Chapter 7

Dirty pedagogies

A conversation

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We propose the phrase 'dirty pedagogies' to describe critical and situated engagements with a context that bring justice and the labours of care, maintenance, and repair to the core of architectural education. Following the muck and 'out of place' at the intersection of the ongoing environmental, social, and political crises, on the one hand exposes us to the risks and toxicities latent in it and, on the other, opens up a space from which to trouble architecture and to engage in the political project of decolonisation – a 'decolonisation of the otherwise too clean imaginary'.[1] We interrogate the nexus of care, dirt, and resistance/dissent in a pedagogical context. Two studio practices based at the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (ESALA) exemplify this approach: *Architecture as Support Structure* and *Radical Harvest*. The former works with architecture as a support structure in ecologies shaped by the oil and petroleum industries in Scotland, and with a specific focus on Aberdeen and its social, political, spatial and material transformation since the discovery of oil in the North Sea. It investigates – through design – how to move beyond petroleum and construct post-petroleum imaginaries, and how architectural typologies could facilitate this by rethinking social constructs as well as the material, energy and dirt systems that these typologies engage with. The latter explores earth, care, and reuse as thematic and pragmatic anchors for situating and reorienting architectural design. Steeped in the social and material fabric of the city of Edinburgh, it develops protocols for the reclamation of discarded/devalued materials and for the development of nonstandard tectonic assemblages, deploying them towards the construction of small architectural interventions for local communities, charities, and social enterprises.

Through these pedagogies, we argue that dirt can be mobilised towards the development of design methods, enlisted as an ally and interlocutor/companion, and adopted as an interface and medium for shared forms of diversion, transformation, stewardship, and care – as 'a way to practice the future together'.[2] As Sara Ahmed explains, to imagine new emancipatory horizons one should 'not start anew, with the light, the

1 Hélène Frichot, *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture* (Spurbuchverlag, 2019), p. 8.

2 adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017), p. 19.

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bright, the white, [and] the upright' but with 'the weighty, the heavy, the weary, and the worn'.[3] Similarly, dirty pedagogies begin by taking heed of that which – and those who – have been wasted, discarded, broken, polluted, and oppressed. They are pedagogies of reclamation, which 'often means to reappropriate a toxic terrain, a field of domination, making it again capable of nurturing'.[4] Here, to care is not only to 'maintain, continue, and repair',[5] or to be present, but to be on the ground – to commit one's body and attention to a specific ground; to stick one's feet in the mud. Engaging with dirt necessitates a measure of co-dependence and entanglement: we don't handle or operate an external dirt-object, we ourselves become muddied and dirty. This physical closeness and temporal with-ness enables us to inhabit specific contexts and to grasp their existing and nuanced relations, enriching our ability to respond to various conditions and sites through situated material practices.

To situate architectural thinking and learning in dirt is to engage with and protect the multiplicity and opacity of what decolonial scholars call the 'pluriverse' (a 'world where many worlds fit'),[6] challenging claims of neutrality, normality, universality, purity and autonomy, and dismissing the powers that assign dirtiness and disposability in order to construct or sustain their own cleanliness and privilege. While the building-object tends to separate itself from a background,[7] claiming to create environments that are autonomous and obedient, dirty pedagogies encourage the blurring of lines and the queering of roles, promoting designs that are generous, porous, liable to the dissenting energies of dirt, and alert to the messiness of labour, construction, and logistics – aspects that are often consigned to the background, and rendered invisible or unimportant. By messing up, untidying, disrupting, noising, glittering, spilling, and reclaiming otherwise controlled, contained, and sterile environments, dirty pedagogies investigate how the architecture studio may move away from the commodity and its projects, and begin to ascribe value to encounters and constraints that foreground not abstract concepts and intents, or a *tabula rasa*, but the dirty and dusty realities of that which already exists.

Dirt defies stable meanings and classifications, just like the subsoils excavated from different cities or regions, or at different depths, cannot be subsumed under a single 'earth' category. Any hope of understanding – and effectively engaging with – earth necessarily involves the specificity of its different colours, textures, precise locations, and material compositions. Similarly, dirt resists and neutralises abstract labels and generic definitions, both retaining a degree of opacity and unpredictability, and demanding a closer form of encounter and communion (*com* + *unus*, together in oneness). It is here that dirt emerges as method, pedagogy and practice – from the refusal to ignore,

3 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 227.

4 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 11.

5 Bernice Fisher and Joan Tronto, 'Towards a Feminist Theory of Care', in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, edited by Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 40. Quoted in Joan Tronto, 'An Ethic of Care', *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, Fall (1998), p. 16.

6 Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2018), p. xvi.

7 Hélène Frichot, *Creative Ecologies: Theorizing the Practice of Architecture* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

reduce, and paraphrase; from the ethical imperative to stay and be entangled with; but also, from the urgent need to act, to become response-able, to reclaim and resist.

