

# The B-sides of Architecture

In my home city of Manchester, the nineteenth century saw the building of countless textile warehouses in the urban core - buildings that exemplified Manchester's role then as the global centre of cotton production. From the street, these were not the utilitarian buildings one might expect; rather, they were imitations of grand Renaissance palaces found in Florence, Venice and Rome - powerful lures to customers to buy from this merchant rather than a nearby competitor. But if you were bold and went round the backs of these buildings you'd see an altogether different form of architectural expression: soot-stained brick walls supporting rusty stairwells; and all the materials the would-be buyers didn't see - the detritus of industrial production; the wastes of the horses that once hauled it; the ground-in dirt of thousands-upon-thousands of wet and muddy boots and shoes.

So often, we don't venture round the backs of buildings - the 'b-sides' of architecture that form the focus of this book. Here, architecture loses the very literal 'front' it usually puts on on its public side.



Dariusz Prasalski: Lodz, Poland

The b-sides are architecture when it first wakes up in the morning, before washing its face, combing its hair and putting on its makeup. They're the antithesis of the Instagram culture that has seen spectacular buildings put up almost for the sole reason of satisfying this insatiable desire for an easily-digestible image - one that will, above all else, be attractive and liked. But just like human beings, buildings can't sustain this image of perfection. As with our bodies, architecture is always subject to the forces of decay - the nature we'd all prefer didn't exist but which is, at every single moment, leading us downward back into the earth from which we came. The materials of architecture - stone, brick, steel, concrete - might seem much more permanent than our soft and fragile bodies but, in reality, they only maintain this image through constant and unrelenting care and attention - the maintenance carried out by an often unseen workforce that keeps architecture's front presentable.

The photographs in this book show us that other side: architecture's unconscious, if you like, but an unconscious that is hidden in plain sight. They're selections from thousands of images posted in a Facebook group set up by Markus Lehr. In all of these images we see clearly the baggage architecture always has to carry around but which is unacceptable to display to others. On the b-sides of architecture, we see renovations that would send building inspectors to an early grave - ad-hoc additions that are clearly improvised rather than carefully planned, including patched-up walls, bricked-up windows, strange coverings

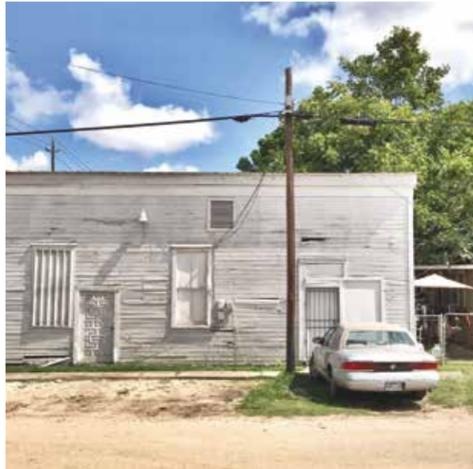


Peter Brutschin: Woman's prison of inquiry, Berlin, Germany

like accidental versions of the artworks created by Christo, where whole buildings are wrapped-up, making them suddenly seem very strange. On the b-sides, we see all the hidden infrastructures that keep buildings - well, more truthfully, their inhabitants - alive: pipes and cables that literally plug into architecture; tangles of wires that connect us all; and air-conditioning units that ward off the anarchy of the ever-changing atmosphere outside. We also see places where waste accumulates: discarded products waiting to be taken away; boxes longing to go inside; obsolete objects that no-one wants anymore. The b-sides are also places where whole buildings go to ruin - sometimes quickly, if demolished; sometimes, much more slowly - rubble accumulating over time as if a building is gradually losing its hold on life.



Dave Jordano: Chicago, USA



Carol Kazmer Liffman: Houston, Texas, USA

The b-sides of architecture are also places where buildings can change their function without being rebuilt. This is most obvious in industrial architecture, where technological and economic transformations often come before its building materials are worn out. In these cases, architecture is adapted in ways that we generally don't see, or perhaps don't accept, in domestic buildings: new pipes and ventilation devices punch holes in brick walls; obsolescent windows are filled with materials to hand (in one photograph, pieces of slate have been shoved into a defunct opening); new doors are held within the architectural memory of the old ones: for example, a brick arch without a corresponding object to house it. We also see vestiges of old functions in signs and other writing: ghostly presences on walls and doors that won't disappear no matter how many times they're painted over. Again, something of architecture's unconscious returns - the past refuses to die.

In some of the photographs, back doors invite us into shady or illicit activities: b-sides that are quite literally tapping into our own unconscious desires. But, even here, out of view, they still pretend to be something else. If we can easily guess what the 'Chicago Tango Club' might really be, what is the 'Hypnomagic' offered in one photograph, the 'Intermountain Hot Spot' in another, or the 'Restaurant Laundromat' in one more? Maybe it's just that, at the back, buildings lose that clear sense of function they usually possess at the front - another kind of order breaking down in the face of complex and often contradictory human needs. And

there's also the disorder of nature: entrepreneurial, or just plain lucky, plants getting a foothold in this loosely maintained world - a tiny fern finding a fertile spot on a damp surface; small trees thriving in a vacant lot where crows now gather; a tiny space between two bare walls a haven for shade-loving flora; climbing plants finding unexpected nutrients from rotting wood and rusting metalwork. This might also be called the b-sides of nature: neither rural nor urban but something in between, an unsightly hybrid that nevertheless thrives when we stop bothering to clear it away.

Even though the majority of these photographs are devoid of people, we see everywhere the marks of their presence. For, if these b-sides are characterised by the lack of care and attention normally lavished on the fronts of buildings, they are also all the product of some human need that wasn't acknowledged, or poorly understood, when the building was designed. Indeed, every single photograph tells us something about how humans really occupy buildings, rather than how they're supposed to, as dictated by architects, planners and builders. As all designers know only too well, if buildings are to survive, they must be adaptable to the changing needs of their occupants. Yet the fact that the evidence of this adaptation is so often hidden away indicates that this may not be something that is celebrated by designers. For the mess that is created is anathema to most architects and planners, a sign that their vision has failed to live up to its promise to satisfy every human need in a building. What the b-sides show us is that the

occupiers of architecture are only too ready, and able, to fill that gap - they find a way, no matter how ad-hoc it may be, to make a building fit their needs, rather than the other way round.

This kind of architecture is one built without architects: an unacknowledged vernacular that is entirely self-organised. It grows organically according to the needs and desires of users. There are many places in the world where such architecture is the norm - what are pejoratively called 'slums' proliferate in their thousands in cities all over the developing world; but, in the West, we tend to believe that modernisation, overseen by the rational minds and hands of professionals, erases such disorder to our greater good. The b-sides tell us otherwise: that wherever there is a building, there is an occupant who wants to mould it to their own particular needs and desires. An apt slogan seen on one of these backsides - 'tous est possible' (all is possible) - reminds us of the freedom that these unassuming places promise. They tell us that we are

all architects, even if the results of our efforts would hardly qualify as the kind of architecture created by professional practitioners. But, devoid of any front, this really is architecture at its most honest - a truth-baring mess, for sure, but one that speaks of a different kind of order that grows from self-determination. So long as architecture is imposed from above, these b-sides will always remain what they are - hidden portals into a richer world where everyone designs and everybody builds.

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Manchester, UK, Spring 2020



Courtney Blash: Juvenile Success Center, San Francisco, USA