

Maintaining the Past for Now:  
Building Repairs in Practice

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## Introduction

### **[Figure 1. Meadow]**

Every hill is eroding, subsiding, and washing away. Recently, I climbed a grassy hillside in Washington County, Pennsylvania, to see the meadow at the top. Someone had driven a vehicle up the path, leaving deep parallel tracks in the muddy slope. Someone had scattered white gravel into the tracks, and the angular chunks ground into the mud provided purchase for my climb. Clearly: water concentrates in the tracks, washing gravel down the hillside along with the mud and cutting the ruts ever deeper. Walking up the hill, our feet sank when we strayed from the gravel. The hill itself doesn't need a solution, but whoever wants to drive a tractor up the hill to mow may. Whatever solution is made to provide foot and vehicle passage from the lower level up to the high meadow will erode, subside, and wash away. Then what will the solution be? Maintenance and then repairs are the steps between the creation of a solution, its collapse, and the creation of whatever comes next.

The gravel that someone poured into the track is what, in my vernacular, I might refer to as a "shit fix." In Philadelphia, another maybe-shit fix catches my eye on a walk. A foamed-in glass block window looks like: "what a mess," or, snidely, "that was a choice," or "gross." I wouldn't say that I like these materials or the way this work was done, but it works. Over time, walking by the same building or hill again and again, I can see that some interventions have been made with care. Someone in a position to occasionally make small progress has been doing so. With every instance of time they spend, the work progresses towards more stability for the building, although not necessarily towards a more elegant finish.

Some work on buildings progresses in small and particular steps, in time snatched here and there, quietly. The street is never stopped with large deliveries or clogged with the vehicles of parked contractors. Yet, the foam around the window is trimmed down and tucked away behind metal lattice, making way for stucco, while the doorway at the end of the same wall is reinforced. I have to see some work over time, in aggregation, to see that it was done with care. Once a building's repairs have resolved enough to be static and finished for a while, you have to know something about time and craft on a landscape to see that the work still has edges that are already coming apart. Back at the hill in Washington county: the meadow is growing. Occasionally, someone drives up the hill to mow it, and the rain is washing down the trail.

In this paper, I share my explorations and findings about the practical, visual, social, and emotional experiences of encountering evidence of maintenance interventions and repairs on a building. I aim to show how having practical repair skills changes other culturally situated responses to wear and repair. While investigating buildings and their repairs, I have been asking: what are my perceptions about the ways they are coming apart and the ways they are being held together? How do the people I'm talking to, working with, and living with perceive them, and why? While considering the gappy patchwork of repair that holds together my dad's decrepit and much-loved, 200-year-old rowhouse in Philadelphia, and the extent of those it yet needs, I have been inquiring: how does being able to see evidence of care in maintenance interventions affect the experience of and response to home repairs?

I reviewed and synthesized literature about repairs for frameworks to use in considering building repairs as craft and investigated sites of wear and repair: the cornice and the porch at my dad's rowhouse and similar features of nearby buildings. These sites involve points of failure caused by environmental weathering and age, heavy human use, and damage from neighboring

construction. Over time, restorations and remediations which keep the building whole have been completed. They look different from the ways I have learned that they should.<sup>1</sup> I have found that while they strike me on sight as negligent or unpleasant, at the same time I find them to be satisfying compositions, competently handled, made with care for the building, the circumstances, and the local community. Maintenance looks like care, and repairs like relief. In the face of decay, neglect can look like gross disrespect on a gut level, but so does a shitty fix.

There is an intensity of misalignment between these responses. Mournful negativity is tempered by safety and resolution when a shit fix looks like careful attention paid. When I examine the possibilities for making certain kinds of repairs from sources that describe how these buildings should look, I find politicized and idealized language that promotes the unacceptability of low-cost solutions and advertisements for the efficacies and affordability of industrialized building systems. When I examine sites of repair themselves, especially those created frugally and with a quick turnaround, I find unsanctioned methods mitigating decay and my conflicting feelings about the acceptability of those methods. The kind of conflict I experience I also witness in the expressions of other practitioners and witnesses.

It has been useful for me to consider my research as taking place within what I imagine as the crafted landscape. The crafted landscape is a distinct and cohesive thing despite being made up of various structures, materials, and systems. This contiguous material thing is a city, in this case, Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> This imaginary accounts well for the continuity of buildings in the

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<sup>1</sup> I have been managing the maintenance and repairs of the building since 2020.

<sup>2</sup> This lighthearted imagery is not intended to open my topic of research into an investigation of what a landscape is, or to reference other such landscape-based conceptualizations. Many frameworks use the idea of a landscape in order to frame networked activity, and a few I have encountered are relevant. These include: the craftscape, first coined by MACR program director Namita Gupta Wiggers in 2010 to “describe a way of reframing craft not just as commodity objects that are sold, collected, or exhibited, but as social objects that are inscribed with histories and narratives;” Tim Ingold’s taskscape, which describes the network of activity which overlays, creates, and maintains any human-occupied landscape; the Hydraulic City as theorized by anthropologists Nikhil Anand to

immediate neighborhood and how they are collectively in a constant state of wearing and being rebuilt by hand.<sup>3</sup> In this neighborhood, the bedrocks of the crafted landscape are big block-long slabs of rowhouses built into the silty flood lands of the nearby Schuylkill River. Blocks of rowhouses abut one another, sharing foundations and roofs. They shake together as buses drive by. The small buildings line every block as far as the eye can see. The area seems to be of one formation with repetitions and variations, built in place of a standard and ever-shifting materials palette, experiencing the same local environmental factors.

Houses come apart, the way things do, but they usually come apart differently than, say, a spoon or a box.<sup>4</sup> My interest in researching the building repairs that I see in my immediate vicinity as craft presented a particular need to orient before researching, as I have not found touchstones from scholarly literature which include the likes of shit fixes I see in our Philadelphia rowhouses. I have been investigating repair in different disciplinary contexts and finding where the overlaps and overlapping gaps make the space within which fits what I see of building repairs.

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explain the way that “maintenance of water infrastructures bind residents, plumbers, engineers and politicians” in Mumbai; and the cultural, man-made, human landscapes of common things, which geographer Pierce K. Lewis considered to be key to understanding American culture. Lewis advocated for learning to read cultural landscapes in a way that “traditional geomorphologists and plant ecologists” learn to read natural landscapes. My knowledge of these various landscape frames, and my experience learning to read ecological and geomorphological landscapes as a volunteer environmental steward and educator has influenced my realization that building repairers are also engaging with reading a physical, as well as cultural, landscape when examining buildings. Anjula Razdan and matt lambert, “Unearthing the Craftscape,” American Craft Council, May 21, 2021, <https://www.craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/unearthing-craftscape>. Tim Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape,” *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): 152–74. Nikhil Anand, *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). Pierce F. Lewis, “Axioms of the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene,” *JAE* 30, no. 1 (1976): 6–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1424390>.

<sup>3</sup> The rowhouse is in the Fairmount neighborhood.

<sup>4</sup> There are a multitude of ways that a house is not a thing. A study of perceptions of building wear and repair could easily become an investigation into ways houses are involved in and resist commodification, thingness, and if that were the purpose of this paper then Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory,” would be core literature. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22.

In this paper, I will present a comparative analysis of literature pertaining to maintenance and repairs within architecture, infrastructure, and craft contexts; along with site studies which investigate perceptions of building repairs from a trade context. By "trade context," I refer to the hands-on work and activities that involve repetitive tasks related to building repairs. I include writing on the topic, which caters to the needs of general contractors, homeowners, and individuals who are involved in building maintenance and repair work in Philadelphia and the wider East Coast.

## **Building Repairs via Scholarship**

Writing about rowhouses in Philadelphia and nearby regions with similar building styles and histories, specifically about their repairs, often engages approaches which examine historicizing styles of seamless repair and remaking, product-based solutions, and assessment and management of building repairs instead of perspectives from practitioners.<sup>5</sup> Trade literature, newspaper columns, and books and guides made for sales contexts and the public, do more to examine maintenance and repairs of rowhouses in Philadelphia. These documents, written by and for an audience who are actively engaging in maintaining and repairing buildings by hand are included in my comparative analysis of repairs on site of a home being kept in a state of repaired maintaining.

In architectural scholarship, building repairs are often explored as restorations made to blend in with original frameworks and architectural forms.<sup>6</sup> In historic preservation and craft contexts, building repairs provide a historicizing view which re-imagines historical forms, or an archaeological view, which explores bygone methods of craft production.<sup>7</sup> Repairing in these contexts is about using modern tooling and materials to remake stylized components, or of using pre-industrial skills to maintain historic objects, or remake structures in pristine perpetuity.<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> The basic style of rowhouses that were built in Philadelphia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is perpetuated by repairs and now by revision and refabrications of that style made out of nostalgia and local custom, are distinct but common in many east coast cities and locales, from Baltimore, Maryland to Boston, MA. For more on the history of Philadelphia rowhouses, read Paul Hirshorn, “The Comparative Rowhouse Study: An Introduction to Architectural Design,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 36, no. 1 (October 1982): 14–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1982.11102631>.

<sup>6</sup> Meghan Drueding, Nigel F. Maynard, and Shelley D. Hutchins, “Big House Renovation: Grace Returns to Four Distinguished Buildings,” *Residential Architect* 7, no. 8 (September 1, 2003): 70–93.

<sup>7</sup> H. B. Sharp, “Some Mid-Fifteenth Century Small-Scale Building Repairs,” *Vernacular Architecture* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 1981): 20–29.

<sup>8</sup> Siân Jones and Thomas Yarrow, “Crafting Authenticity: An Ethnography of Conservation Practice,” *Journal of Material Culture* 18, no. 1 (March 2013): 3–26.

construction and engineering scholarship, building repairs are most often written about as a subject that pertains to the development of products, systems of assessment, and management of creating repairs to buildings.<sup>9</sup>

My interest instead is in repairs which have been created to hold a building in place and in use with smaller interventions. While readily visible in Philadelphia, these turn up less in scholarly work or even trade literature. Within the past decade, cultural and architecture scholars have begun to study repairs to buildings and infrastructure that are closer to what I see of shit fixes, as a concept and a practicality. I have combed a collection of recent research which, considered together, stakes the boundaries of a type of repairs on buildings that I have not found to be well-researched.<sup>10</sup> Urban planning scholar Shannon Mattern's research about learning from the decay of infrastructure, published in 2021, architect Hilary Sample's book about the maintenance of architecture, published in 2016, and architect Priya Jain's presentation about repairs given at a conference for architectural educators in 2018, together define an orientation for a new wave of research into building repairs, which my site studies intend to work within.<sup>11</sup> This orientation is towards practical work within a spectrum of activities: cleaning, maintenance,

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<sup>9</sup> P. Kalyanasundaram, S. Rajeev, and H. Udayakumar, "REPCON: Expert System for Building Repairs," *Journal of Computing in Civil Engineering* 4, no. 2 (April 1990): 84–101, [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(ASCE\)0887-3801\(1990\)4:2\(84\)](https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)0887-3801(1990)4:2(84)).

<sup>10</sup> I would need to devote more time to in order to better evidence the trends I claim here. It is a difficult if not impossible task to evidence an absence such as the one I claim here. These assertions currently represent a feel for the fields in question after touring literature in search of answers to an evolving set of research questions about building repairs that I have been examining over the past few years as a scholar, and longer as a building repairer myself. Shannon Mattern, thinks with theorists Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift who laid out a case for their idea that "repair and maintenance activities present a kind of 'missing link' in social theory, which is usually overlooked or forgotten." Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care," *Places Journal*, November 20, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.22269/181120>. Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, "Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (May 2007): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407075954>.

<sup>11</sup> Mattern, "Maintenance and Care." 2018; Hilary Sample, *Maintenance Architecture*, (MIT Press, 2016); Priya Jain, "The 'Iconic' and 'Everyday' Mid-century Modern: Shifting Attitudes Towards Repair and Preservation," 106th ACSA Annual Meeting Proceedings, *The Ethical Imperative*. (Roosevelt (NJ): ACSA Press, 2018): 534-539, <https://www.acsa-arch.org/proceedings/Annual%20Meeting%20Proceedings/ACSA.AM.106/ACSA.AM.106.83.pdf>

and repairing, which fall short of remaking, and which make up the necessities of preserving a building from newness and into a state of degrading.<sup>12</sup>

The literature that I use to establish frameworks have come about within a current bubbling-up of larger interest in repair, within both academic literature and consumer interest. Craft itself, as well as the craft of repair, is also experiencing a surge in interest, from art and architecture fields which are turning to craft for questions and answers about the design of buildings.<sup>13</sup> This interest in craft is currently rising in popularity, and the craft of repair itself a rising hot topic on Instagram as well as in the art world.<sup>14</sup> By considering building repairs as craft I am participating in this timely cross-pollination.

### ***Synthesizing a Conceptual Space for the Craft of Building Repairs***

The work of building repairs that I am most interested in is not about making newness. With neglect, buildings come apart. With maintenance, the coming apart can be forestalled: first

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<sup>12</sup> I use the word degradation in this paper the way it is used in geology, to describe ongoing disintegration and breaking down; the process of losing cohesion and vitality. This suits the aging together of house parts and their surrounds which have been either neglected, or else just aged, that I see in Philadelphia, and other generations-old cities, and natural landscapes that I know.