Furthermore, dirty pedagogies contribute to the project of decolonisation in architectural education, aiming to identify and challenge systems and structures that require the active reproduction and perpetuation of colonial hierarchies and epistemologies. They curate stoppages and diversions that call established orders into question and dismantle their value systems, both understanding that 'cleaning is also a practice of care that makes social relationships livable', and blurring 'the rigid line between clean and dirty' drawn by slavery and colonialism – one driven, as Françoise Vergès explains, by 'an excessive and obsessive attention to be protected from the "stain" of Blackness'.[8] In this sense, an architectural pedagogy might be 'dirty' both when it undoes what Vergès calls 'the mystery of cleaning'[9] – engaging with and making visible the labour of cleaning, and those who clean – and when it rejects and neutralises models of what Martinican scholar Malcolm Ferdinand calls 'colonial habitation': 'a violent way of inhabiting the earth' that subjugates 'lands, humans, and non-humans to the desires of the coloniser'.[10]

Dirty pedagogies address at least three temporalities or contexts for understanding (or engaging with) dirtiness: one results from 'becomings of earth and society'[11] that foreground the scarring and polluting of the earth through capitalist processes of extraction and colonial violence/inheritance; another acknowledges the constitutional instability of material substrates, and how their dynamic meanings and effects exceed single projects, generations, and authors; and the third one implicates dirtiness as an expression of power relationships that depend on wider, and often uneven, systems of organisation and classification. Against the violence of pollution and colonialism – of making dirty and thus disposable – it is in the instability, recalcitrance, and opacity of dirt that one might find its emancipatory potentials.[12] Like Bataille's 'formless',[13] dirty pedagogies encourage actions that pierce, break, squeeze, and crack environments of containment/enclosure and make them leak; they prompt designs that muddy and expose to the dirt, questioning all manner of borders and divisions (geopolitical, physical, infrastructural, cultural, etc.). Indeed, dirty pedagogies push architectural thinking and design 'out of place', beyond the conventional boundaries of disciplinary and professional

8 Françoise Vergès, *Making the World Clean: Wasted Lives, Wasted Environment, and Racial Capitalism* (Goldsmiths Press, 2024), pp. 30, 46.

9 Françoise Vergès, *Making the World Clean: Wasted Lives, Wasted Environment, and Racial Capitalism* (Goldsmiths Press, 2024), p. 29.

10 Aurore Chaillou, Louise Robin, and Malcolm Ferdinand, 'Why We Need a Decolonial Ecology', *Green European Journal*, 4 June 4 2020, www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/why-we-need-a-decolonial-ecology/ [accessed 27 April 2025]. See also Françoise Vergès, *Making the World Clean: Wasted Lives, Wasted Environment, and Racial Capitalism* (Goldsmiths Press, 2024), p. 39.

11 Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff, 'Geosocial Formations and the Anthropocene', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34.2–3 (2017), p. 6, doi:10.1177/0263276416688946.

12 For the link between pollution and colonialism, see Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2021). For that between dirt and disposability, see Max Liboiron, 'Waste Is Not Matter Out of Place', *Discard Studies*, 9 September 2019, https://discardstudies.com/2019/09/09/waste-is-not-matter-out-of-place/ [accessed 26 April 2025].

13 George Bataille, 'Formless', in *Formless: A User's Guide*, edited by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (Zone Books, 1997).

knowledge, also challenging the writing of briefs and forms of assessment in architectural education. They invite us to rethink and reimagine institutional cleanness – the values that shape our explicit and implicit understandings of architectural education.

In what follows, starting from our own studios and experiences, we discuss why dirty pedagogies might be needed, and what some of their distinctive traits are or might be.

SK: Where do we start? Where do dirty pedagogies begin?

SF: I think that they always start from where one is, and that is partially what makes them dirty. The 'god trick of seeing everything from nowhere',[14] as Donna Haraway puts it, cleans everything up, and washes out the dirt of what doesn't fit or seem important, productive, and useful; it reduces to the essential, to what 'really matters'. Perhaps a dirty pedagogy begins by rejecting the viability of that reduction, of that judgement. It commits to the dirt and out-of-focus – to the possibility that it too matters, even if only *in-potentia*, or to some-body else. There is generosity in dirt, I think, a radical form of availability or openness. Everybody can roll in it; everybody knows how to get muddy. Perhaps that is where we start, then – from the dirt that is always already there, before and beneath our feet.

SK: Dirty pedagogies start from a place of not knowing or unknowing a world that requires us to do things in certain established ways. They prompt us to imagine ourselves in an unedited place or, as one of my students, Mari Helland, calls it, a 'muddled place'. They perhaps involve becoming overwhelmed by one's surroundings, allowing them in. Being porous, accepting the 'generosity' of dirt, as you put it. This is perhaps difficult for a discipline that traditionally separates, that constantly cleans and edits, but I think that pedagogies, in order to be dirty, must challenge the nature of architecture as a sealed or autonomous environment, and ask what it truly means to be porous.

In the *Architecture as Support Structure* studio, we pose these questions starting from the ground. From the very beginning of the course, we aim to understand and work with the ground as a messy, dirty, and sticky entity, teeming with oily substances. We start from a difficult and challenging ground wherein we are stuck socially, culturally, and politically – a ground that is literally and metaphorically filled with petroleum waste and shaped by petroleum industries, and by their material and immaterial infrastructures. Yet, as soon as we stand on this ground and start taking a position, as soon as we put our feet in the dirt of petroleum, it starts changing and moving, and we start sinking. The energy required to disengage from the ground and to unstuck ourselves is what animates dirty pedagogies. Or, speaking in oil metaphors, what 'fuels' them…[laughs].

SF: …what 'fuels' them, or perhaps what 'drives' them…[laughs]. The very words at our disposal are stuck in mechanical metaphors, in metaphors lubricated by oil and dripping in petroleum, ones that equate energy with speed and the roaring of motors, novelty with colonial violence ('pioneering', and what Max Liboiron calls 'firsting'),[15]

14 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), p. 581.

