

STATE OF CERAMICS | February 17, 2024

Sam Dodd

**Architectural Ceramics:  
*Boom and Bust Brick***

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#### In Attendance:

Alexis C. Brunkow, Alice Foxen, Alice Zerini, Brittany Morford, Carly Slade, Casey Whittier, Clare Stephens, Cyrielle Marchetti, Danielle Callahan, Emily Comstock, Emma Sher, Harley Healy, Janet Lines, John Roloff, Julia Schuster, Kathryn Fullerton, Keagan Polentz, Laura Boles Faw, Malorie Shallcross, Mari Nagem, Mychelle Moritz, Natalia Arbelaez, Neha Kudchadkar, Nicole Seisler, Priyanka Sen, Rachel Mangold, Robyn, Rosa Glaessner Novak, Rosanna Martin, Sangeet Gupta, Sarah Christie, Sherry Shieh, Stephen Ateser, Zena Segre.

#### Context from Sam Dodd (summarized by Mychelle Moritz)

Brick, a ubiquitous object that inhabits the compositions of so many of the structures throughout our landscape; so commonplace, most likely do not often reflect on their history and the ways in which bricks are tied to the development of our capitalist systemic structures.

As an architectural historian, Sam Dodd shared that his interest in the brick is specific to the ways in which it has broadly impacted American architecture, from a perspective of history as a multilayered process. Sam introduced the conceptual basis for our discussion with reflections and inquiry about the ways in which bricks provided a substantial purpose in the act of domination and colonization of this country. He proposed that bricks can be seen as symbolic, much like flags, in the claiming and making claims of the land as settlers invaded the West. He noted that bricks are easily replicated, produced and reproduced, and as entities are makers within the material making systems, "bricks are made in structures that make bricks," "it takes bricks to make more bricks." Sam offered an opportunity for us to, through bricks, reconsider the kinds of stories that we tell about places and objects.

Our discussion wove through an exploration of the brick's uses as well as symbolic and historic involvement as a singular object and as a part of a whole. We considered the

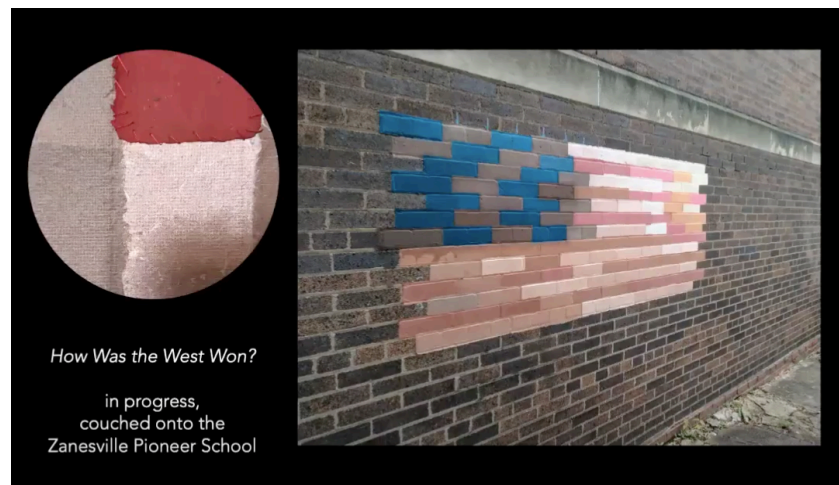
brick as a tool, a surface, a symbol, a carrier of messages, a marker, an integral part of the ceramics process, and the ecological repercussions of brick. The discussion brought together a variety of roles that bricks play in our social and cultural constructs past, present, and future, but also other inherent aspects of the brick, bricks, and brick structures. Sam began the discussion by inviting participants to consider the theoretical and speculative ways to think about the history of bricks in relation to ceramics. He set the stage with a question of the affordance of bricks, "What does brick make it possible to do or even imagine doing? What can be done with a brick?"

### Summary Of Discussion (Written by Mychelle Moritz):

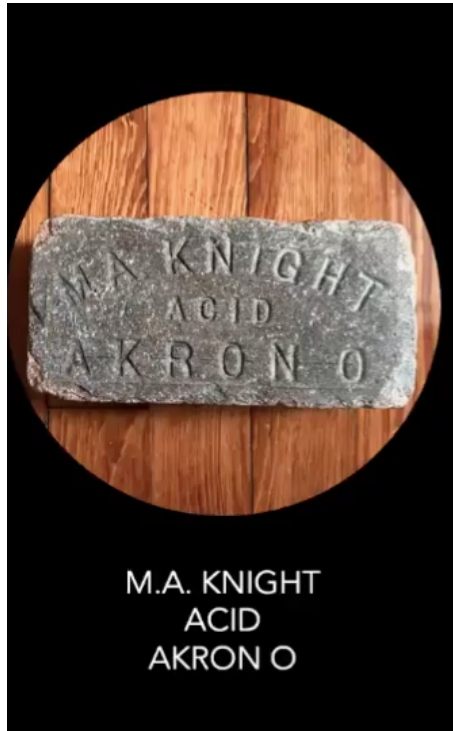
Consider the affordance of bricks. How do we consider a brick as a process versus a thing? Brick houses were built to control spaces, in the process of claiming land, and as investments for a group to divide, control, and dominate others. Structures were built—houses, buildings, and walls to keep people in as well as keep people out. The permanence of

