tons of technosphere for each pound of a hundred-fifty-pound person. The world we make tells us how to live in it."

"A Sonorous Subtlety: Kara Walker with Kara Rooney," *The Brooklyn Rail* (6 May 2014).

[Available online.](#)

"Walker: Imagine gathering all the sugar in the world in one location. This demands immense amounts of physical labor, from the Dominican Republic to Cuba and other sugar islands, that brought that product onto that site, and are still bringing that product onto the other site in Yonkers. Then there's this insane amount of pressure, heat, centrifugal force, and manpower necessary to bleach the sugar. Not to bleach it, exactly, but to turn it from its natural brown to white state. There is all this knowledge that comes with that, the learned knowledge of the men and women who have worked on this site for years and years and years, not to mention of the families of these

laborers. There is a living memory of the smell and the steam—this heavy molasses odor that's still in the space.

Interviewer: It's like the gooey, sticky manifestation of America's original sin.

Walker: Yes. There's this grassy, pungent, almost nauseating sugar smell that lives in the tissue of everyone who has worked in that plant."

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Power in the Story," in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 1-30.

"Mass graves and pyramids bring history closer while they make us feel small. A castle, a fort, a battlefield, a church, all these things bigger than we that we infuse with the reality of our past lives, seem to speak of an immensity of which we know little except that we are part of it. Too solid to be unmarked, too conspicuous to be candid, they embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hands...We suspect that their concreteness hides secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences. We imagine the lives under the mortar, but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?"

Questions

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What are the affordances of (a) brick?

Put another way, what does brick make it possible to do, or even imagine doing?

How is this question answered differently when asked of architects, builders, revolutionaries, historians, artists?

—
Following Walker and Purdy's thought experiments: Might we guess how many bricks currently sit on the planet?

If we imagine gathering all the bricks in the world in one location, what story about humanity does this place tell? Draw what this place looks like.

What is the formation of bricks as you imagined them gathered there: a tower? a paved street? a wall? an orderly stack? a rubble pile? something else?

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How have bricks factored into the production of a place called America?

To what degree have they been useful as both physical objects and value-laden symbols in constructing American societies?

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How might artists and historians work alongside each other in reckoning with the weight of the world as we have inherited it, including the imbalanced and unjust material conditions of oppressive modern systems?

What conceptual value can be found in treating a mundane, "mass produced" thing, like a brick, as a type of folk art, craft object, or fine art?

To what degree do we want to treat the brick as a theoretical object or as a metaphor when discussing the state of contemporary ceramics?

How can we understand the brick as a process rather than a thing?

What are we going to do with all these bricks?