

## CONCLUSION

Kurt Schwitters' Merz method of using found objects as a modeling material to inspire new architectural ideas is an important contribution to architecture. The significance of his approach is particularly clear when contrasted with the normative practice of architects from the same period who constructed physical models as mere illustrations of predetermined ideas. Schwitters first developed this modeling method when he was exploring his use of "all conceivable materials" to create art in other artistic domains including architecture. During this time, Schwitters' created *Haus Merz*, as his "first piece of Merz architecture" by assembling objects that had been "found" rather than made into a model of architecture. The use of found objects as modeling materials provides the architect with a unique method by which they can "refresh" their imaginations.

In the Merz approach, found objects are 'cleansed' of their narrow utilitarian associations (e.g., a button is for holding up trousers), and thereby allow the imagination of the architect to discover other properties and associations of those objects (e.g., a button as a tower clock). Similarly, the assemblage of found objects into a model of architecture invites the imagination to invent new ways of translating them into a building. Not only does the architect interpret how an object contributes to a new unity as part of an architectural model but also how it anticipates the building materials and constructive possibilities of a building design. However, as a modeling method, the aim of Merz is not to make us live amongst giant buttons, gears and medicine corks, but to invent ways of using materials in order to imagine new building designs. Rather, the contemplation of how tree bark is layered on a pine stump might lead to its use as a model for the

design of a building's cladding out of, for example, a particular sort of brick. It is by having an open imagination in the active engagement with the model that the architect makes this projection of future edifices possible. In the same way that Schwitters faced an urban environment inundated by the presence of industrially mass-produced items, architects today face a method of building construction defined by pre-manufactured elements assembled on site. The value of the Merz method for these architects is that it allows them to work analogically within that system while not being imaginatively constrained by it.

The process of interpreting objects that Schwitters called Merz was shown to have its intellectual origins in the medieval exegesis of religious texts. The literal or "historical" meaning of a text compares to the ordinary function of natural and manufactured objects assembled in a Merz work. Since everyday things are usually restricted to their singular use-value significance, once they are 'cleansed' of this meaning, the objects in an assemblage are open to a discovery of analogical comparisons between their formal, material or constructive properties and those of built constructions. In this way, the invisible "anagogical" meaning of the model can then be interpreted through its translation into a building design. Anagogy's exegetical origins in religion tie it to an assumption of transcendence beyond the physical realm into a direct relation with the metaphysical. This aspect of medieval anagogy, however, is not present in Schwitters' Merz of found materials. Rather than a transcendental meaning beyond any physical existence, the anagogical Merz interpretation seeks to find the invisible within the visible; the source of which need not be divine revelation but instead the active imagination of the architect with the "artistic evaluation" of found materials as a model of architecture.<sup>1</sup>

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1. On the presence of the invisible within the visible, see: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

The presence of anagogical meanings within rather than beyond objects can be illuminated through a reexamination of Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" in a work of art. In his famous 1935-38 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin distinguishes original from technically reproduced artworks through a concept of "aura."<sup>2</sup> For Benjamin, all original, unique art has an invisible aura that is not transcendental, but felt in the presence of its actual material, its making and aging over time. However, as Benjamin argues, when a work of art is re-produced, even as an exact copy, its aura is lost.<sup>3</sup> Schwitters, confronting the industrial condition of postwar Germany, found a way to acknowledge the intrusion into daily life of technically reproduced objects lacking an aura – newspapers, photographs, tickets, etc. – but by recombining them into new situations as art, he could impart to the technically reproduced object a unique aura. When viewing an original Merz work by Schwitters, one senses the presence of the aura that Benjamin describes.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the use of found objects rather than, for example, a drawn representation of them, allows the aura of the actual material to be present. In this way, Merz architectural models appeal to the architect's material imagination because of their real material presence. The architect, in using Merz models, performs like Benjamin's magician in the act of interpreting actual present objects as architecture by being in a direct relation with them while Benjamin's surgeon, who cuts into the

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2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999) 211-244. See specifically, 214-16.

