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Columns Worth Stealing

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Columns Worth Stealing

Kadk's internal artistic research call 2020
Associate professor Architect maa. Frans Drewniak

Columns Worth Stealing

The extraction, production and formation of virgin and non-renewable materials & resources threatens our existence, but also opens up new questions and aesthetic demands. When raw materials such as cement and clay are precious resources that also require a great deal of energy in the process and burning, and thus are a possible prime suspect as climate sinners, what does this mean for our “modus operandi”?

Clarity

This section addresses in particular the aesthetic origin, relations and the way in which this work stands forward.

In the 1970 writers as Christian Norberg-Schulz and Christopher Alexander summarised a critique of the late modern era also expressed by architects among others in the work of Jørn Utzon. This reflection and practise goes against the rational suboptimization of architecture that is still haunting the built environment today limiting the expressive and rich vocabulary found in any historic building culture around the world. When talking of columns in present day architecture. They seem often to be sought as dispensable objects that are in the way and therefore sacrificed on the altar of minimal and rational space and plan. In the words of Christopher Alexander we are remembered the many layers of meaning not to be neglected by architects:

*“In all the world’s traditional and historic buildings, the columns are expressive, beautiful, and treasured elements. Only in modern buildings have they become ugly and meaningless. Certain columns, especially those which are free standing, play an important social role, beyond their structural role as columns. When a column is free standing, make it as thick as a man - at least 12 inches, preferably 16 inches: and form places around it where people can sit and lean comfortably...”*¹

This loss of matter and meaning is no less relevant today. But an increased focus on life cycles, robustness and versatility calls for architects again to design beautiful structures with an optimal understanding and use of valuable materials and resources.

Recalling C. Alexander and “make it as thick as a man”¹ I chose to work with a hollow conical brick element equivalent to the volume and weight of 10-12 standart danish bricks. Ideas of design for disassembly and reuse were applied and discussed as an artistic obstruction in developing the elements for the stacked columns.

Density

This section addresses in particular the production process and technique, including the experimental framework.

“Columns worth stealing” is pursuing some ideas from “Når materialet svarer igen” (When the material answers back) for which I received a working grant for the Danish Arts Foundation 2018. “Når materialet svarer igen” is a framework for my artistic research in which the discussion of the importance of experimentation and the criteria that qualifies experimentation are pivotal.

First there was an intention of form as a mere starting point. Secondly acting as an informed amateur (no previous skills as a ceramist) an old ceramic technique “kvætsning” (knock-in form) were used but also questioned and altered. Instead of a plaster mould as proposed by the experienced potter, a laser cut, rolled and welded 2 mm steel cone was introduced. (See pictures from the moulding, drying and burning of the terracotta elements included.)

Reflecting on the process of making the steel mould it represents a level of “novelty” not originally intended. The choices made have been deeply influenced by the introduction of the steel mould and later in the process it is realised that working with the conventional plaster mould would not have been possible or would have proved difficult to handle by two persons.

One of more layers added to what was brought forward is the richness and contingencies of clay as a material resource that man has explored for thousands of years. In the “final” work presented this year at the Charlottenborg Spring exhibition two columns with many discoveries and enriching "mistakes" in texture and color were exhibited.

The quality of the work brought forward is thus produced by a “sensuous encounter between maker and material”² and not preconceived. Thereby relating to research discussing the criteria that qualifies experimentation² as well as the idea that matter itself could suggest form understood in the works and the words of Constantin Brancusi :

"Matter must continue its natural life when modified by the hand of the sculptor. Matter should not be used merely to suit the purpose of the artist, it must not be subjected to preconceived ideas and to a preconceived form. Matter itself must suggest subject and form; both must come from within matter and not be forced upon it from without”³

Depth

This section addresses in particular rules for artistic practice and relations with existing meaning-making in culture and society.

From around the year 300 (A.D.) the reuse of materials, fragments, and elements such as columns of antiquity was widespread in the construction of the early christian churches. The phenomenon has been named spolia. The latin word "spolium" originally meant the skins ripped off by an animal, but came in its plural form, spolia, to account for various forms of prey and stolen treasures. This spolia was since the common term for building parts or sculptures taken from one context and reused in a new place, and often in a new way.⁴

The extraction, production and formation of virgin and non-renewable materials & resources threatens our existence, but also opens up new questions and aesthetic demands. When raw materials such as cement and clay are precious resources that also require a great deal of energy in the process and burning, and thus are a possible prime suspect as climate sinners, what does this mean for our “modus operandi”? :

With the questionable right to exploit the earth's "material bank" could follow the obligation to value these precious non-renewable materials equally high !