<sup>13</sup> The idea that craft scholarship could uncover something for the practice of architecture was typified by Catharine Rossi for the *Architectural Review* in 2017. Quickly connecting buildings to craft, Rossi defines craft as “simply to be interested in making: to understand things, be they chairs or cities.” Catharine Rossi, “Craft Contains the Critical Thinking That Could Unpack the Current State of Architecture,” *Architectural Review* (blog), February 7, 2017. Architecture’s interest in craft is seemingly on the rise in our current decade, but the roots of this interest in reconnecting architecture to its basic “material reality,” via craft theory has been going on a little longer. The matter can be seen in Lara Schrijver’s “Whatever Happened to Projective Architecture? Rethinking the Expertise of the Architect” from 2009. Lara Schrijver, “Whatever Happened to Projective Architecture? Rethinking the Expertise of the Architect,” *FOOTPRINT*, January 1, 2009: 123-128.

<sup>14</sup> We are also at least a decade in to an expansion of interest in building repairs on television shows, largely by way of flipping houses (which refers to ostensibly repairing and restyling homes to resell, a tenuous attribution of “repair”), including an entire network devoted to the enterprise, the Magnolia network, launched in 2018, a spin off of the DIY and HGTV networks. On building television shows, and in the way of ceramics and textiles mending kits for sale on sponsored Instagram posts, the focus of repairing is repair as product, as a means to make something of economic value in the future, as here: Amy Howard and Quentin Bacon, *Rescue, Restore, Redecorate: Amy Howard’s Guide to Refinishing Furniture and Accessories* (New York: Abrams, 2018). The craft of repair is for sale as a product and a stylish fad here: Kelly Richman-Abdou, “Kintsugi: The Centuries-Old Art of Repairing Broken Pottery with Gold,” *My Modern Met*, accessed March 6, 2022.

noticed, and then intercepted in the form of repairs. Maintenance is the lower bounds of repair. This practical care is necessary in order to maintain a structure in a state of durational wearing, in patination.<sup>15</sup> The sprucing-up of maintenance is ongoing and repetitive and begins with observation before action. Looking, in order to see change, is a necessity of keeping a building together within that murky space between newness and disrepair. This repetitive tending as an expression of care has become a focus of modern craft writing and is a focus I connect to building repairs.<sup>16</sup> This is a descriptive framework for the tending work of building repairs that I have derived from scholarship on the subject, and which I have used to orient my site studies.

Repairs created within this patination are punctuations which engage necessity. It is a theme in writing about repairs to include expressions of urgency, or the importance of the right moment to act, of now-ness.<sup>17</sup> The research finds that *now* is the time to study the practical labors, infrastructures, and styles of the work within this largely unstudied continuum of craftwork on buildings and infrastructure, and that *now*, as well as *more often*, is the time to practice the practical handwork of repairs. This urgency to study and practice repairs is central in recent work on the subject. This is another detail held in common between Shannon Mattern, Hilary Sample, and Priya Jain's research projects. I feel the same need to learn more about repairing and decay, both because of the deterioration I see of our infrastructure and my

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<sup>15</sup> Patination is a state of repaired wearing that many buildings are in, and which can disallow buildings from consideration as architectural. This idea is from Priya Jain, who describes patina to a building as “a middle ground – the deterioration that modern materials experience can rather be seen as patina,” which is possible when “users, maintenance staff and preservation professionals... resist their urge to make these buildings look eternally new” Jain, “The ‘Iconic’ and ‘Everyday’ Mid-century Modern,” 539.

<sup>16</sup> The importance of repetition to tending and care is central to artist Lisa Jarett, whose work and ideas I was introduced to in 2021, including with her keynote speech, “100 Questions: Tending and Collaborative Research Practice,” at the Craft Ways 2021 Virtual Symposium, hosted by the Asheville Center for Craft, and the MA in Critical Craft Studies program at Warren Wilson. Tending as care as a focus of craft studies as seen at the symposium is further addressed in footnote 27.

<sup>17</sup> This theme of urgency is present in research by scholars Shannon Mattern, Steven Jackson, and Amy Meissner, and which I find applicable to many others whose studies are examined at length in this paper.

experience with that deterioration as a practitioner, and because there is not enough scholarly attention given to repair.<sup>18</sup> Even with a public rise in interest in the craft of repair, I see a lack in commercial interest as well as scholarly interest in repairs within patination. A time-pressurized need to attend to or act on repair is one that comes along, in my experience with the practice of being a repairer. Scholars of repair express a similar motivation, or pressure.<sup>19</sup> I will further consider the ground that I share with these scholars, the way their research has oriented mine, and outline where my studies about building repairs differ.

### ***Repair as Ongoing Engagement with Decay***

In recent years, anthropologist Shannon Mattern has pivoted from research focused on cultural studies towards infrastructural repair, as in an essay published in public journal *Places* on the titular “Maintenance and Care.” The essay is both a study and a call to action, emphasizing the importance of comprehending the process of restoring things that have fallen apart. It also highlights that the study of repairing cannot be separated from an understanding of decay, which is the force that creates the need for repairing in the first place.<sup>20</sup> “Maintenance and Care” provides a history of theories of maintenance and care to date, and presents interviews and analysis of projects on the topic at hand from engineers, artisans, conceptual artists, and maintenance technicians.

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew Wills, “The Permanent Crisis of Infrastructure,” JSTOR Daily, August 12, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewer Melis Uğurlu, in conversation with Shannon Mattern, connected urgency, pressure, to care via architecture and climate in the research and found resonance with Mattern’s work on maintenance. This is one nested citation which intends, again, to reference a larger trend which I explore further throughout this paper, and which requires more attention to better evidence as a trend. Angelika Fitz, Elke Krasny, and Architektur Zentrum Wien, eds., *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet* (Vienna [Austria]: Cambridge, MA: Architekturzentrum Wien; MIT Press, 2019); from “On Maintenance and Care: A Conversation with Shannon Mattern,” accessed April 29, 2023, <https://pavilionofturkey21.iksv.org/en/conversations/on-maintenance-and-care-a-conversation-with-shannon-mattern>.

<sup>20</sup> Shannon Mattern, “Maintenance and Care,” 2018.

Repair is defined in Mattern’s handling of the subject by the circumstances explored more than it is explored in practical execution. The space defined, called maintenance but broader than a common understanding of this word, is the one within which decay has encroached into human constructions, and so some work is called for which “preserves and extends” human value.<sup>21</sup> By “called for,” she means that maintenance and repair waiting to be made is “necessary,” “timely,” a “need,” “more socially valuable,” than new construction, a “debt burden on future generations,” a right, and a responsibility.<sup>22</sup>

The work of repairing is a response to decay, oriented towards the collective project of maintaining. This dual-directed orientation of repair is stated more clearly in the article regarding a collective imperative to study repair than to practice it but using the same logic as the practice of repair themselves – that decay calls for repair as a response. The studies do not distinguish repair within maintenance, while referring to maintenance and repair not interchangeably, but without much in the way of specificity of differentiation. While she refers to the particularity of the essence of the personal experience of being called to repair, the studies do not explore the experience of a practitioner, as I will in my studies.

Mattern casts the repetitive actions of preservational maintenance and repairs made in response to decay as care, a generous offering of abiding support. In this light, infrastructure care isn’t only or necessarily about creating value, making more of what we want, or even work made to keep enjoying value, but is labor practiced as an expression of care. This reorientation, from action in-service-of (responding to the demands made by wearing and rupturing structures) to

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<sup>21</sup> Steven J. Jackson, "Rethinking Repair." *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (2014): 222

<sup>22</sup> Mattern, 2018.

precedent for action (a pre-orientation to provide support), aligns with contemporary feminist theories on care:

Contemporary theorists and activists are also investigating “care,” which has more to do with the ethos and affect of maintenance than with its (re)productive capacities. Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.” Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues that caring involves an “ethico-political commitment” to the neglected and oppressed and a concern with the affective dimensions of our material world. We care for things not because they produce value, but because they already have value.<sup>23</sup>

Mattern makes this connection between pre-orientation and maintenance, but without much in the way of further analysis. In my estimation, there may be many types of pre-orientation that lead to repairing, some which are overtly productive, about value and future-oriented capacities, which is certainly part of what is going on when repair work remakes via historicizing styling. It is acts which focus on the pre-orientation to bring the past into the future, and to be caring for a building and its inhabitants, that unify maintenance and repairs which preserve a building in patination.

While this research contextualizes repairs, and explains the motivations of maintainers and repairers, it does so with an analytical eye towards mass collective maintaining, which “encompasses a world of standards, tools, practices, and wisdom.”<sup>24</sup> In examining continuities and breaking points at one house, I will be able to analyze decay and a state of patination itself, as well as practitioners’ perspectives for insights into how being able to discern the care which tending to repair represents affects the experience of seeing repairs. This is the position of practice which orients towards knowing repair that Mattern conceptualizes, but explores at a

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<sup>23</sup> Mattern, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Mattern, 2018.

distance, whereas in my site studies, as an experienced maintainer myself, I am able to directly extend her thinking.

### ***Care for What Pre-Orients Repairing***

Care is expressed in the tending of landscapes and objects via acts of repairing in the studies by artist and craft scholar Amy Meissner in her research project, “The State of Repair.” Her research aligns to feminist care theorist Joan Tronto, as did Mattern’s, staking care as an orientation that precedes work. Meissner’s writing about craft provides relevant meditations on material, the skill, perceptions, and feelings of the craft practitioners of repair which I find missing from architectural studies, which lack the perspectives of practitioners.

The common credentials of repairers which she defines as acquired “intergenerationally or through solitary tinkering and experimentation,” well describe my experience of learning to fix buildings.<sup>25</sup> The cultural position and practices she defines for fixers in the community she is studying (artists in the circumpolar North), is very far away from the one that I am studying (building maintainers in Philadelphia), but it seems that an orientation to repair has created similar alignments. This is something like the pre-adoption of a temperament to care before engaging in caring acts, and about tending through time and in response to breakage that Mattern attributed to “fixers.” These scholars found the same alignments in their studies of repairs with very different topical foci. In my site studies I look for the outcomes of these pre-orienting alignments.

Meissner’s work examines repair itself as a practice aligned with certain goals, like caring, that I find apply more directly to the category of work of building repairs which

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<sup>25</sup> Amy Meissner, “The State of Repair, Chatter Marks Journal Issue 3: Guest Editing for the Anchorage Museum,” MA in Critical Craft Studies Practicum, (Warren Wilson College, 2021): 5.

maintains patination than to building repairs which are remaking. This approach holds repair in a different light than an examination of repair as either a heritage craft or a remaking.<sup>26</sup> The theme of tending to repairs as care is present in Meissner's work, at large in craft scholarship, and within other modern maintenance and repair studies that center human-scale infrastructures.<sup>27</sup> Studying and knowing about repairs creates a practical feeling of need to further study or create repairs, and acting on this need is considered to be care. This is different from work that primarily makes and remakes buildings, which is not oriented towards care in the same way, nor towards urgency or necessity.

While looking at the intergenerational patchwork of repairs I see at my dad's house, I am grounded both to my home life and to the craft practice of building, maintaining, and repairing which I have inherited and developed. This practice crucially involves the gathering and preserving of materials for future use.<sup>28</sup> In a paragraph that perfectly encapsulates this experience, Meissner describes the outcomes and motivations of repairing objects in Alaska:

The historic and contemporary acts of repair here reveal adaptation, prolonging, circular methods of production and ongoing maintenance. They reveal the collapsing of time through generational learning, craft's connection between people, objects and methods across great distance, ways of belonging to a place, and an ability to foster an ethical response to the broken — whether an everyday object or a climate in crisis. To engage in this craft is to consider repair, rather than replacement or discard as a first response. An

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<sup>26</sup> I am not intending to say that she *only* examines repairs as practice and not as the product itself, but that these are discrete intentions, and that the former is significant, and more relevant to my own research.

<sup>27</sup> *Tending to Craft* was the title of the Craft Ways 2021 Virtual Symposium, hosted by the Asheville Center for Craft, and the MA in Critical Craft Studies program at Warren Wilson. The craft of repair, as well as the nature of craft and tending, repetitive attention and action in response to noticing, and assessing needs, focused on the topic of textiles, art making, stewardship, forestry, and domestic arts as acts that constitute care were all ideas featured, assessed, and reassessed in the talks and sessions of the symposium. Tending as care is a subject of study in many other disciplines as well – medical and palliative care contexts, sociobiology, and ecology, to name a few, but is certainly having a moment within craft studies.

<sup>28</sup> I see this patchwork of repairs at my dad's house, and at large in Philadelphia. While it is outside the scope of this paper to consider the way of repairs in all of Philadelphia, I know from observation that shit fixes are at large in the city, that this is an outcome of the on average low income of homeowners in Philadelphia historically as compared to the national average income of homeowners, and moreover that, per P.K. Lewis, "a cultural landscape make[s] little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e. locational) context." Lewis, F. Pierce. "Axioms of the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene." *JAE* 30, no. 1 (1976): 9.

act of repair expresses care, *of some kind*, whether this lasts momentarily or is felt deeply for years.<sup>29</sup>

Mattern and Meissner both build on social theorist Steven Jackson’s question, “what do fixers know?”<sup>30</sup> Meissner found answers, specific intelligence of repair that is learned from proximity to decay and repairing and which, rooted to lack, encourages stewardship by way of feeling for the environment, as well as a drive to frugality in material selection and use. My intention is to assess decay and repairs from the perspective of a practitioner, and to underpin specificities of this intelligence with examination of that knowledge.