15 Max Liboiron, 'Firsting in Research', *Discard Studies*, 18 January 2021, https://discardstudies.com/2021/01/18/firsting-in-research/ [accessed 04 August 2024].

and possibility with the extraction and manipulation of raw materials, or with a blanked slate.[16] Surely, dirty pedagogies must also be capable of developing words and concepts that re-articulate the world – they must reject established and 'natural' forms of description and articulation, and the implicit values they perpetuate.

SK: Absolutely. The way we name things and the language we use to talk about situations and actions are crucial (a crux, a fork in the road) in challenging the colonial mindset of extractivism. Specific terms shape the world in particular ways, promoting certain worldviews. For example, Jamie Vindel views fossil culture not just as a reflection of the fossil economy, but as constitutive of its essence. Language, terminology, and words are all key components of what he calls a 'socioenvironmental relation'.[17] Something we do in *Architecture as Support Structure* is disrupt this language by turning it against itself. By distorting, twisting, and diverting the language of extractivism, we can steer it towards post-petroleum visions. This process involves gradually constructing a dissenting language that challenges the values that have shaped 'petroculture'.[18] For instance, the concepts of decommissioning and recommissioning, commonly used in the petroleum industry, are central to our work in the studio. We apply these concepts not only in developing architectural typologies, but also in the studio space, and in creating models and tools. By engaging with de/recommissioning, students are encouraged to reconsider the existing structures on a site, understanding their material and structural qualities and envisioning how they could function in a post-petroleum world.

Returning to the question of ground in dirty pedagogies, constructing a language through which to articulate a world – other worlds – is also integral to the work of preparing and making ground. Where does *Radical Harvest* begin? Where is its ground?

SF: In one sense, it begins with Mary Douglas, and with the volatility of dirt. Its articulation as 'matter out of place'[19] may be overused, but it remains profound. In the context of the architecture studio, I've always understood it as a double prompt. In the first place, as the need to teach that design can never be neutral or innocent – that it always draws boundaries that identify forms of cleanness and propriety (e.g., functionality, bodily ability, beauty, conceptual integrity, class, art-historical significance), and that every project, well-intentioned as it may be, sets up a 'systematic ordering and classification of matter' that necessarily 'involves rejecting inappropriate elements'.[20] As Douglas pithily explains, '[w]here there is dirt there is a system',[21] and to the extent that design is a systematizing activity, it is a form of violence.

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16 For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Simone Ferracina, *Ecologies of Inception: Design Potentials on a Warming Planet* (Routledge, 2022).

17 Jaime Vindel, 'There will be No "Third Earth": Colonial Modernity, Fossil Culture & Cosmic Imaginaries', in *Climate: Our Right to Breathe*, edited by Hiuwai Chu, Meagan Down, Nkule Mabaso, Pablo Martínez, and Corina Oprea (L'internationale & K. Verlag, 2022), p. 43.

18 Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman, Adam Carlson, 'On Petrocultures: Or, Why We Need to Understand Oil to Understand Everything Else', in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, edited By Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

19 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 2002), p. 44.

20 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 2002), p. 44.

21 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 2002), p. 44.

In the second place, Douglas' dictum underscores the fact that dirt, and therefore disposability, is not universal or intrinsic to things, but assigned to them in political and socio-technical contexts – ones that can be contested. While it is crucial to realise that the effects of a project spill beyond its presumed system boundaries, the instability of dirt can also be empowering – it can be an entry point for enacting dissent; for establishing different values, relational frameworks, and forms of life. It is this instability that the *Radical Harvest* studio starts from – from the plasticity and potentiality of dirt, and towards its reclamation, in both etymological senses (protesting and taking back). This is what we call 'exaptive design' – designs that, like evolutionary systems, 'exceed the projects and signatures of any one generation, and prompt a collective reconsideration of potentials and value, radically prioritizing practices of maintenance, reuse, care, and […] co-option'.[22]

So, to answer your question, I'd say that we begin with encounters. If mining, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, 'proceeds on the assumption that the birth of the new requires the death of the old',[23] we instead seek novel design protocols, uses, and users by finding, and paying attention to, that which is old, worn, dusty, and redundant (or freely available). The first step in the brief usually concerns the sourcing and procurement of the materials and components that will be used in the students' projects. Every group of three students is responsible for finding and diverting flows of secondary, discarded, and devalued items in the city; to consider how to mitigate eventual risks; to negotiate and set up collection strategies and routines; to clean, prepare, and recondition the resulting harvest; and, finally, to develop experiments and prototypes that will progressively transform it into architectural materials and tectonic assemblies.

Wing Hei So, Xiaowen Wang, and Shuyan Zhang, for example, found several oddly-shaped rolls of black and white polypropylene carpet slated for disposal on an industrial estate in Granton and, having cleaned and disinfected them, they brought them into the studio. This preliminary operation, I would argue, does not simply transport materials from one location to the next, but marks the crossing of a threshold of care and accountability. In the studio setting, that is, the carpet rolls are not only the students' material (something they claimed), but also their responsibility (something they reclaimed). It is this shift – from architectural design as a form of accumulation, organisation and control to a form of 'resource stewardship'[24] and care – that the studio aspires to and encourages. In any case, committed to turning their grimy scraps of carpet into something they could mobilize and revalue in an architectural context, and that might support new affordances and horizons of use, Wing Hei, Xiaowen, and Shuyan started to experiment with cutting, folding and sewing protocols, and developed construction units that – proliferated and filled with

22 Simone Ferracina, *Ecologies of Inception: Design Potentials on a Warming Planet* (Routledge, 2022), p. 262.

23 Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Polity, 2011), p. 21.