"Columns Worth Stealing" reflects on how to make structural columns of stacked brick elements. Made so deliberately graceful, that they play a Hoover role in space, will never be covered and that they will survive even demolition and thus live on as "spolia"⁴ for ever and ever. An artistic and architectural endeavour to instal beauty and meaning in the making of a more circular and resource-conscious architecture.

Cv <https://adk.elsevierpure.com/da/persons/frans-drewniak>

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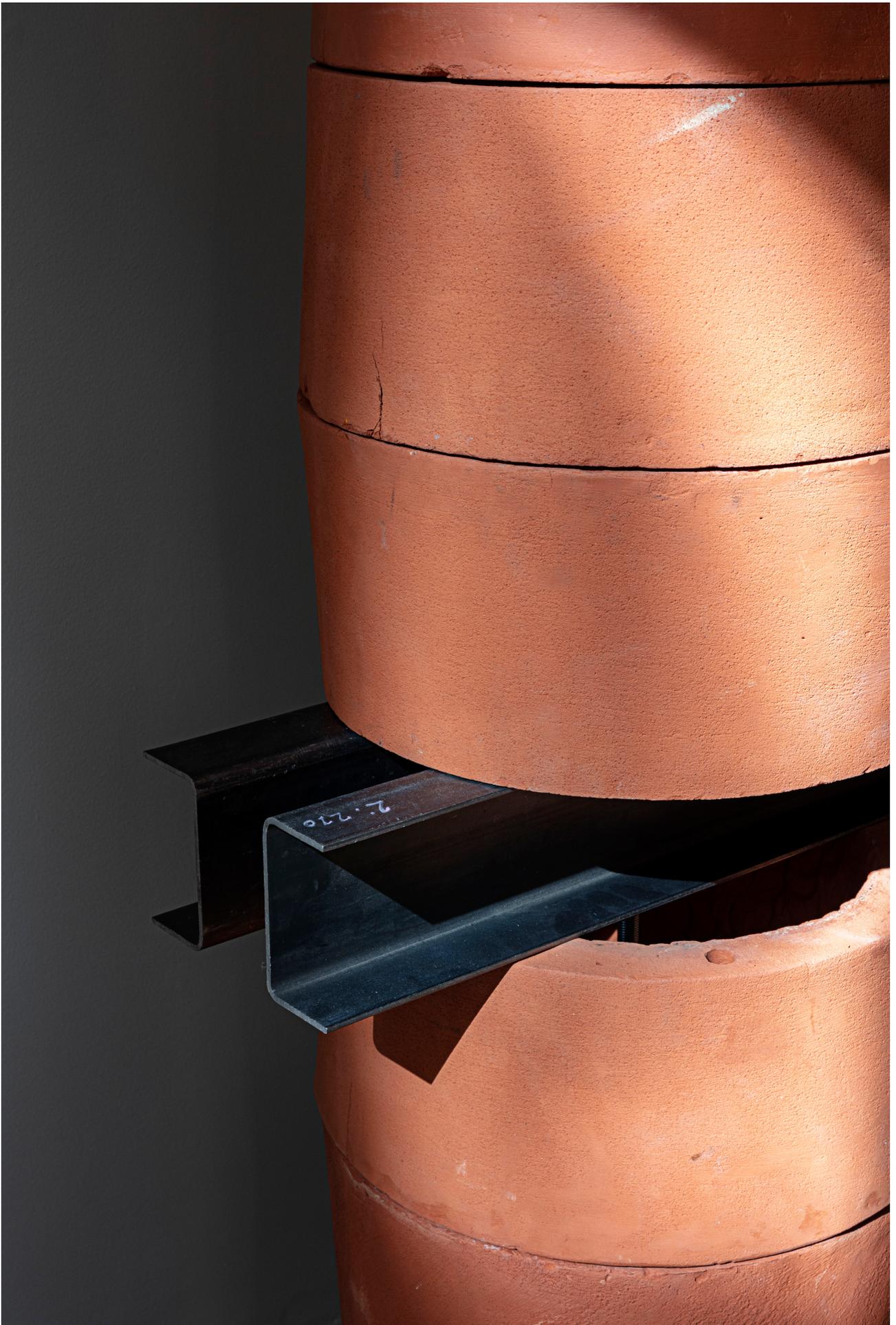
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Yonobi. Løvstræde Copenhagen April 2020. Photo © Laura Stamer



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