### ***Maintenance as Tending***

In architect Hilary Sample’s detailed studies and poetic responses to the practical and “never-ending regime of labor” which are the broad swathe of behaviors that stop short of and forestall the need for repairs of buildings in the 2016 book *Maintenance Architecture*, she picks up the same thread of this kind of practical labor as care which necessarily connect to tending through cycles of labor and time.<sup>31</sup>

She finds that sustained and widespread maintenance of architecture creates a consciousness, larger than any individual act or site of maintenance itself, which represent “enlargements of human energy.”<sup>32</sup> Sample finds that objects which resist “nature’s wear and tear” reflect good design, but that natural wear on buildings, which breaks through the duration

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<sup>29</sup> Meissner, “The State of Repair, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Jackson orients research towards fixers in his work by asking “Can the fixer know and see different things—indeed, different worlds—than the better-known figures of “designer” or “user”?” Mattern and Meissner both pick up his orientation towards intending to gain understanding from fixers. I have summed up and carried forward the question more specifically in this rephrasing: “what do fixers know?” Steven Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” 229. “Fixers’ Know and See Different Things than ‘Designers’ or ‘Users’”. Shannon Mattern on the Growing Centrality of Maintenance,” THE ALTERNATIVE, accessed July 26, 2022, <https://www.thealternative.org.uk/dailyalternative/2022/7/19/shannon-matters-maintenance>.

<sup>31</sup> Sample, *Maintenance Architecture*.

<sup>32</sup> Sample, 73.

that maintenance provides, unmake a building from being itself.<sup>33</sup> The idea that the wear of buildings would be forestalled by better planning, or that planning would do so in the future, is another common conceit of research about building restorations and repairs. Even while looking at the wearing of a building as an ongoingness, this conceptualization of fixing involves simultaneously imagining a fresh new future, a remaking.<sup>34</sup> Sample distinguishes between a state of being maintained and a state of unmadeness, naming cleaning the maintenance which is a bulwark against the changes of aging on a building. Cleaning, unlike restoration, reconstruction, or rebuilding, temporarily preserves madeness. I am interested in learning from repairs which maintain the ongoingness of a building's unmaking.

Restoration, work which repairs buildings, but which represents the upper boundary of repair in my construction of repair's conceptual space, consists in Sample's analysis of plans that are often judged appropriate only when they come with large planning and labor requirements. These methods aim for seamless repairs, which often amount to full remaking of a building component, which "amplify the burden of care," of maintenance.<sup>35</sup> These judgements produce requirements for specifications "around restoration or preservation" which raise their costs but also eliminate the possibility to practice what Sample calls, enigmatically, "creative making,"<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sample attributes this idea of the madeness of a building, that state of being when it works as it is supposed to and looks as it was made to and which human use and environmental wear unmakes, to Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. Rem Koolhaas, interview by Ila Beka and Louise Lemoine, *Koolhaas Houselife*, DVD, directed by Ila Beka and Louise Lemoine (Paris: Beka Films, 2008), from Sample, 101.

<sup>34</sup> The reasoning behind considering repair sites to help in planning for the future is sound, but we cannot expect the knowledge required in a moment to be the same as the knowledge required for planning a new creation. While both approaches may have their merits, it's important to recognize that responding to decay and repairing something in the moment is fundamentally different from using knowledge of rupture and repair to plan for the future. While my research doesn't seek to ignore the ways that learning from repair enables planning for new making, I intend as well to learn about something besides making anew.

<sup>35</sup> Considering the difference between preservation and maintenance, Sample describes standards of repair applied after architecture receives historic designation as methods which "amplify the burden of care," shifting the care of maintenance to the kind of work which is subject to the stylistic judgements of new building forms. Sample, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Sample, 73.

the likes of which I consider to be the craft of repairing in response to the breaking through of decay, without remaking.

### ***Unsanctioned Building Repairs***

Architecture professor Jain Priya's research expands on repairs which work within the dialectic between buildings made and unmade, maintained and restored, or cared for or neglected. In a presentation at the Associate of the Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) Annual Meeting in 2016, Jain presented findings about work of building repair which is between restoration to some original state (often impossible, impractical, or unaffordable), and abandonment.<sup>37</sup> Repairs that fall into this category are ones largely neglected by architectural study, and outside of study are the kind of creative making which is often judged inappropriate, as Sample defines but leaves unexamined. Jain's research is the only writing I have found about building repairs which seeks to learn from this work in-between the bounds of maintenance at one end and renovation and restoration at the other end, which are blatantly out of sync with the demands of seamlessness.

This emphasis has been particularly relevant to my inquiries, both because of her focus on this niche form of repair, work which is made closer to decay than to seamlessness, and because she acknowledges the work of craft practitioners of building repair themselves, which are overlooked in other literature on the subject. The repairs studied engage practicalities and challenges of repairing Mid-Century Modern architecture. These buildings were built with cladding made from mass market industrial building products that are no longer available, and for which there are no clear repair protocols. Large repairs have been necessary since their

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<sup>37</sup> I am referencing the contents of this presentation as seen in the associated paper published by the ACSA press: Jain, "The 'Iconic' and 'Everyday' Mid-century Modern."

construction, and now these repairs are in need of repairs. Her project reveals a lack of standardized building solutions for this recently common problem, as past industrialized niche solutions are not easily restorable let alone repairable.<sup>38</sup>

The studies in question investigate the design and handiwork of the buildings as originally made, the decay and repairs, and analyze the material and executive choices made, their costs, and their impact on the buildings' look and functionality. Jain's work points towards the craft practitioners of architecture, without involving them in her research. She names general contractors as the primary practitioners of the repairs she investigates, rather than the planners and designers who are the creators of restoration plans in other architecture scholarship. This is an outcome of the intricacies of building management, which in her studies leads to disappointing style outcomes. While Jain acknowledges general contractors as practitioners of repairs, they are absent from her studies.

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<sup>38</sup> The unrepairability of mass-produced, niche industrialized solutions from the past is further explored in my cornice case, later in this paper, as an issue for many buildings besides those in Jain's study.

## How I Have Been Researching

### *Definitional Frameworks for Building Repairs, Gleaned*

To summarize those themes gleaned from literature which resonate with my practical experience of building repairs and which I use to guide my studies: 1. Repairs are crafted in response to punctuations of decay through maintenance and are associated with, surrounded by, and promote a sense of urgency, in both a present and durational moment.<sup>39</sup> 2. The kind of work done in response to the degradation of buildings is necessarily repetitive, requiring an attention to and examination of decay and change which works with understandings of the state of a structure, a material, a building, that are interwoven with understanding of the past, as well as the regularly occurring, and the future. 3. This repetitive tending, responding to need in a way that maintains existing structures, is easy to conceptualize as care, in a rigorous way which connects to big ideas about society and practices which uphold mutual wellbeing, but also casually, in a way that is easy to speak about – that to maintain and repair is to take care of. Buildings are taken care of through maintenance and repair to prevent and forestall degradation of a building,

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<sup>39</sup> I am not studying urgency, but will here make note of some parameters of studies of urgency as a matter of due diligence and also because my use of the word, like building repairs, may benefit from some definitional attention. Urgency is a personal experience, a feeling of a need to act. Studies of urgency are most often research into medical and mental health issues. In medicine urgency refers most often to urges to expel bodily fluids, or else to a psychological experience. In psychology and mental health contexts, urgency most often refers to impulsivity and negative obsessive behavior, as in Joël Billieux et al., “The Role of Urgency and Its Underlying Psychological Mechanisms in Problematic Behaviours,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 48, no. 11 (November 2010): 1085–96. Tema Okun, thinking with a complex lineage of activists and scholars including her mentor at the time of the original publication of the article, Kenneth Jones, has ascribed pervasive and persistent sense of urgency to act as a tenet of white supremacy. The imperative to act that I find expressed in scholarship about the study of repair, and in practice in response to the decay of buildings is the same internal psychological motivation to act, but rather than a response to internal movements (as the need to eliminate), or obsessive worry (as in white supremacy culture and the related personal psychological problems due to obsessive and ongoing urgency), it is a response to movement outside the body, a feeling of responsibility for the movement of decay of a building. Okun’s original guidelines for white supremacy were published in 1999, but the information was republished in 2021 as a website: “WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE,” WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE, accessed March 18, 2023, <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>.

and these practices are in some way about decay as well as about keeping buildings together. 4. Research about repairs is not research of decay but requires research of decay. But, repairs themselves *are* research of decay, and the tipping points of degradation encroaching against the work of maintenance.

### ***Studying Sites***

To research the outcome of the ability of repairers to perceive the care of building repair, I conducted site studies of a rowhouse that was built in 1820 which has belonged to my family since the 1980s. The building is heavily patinated, in that it has been largely cared for with maintenance and repairs and so many repaired and remade sections are in evidence.<sup>40</sup> I have found it to be a great case to investigate the experience of caring for and aiming to learn from a state of decay which creeps and jumps, the maintenance and repairs that are possible, and which have been made in response. The studies are intertwined with analyses of the ethnographic details which reveal the particularities of the perceptions of practitioners of repair with regards to the themes established during my reviewing of literature on relevant topics.

### ***Guidance for Site Studies***

For guidance towards topical as well as methodological approaches I took cues from other studies of specific building rehabilitations. Priya Jain's study of "Shifting Attitudes Towards Repair and Preservation" investigates building repair projects which were not designed to achieve or contribute to a complete look for a building<sup>41</sup>. No set standard has been established for buildings in the style under consideration, made of specialty industrialized building systems

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<sup>40</sup> In patination the ongoingness of decay is also visible.

<sup>41</sup> Jain.

in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her studies include analysis of the style and materials of the buildings as built, as well as costs, planning, and methods associated with various repairs. These are all matters I take into consideration in my site studies, which compare wear and shit fixes with surveyance of the established restoration methods available. The judgments expressed in response to the repairs are ones that come from communities interested in these buildings for certain stylistic outcomes. Ultimately, she argues for learning to accept the look of buildings aging, possible if we “resist the urge to make these buildings look eternally new.”<sup>42</sup>

In my site studies, I look to find opinions about these kinds of maintaining repairs, and to learn from sources closer to the work of repair: from practitioners, trade, and public media.

### ***Culturally-Bound Building Repairs Studies***

The stylistic investigations of Halauniova et al, "In Ugly and Uglier: Defining Value and Politics in Architecture," focus on a larger building remaking project, the kind planned for and executed by many who were not involved in that planning. This is a common subject for architectural studies, more so than the breaking cusp of maintenance into repairs taken on by one person or a small contingent which I am instead considering.<sup>43</sup> However, their research into accounts of "Potempkinizing" updates to Soviet block housing included gathering feedback from

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<sup>42</sup> Jain, 539.

<sup>43</sup> Some instances of architectural studies into large building remaking projects are: this book, which focuses on large building remaking projects and which the publisher calls the “standard text for architects and others involved in the conservation of historic structures”: Bernard Feilden, *Conservation of Historic Buildings*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2015); as does this book of standards: Stephen J. Kelley, *Standards for Preservation and Rehabilitation* (ASTM International, 1996). Individual citations in reference to the longstanding interests of building studies primarily being towards what I reference in this paper as, among other phrasings, remaking newness as opposed to maintaining and repairing in patination, is something that further iterations of my research will need to better examine as a whole.

subjects who were familiar, as neighbors, with the buildings, as well as clear articulation of the basic conceit that people have strong opinions about the state of wear and style of buildings.<sup>44</sup>

Although their studies focus on building restoration, remaking rather than mitigating decay with repair, the investigation methods into practical materials and styles, interest in local governance, and input from subjects familiar with the buildings in their everyday lives, regarding the perceived values of pre- and post-repair buildings, have influenced my own research.

In a similar way, study of my dad's rowhouse reveals methods and materials of building work, governance and trade advice, and considers the opinions of managers, practitioners, neighbors, and other witnesses to the repairs. My studies are also drawn from my own recollections, from my own experiences assessing buildings, and from making repairs as a practitioner of building repair.

### ***Ethnographic Orientations***

In my research I accounted for wear and repair, by studying house components visually on site, then via photographs, and thinking through and writing about the materials, design, and installation, considering and researching repair and remaking possibilities, as well as recollections of their repairers and relevant bystanders, and any of my own felt positive or negative general affects. I scrutinized these accounts and possibilities in light of other researchers' theories about cultures, perceptions, and the repair of buildings.

The sensory aspect of researching buildings is often, for me, the loudest part of the experience. By this I mean that the look of, and my feelings about, the wearing and repairs of buildings are the most insistent and attention-grabbing component as an investigator of

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<sup>44</sup> Olga Sezneva and Anastasiya Halauniova, "Ugly and Uglier: Defining Value and Politics in Architecture," *Journal of Urban Design* 26, no. 5 (September 3, 2021): 575–590.

buildings, their wearing, and their repairs. As the experience of repairers themselves is often missing from studies of repair, this focus allows my perceptual studies to serve as underpinning, that may be able to enrich established studies of repair with practitioners' perspectives.<sup>45</sup>

Besides intending to fill a gap in scholarship with research that provides data from an under-represented source of information by considering my personal sense of repairs and the emotional expressions of participants of repairs, this source of knowledge provides particular and complex empirical grounding for gaining understanding from material culture. Sarah Pink's research on sensory ethnography and on domestic environments has been clarifying for me in understanding how to investigate personal experience as a researcher.<sup>46</sup>

Pink's accounts describe the reflexive relationship between researchers and the environments they research, the root of which is that the body of the researcher is the primary data collector. In my case, my research is of a subject which I am very close to, and of which I have practical knowledge as well as researched understanding. For research that recognizes its own footing, the body of the researcher must be taken into account as a source of interaction and bias which skews data. In addition to the value of sensory information for informing reflexivity, Pink's work acclaims sensory experience as a fruitful methodology for ethnographic exploration of culture. In addition to my own perspective, sensory and reflexive, I have made note of the practical and emotional experiences of others present in these studies when available, to contextualize their positions as well.