24 Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Zozia Dzierżawska, 'New Rules for a Generous School of Architecture', *Cartha Magazine* 1, 2021. www.carthamagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Charlotte-Malterre-Barthes-Dziersawk.pdf [accessed 26 April 2025].

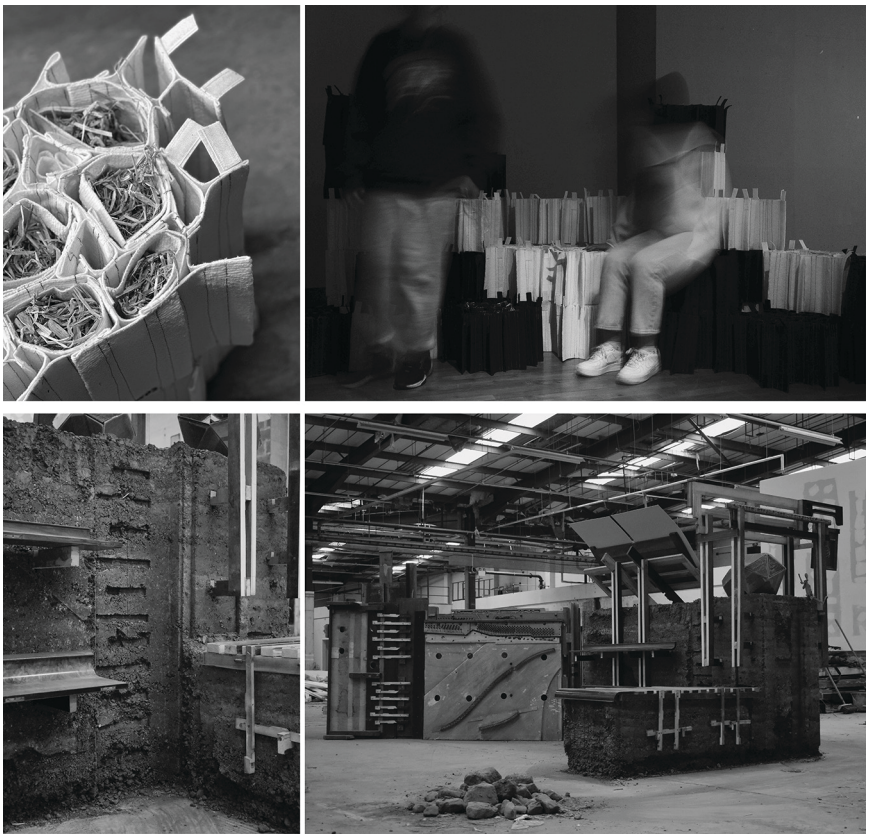


Figure 7.1 Top: *Folded Tectonics*, Radical Harvest, student work by Wing Hei So, Xiaowen Wang, and Shuyan Zhang, 2022; Bottom: *Instrumental Earth Building*, Radical Harvest. Student work by Coll Drury, Peter Brewser, and James Melville, 2024.

compacted straw – could be used as seats, stacked into partitions, or combined into larger spatial constellations. Similarly, Coll Drury, Peter Brewser and James Melville – after realizing that untunable pianos are routinely thrown away and incinerated, and having learnt to take them apart safely – diverted, disassembled, and surveyed six discarded pianos, elaborated a taxonomy of their parts, and developed protocols for their re-assembly as formwork, frames, and spacers. In the meantime, and over several weeks, waste subsoil and aggregates from a stone quarry near Fife were crushed, dried, mixed, and rammed into the formwork. Eventually the formwork was removed and the piano pieces were either reconstructed as an independent structure, or fastened to the spacers in the form of shelves, signage, and aerial displays. These examples illustrate how the key pedagogical prompt in the studio is, returning to Sara Ahmed's words, to start 'with the weighty, the heavy, the weary, and the worn' (see Figure 7.1).[25]

25 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 227.

SK: Ahmed's words also resonate with the ground's stickiness – 'the weighty, the heavy' perfectly captures the situation of getting stuck, and the challenge of getting unstuck in the context of petroculture and ecologies created by the petroleum industries. It also hints at the physicality of the ground, its layers and depths, emphasising the need to consider its thickness in any architectural endeavour. To explore and register the thickness of the ground, one of the pedagogical approaches I used over the past few years has been to rethink conventional tools and to reimagine and construct tools that embrace this complexity. These tools register layers of stories, middens of living and non-living that exist in the ground, inscribing a tapestry of voices. These tools operate in line with 'pluriversal' thinking. They support world-making in a pluriverse that, as Arturo Escobar writes, is a 'world where many worlds, worldviews and epistemologies fit'.[26]

SF: Decolonial notions of pluriversality and opacity (I'm thinking here also of Édouard Glissant's 'right to opacity')[27] are at the heart of dirty pedagogies. Here, dirt and dirtiness are not something to avoid, wash off, or violently ascribe to the other – to that which is unknown, different, or unwanted – but are rather forms of communion and solidarity: a shared condition of unknowability and partiality. They represent, in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's words, 'the incompleteness that we share'.[28] Other worlds, languages, values, and meanings always exist. As Glissant teaches us, only by preserving all of them we preserve our own. 'We can act', he writes, 'but on the condition that we do not believe that what we do is absolute and valid for everyone'.[29] This is the epistemic ground of dirty pedagogies, I think, one that is shifting and unstable, in which all manner of 'transformative seeds' might take root.[30]

SK: 'A shared condition of unknowability and partiality'. I think that we start working with tools exactly from that position, the position of not knowing or partial knowing, and also of positionality. The first tools we work with are *Architectural Devices of Unknowing*, which are mapping devices designed and constructed by the students. These devices are meant to explore and register aspects of the site that conventional tools might miss or overlook. The devices are built not to take measurements, but to connect to (and make visible) the silent and silenced voices of the site. They are designed and constructed from a range of positionalities in the studio, and later in group tasks they meet one another and contribute to the formation of a pluriverse.