brick facilitated sustainability of this domination, particularly in a land previously inhabited by largely nomadic tribes. In this context, the brick acts much like a flag, staking claim, and announcing ownership. However, there were resistances to this as brick makers and bricklayers organized with such power that those who owned capitalism began to fear the unions of these workers who could halt all "progress" with the leverage of a strike. This part of the story brings forth the push and pull of power in a system built on the backs of the oppressed; as the brick begins to play a role in resistance and revolt of capitalism and oppressive forces of power. The brick wall became a favored canvas for graffiti because it is more difficult to remove from the varied surface of brick walls compared to smoother surfaces. The brick has become a symbol of resistance in many uprisings, as they were used as weapons thrown by people at people, used to smash windows, objects with messages, and as easily placed highly effective small roadblocks during protests. We consider the notion of a brick in the hand and in a process, simultaneously.

Consider the brick as an object. What can a brick be? The structure of a brick is substantially diminished when the brick is removed from the structure into which it was built because the stacking and the mortar lend the brick its strength. A brick used as a paver has significantly less strength than a brick that is part of a building. Bricks in an



archway have more strength than bricks in a wall. Consider bricks in a pile versus bricks in a stack, a brick without a structure is vulnerable. Bricks as objects hold nostalgic value for some who have grown up in towns where bricks are created, and who value the material, craft, skill, landscape, and community-building potential of the brick. There are collectors of bricks who are interested in the history of bricks. One can determine where and when a brick was made by the markings on it as well as the size, shape, color, and material of it. Others salvage bricks for repurposing, and some go to great lengths to glean the bricks, including stealing them.



Consider the ecological cost of bricks. The making of bricks has a high ecological cost, brick kilns have been noted to be one of the largest stationary sources of black carbon and contribute to hazardous working environments. If a brick is no longer used, what becomes of them; how do we reckon with them? There are many factors that influence a brick's lifespan including the context of its use, the conditions of the brick's environment, the composition of the brick itself, and the brick's function. Bricks in a landscape, as described in Jean Hutton's reciprocal landscape model, can be observed from the shoreline in Toronto, the circular narrative of a brick's life from creation to building to extraction and reabsorption by the land entangled in roots throughout the shoreline. We consider the resourcefulness of Iranian architect, Nader Khalili, who developed the Geltaftan building process to make a building more resistant to fire and earthquakes. We consider bricks made from alternate materials. Not all bricks are made with mud, clay; is the shape and structure of a brick what makes it a brick? There are bricks made of glass, concrete, straw, hemp, cork, and plastic bricks, consider Legos. Legos bring to mind other uses for brick including as objects of play, toys, practicing, and imaginal exploration.



Consider bricks in ceramics. Are they the epitome of functional ceramics? Bricks are used in kilns and made in kilns made of bricks. Bricks are hand-sized, sometimes hand-formed other times made with molds of wood for uniformity and practicality. How is the making of brick a metaphor for process when we examine the role of bricks as a part of kilns. We

tie bricks back to domination- when an individual builds a kiln with bricks, that person is in control of the kiln and how and when it is fired. Perhaps we can concretize the idea of stages of history like the firing of a kiln: preheats, soaks, climbs, cooks, and cooling phases. How does the heat exposure change the brick? What considerations are there about soft bricks, often heat resistant and lightweight but fragile and hard bricks which are heavy and less heat tolerant of temperature extremes but are much more durable and enduring. How can the brick inform a ceramic process when we consider the process of building upon, using the micro to create the macro. We also consider the pattern of kiln use as a metaphor, some kilns in Japan are built next to one another so that one heats the other in sequence, saving resources and workload.

Lastly, we consider the brick as a model [for historians]—can the historian (or any one of us) be a witness like the kiln brick, changing the contents of the kiln and, in turn, being changed by the contents and heat of the kiln? Can we all be both stable and in flux in this way, carefully considering how our stories change and are changed over time, and considering how we are changed by those stories?

We look forward to diving deeper when Sam's forthcoming book *The Weight of a Brick* is published.