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<sup>45</sup> Underpinning is a process wherein a building which is lacking supportive structure underneath the foundation on which it has been built is provided with new support from below. Underpinning repairs a building downwards, with new structural support beneath what up until that point was the entirety of the building. In a similar way: I imagine research into building repairs which is generated from the practice of repairers to be a sort of material that fits underneath, or within an established structure that has been created with blank space, air pockets within structured research into repairs, for these types of studies included.

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Second edition (London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2015).

### *More Than Visual*

My visual analysis of building components are also processual analysis of what has been happening, gleaned from appearance. These perceptions are fallible, and they are to some extent, deductive. However, due to my knowledge as a practitioner of work on buildings and personally of the sites and materials involved, when I look at and consider them with the new eyes of a researcher, I understand their construction and wear by drawing from my accumulative experience. By this, I mean that by choosing sites that are well known to me, that I have been privy to for decades, and which I have been managing repairs of for the past two years, I am able to examine accounts that span years of acquaintanceship, as well as make visual and analytical accounts which draw on my professional skills. Except in those cases where I have been present for damage or repair, or else privy to another's personal account, I am deducing, guessing, and predicting. I do not know the consistency of materials I cannot touch, nor can I know the motivations behind installations.

Building component assessments are deductions but at the same time: looking at built structures which I know about feels something like perceiving motivations and decay directly. In this project I have found that repairs strike me, on sight, as positive, handled; or gross, negligent, and unpleasant, as stable, unstable, sinking, and like dissolution, as moving through a state of wearing. This seeing, examining, and then knowing is all a part of a more-than-visual experience which depends on possession of specific skills and culture to be seen. In anthropologist Cristina Grasseni's paper "More than Visual: The Apprenticeship of Skilled Visions," published in 2022, Grasseni surveyed recent scholarship which considers the ways skilled practice leads to more-than-visual sight. This vision provides an experience that is embodied (felt as emotion), socially

mediated and constructed (culturally bound), contextual (informed by surroundings), and multi-sensorial at a glance.<sup>47</sup>

This means that practical knowledge, such as being well-acquainted with the craft of repair, means that the mere look of something can provide an experience beyond the sight of it. In essence, a viewer with experience in handwork and visual appreciation learned within their cultural situation has understanding of what they see which is different, and more than, visual perception of their subject of expertise for someone who lacks that knowledge. Other sensory input is built into an “on sight” experience for a knowledgeable viewer. Touch, smell, sound, emotional and affective experience extend visual perception.

The more-than-visual experience of observing repairs and decay also provides a sense of understanding of the rate and kind of movement building components undergo between states of wear, and for specifics of repairs which have been created in response to that decay. My analyses are enlivened by traces of the sources of a building's degradation, and the interceptions of craft practitioners. My experience of impermanence, of the metamorphosing of buildings (like landscapes), provides me an embodied experience of the satisfaction in the sudden absence of timed pressure, relief, and also a gut level understanding that wear, neglect, damage, and certain repairs look bad. By looking to house projects with known interlopers, I can assess others' personal experiences in these veins, not only my own. The ability to discern and evaluate repairs plays a pivotal role in my investigative approach when conducting on-site analyses. In these inquiries, I document my investigation of the process involved in comprehending the circumstances leading to the repair or reconstruction of a building, in order to delve into the underlying motives.

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<sup>47</sup> Cristina Grasseni, “More than Visual: The Apprenticeship of Skilled Visions,” *Ethos*, December 25, 2022.

As part of my investigations, I employ both imaginative and non-narrative methods of visualization. Looking for research techniques that investigate the mechanics and material cultures involved in building repairs, I found research methodologies which consider the mechanisms and materials of components in consumer research ethnographies.

### ***Sensory and Design Ethnographies***

In this paper, I use comparative scholarly literature and trade publication analysis, interviews with trade professionals, site studies, and recollection of conversations and family oral history of the house to develop a deeper understanding of building repairs and the culture of building repairers. I used close examination of sites of building repairs in person, collecting sensory information, taking photographs, and analyzing component design and craft details. I also shared the perspectives of those who worked on, assessed possibilities, or commented on repairs at the house.

By examining the evidence of previous design and craft processes on buildings, as well as considering participants' opinions and my own experiences, I have been able to apply the iterative process of design research to the study of objects, cultures, and experiences involved in the repair of the building. This approach has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of decay and repair situations which are in ongoing processes of unfolding, looking forward as well as backwards. I looked to Sara Pink's *Making Homes: Ethnography and Design*, where repetitive social contexts create the environments of homes for modeling research methods into this context.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sarah Pink et al., *Making Homes: Ethnography and Design* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

However, the context of building components at my dad's rowhouse is less of a human-focused position than these investigations model. Their situation in the environment does include human use, but the components, a cornice and a porch, do not primarily create the interior living space of a home. While their functions involve and entail the interactions they facilitate, they are not realized by the human activity within, in the way something like a living room is. In my investigations, components, and repairs are enlivened by their craft, material, and design, as well as their situation in the environment, in some ways in service of the building itself.

In a practical sense, undertaking the process of assessing the state of wear of a building component, and the possibilities for its shit fixing, repair, or replacement, with intention to remediate wear on a building, is design research. Design research emerged as a school of investigation in the 1960s in London in reference to manufactured product making. Bruce Archer, an early establisher of design research as a discipline, defined the practice as "systematic inquiry whose goal is knowledge of, or in, the embodiment of configuration, composition, structure, purpose, value, and meaning in man-made things and systems."<sup>49</sup> Design ethnography is a more recent application of design research towards ethnographic research instead of production purposes. Per Francis Müller in *Design Ethnography: Epistemology and Methodology*, in design ethnography, the iterative process is applied rather than to the creation of forms, to study of objects, cultures, and experiences.<sup>50</sup>

The practice of design incorporates, per Müller, "stores of implicit knowledge through their practice. The consequence is an intuitive approach to design that is guided by internalized experiential knowledge."<sup>51</sup> In my site studies, I explore the evidence of previous design (plans

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<sup>49</sup> Bruce Archer, "A View of the Nature of Design Research" in R. Jacques and J. Powell, eds., *Design: Science: Method*: (Guilford, UL: Westbury House/IPC Science and Technology Press, 1981)

<sup>50</sup> Francis Müller, *Design Ethnography: Epistemology and Methodology* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Müller, *Design Ethnography*, 2.

for) and craft processes and their outcomes (hand-making and installation of materials), while also considering participants' opinions and expressions. My own more-than-visual, and often emotionally toned experiences have been influenced by frameworks for design ethnographies as seen in Müller's book as well as in Dominique Vinck and Eric Blanco's collection of essays *Everyday Engineering: An Ethnography of Design and Innovation*, published in 2003.<sup>52</sup> In *Everyday Engineering*, the detailing of the production and design contexts, the resulting objects and “contrasting cultures” involved in their design and production demonstrate the way that “real work situations are complex,” in much the same way that I couch sensory and cultural details of components with technical possibilities.<sup>53</sup>

While design ethnography has been an interesting and useful tool in this research, the approach does not stand well alone in an academic study.<sup>54</sup> Criticism for design methodology used in ethnographic contexts calls the practice appropriation of academic terminology in service of processes that serve to design new forms, not conduct scholarly research.<sup>55</sup> But, the guidance for contextualizing these investigations with industrially produced building repair solutions in mind, as well as the forward thinking planning that goes into making repairs without remaking from design ethnography has been valuable. Enriching these investigations with other methodologies rather than resting on exhaustive design ethnography ways has, I hope, averted from the possible pitfalls of those methods.

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<sup>52</sup> Eric Blanco and Dominique Vinck, eds., *Everyday Engineering: An Ethnography of Design and Innovation*, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Blanco and Vinck, *Everyday Engineering*.

<sup>54</sup> For more on the somewhat newfangled and not entirely academic intersections between anthropological and design research methods, topics, and outcomes see Alison J. Clarke, ed., *Design Anthropology: Object Cultures in Transition* (London, England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

<sup>55</sup> There is something in common with this assertion and mine that intentions to repair or to understand repair are often co-opted by intentions that are about making anew, which is also the ultimate goal of a design process. Fabian Segelström and Stefan Holmlid, “Ethnography by Design: On Goals and Mediating Artefacts,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 14, no. 2 (April 2015): 134–49.

## *Pictures and Metaphors*

From the descriptive journalism of James Agee and Walker Evans' book *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, I found inspiration for the evocative and informative power of images of building parts that accompany descriptions of their careful construction and tending.<sup>56</sup> Images closely linked with their descriptors is like the experience of examining one instance of a repetitive feature of the crafted landscape. A collection of images of those repetitive features without pairing to individual delving is more like a walk around the block, attuned to noticing trends.

While my research aims to provide insight to the kind of knowing possible via the understanding that practice enables in the viewing of crafted repairs, with hopes of providing a glimpse of that knowing for a reader who may not have those same practical skills: I have structured this paper to share more depictive and evocative sections, to share something of the affect of the experience.

I have also been looking to literary works for examples of literature which provides a feeling in the reading as well as an analytical experience. These structures detail as well as evoke. I took cues from the writing of Lydia Davis in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, and Eula Biss in *Having and Being Had*.<sup>57</sup> In both of these collections of short writings, building ownership and the relationships enveloped in that experience are the anchoring narrative devices to explore modern life.

The realities of laying out this research in a technically sound way took precedent, and so what remains of this plan are small moments instead of whole sections in a looser style.

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<sup>56</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, 1st Mariner books ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Lydia Davis, *The Collected stories of Lydia Davis*, (New York: Picador, 2009).

Something of my original intentions to use more evocative styling is still present in the inclusion of metaphorical, casual, and vernacular language like shit fix. In an ideal formation of this paper there would also be a section of images which show more iterations of the kinds of neglect, making and unmaking, and shit fixing that I am considering.

## Site Studies

### Cornice

#### *Regarding the Cornice*

#### [Figure 2. Cornice from the Ground]

From the ground, and even more so from the roof: the look of the cornice is immediately vaguely concerning. It is also interesting – as something the likes of which I do not often see in my immediate presence.<sup>58</sup> In 2016 I looked up at it for the first time since I was a child, and even from 30 feet away could tell that it was a thing out of place, such that the wholeness of the house is wearing through here. “Is that *original*? Is that wood? Have you been up there and looked at that?” I asked my dad. My implication: that is amazing, old and lovely, and it looks like it might be a problem that you’ve been ignoring. But he had looked at it, he said, and it didn’t need our attention that day.

The cornice covers over, protects and accentuates the seam between the roof and the front wall of the house. It is about two feet tall and made of wooden boards which were once painted green and brown, which create an overhang that runs the width of the roof. Corbels, wavy wooden brackets that brace each overhanging structure from underneath, punctuate along its

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<sup>58</sup> The scholarship of literary critic Sianne Ngai finds and defines aesthetic categories which typify the way things look to us in late-stage capitalism. The aesthetics she defines most often provoke more than one response. The interesting, one of her subjects, for instance is deeply captivating but also ineffably elusive. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015).

length. The overturned, stacked box structure makes a crown for the building that directs rain away from the front wall.<sup>59</sup>

The wooden structure has not in family memory been spruced up in any significant way. It consists of a boxing-in along the top seam of the house. We believe it to be original and, if so, it was made and installed some-time in the 1830s. Given this, it's in remarkably good shape.<sup>60</sup> By the looks of the few crevices where gooey green still clings, in the 200 years between its making and today, my dad (certainly), and an unknown predecessor (maybe), have daubed on a little caulking. The paint has flaked off everywhere else, and so bare wood faces the elements. The seams have popped open. Every one, just a little. Even so, the wood could barely be said to be cracking. At every joint, every nail hole, and along every seam, I can see that fiber has pulled away from fiber. The wood is densely grained and looks hard. I'd guess that when it was new, I wouldn't have been able to dent it with my fingernail. It must be very tough to be able to flex like this without coming apart.

### **[Figure 3. End Cap]**

An end cap, which covers the end of the boxing which hooks around to the left side of the house, is the only part of it that I can get a good close-up look. This part is visible but unreachable from the rooftop. It is made from three oddly shaped pieces of wood, whereas I would have thought to make it out of one board cut to shape. The choice to use a few pieces here instead of one could be construed as cheaping out, using scraps rather than fresh material to

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<sup>59</sup> The American Heritage dictionary describes a cornice as a crowning, decorative roofing element. The etymology is possibly from the Latin *crow*, as in a jutting projection, but also the Greek *korōnis*, a flourish, a curvy line, or a coping stone: the highest stone of a wall, made to guide the water away. This cornice is indeed all of these things. HarperCollins Publishers, "The American Heritage Dictionary Entry: CORNICE," accessed March 20, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> I asked the city to corroborate the date on the deed, which records the building of the home as 1850. They told me that this was the date the city began issuing deeds, and that it was probably 30 years older.

make this piece which will not be seen from the street.<sup>61</sup> While this was my first impression, after further consideration, I don't think this is the case. The orientation of the boards looks more like a careful and knowledgeable choice. Made this way, it has been possible to orient the long grain of the wood along the length of every downward-facing edge to direct water away from the larger structure.