3. Ibid.

4. In the essay, Benjamin identifies Dada with the "degradation of their materials" in order to achieve a "destruction of the aura of their creations" (pp. 230-31). Although Benjamin does not refer to Schwitters directly, he does give as examples for the materials used in Dada paintings two materials, "buttons and tickets," that were commonly used by Schwitters in his assemblages of art and architectural models. The present application of Benjamin's concept of aura does not follow his critique of Dada, perhaps in part because the passage of time allows one to discover the aura in Schwitters' Merz and because architectural models in particular, place the found objects in a different relation to viewers than a painting. The present interpretation suggests that found objects are altered in order to impart an 'anagogical' aura.

object, losses a sense of a comprehensive relationship with it.<sup>5</sup> Because the modeling method requires imaginative interpretation rather than the representation of prior, fixed ideas, it sustains the architect's exploration of it as an open work.

In what is nearing a century since Schwitters first introduced the Merz model, normative architectural practices remain dominated by approaches that use models merely to exhibit already developed ideas. Even leading architects, only use models to record an innovation of form and shape rather than as a tool for inspiring the material imagination. Nevertheless, there are a handful of contemporary architects, whose experimentation with the use of assemblage in the design of architecture, demonstrate some of the potential of Merz modeling. Included among these individuals is the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor who, like Schwitters, explores the use of his modeling materials as a source of inspiration for the imagination of new designs.

In 1996, Peter Zumthor gave an example of this approach to architectural modeling in the design of his Thermal Bath project in Vals Switzerland. At an early stage in the design of the Thermal Bath, Zumthor constructed a "model" of the project using a collection of Valser quartzite stones that had been quarried in the region (figures 93 and 94).<sup>6</sup> It is clear that he had other intentions for the assemblage that to use it as a miniature scale illustration of a bathhouse design since it had only the vague appearance of the completed structure while the slabs representing the roofs would have collapsed from their own weight. In an article about the education of an architect, Zumthor described this approach to using models as a reversal of the normative design practice:

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5. Ibid., 227.

6. Peter Zumthor explains that he created the model during the 1:100 scale of design for the Thermal Bath House in Vals, Switzerland and later used it for an interview with the community to gain approval for the project construction. Later, during the development of the project, its form and construction changed. From: Peter Zumthor, June 23, 2004, in an e-mail to the author.

All design work in the studio is done with materials. [...] There are no cardboard models. Actually no “models” at all in the conventional sense, but concrete objects, three-dimensional works on a specific scale. The drawing of scale plans also begins with the concrete object, thus reversing the order of “idea – plan – concrete object”, which is standard practice in professional architecture. First the concrete objects are constructed; then they are drawn to scale.<sup>7</sup>

If one assumes that by “conventional” use of models, Zumthor meant that an architect first had an idea of architecture, and then created a model to test and give definition to it, the materials he employed in his model are not be easily cut and transformed into any predetermined forms.

Rather, like Schwitters’ Merz models, by assembling the stones, they suggest specific approaches to form and space through their material presence. For Zumthor, he approaches these physical conditions of materials and their methods of facture as a source of inspiration for his material imagination of architecture because of a belief that, as he paraphrased the poet William Carlos Williams, “there are no ideas except in the things themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Like Schwitters’ Merz models, it is in the contemplative evaluation of the materials as a model of architecture that the architect develops a material image of the proposed building, not as a formal description of the mass and volume, but as a demonstration of its composition as architecture.

As models of architecture, Schwitters’ Merz models are valuable examples for the role that different modeling materials, methods, and interpretations can play in the development of new innovative architectural designs. Compared to a normative practice of transforming materials into illustrations of prior ideas, the assemblage of found materials into models of architecture aims to hinder the repetition of architectural conventions and “refresh and architect’s

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7. Peter Zumthor, “Teaching Architecture, Learning Architecture,” in Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, trans. Maureen Oberli-Turner (essays 1988-1996), Catherine Schelbert (essays 1998-2004), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Basel; Boston; Berlin: Birkhäuser Publishers for Architecture, 2006), 66-7. This English translation by Maureen Oberli-Turner.

8. Peter Zumthor, “The Hard Core of Beauty,” in *Ibid.*, 29. This English translation by Maureen Oberli-Turner.

imagination.” By approaching his modeling materials as open to different levels of meaning beyond their everyday significance as natural or manufactured objects, Schwitters’ Merz models sought to demonstrate how the imagination could be led analogically to discover different properties and associations between them as models for new architectural ideas. In the Merz approach to architectural modeling, the idea of an architectural design is not complete in the assemblage of materials but open, inviting the architect to enlist a speculative mentality to imagine its analogical applications in representative materials and constructive possibilities of a built construction.