One of the students, Ciara Stenhouse, embarked on a project using a device that allowed her to explore the ecologies of the coastline. She crafted this device using elements found in (or inspired by) the context: driftwood from the beach, a

26 Arturo Escobar, *Design for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2018).

27 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 189.

28 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Minor Compositions, 2021), p. 15.

29 Édouard Glissant and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Archipelago Conversations*, translated by Emma Ramadan (Common Era, 2021), p. 72.

30 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 11.

fishing net, textile, and traditional washing/cleaning practices in Scotland. Through this device, she mapped the ecologies of the coastline, emphasising past industries and their 'middens' – a Scottish term that refers to debris and residue from the past. By using cyanotype, she imprinted the middens upon the textile, a system for documenting the site and producing maps in situ. We (myself and Naomi De Barr) ask the students to work on/with their device throughout the term, using it as an architectural companion and as a tectonic totem that would evolve alongside, and in harmony with, their projects. Ciara worked with this device iteratively throughout the semester and in different sites and situations. This not only aided in her map-making endeavours, but also guided her towards the realization of an architectural typology – the Steel Wash House, a feminist community centre that decommissioned and recommissioned steel from the oil industry in a post-petroleum world. Run by women, the project represented a new material practice that processed/cleaned the dirt of the oil industry – a platform for maintenance, care, and a healthy environment, and a place for solidarity and empowerment among working-class women (see Figure 7.2).

Students undertake this task in parallel to another task, *De/Recommissioning Details*. Here, they seek out the often-overlooked minor details that play a supportive role in the functioning of oil infrastructures. Through drawing and model making, they study these details and the materials involved in their fabrication.

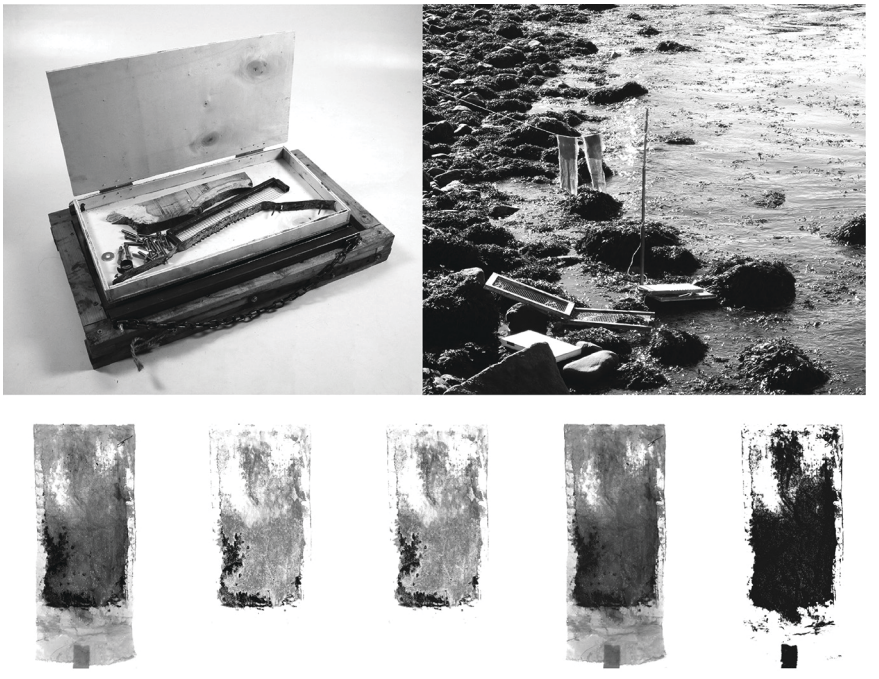


Figure 7.2 *Architectural Devices of (Un)Knowing*, Architecture as Support Structure. Student work by Ciara Stenhouse, 2023.



Figure 7.3 *De/Recommissioning Detail*, Architecture as Support Structure. Student work by Mari Helland, 2023.

They imagine them in a post-petroleum scenario and work with them as integral components of support structures. In the construction of both *Decommissioning Details* and *Architectural Devices of Unknowing*, they use found materials and objects. They are discouraged from using laser cutting machines or CNC routers in making models, to avoid a 'techno-fix' approach to materials, or one that presumes a seamless translation from digital software environments. Instead, they are encouraged to engage with the materiality of their surroundings, to 'follow the dirt'.[31] As Hélène Frichot puts it, following the dirt 'can be a creative movement, a profound relationship with our local environment-worlds'.[32] This helps them to better understand the life and nature of these materials, the messiness of the world we operate in, and the value embedded in dirt (see Figure 7.3).

31 Hélène Frichot, *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture* (Spurbuchverlag, 2019), p. 22.
32 Hélène Frichot, *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture* (Spurbuchverlag, 2019), p. 6.