If this piece had been made from one solid board, the grain would hold the water in accumulation rather than falling. The piece would be curling at the edges and splintering from the end, the way the board above it is, because of the way the end grain would hold water from falling out, holding it longer in the horizontal. The back of the house faces northeast like this end piece and is perpetually soggy. The flashing is always green with the gunk that grows on warm tar in the shade, where it is never dry. I can see the way this, on the other hand, stays dry. Water drips off the edges when it rains. Although this end cap faces away from the sunshine, it is attached to a structure that is baked dry every day. This orientation is a lucky detail of the situation of the building's lot, but the layout of the boards of this endcap looks deliberate.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In order to take this photograph, I had to lie on my stomach at the roof edge and then hold my phone out over the edge of the roof. The idea of some work being obviously made to save money, out of an intention to defraud a project of funds and value in conniving way that I imagine here when I consider this kind of cheaping out has a lot in common with the gimmick, another one of Sianne Ngai's aesthetic categories for modern times. There is a lot I could say about the culture of building repairers, or I'd argue other blue-collar repairers (like car mechanics and plumbers) and the reputation they have and the way that this kind of work is often irrefutably viewed as gimmicky, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.

<sup>62</sup> Filling in details as possible of historical norms of building carpentry work like this, and a breakdown of the comparative costs and classes of the workers and building owners of this kind of work when it was built, would be interesting information to include in an elaboration of this research. Filling in these historical norms and looking for the community of practice who creates this kind of work as a revivification of the historic styles would amount to accounting for seamless remakers, not repairers. Before seeing this piece up close, I had never studied or been taught the art of ornate house carpentering with grain oriented so carefully like this, and so I don't know if these tactics are well-known in some circles. I expect that there are communities of traditional carpenters who do work that adheres to principles like this and who have been trained in these methods via some community that connect to the practices of the trade communities that made these in the 1900s, but also that this community of practitioners and the materials they use must also be more of a reimagining of these practices than a continuation.

*Nearby: More-Advanced Decay*

**[Figure 4. Neighbor's End Cap]**

Thirty feet below and four feet northward, across a narrow alleyway, is a similar piece: the replacement endcap of the neighboring garage's awning cornice. This end cap has been made out of one continuous of plywood, with the end grain oriented in such a way that water has stayed soaking in the horizontal rain after every dousing rather than traveling along the grain with gravity to drip outwards. Although these materials don't look to be more than a few decades old at the most, they are coming apart. This remaking was not made to last. The way that it is coming apart means that it will need to be rebuilt again, not refinished.

Maintenance could have done little to forestall the degrading of this plywood because the piece wasn't made to be maintainable or to wear well. These materials are ruined. They are no longer strong and whole.<sup>63</sup> The awning needs to be fixed. But, because of the location (above a rarely opened and low-to-the-ground door), nothing much will come of its failure. Moreover, I can see that maintenance is happening elsewhere on the property (to the main building's façade, windows, and the garden space between garage and building), and so I expect this awning will be handled in due course. Though maintenance has ruptured into a need for repair, there is no urgency here. Maintenance to stop the spread of the damage would accomplish little, here. Because of the context of this component and the visible evidence of tending nearby, the sight of the delaminating plywood of the ruptured awning end cap does not cause me concern.

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<sup>63</sup> This construction is not one that I would call a shit fix. While it did fix the garage when its previous awning degraded, this work does not fit into the category of shit fix for a few reasons. The damaged part is one component within a larger remaking of this awning. Work has been done to make the board a contiguous part of the whole of the awning. It has been cut to fit, set in flush to the end, and painted to match the rest of the structure.

### *Worrying about Decay as Care*

On our cornice: the opening of the fibers of the wood can only continue as water trickles into the cracks. In the winter, it will trickle in, expand as it freezes, and further shred the boards from within. This would cause damage to the interior walls of the home. This kind of damage would be invasive to the people living there and more costly to fix than the cost of managing the cornice itself. I have been watching and have seen no damage inside from water coming in along this seam, not even water clinging to it from the outside after heavy rain. I have yet to touch it, or to dig in with an awl to assess its constitution, as I would in order to decide whether, after 200 years, this need for maintenance has ruptured into a need for repair.

Because of the state of the cornice, the building is slipping into the territory of being unmade, the state that maintenance is supposed to forestall. I feel worry about this, but without immediacy. Instead, it is an increase in the pressure of an abiding intention to keep this together next by seeking a way forward. In other words: from what I can see, the cornice needs maintenance. It needs to be painted and resealed. But it looks fine, so I'm not worrying, much. Moreover, my dad has been watching it for years, and he thinks it looks fine. Pressure calls for me, rather than to do something immediately, to determine more.

As a maintainer who is responsible for the house, the cornice pulls my attention on sight to consider its wearing, with an experience of concern. This is the initial necessity to be engaged in the responsibility of maintenance of the house, to look at it repeatedly over time. The next thing I need to do is to look at it more closely, and to poke it. The way that feminist theorists of care, such as Joan Tronto conceived of care, as an orientation to be providing that precedes action, I have an orientation to look and understand that preorients action, which is pre-oriented by intentions to tend to the thing. This orientation represents action from my responsibility for

the longevity of the building, to maintain the associated value of the building as a place to live as well as a thing worth money, but also to the cornice itself, more ineffably to the way it looks, the neighborhood, and to absolving my own feelings of pressure about its state of being and all of these associated interests.

### ***Possibilities and Fitting In***

Without direct ability at that time to investigate in a hands-on way, and so without clarity about the exact needs of the cornice to be repaired or the urgency of those needs, I looked around the neighborhood for advice. When assessing one building alike its neighbors, the job of surveying one to understand the proper way to proceed is best done by surveying many. It is in situations like this one where the character of the context of a building in a city are most clear to me as the crafted landscape. My dad's rowhouse is surrounded by and built attached to others of its kind, which were made at nearly or the same time out of the same materials. Surveying the crafted landscape, as a repairer and a researcher of specific maintenance and repair needs and interventions, I conduct comparative analysis, enriching my understanding of the state of one building by seeking to learn from the state of the buildings nearby.

What I saw at large in the neighborhood was that many of the original cornices remain and have been maintained. Here maintained looks to mean has been repainted again and again, since their creation. This is evidenced by the clumpy build-up of paint visible even from the street. Many others have been covered-over, built into a new boxing-in with shaped sheets of

vinyl or aluminum siding, but none on our immediate street. This way of covering over the cornices so that they would not need to be maintained has been a norm for decades.<sup>64</sup>

### *Bypassing Maintenance Needs*

#### **[Figure 5. Siding]**

In the fall of 2021, I spoke with fourth-generation Philadelphia general contractor Steve Spector, whose business specializes in work on these kinds of buildings, about the options for repairs to the cornice. Spector verified that fixing it up would depend on the condition of the wood, as well as our interest in and ability to keep up with the Joneses, as he put it.<sup>65</sup> This last possibility meaning: whether we could afford to, and if we wanted to, meet or exceed the visual, and economic standards of the other buildings in the neighborhood. He gave me a rough estimate of \$20k for a full restoration, in which all or most of the wood needed to be remanufactured and replaced, re-made to look like the original.<sup>66</sup> This is not a common means of repair in this neighborhood, but in certain communities and in certain neighborhoods, it would be considered the right way to fix the cornice.<sup>67</sup> If we find out that most or all of the wood is in good shape, we

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<sup>64</sup> Brief materials history: Appalachian hardwoods and the nearby train tracks and building of the East Coast cities at the beginning of the industrial revolution when Philadelphia was innovating mass manufacturing, early 1920s deforestation, WW2 government subsidies for coal-based and other American materials spawned the siding and asphalt industries, and more broadly our current American mass manufactured general contracting materials paradigm.

<sup>65</sup> Steve Spector, Jobs coordinator for Mr. Contractor, Transcript of Recorded Phone Interview by Miriam Devlin. Philadelphia, PA, November 8, 2021, 22.

<sup>66</sup> The same tricky cultural values are at play in the design of historic building restoration projects which seek to remake the past, as in heritage crafts. Craft is often understood as fabricated objects, materials, foods, styled to honor traditional methods, brand new but also in some way, often a way constructed with a lot of political baggage influencing the definitions, original. For reading on the topic: For more about heritage values in craft read Fabien Petiot and Chloe Braunstein-Kreigel, “Thinking (About) Craft: Culture, Networks, Ethics,” in *Crafts: Today’s Anthology for Tomorrow’s Crafts* (Paris: Editions Norma, 2018).

<sup>67</sup> Writing about development projects in postwar Philadelphia, Marcus Anthony Hunter, Kevin Loughran, and Gary Alan Fine “offer the framework of memory politics,” the development of guiding visions for property development by “memory entrepreneurs,” growth coalitions and influential individuals and organizations which placed requirements for the renovation of historic buildings in certain neighborhoods, in order to limit ownership of

could get away with just scraping, sealing, and painting it – the work of maintenance – in which case the cost would be less than half that. If some of the wood must be replaced, the repair work will be the artisanal craft of seamless repair made out of new materials to match the original, and then the cost would vary depending on the extent of the replacement necessary but would likely be somewhere in the upper middle.

Covering over the cornice with siding would cost less than any of the options that would require the replacement of wood, more than scraping and painting, but could curtail the need to do any other maintenance to the cornice, for decades. This method of keeping out the water would leave whatever original wood remains unrotted intact inside, without precluding it from being otherwise repaired, restored, or replaced in the future. If my primary concern were cost, I would need to choose the siding method. Although I know that siding would last longer than repairing or replacing the wood, the thought of being one of the few houses on the immediate block to have shirked the traditional look, does not feel good. I feel shame when I consider asking Steve to box it up with vinyl siding; it would be hard to face the neighbors after doing that. I'm almost certain someone would comment on it. The idea of putting up siding that doesn't fit in with the neighbors' is a discomfoting one, and the look of the siding itself also seems distasteful.<sup>68</sup>

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buildings in certain neighborhoods to white buyers of a selected elite social class. M.A. Hunter, K. Loughran, and G.A. Fine, "Memory Politics: Growth Coalitions, Urban Pasts, and the Creation of 'Historic' Philadelphia," *City & Community*, 17 (2018): 341.

<sup>68</sup> In Sylvia Wynter's "Rethinking Aesthetics," Wynter wrote about the ways that we, as biomechanical creatures, experience a positive wash of chemically produced feelings in response to normalized aesthetics, the way things look in our lived regime of shared presentational norms. Wynter wrote about this with regards to plotlines and motifs in films and literature, but I find her ideas rattling against my feelings of negativity while considering something about a building which is, in any of a wide array of possibilities, out of sync with expectations. Thinking this way, I see that the negative experience is disincentive from deviating from the norm, in this case of wooden cornices on this block being repaired rather than covered over.

## *Who Else Finds This Distasteful?*

### **[Figure 6. Tacky]**

Ragging on the siding look is a common regional pastime. Casually as a layperson, professionally in the building and architectural design trades, and at the level of city management and political dictums, siding as a protective covering to bypass the maintenance needs of a building is known to be bad, in a variety of ways that boil down to the words of the Facebook comment in *Figure 6.*: it looks *so tacky*.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, using siding in this way is disallowed by zoning in many neighborhoods with old buildings (but not this one) and discouraged by ideologically-minded publications with the backing of the city and architectural preservation and restoration organizations as well as commercial building design communities. My distaste is an expression of the perception of tackiness and by the idea of thwarting rule-governed behavior.<sup>70</sup>

In one of the older instances of this advice that I could find, Michigan State Historic Preservation Officer Brian D. Conway cautioned against the usage of sidings in his article “The Case Against Substitute Siding,” published in 1980.<sup>71</sup> The article is still regularly cited in commercial home repair publications, on home repair blogs, and on message boards.<sup>72</sup> The reasons listed for the unacceptability of sidings to be used in this manner are that the work will lower the value of the house. The explanation given is that “authenticity of materials and preservation of style commands a premium.”<sup>73</sup> That many with the ability to repair or restore

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<sup>69</sup> This is another perception reminiscent to that of the gimmick, wherein someone has done something cheaply. Shawn Burke, Facebook post on page of Mr. Contractor Inc., Facebook post, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Mark Galizio, “Contingency-Shaped and Rule-Governed Behavior: Instructional Control of Human Loss Avoidance,” *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 31, no. 1 (January 1979): 53–70.

<sup>71</sup> Brian D. Conway, “The Case Against Substitute Siding,” *The Old-House Journal*, 8, no. 4 (1980), 37-44.

<sup>72</sup> The article and “hazards” of substitute siding there mentioned are even referenced as a suitable “preservation brief” in chapter two of the “Design Guidelines” in the building code book of the local governance of St. Charles, Illinois “17.06 – Design Review Standards and Guidelines | City of St. Charles Municipal Code Book,” accessed April 29, 2023, <https://codebook.stcharlesil.gov/title-17-zoning/c1706>.

<sup>73</sup> Conway, “The Case Against Substitute Siding,” 44.

wooden components instead cover them with siding is proof, to Conway, that “not everybody’s consciousness has been raised.”<sup>74</sup> For Conway, like Hilary Sample in *Maintenance Architecture*, this work which is performed en-masse is indicative of consciousness. Conway’s treatise argues for a lack of consciousness in the mass installation of siding. But here that consciousness is awareness of an imperative that is stylistic while asserting itself as functional, as opposed to the consciousness of the outcome of repetitive tending represented by mass maintaining. Installing siding strikes me as a move to maintain, rather than rebuild. Conway can’t see this.

### ***Other Insistent but Careless Advice***

Conway was far from the last to object to siding, and he has good company in making formal objection to other measures which maintain and repair without remaking. In 2007, with the backing of the National Trust for Historic Preservation along with half a dozen development, restoration, and housing organizations, the city of Philadelphia commissioned a study of and subsequent guide to the repairing of rowhomes in Philadelphia. The outcome of this was the publication of *Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual* by architect Rachel Simmons Schade, in 2009.<sup>75</sup> Alan J. Heavens, a real estate reporter in the Philadelphia area since the mid-1990s, wrote with optimistic support for the project when the study was first announced.<sup>76</sup> Heavens considered the plan for a “Survival Guide” for rowhouse caretakers long overdue. To Heavens the prospective manual meant the city was expressing care for the maintenance of rowhomes (and their owners and inhabitants) in the form of attention. The city investigating and sanctioning the repair of

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<sup>74</sup> Conway, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Rachel Simmons Schade, *Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual: A Practical Guide for Homeowners* (City of Philadelphia, 2008).

<sup>76</sup> Heavens reported the real estate news. For example: a 2001 article called “How neighborhood houses became homes,” which details the career of John Kromer. Kromer spent 10 years working for the Office of Housing and Community Development. Alan J. Heavens, “How neighborhood houses became homes,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, PA, July 8, 2001, J1. Newspapers.com.

rowhouses meant, to Heavens, that the city was sanctioning the current lifestyle of many residents, in a way they had not previously. In Heavens' interest in the *Rowhouse Manual* I see another instance of someone concerned with building maintenance being compelled to investigate repairs, and able to see attention paid by the city as the first step of tending to the buildings.

In 2008 the city published the guide. While Heavens announced the publication in his column, he did not then or ever again recommend the book to his readers. My impression is that once he had read the document, he no longer thought the guide would be of such good use in the care of homes. The information included in *Rowhouse Manual* provides more guidance about modernization which adheres to principles about the madeness of original architectural forms than to the survival of buildings and no way forward with an old cornice and a budget.

At the same time, the manual acknowledges neglect and water as the primary culprits of ruin to a rowhouse. The *Rowhouse Manual* insists on restoration without acknowledging the need for maintenance and so, in some cases, for shit repairs in a time of urgent wearing. The manual has a whole page devoted to cornices, which includes a photograph of maintained (repainted), covered-over with siding, and removed cornices. There are no photographs of rebuilt cornices, but drawings advocate for this method over all others. The maintenance of scraping and painting of wooden components like the cornice, the only way to truly preserve original features, is never mentioned.

This attitude may explain the remade endcap of the first-floor awning in the neighborhood. When these components ruptured, they were rebuilt by practitioners who ascribed to similar values put forth by Conway and in the *Rowhouse Manual*. More care was taken to adhere to the tenets of rebuilding than to maintaining old components, making something that

could last untended, or of the new components. Maintenance looks like the tending of care, and the ability to see this helps to make remaking, which has lacked this attention, was not made to be maintainable, and so will never have a long future, as with the rebuilt awning endcaps, like a lack of care. So too does advice which lacks guidance towards the long view of tending.

With these lacks, repairs within the bounds I have defined as other than remaking do not appear in the manual at all. The Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual includes, in this way, nothing that advocates for the maintenance of the wooden components of an old building, only the remaking. When maintenance needs rupture, which is guaranteed to happen sooner without maintenance, the manual advocates for remaking.

### ***Un-Repairable?***

#### **[Figure 7. Sheetmetal Firewall]**

At the end of our cornice on the far right is a sheetmetal firewall. The piece is shaped like a bracket, like the corbels that dot the underside of the cornice. Like the cornice, this firewall, or cornice, is original, made at the time the house was built. Philadelphia rowhomes have raised ridges at the edge of the roofline, and these enlarged often but not always metal structures are a continuation of this feature. This one interrupts the otherwise continuous horizontal wooden cornices between adjoining rowhouses to mitigate the fast-spreading fires that have plagued other cities of rowhomes.

This component provides structure which makes the functional shape of the building, and so its deterioration would begin unmaking the building. It would be challenging and expensive to reproduce in the way it was made at any time other than the time in which it was produced. The same is true of the wooden components of the cornice – wood of this quality is not available in

the abundance it was when this building was made, and reproducing the shapes will be very individualized work, as opposed to the production work it was originally.

The metal firewall represents a way of making that is less common still in modern building than the wooden corbels. Restoration carpentry is a common mode of interceding on these buildings, so the craft is commonly practiced. Businesses like Steve Spector's, who work with "substitute" (other-than-wood) sidings also make wooden corbels. There is no clear way to repair the structure, but no clear way, either, to replace it with a remaking. Repairs to this component of the homes is not mentioned in any of the rowhouse repair sources I have encountered. On other buildings in the neighborhood, the firewalls have been neglected, painted, encased, or removed.

#### **[Figure 8. Encased Firewall]**

The lack of clear repair method that extends into a lack of even remaking of parts like these is the same situation Priya Jain considered on the topic midcentury modern buildings. She presented the brick homes of the early industrial era, like this one, as more readily mendable. But, this rowhouse, a building with mostly replaceable parts, still has these unfixable pieces. Similarly, while the *Rowhouse Manual* provides guidance for refurbishing the masonry, there is nothing to guide the maintenance and repair of the wood or this firewall. And yet, the buildings are maintained and repaired, as were the mid-century modern buildings.

If in the near future I determine that one or only a few spots on the cornice or on this firewall become in urgent need of repair, but at that time I do not have \$7000, the ability to accept the visual change of siding over, more money plus the willingness to accept that the cornice may need to be remade, or the time to make a whole covering-over or replacement happen, rather than letting damage set into the wall, I will need to make a spot repair, a shit fix.

A spot repair will almost certainly stand out, made from modern materials used other than how they were necessarily designed to be used. This is a way to repair that is practiced by people with responsibility for maintenance, who are responding to wearing which triggers their sense of worry in a way that kicks into urgency.

### *Shit Fix – End Cap*

#### **[Figure 9. Shit Fix End Cap]**

Down the street, within the past few months, someone has repaired the cornice end cap on their first-floor bay window awning. This end cap is more like the metal firewall at my dad's house, a large and particular shape that crowns the end while also anchoring the awning's edge against the roof, than just a cap. While the bay window under this awning has been remade, the windows replaced and the structure skinned over with stucco, this cornice appears to be made of a mixture of original and rebuilt pieces. It has been maintained with paint and repairs, such as the replacement of the roof surface, the flashing at the roof edge, and the replacement of the endcap with plywood. Since January and March of 2023, someone has interceded against rupture of the end piece with a few pieces of brown aluminum flashing, hammered to fit the shape of the end cap-proper. Underneath the aluminum is a piece of flaking plywood, skinned over with tar tape. This shit fix appears to have been made to intervene against the rupturing of a previous shit fix of this component.

This fix looks worse than the much-maligned siding. It is easy to say that it looks bad, and it would seem somewhat ridiculous to assert otherwise. Surely, I mean the materials used are not the same as what they are fixing, and the original shapes of the structure have been disrupted by the repairs rather than reified. Clearly, the previous attempt to fix shittily did not hold in the

long run, and perhaps it is this that makes it clearly bad. It could be that what I mean is just that repairing like this is not to my taste, but thinking that this kind of repair is really to anyone's taste seems odd, and certainly classist. It is the kind of work which demonstrates a lack of consciousness, the way Brian D. Conway meant it when he wrote the "Case Against Substitute Siding." As a repairer, especially one concerned with the well-being of the nearby cornice, which is in my care, I can see that this shit fix has been made as part of the care of tending through maintenance that forestalls decay and into rupture, which curtails decay. I see the lack of stylistic consciousness but presence of the consciousness of tending with care. Because of this person's quick work, made, I'm certain, to relieve their own feeling of urgency upon seeing a need for maintenance rupture into disrepair, I feel appreciation for the repairer and their shit fix. I feel the stalling of disrepair. Their work has reinstated this building component to the edge of madeness. I'm worried about the rightmost side, where the plywood is peeking out from the flashing. The fix has managed to do this without either unmaking or remaking the original structure. This work is *keeping* the original, protecting it, not paying homage to it.

I can see that this intercession was done quickly, which adds to my perception that it was something that the state of decay indicated *needed* to happen. The project of nailing and adhering this repair in place was the work of perhaps twenty minutes. The materials used are tar tape, the same kind that was likely used in the reskinning maintenance of the roofing surface, and sheet metal tin of a color that does not match this house, but which does match many others in the neighborhood. The brown is a similar color to our cornice and wooden windows (also original). I have an expectation that the patch used is scrap material from the cache of someone who does other work on buildings, and that the repair will grow over the next few months to encase the

exposed plywood edge. Because I see evidence of care, I have expectations that this care will continue, and I have expectations that the decay of this building will slow, abated for now.

### *Neglect*

Within the blocks surrounding my dad's rowhouse, nearly all of the cornices at the roof tops are still the original ones, just painted and repainted many times. There are a scant few remaining in addition to ours which have the original wood showing through. In this neighborhood, none of the original cornices remaining are showing rot visible from the street, or losing dangling pieces. Nonetheless, those that remain unpainted have clearly been neglected, in the most basic sense. No one has acted to maintain them. The "enlargements of human energy" which maintenance represents for Sample, which en-masse preserves a whole via careful tending, are in this neglect inverted.<sup>77</sup>

In the neglect of the maintenance of these cornices I see our collective, individually practiced, unconsciousness enlarged in lack of action. It does not feel good to see. Here the look of lack-of-maintenance provides me with an intellectual experience wherein I both understand many things about the state of the buildings and the neighborhood, but also more directly I experience a generally negative feeling. The feeling is akin to my feeling of worry about my own cornice, about things moving towards dissolution, and work to be done in response. But this is inaction networked, enlarged and depersonalized. This feels different than looking at one decaying thing and seeing either its stability or its incipient doom, but it touches on similar feelings. The worry is abstracted, about a structural problem, not for craft and craft's opposite: unmaking by impersonal forces.

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<sup>77</sup> Sample, 73.

This neighborhood disappointment I experience could be explained as the outcome of a number of factors, like the broken windows theory. This theory states that broken windows in a neighborhood increase risky behaviors of residents, like violence and more window breaking.<sup>78</sup> This theory is also used to explain the way a house in disrepair encourages other disrepair, as value is lowered by neglect of some homes, which disincentivizes attempts to maintain or increase value nearby. It could also be more of the same displeasure at standing out: in a neighborhood full of mostly well-maintained cornices, a neglected one is out of alignment with social standing. As a practiced practitioner of repair, I think it is more that I see and am affected by the absence of action in response to decay. I feel shame on the behalf of old-house carers in the neighborhood who have left their cornices to rot: we are slacking when we should be acting, and with these exterior components, this is obvious on a searching walk around the block.

In conversation about another Philadelphia rowhouse in another neighborhood (Mantua), being demolished to make way for new development after a long period of neglect, neighbor to that project, Audrey Davis said: “When the breath leaves a home, the house falls soon after.”<sup>79</sup> The decaying wood, back in Fairmount, looks like buildings experiencing, fundamentally, a lack of care. This kind of happening is palpable, in a way that is viscerally sad enough to prompt death analogies. We feel the neglect as an absence of care, and an associated loss of vitality to a building.

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<sup>78</sup> Bernard E. Harcourt, “Reflecting on the Subject: A Critique of the Social Influence Conception of Deterrence, the Broken Windows Theory, and Order-Maintenance Policing New York Style,” *Michigan Law Review* 97 (1999 1998): 291.

<sup>79</sup> This quote is from an interview with a neighbor (Audrey Davis) of a building which was demolished to make way for new development, and which was memorialized with the performance of a funeral for the building before it was taken down, from an article about the project. “Funeral for a Home: Excerpts from a Conversation with Robert Blackson,” Text, The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, May 29, 2014, <https://www.pewcenterarts.org/post/funeral-home-excerpts-conversation-robert-blackson>.

In addition to seeing neglect as an absence of human activity, as I look at the old house parts, I feel sad that they are coming apart. It means that soon we will not have these old things around. It's easy to see the lack of care when neglect sets in. The brink of maintenance as it ruptures into a need for repair is anchored to the movement towards unmaking, the stylistic dissolution of a building as architect Koolhaas and Conway meant it. When Jain argued for patination, she was actually advocating for the careful tending and repairs. This is the breath that observer of vanishing Philadelphia rowhouses Davis referenced, the responsive crafting that is what keeps a building together. In Fairmount there are neglected cornices, including the one on my dad's rowhouse, but there is also evidence of tending.

### ***When Neglect Means Leaving Alone in Order to Keep***

It's evident that our building and the few others with neglected cornices haven't been cared for by way of regular maintenance. At the same time, from what I can see of our building and from what I have been told about it, the cornice is not a concern. The wood looks fine. When I look at it, while I am motivated to work towards a solution in the near future, I am un-hurried by worry that would motivate a need to fast-track a maintenance or repair project to the cornice. These investigations have only further solidified my lack of worry. The sight of the few unpainted cornices that remain in the neighborhood, their lack of dangling, rupturing damage, and the presence of shit fixes are evidence that the owners and caretakers of these buildings have the pre-orientation to be tending them, such that certain levels of decay will mean action. I know that I have taken measures such that I am practicing discernment by leaving the original cornices intact.