SF: Édouard Glissant writes that, if we hope to co-exist in harmony and oppose forms of oppression and domination, we must forge our identity from the 'constant exchange with others'.[33] According to the Martinican poet and philosopher, this means that 'we can no longer influence the world according to plans we've drawn up in advance'.[34] In the *Radical Harvest* studio, this means that the development of computer models, drawings, and physical prototypes in a controlled environment guides the design of layouts and assemblies, yet it can never paint a full or definitive picture. Both the overall scope of a project and its actual configurations must remain plastic and capable of changing (and learning) in response to contingent tasks, challenges, materials, sites, clients, and opportunities.

For us, to 'follow the dirt' means that materials are not assumed to be given and generic substrates, or commodities exchanged on the global marketplace and available at one's fingertips – they don't magically appear on the scene to 'embody' and translate an abstract design or intent that precedes them. Rather, they are starting points, neighbours, and interlocutors; they take up space, and demand time and attention.

Not only do they remain anchored to specific histories and genealogies, and available (usually for a limited window of time) in specific places, conditions, states of repair, and quantities – they also don't pre-exist, and are not separable from, those who hold them and make them available to students; the tools and techniques needed to transport, store, and transform them; or the ingenuity, labour, and skills involved in their diversion, reconditioning, and reuse. For example, the hangers disposed of by thrift stores in central Edinburgh were not materials until Tallulah Bannerman, Molly Deazley, and Eilidh Duffy started to collect, measure, and classify them, and to fasten them into modules to form chairs and other structures (see Figure 7.4).

The studio sets out to honour the labour, energy, carbon, and environmental harm embodied in all manner of things, regardless of what they currently are, or of their perceived or market value. Whether something can be mobilized toward building construction or not is not decided in advance, based on precedent and scale, but established through rigorous – and playful – processes of hands-on experimentation, prototyping, trial and error.

SK: Through material routines and embodied knowledges.

SF: Exactly. If, in the studio, operations such as cleaning, sanding, mending, drying, mixing, sewing, knotting, transporting, and storing are not deemed inferior to conceptual ones, and are rigorously recorded through drawings and video – it is, on one side, 'to disrupt the commodity fiction' and reconnect objects and their meaning to 'the congealed forms of human labor, power, and interest that are built into [them] at their moment of production', and on the other, to draw the students' attention to

33 Édouard Glissant and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Archipelago Conversations*, translated by Emma Ramadan (Common Era, 2021), p. 74.

34 Édouard Glissant and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Archipelago Conversations*, translated by Emma Ramadan (Common Era, 2021), p. 70.

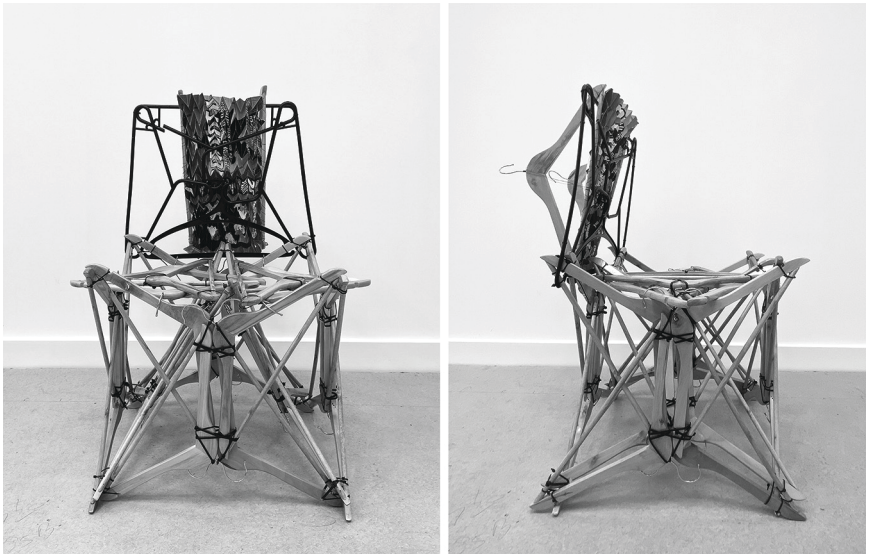


Figure 7.4 *Hanger Chair*, Radical Harvest. Student work by Tallulah Bannerman, Eilidh Duffy, and Molly Deazley, 2021.

'the ongoing forms of labor, power, and interest – neither dead nor congealed – that underpin the ongoing survival of things as objects in the world' (see Figure 7.5).[35]

What does 'following the dirt' mean in the *Architecture as Support Structure* studio? And how do architectural proposals emerge from it?

SK: That's an important question. Along the way, we persistently address this question: how do we arrive at a post-petroleum world? In the studio, the design of this journey towards a world that is liberated from the relations and epistemologies of the petroleum industries is integral to the design of architectural proposals. This is exactly what we mean by 'constructing the ground', and by interrogating the role of architecture as a support structure. We follow Frichot's invitation: 'make a mud map, find your way through the dirt'.[36] And while finding their way through the dirt, the students work with messy collages and models, designing and fabricating micro-worlds – instances of inhabitation that are no longer dependent on petroleum. They propose and make pockets of space that host ways of life that could challenge petroculture. These are made through architecture as a support structure, as material structures on which new typologies could be founded. In a world where oil is no longer the lifeblood of society, how could we possibly continue living? The absence of oil means that we need to reimagine the spaces we inhabited and the industries that sustained us. What types of spaces do we need? Who would be involved in constructing a post-petroleum world?

35 Steven J. Jackson, 'Rethinking Repair', in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (MIT Press, 2014), p. 230.