I feel something positive other than the shame of being caught neglectful. I feel some pride on account of the original materials and how well they are lasting. It is ill-gotten pride, because I am not the craftsperson who selected this material and made something that has lasted so long. It may be some positive affect that is less specific than pride, and which is tied to the kinds of politicized lessons that promote heritage styles and heritage materials.<sup>80</sup> My dad has also expressed pride in the cornice, and I have heard other fans-of-the-house express the same kind of appreciation for the long lasting original wooden components. It's doing, really, just fine. A defensive tone is necessary because at the same time it is clearly not doing fine, and has clearly been neglected in the way of maintenance for a long time. I feel heady ambivalence. In this ambivalence I see that neglect of this cornice has been an act of respect for it. Rather than rush to remedy the situation, which may mean its obscurement or demolition, we are watching and it is persevering. I point it out as original to visitors, and we gaze at it with reverence.

## **Porch**

### ***Regarding the Porch***

As opposed to the cornice, I know the person who built the porch, and so I know more details of its history. Moreover, it has had a host of maintainers whose reports of wear and repair I am familiar with. In 2022, I was present for a significant instant of porch damage, the subsequent urgently made repairs, and the public reception of those repairs. Whereas the cornice

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<sup>80</sup> For more about heritage values in craft read Fabien Petiot and Chloe Braunstein-Kreigel, "Thinking (About) Craft: Culture, Networks, Ethics," in *Crafts: Today's Anthology for Tomorrow's Crafts* (Paris: Editions Norma, 2018).

is withstanding neglect without apparent desperate need of intervention, the porch has been in more pressing need of restoration.

**[Figure 10. Porch]**

My dad built the porch in the 1990s. The sheathing materials, flooring, underside of the roof, and the trim are all made from wood that was new when he built it. The columns and support brackets are heavy, old, curly-lined, scavenged wooden pieces. The dense old wood in contrast to the spindly new materials makes it look a little heavy-legged and light-headed. This collection of materials was sourced from the ecology of the crafted landscape of Philadelphia in the late 1980s. The columns, spindles, and corner braces are all salvaged from the street and the dump. Discard at that time was an abundant source of original 19th-century building parts. He told me that during the 1970s and into the 1980s, many large institutions underwent big renovations, gutting and modernizing the interiors.

I think this is the only porch he has built, although I suspect that he has fixed others. Before building this one, his craft training and practice had been via boy scout woodworking and public-school shop classes as a child; tinkering with the arts and crafts and photography, art/shop, and theater as a teen; working construction and landscaping jobs as a young adult; and then a life spent tinkering with buildings and materials as essentially a hobby, and as a homeowner without funds to hire general contractors. The skills of many people who work on buildings are like this trajectory, accumulations of relevant crafting knowledge channeled towards a building without much specific training.

### ***Repair Needs***

When I first began investigating the building's maintenance needs in 2020, the tenants listed the porch floor as a top priority for repairs. Everyone living in the house has responsibilities to the house written into their lease. The lease demands using a cutting board on the kitchen counter, trimming the tree and yard, being empowered to hire professionals as necessary, and passing along any foibles to whomever comes next. Buying into residency has meant opting in to care for the house.

The spindles of the porch rail have been falling out like clown teeth at a carnival game for years. The custom among inhabitants is to shimmy them back in place, and as such a number of those which remain installed have a chip of wood and a screw, or foamy polyurethane glue, holding them in place. There is a stash of the fallen-out spindles right inside the front door. This procedure has been explained to me with humor and reverence by my dad, the generator of the practice, and at least two tenants. The system is, to me, both charming and frustrating. This strikes me as the same way the cornice is being tended, which isn't quite neglected because something vital in the way of collective action is still in action, and in observation. Although the porch shows signs of wear, it remains, and it is being cared for.

### ***Remaking Without an Original***

As far as we know, the house didn't have a porch originally. The only other porch on the street is also a recent addition. So, there was no traditional porch style to follow. The concept of "traditional" in craft and architecture is often tied to specific values upheld by certain communities, the state, and capital. This can be seen in the *Rowhouse Manual* sanctioned by the

City of Philadelphia, which only allows repairs that fit certain stylistic criteria. It's not clear to me whether this porch fits the kind of criteria found there.

Craft tradition values cultural heritage, as well as practicality. On the connection of craft to the past, a root of traditional styles and modes of making, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson wrote in *The Journal of Modern Craft* of the way craft's "important and distinctive ontology is its connection to the past, to the entire rich terrain of thrift and ingenuity, to knowledge production passed down through the hand, and skilled legacies."<sup>81</sup> When the remaking of building components are styled like the past, that connection seems tenuous, as in the "Case Against Substitute Siding" or the *Rowhouse Manual*, where the logic stated for rebuilding is the value of the building in the future.<sup>82</sup>

The cost of time and specialization to use heritage-skilled handmade wood solutions is certainly higher than the cost of an owner with limited skills making a porch out of big box store lumber. But, heritage-skilled handmaking out of wood, like the savvy end cap on the cornice, is not advocated for in these documents either. Something more like the remade awnings next door and down the street are advocated for. The pre-orientation of this kind of remaking isn't the past, it's the value of the new materials and their heritage-derived forms, in the future.

The porch was made with gathered materials that demonstrate "thrift and ingenuity," one of the skills of heritage craft per Bryan-Wilson.<sup>83</sup> This style of construction is similar to something built by a shit fixer. A combination of gathered and purchased materials have been grafted onto an older structure, in a way that resembles the use of aluminum flashing on the awning repair down the street. The aluminum used there looks like it was from work on a nearby

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<sup>81</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Eleven Propositions in Response to the Question: 'What Is Contemporary about Craft?,'" *The Journal of Modern Craft* 6, no. 1 (March 2013): 7-10.

<sup>82</sup> Conway, Schade.

<sup>83</sup> Bryan-Wilson, "What Is Contemporary about Craft?," 8.

house, pulled out of a truck bed from a stack after another job. If it had been purchased, I would expect the color to match.

This mixing of new and old house parts points to the culture and motivations of the building component crafter working between old materials and new ones, but with new making rather than a repair. This shows a connection to and usage of the crafted landscape as a repetitive and contiguous thing with an established material palette. The palette includes the likes of wooden building parts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern sidings, bits of aluminum flashing, and big box store lumber. Interaction with this material palette indicates that work has been created that is pre-oriented with a certain intention to maintain, to tend to the materials of the past for the benefit of the present as well as the future.

In Meissner's explorations of repair in the circumpolar north, she found the values of Indigenuity, a material-efficient building practice noticed and coined by artists Nango and Thoreson.<sup>84</sup> This method is reminiscent of rasquachismo, a found-object style of Chicano art and architecture, theorized by Artist Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, which also emphasizes the use of materials at hand.<sup>85</sup> In both practices, a material palette that includes reuse as well as incorporation of local fresh material elements (natural materials in Indigenous projects and paint in rasquache ones) plays a crucial role in creating artful constructions from curated collections of prefabricated and decorative industrialized materials.

I see ideological connections between these craft practices and the work done by building maintainers in Philadelphia, such as resourcefulness and valuing the past in a way that enables it

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<sup>84</sup> Joar Nango and Silje Figenschou Thoresen, "Structures," Silje Figenschou Thoresen website, 2021, <https://siljefig.com/structures/>.

<sup>85</sup> Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano and Chicana Art*, ed. Jennifer A. González et al., Book, Section vols. (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 85–90, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478003403-018>.

to last into the future. The extent to which using gathered materials is a means of coping with limited resources or demonstrates an ideological alignment is unclear and warrants further investigation. In the case of shit fixes, there is a heightened element of *now* that I see motivating a build. This is lacking in this porch, a remaking that has been made with the ethos of a maintainer and the skills to repair, but without the urgency of practice in response to rupture. This perspective of working on a building engages in remaking while focusing on the past in a material sense, rather than a conceptual or ideological sense.

The work recognizes longevity, as practitioners of repair make work that "moves knowledge into the realm of future thinking."<sup>86</sup> There are many reasons to use the old materials, instead of new ones. The choice is a longevity-oriented one, both because the life of the materials are extended in reusing, and as these old materials may be of higher quality and so longer-lasting than new ones. These craft practices prioritize local availability of materials, expedient use of time, and practical environmental concerns over abstract aesthetic goals, as exemplified by the design of this porch. In contrast, the remaking of the garage awning endcap next door lacks this approach, while the shit fix of the awning end cap down the street embodies it and carries also an element of creation amidst urgency in response to rupture.

### ***Pressing Repair Needs***

The porch flooring slopes slightly, allowing water to run down the grain and off the front edge. The unsealed end grain there collects the dripping water. The nearby sidewalk tree canopy gathers water when it rains, increasing the load to the roof, which has no gutter. The porch roof edge extends to just the edge of the porch floor, and so the water rains straight down from the

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<sup>86</sup>Meissner, 5.

roof onto the end of the boards that jut out a few inches past the banister. On a rainy day, the overhanging branches, and the roof below, drip onto the floor's edge, causing it to remain dark with water for hours after rainfall. In the soggy and shaded present, the edges have all begun to soften. This new wood has lasted for only a few decades, unlike other long-lasting wooden structures nearby.

In the softening floor is a rot which has been creeping in from the edge. In 2020, when the tenants mentioned the porch as a problem, they prioritized the porch damage as one of three urgent needs the house presented. The rotting porch was the first problem people encountered when entering the house, but the third in terms of urgency, a worry on its way to growing. On the top of the urgency list was a second-floor closet that leaked every rainy day which I repaired within the month. The second was a railing inside, which had broken and been fixed. Although the tenant had fixed it in 2019, neither my dad nor I had yet seen it. It is a shit fix, and the manner of repair had caused some disagreement. I was expected to assess it for acceptability of repair.

On the way into the maintenance tour, the tenant pointed out the porch floor damage by saying: "E [the other tenant at the time] is going to put her foot through it."<sup>87</sup> "One day soon" was implied. On sight, I agreed. We felt the same concern for this decaying feature of the porch. This concern was an emotional worry for the way it would effect the people who walk on it, but also for the porch itself. This latter worry unrolled with less a feeling of sympathy for another being than with an impression of the way the decay was working, happening, and growing. The former is a feeling of responsibility to keep the building functioning for people as it should and for the safety of those people.

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<sup>87</sup> This quote is from my memory of the conversation.

The damage indicated to me another easily improvable feature. I cut the canopy of the overhanging tree so that it stopped short of the porch roof. I cut the tree, the porch stayed dryer, and I resolved to tack a piece of plywood over the soft spot. Cutting the tree was maintenance work - pruning and tending, which can be done regularly, and which forestalls repair. While that work was to a nearby tree, the maintenance done is to the wholeness of the house, and specifically the porch floor. The floor's need for repair, similar to but more advanced than prospective concerns for the state of neglect of the cornice, with water directed away from the damage, is a worry but not an urgency. The tenant who could not see the damage and had no instinct to step over it, has since moved out. Pressing repairs call for action within a narrow window of time and multifaceted circumstances of use and wear, which sometimes can be extended by maintenance.

### ***Shit Fix - Railing***

#### **[Figure 11. Shit Fix Railing]**

The second urgency from the 2020 list, which the same tenant had interceded against with a shit fix in 2019, was a broken third-story stairwell guard rail. The repair raised ire from another tenant who lived in the house at the time. The oak guardrail runs the full height of the sinuous three-and-a-half-story stairwell, supported by a spine of oak spindles. The wood has never been refinished. It is smooth and hard with wear, solid as a rock. The railing is original to the house, and so has been used nearly daily for at least fifty years, and presumably much of the past 200 years. At every landing is a switchback, where curved pieces connect in a splayed U, turning the rail up the stairwell. These joints are held together with an adjustable tensioning rod so that they can be tightened as the wood expands and contracts during seasonal changes. At

every floor, there is evidence of cracking at this joint along the curve because of the orientation of the grain and the movement of the railing.

The bolt that holds the rod in the joint that connects the topmost guardrail switchback, above the 18-foot drop to the landing below, wore through. At every landing, it is clear that this joint is wearing through, but on the third floor, I'm told it was in the process of letting go when the tenant started to call my dad looking for a solution. As with the cornice, and the firewall, the rail was mass-manufactured in the way of the time when it was made. No ready repair solution exists, and the skills to repair it in a heritage craft way are elusive in the modern world.

More than one inhabitant of the house called him in the time leading up to its repair, insisting that the joint be fixed. He had given them leeway to figure it out as they could, but no repairer with a plan besides replacement was found. Neither the tenants nor my dad wanted to replace the beautiful old component, and my dad was out of commission to intercede in another way during the time when the need to repair seems to have overcome one of the residents. They reamed out the bore for the threaded rod, removed the rusted hardware that was buried there, installed a zinc carriage bolt in its place, and secured the railing. The other tenant was incensed by the manner of repair. The fix holds, but has significantly altered the original mechanisms and, to a discerning user fond of the original style, the look of the railing.

Before I saw the repair in 2020, my dad had described to me over the phone the situation with the breaking of this joint. While the railing was certainly not the only factor that led to one of the tenants moving out, a few people have told me that it contributed to the decision. My dad asked me to investigate, to rule out whether the fix worked, and if it was as offensive as he'd been told.

The tenant who fixed the guardrail was the one who told me about the rotting porch floor. Before showing me the repair, he corroborated the story of the railing's incipient failure and the other tenant's ire, which I had heard already. He also reported to me his own craft credentials.<sup>88</sup> Hoping, he told me, that his credentials would help me to trust the repair that he had made. He was upfront about the fact that he did not think the repair looked great. In the same breath, he told me how great he thought it was. He was excited to have been able to find a way to fix it so handily with a found bolt. It had, in the years he had lived there, never felt so safe. He expressed chagrin and a measure of disbelief about the other tenant's negative response, disagreeing with the strong reaction on account of the need, efficacy, and method of the repair.