36 Hélène Frichot, *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture* (Spurbuchverlag, 2019), p. 11.

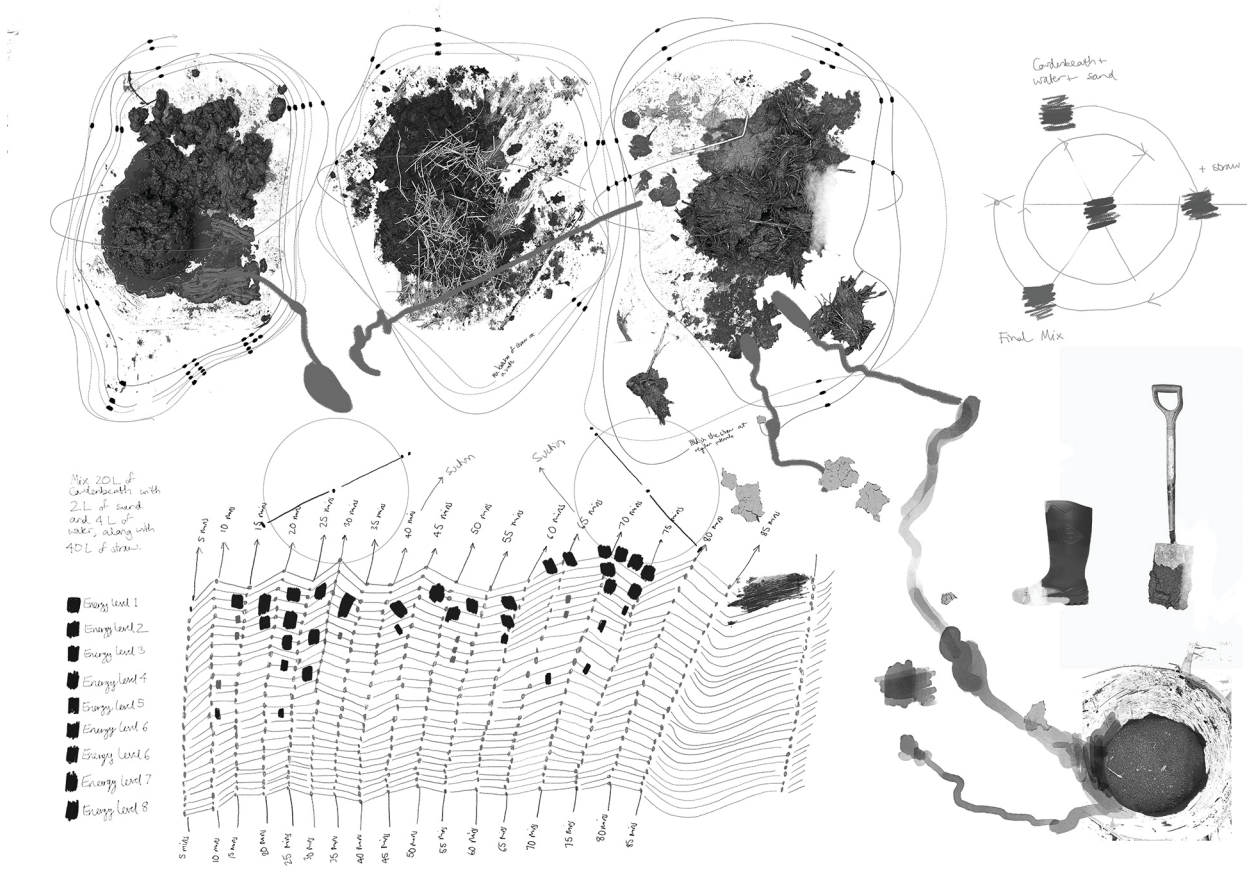


Figure 7.5 *Mud Choreography*, Radical Harvest. Student work by Sonakshi Pandit and Alice Reed, 2024.

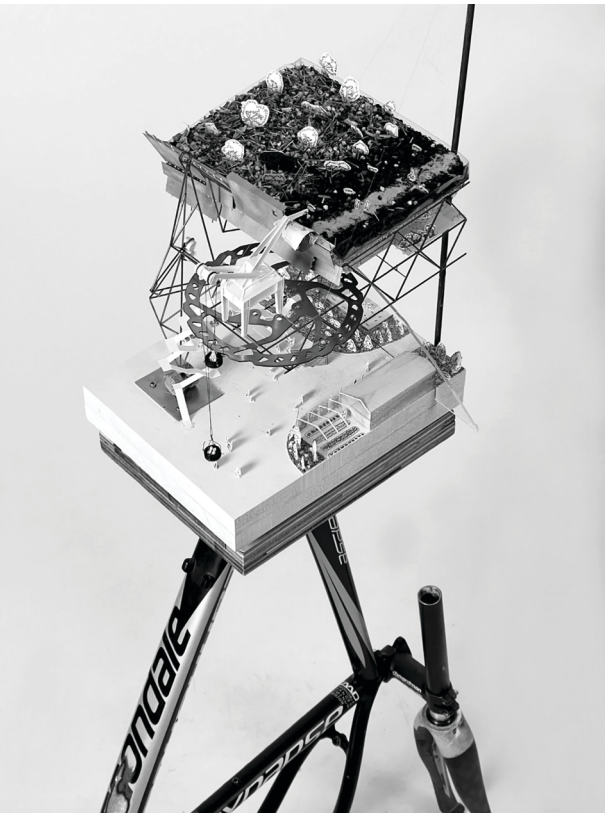


Figure 7.6 *St. Fittick's Community Park Escape Plan*, Architecture as Support Structure. Student work by Wenjing Xiao, 2024.