Looking at the fix, I find that I can agree with each of them. The look of the shit fix in 2019 was an accurate harbinger of future repairs of the same sort (as in 2023, more has broken and been shit fixed), and so the upset tenant read the situation well. This kind of decaying and fixing, while inside, hits on the same experience of making the house stand out from the neighbors, so to speak, due to neglect, disrepair, and shit fixing. The repair was also an accurate harbinger of a certain level of decay in the absence of regular maintenance settling into the overall state of the house. Attuned to the values of shit fixing, the action taken in the face of an urgent decaying, with an eye on preserving the past, which still allows for the old materials to be present in the future, tempers the negativity of the experience of seeing a repair like this. It does work handily without prohibiting future repairs. It does not worry me at all. It looks like a problem handled and a danger made safe. The other tenant lacked this perspective, and so instead could only see aspects that are no less accurate for the possibility of another perspective.

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<sup>88</sup> He had spent a number of summers in exurban Pennsylvania repairing and remaking old stone structures for a friend's family masonry business, and had more recently been volunteering with Habitat for Humanity. He expressed pride at the way our rowhouse stood strong, despite looking old and worn.

It also looks like something precious has been ruined. The new material is out of place with the old. The repair is not only not seamless, but it also maintains the old material with the look of the damage preserved and accentuated. Some part of why this looks so bad, if it doesn't look like a relief, is out of something like grief for this precious stuff falling apart, never to be the same. I think that the tenant was outraged by the cheapness of the fix, that it looks like something for poor people. Pierre Bourdieu wrote aesthetic philosophies in the twentieth century, which found sociological roots for perceptual appreciation.<sup>89</sup> In his sociological model of appreciation, the cultural environment, customs, materials, etc. of one's own situation in life contribute to the look of the products of one's own status. Thinking with his theories, yet another way of understanding the objection to things that look like this is that they look definitionally bad, because this is a practice engaged by people with less money, which in our culture is a position to be denigrated, and so anything that looks like that position looks to us all, bad.<sup>90</sup> It also looks like a harbinger of an era of the breakdown of old parts.

Meissner found care, as a warm feeling, for the "geographical" environment in an experience of *here* learned by stewards, attuned to the material landscape via craft practices.<sup>91</sup> *Here*, the place, the ecological and sociological landscape, is that which provides the backdrop, and from which all supplies issue, in the circumpolar indigenous making of repairs which she researches. She finds in her surveyance of her relationship with locality and repairs what Yi-Fu Tuan refers to as "topophilia," a meaning-making that arises from an affective bond or love for a place."<sup>92</sup> The landscape of regional buildings in my experience as a fixer brings me *closer* to this

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<sup>89</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press., 2002), 11.

<sup>90</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Meissner, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Meissner, 4.; Yi-Fu Tuan, "Place: an Experiential Perspective," *Geographical review* (1975): 151-165.

estimating of the real environment, per Mattern.<sup>93</sup> The way that Meissner finds an intelligence of repair that is rooted to the land, the craftwork of fixing builds a path to topophilia, which leads to affection for the old parts of the crafted landscape of Philadelphia. This topophilia provides a baseline affection to make its counterpart: solastalgia, grief at a place changed. A source of my displeasure, our displeasure with the state of the materials at hand in this railing repair, are for the perceptible state of decay of this era of well-known old stuff.

As the components of the crafted landscape of Philadelphia which constitute some of its basic look – these old building parts – fall apart, we will miss them. The shit fix shows savvy acceptance and also thwarting of the mechanisms. If not for this fix, I would feel a need to intervene immediately, almost certainly with another shit fix. As it is, this fix looks like someone cared enough to notice a critical issue and to intervene, and also like our stuff is coming apart, which feels bad because it feels like being poor and like the landscape is changing.

### ***Learning from Decay to Remake***

The porch's softening floor and problematic water management indicate that it will need to be dismantled and rebuilt within a few years. The new materials will be useless, but the columns and brackets could potentially be reused again. In my plan for the new porch, I will adjust the porch's roof and floor alignment so that one doesn't drip so directly on the other and install a gutter.<sup>94</sup> This approach aligns with writer Stewart Brand's concept of learning from

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<sup>93</sup> Mattern, 2018.

<sup>94</sup> The property does not currently have the infrastructure to manage the water from a gutter, which would need to be captured into a drain that connects to the house or storm sewers, otherwise it will flood over the sidewalk, which can cause potholes, and ice slicks. In order to add a gutter, a drain would need to be added – a project that would require adding another juncture of connection between the building's infrastructure and the city's. The edges of a repair on a building bleed into the edges of the conjoined infrastructure. Here, water falling from a tree will be gathered by our porch lip, or else the public sidewalk, or else the connected sewer, which is another instance where the crafted landscape presents itself as the broader context of repairs on a building.

buildings to inform future plans for new buildings, from his book *How Buildings Learn*.<sup>95</sup> By using the decay of the porch to plan for its future, I can make better-informed decisions based on the needs of the environmental context and the building's inhabitants. Using the outcomes of decay to plan anew is a re-application of the knowledge of repairing to remaking, engaging primarily with the future. Learning from the past to use in remaking is a different kind of motivation than work like maintenance and shit fixing which engages with the past and the future, as well as with an immediacy that has duration which is tied to a rate of decaying as it approaches rupturing.

### ***Overt Breakage and Urgency***

#### **[Figure 12. Broken Railing]**

In the spring of 2022, developers demolished the adjacent rowhouse and in the process unseated the right front column of our porch. It was yanked forward and onto the sidewalk as the neighboring porch was dismantled. Everything that was attached was torqued out of connection. The creeping failure of the floor, forestalled indirectly with environmental control in the way of tree trimming, although concerning in a palpable emotional way to some of us, paled in comparison to the intensity of my discomfort and concern when faced with the unmoored swaying of the porch column.

#### ***[Figure 13. Roof Seam]***

The yank broke the tar seam between the asphalt of the porch roof and the brick of the front of the house. This created the possibility for water to flow into and collect inside the cavity of the porch ceiling below, and to drip into the windows below. This is a problem that could ruin

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<sup>95</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1995).

what remains of the porch, quickly, and make significant inroads to damaging the front wall and the room inside during just one big summer rainstorm. The bracket supporting the roof against the front of the house was broken. When the column was pulled off, the railing came with it and broke away from the column on the other end. The porch had become a liability for the wholeness of the building on account of water, and on account of structural danger, not only to inhabitants of the building but also to passersby.

I did not realize that the porch had been broken in the demolition until the day after it happened. To climb the steps, I extended my right arm in a hook around the customary support of the column. Placing my palm against the side facing away from me, I pulled to aid my step up. Rather than anchor my climb as usual, the column swung towards me. I felt vertigo, spinning lightness in my head and stomach, and saw sparking light in my eyes.<sup>96</sup> I let go of the support like it was hot, with urgent motion registering before thought, and stepped back down the sidewalk. With the swing of the column my glance snapped up to see the gape and skew of the supports, no longer stacked in a tidy triangle. I hurried inside. My expectations of the performance of this built structure were unmoored with great specificity.

I spent short bursts of time in the next few days creating and weighing in on repairs that would disconnect the sound of footsteps on the porch from that feeling of concern by

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<sup>96</sup> In her book *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson writes about the vertiginous conceptual experience of owning a house, the feeling of the chasm of responsibility, money, class, that property ownership can evoke. While working on this project the frequency of buildings as metaphors has been interesting to encounter and compare with the very concrete outcomes of this emoting in response to abstracted building experiences, which themselves provide more concrete versions of these metaphorical experiences. Certain experiences clarify the movements and materials of an environment. Prior knowledge in combination with these clarifying moments can provide insight, that when applied to a structure not performing expectations belies, and unsettles. This was true in the case of a column swinging free. This is a stark example, but is the same kind of experience as that of concern for E's footfall on the rotten floor, the deductive imagining of someone falling through at the sight of decay. A lighter shade yet of the same understanding is the one which flags the cornice as a problem for the future. Some of us have more feeling for the outcomes of damage and repair, and some of us have more responsibility, and feeling for that responsibility. Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, (Random House, 2020).

reconnecting everything that needed to be reconnected, and so did Anthony, the project manager for the construction next door. Because the materials of the porch were already breaking down they were difficult to affix, there was no right way or right material to go about anything, and no sense or possibility of rebuilding the porch on the spot. In triage mode, my investigations indicated that I couldn't reattach the columns using screws, because their softened ends had been shredded by the torquing, and the floor they rested on was too soft. So, I tied the column in place for the day, with rope and caution tape. On another day, Anthony stopped by and learned that the bracket wouldn't go back together handily, and more support would be needed.

In the end I built duplicate bannisters using all the 2x4s I had on hand, anchored to the floor away from the rotting ends, to secure the guard rails and columns. The project manager came back another day and reinstated the structural support between the roof and the wall despite the busted bracket by using a triangle of grass green 7/16" water resistant structural panel, which he then taped to make it watertight.<sup>97</sup> All of our projects managed to secure the porch without causing further damage to the parts that are old, and which remain theoretically salvageable. Our repairs really stretch the edges of preservation. They are entirely sufficient, unmoving upon rattling 11 months later, and also disappointing to look at.

While watching Anthony nail the greenboard to the porch, the neighbor's contractor shouted across the sidewalk to me, in anger: "That porch is original! What is he doing!?" This was the first but not the last time he expressed this concern for the porch. Later he called to follow up, asking again if I was outraged about the shit fix of the porch. After we got off the phone, he texted me his Instagram page and business card, assuring me that a ruined porch is something he knows about.

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<sup>97</sup> I am almost certain that he grabbed a piece of cut off board from another one of his job sites nearby.

## Conclusion

The repetitive and responsive nature of the care of repairing is defined by the ongoingness of decay that repair must respond to. In looking at repairs, as a scholar and a craftsman, I must notice and assess the falling apart to understand the repair and the need, by which I mean that looking towards buildings which have come apart includes noticing how they come apart. Decay accompanies and precedes repair. Maintaining and repairing a building begins with noticing the ways decay is progressing.

A myriad of cultural and commercial incentives are built into our perceptions creating experiences of disappointment, disapproval, and disgust in response to repair work done quickly and cheaply. The ability to see the care of tending present in repairs created in a timely manner to respond to a pressing need modifies those negative responses. The feeling of the look of handled, of a potential threat neutralized on purpose with foresight and material frugality cuts through the feeling of the sight of even neglect.

By theorizing the shit fix as a particular type of repair, I have defined a point of interest along a spectrum of building repairs. There are a seemingly endless variety of ways to go about fixing, and so seemingly endless array of kinds of things to examine with regards to the process. In specifying this kind of repair and the consistently inconsistent emotions they evoke, I found a way of working on buildings typified by tight adherence to the frameworks which can be understood to pre-orient the practice of building maintenance. Shit fixes demonstrate with specificity what repairers know about the material palettes and urgencies of the crafted landscape. What repairers know can change a negative perceptual assessment, oriented by motivations and pre-orientations outside of those towards the tending of repair.

## Images



Figure 1. The meadow at the top of the hill at Charissa’s rabbit farm in Washington County, Pennsylvania. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2022



Figure 2. The cornice, the wooden structure at the top seals that and supports the edge of the roof and the top of the wall, is original to the house. As far as we can tell, it has never been painted. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2022.



Figure 3. The endcap of the cornice, which is the only part of this component which is currently visible to me from close up. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2023.



Figure 4. A rebuilt endcap of the awning of the neighbor's garage which is coming apart. More recent work is in evidence; the mortar shows signs of maintenance. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2023.



Figure 5. A newer style of rowhouses nearby, with porches and siding coverings. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2022.

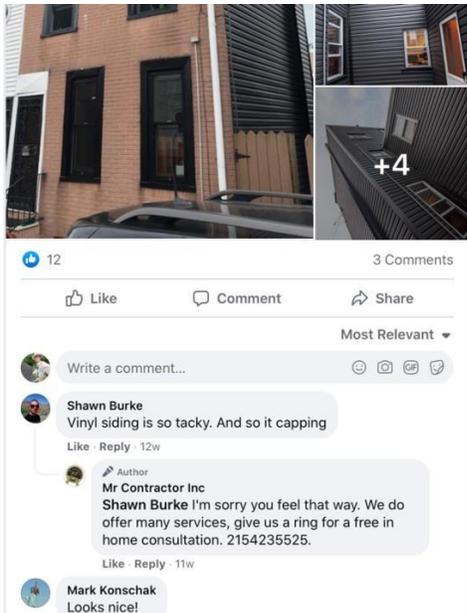


Figure 6. A commenter disparaged the use of vinyl siding in work on a rowhouse on Philadelphia contractor Mr Contractor’s (the business where Steve Spector works) Facebook post. Mr. Contractor Inc., *Facebook post*, 2021.



Figure 7. The center rowhouse has cornice and firewalls boxed in with siding, down the street from my dad's rowhouse in Philadelphia. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2023.



Figure 8. Sheet metal firewall cornice end piece. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2023.



Figure 9. A shit fixed bay window cornice end piece, down the street from my dad's house in Philadelphia. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2023.



Figure 10. *The porch*. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2020.



Figure 11. Four images of the guard rail. The top left is an instance of the same joint on a different landing, which has not needed to be repaired but which is visibly damaged in similar ways to the joint which broke. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2022.



Figure 12. The porch guardrail unmoored. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2022.



Figure 13. The porch roof seam with the house, cracked open. Photograph by Miriam Devlin, 2022.

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