I think that it is essential to consider what imaginaries are constructed by architectural proposals. Similarly, in the context of dirty pedagogies, it is critical to examine which imaginaries (and whose imaginaries) these pedagogies endorse. As Haraway famously puts it, '[i]t matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts' (see Figure 7.6).[37]

SF: Yes, absolutely. I think that dirty pedagogies also rearticulate the figure of the architect, troubling our preconceptions about the scope and purview of architecture, and its values. Here, the architect's worth isn't predicated on the shape, style, or complexity of their outputs, or on the production of compelling images, but on their ability to develop nuanced responses to the social, environmental, and material conditions of a project. Creativity is not only consigned to conspicuous forms of intervention, but also recognised in active forms of spatio-temporal engagement, consideration and care, which include operations such as surveying, finding, holding on to, and listening.

37 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

In the *Radical Harvest* studio, for example, each group of students is introduced to a social enterprise, community group, or charity in Edinburgh, and spends several weeks surveying their premises, studying their operations, volunteering time, and discussing what kind of live-build programme or project might suit them. Co-designing with communities and pre-existing materials and conditions requires a different set of skills – a relinquishing of (some) control, a collaborative and distributed understanding of authorship, and the willingness to remain open and response-able.

SK: Does this result in a weakening of authorship, of authorial protocols?

SF: It results in a generous kind of authorship, I think, that is necessarily weaker – in authorship as an invitation, as a form of conversation and relational exchange, rather than a missive or command. Dirty pedagogies complicate simple causal relationships (action/reaction, intention/effect) and their presumed linearity, transparency, visibility and immediacy, understanding agency as potentially slow (in the sense suggested by Rob Nixon's notion of 'slow violence'),[38] 'distributive or confederate',[39] and as extending beyond orthodox (proper) actors, projects, values, and functions. Jane Bennett writes that 'distributive agency [...] does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. There are instead always a swarm of vitalities at play'. She continues: 'The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm'.[40]

In the *Radical Harvest* studio, the students negotiate these messy contours in a variety of ways. Firstly, they do so by engaging directly and iteratively with materials – by getting their hands dirty. New affordances and functional horizons are not the result of ideas, or illuminated by light bulbs or lightning bolts, but the culmination of patient and persistent – but also playful and intuitive – cycles of material experimentation, improvisation, tending, and prototyping. Design solutions, then, remain tentative, adaptive, and liable to being guided by the shape and texture of things, and responsive to local conditions and contingent opportunities.

But the studio's projects don't exclusively depend on architectural sensibilities or technical aspects – on testing routines, on the invention of tectonic recipes, or on the acquisition of new skills. Rather, they rely on the distributed networks of support, generosity, and trust that the students must weave in order to succeed: on the charities, community groups and social enterprises that agree to be their clients, and to provide feedback; on those who volunteer their expertise and time; on those who set wastes aside for them to collect, or who donate materials; on those who help move items, or drive between places; on those who review ethics forms and risk assessments; on the builders who teach them about specific tools, technologies, and techniques; even on those who bring them hot tea when they are working outdoors on a frosty Scottish day. The studio does not shield the students behind claims of authorial purity and conceptual integrity,

38 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2013).
39 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), p. 32.
40 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), p. 32.

muddying their work with the opinions, expectations, and contributions of others. This also applies to the tutors (myself and the brilliant Asad Khan), who do not hold a pre-established truth/set of solutions or rigidly control the studio's outcomes, but must navigate and respond to a project's contingencies and external pressures, continuing to learn and adjust along the way.

SK: It was fascinating to observe the blending of messes from the two studio spaces as they merged along the border between them last year. This real-life situation highlighted how dirt can blur boundaries and challenge borders. I think that in both *Radical Harvest* and *Architecture as Support Structure* engaging directly and iteratively with materials, and as you say – patiently and persistently – is at the heart of what we do. However, this engagement with dirt also exposes us to potential risks, as dirt can be unpredictable and even harmful. Dirt is not always kind to us. It can be wicked. Understanding the dirty reality of dirt is also about acknowledging the position of those who work closely with dirt and are exposed to its risks and complexities.

SF: Unquestionably. The studio emphasises the embodied value of all things, as opposed to value as codified by economic actors, or by architectural or heritage traditions that privilege their conceptual or art-historical significance – or that, in some way or another, become the distant arbiters of what is worth valuing or keeping. Yet, this approach, like yours, has also to account for the violence that objects distribute and hold as dispositional properties – the toxicity and damage they represent, transmit, inflict, and enforce. In a pedagogical context, this pollution is not only part of an object's history, but of its actuality, or a potential that may be, willingly or unwillingly, unlocked by the student's actions. In addition, repurposing has to contend with a certain opacity (you often don't know what the exact material composition or layering is), and with the fact that the official thresholds of toxicity and safety associated with objects and buildings only make sense (or stipulate responsibility) within the context of primary ecologies and functions (a fridge is environmentally safe in relation to the kitchen, but not very safe if discarded in the middle of a forest, or if used as a flotation device at sea).[41] In the studio, the risk assessment has become a design tool capable of helping us navigate this opacity. 'Staying with the trouble'[42] also requires the development of a heightened form of attention towards found materials as potential sources of harm.

(The theme of dirty pedagogies is now the subject of a forthcoming co-edited book, *Architecture in Polluted Worlds: Dirt as Method, Pedagogy and Practice* due to be published in 2027 by Routledge.)

41 This argument was further developed in Simone Ferracina, 'Yet', *Vesper*, no. 8 (Quodlibet, 2023), pp. 208–209.

42 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).