

The Architecture of Collage  
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# Collage Is ... Collage Ain't

## Marshall Brown

Collage is a manner of creating, thinking, building, and understanding the world. Over the past decade, it has become my favored medium for actively engaging with and using my creative influences and to construct visions of the future. By sampling from the inherited material of architectural history, the production of space becomes an act of honorific thievery. As an *allographic* medium involving mechanical means of production that do not register a unique creator's hand, collage expands the antiquated definitions of authorship, originality, and novelty.<sup>1</sup> In his essay "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," the novelist Jonathan Lethem writes that collage "might be called *the* art form of the twentieth century, never mind the twenty-first."<sup>2</sup> Creation no longer belongs to the minds or hands of singular geniuses and has instead become the strategic synthesis of inherited material and ideas. Lethem explains that "inspiration could be called inhaling the memory of an act never experienced. Invention, it must be admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos."<sup>3</sup> By "inhaling the memory" of architecture from across time and space, collage allows me to sample and recombine specific formal and material qualities to create new spaces that address new challenges in new contexts.

Collage is a transgressive act. By juxtaposing, remixing, and splicing images from disparate sources, collage can break aesthetic boundaries, expose false dichotomies, and challenge intellectual bigotries. An excellent example from popular culture is *The Grey Album* by DJ Danger Mouse.



Front cover of Danger Mouse, *The Grey Album*, 2004

In 2004 Danger Mouse created a mash-up of the Beatles' "White Album" and Jay-Z's *Black Album*. Danger Mouse's selection of these two sources was impeccable—matching the sacred "whiteness" of one of the Beatles' most acclaimed records with the profane "blackness" of one of hip-hop's greatest lyricists. We could compare it to Robert Smithson's experiment

in entropy: the idea of a sandbox filled on one side with black sand and the other with white. A child walks around clockwise in a circle and then reverses the motion, but the entropic process only continues, blending ever further into gray. One can certainly hear the sources in *The Grey Album*, but they are both put in service of creating a new work of art that breaks cultural and creative boundaries.

Collage embraces multiplicities. I have previously written about collage as an act of creative miscegenation, which points to how collage destabilizes fixed notions of identity.<sup>4</sup> Every collage is a multitude in itself—both one and many. Throughout all of my work, the identities of individual fragments remain legible but matter less than their unions' productive potential. Over time, I have developed methods to cut architectural photography from journals, books, or enlarged photocopies and assemble the fragments by hand with tape and glue. Every collage incorporates at least three pieces from different sources. Because each image is carefully tailored to fit without overlaps, the collages possess a paradoxical visual quality. The seams produce the patchwork effect for which collage is known, but the alignments between images and figural contours of the composition conspire to create a visual synthesis. Thus, viewers experience visual tension between wholeness and fragmentation.

Collage reveals connections between conditions and concepts formerly thought separate. By appropriating found materials to create new works, collage disturbs our reality with defamiliarizations, disjunctions, and juxtapositions. These affordances are the consequences of physical actions: cutting, tearing, placement, and gluing. These movements become legible to viewers in the richly fractured surfaces of collages themselves as edges, overlaps, and seams.

In his book *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture*, Jesús Vassallo observes that since photographers, filmmakers, graphic designers, architects, and artists use the same software, the technology and technique transfer "has intensified an existing trend, namely photography's gradual shift from being considered a discipline itself to a medium that is strategically co-opted by other disciplines within the larger field of art."<sup>5</sup> Vassallo writes in the last chapter of the book, "Because the union is impossible, the traditional collage becomes

1 Allographic media are those that do not directly register the hand of unique creators in the ways that autographic media such as painting or drawing do. Because collage relies on appropriation of materials and images along with the use of mechanical reproduction methods, it is typically considered an allographic medium, much like printmaking and photography, for example.

2 Jonathan Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," *Harpers* (February 2007): 60.

3 Lethem, "The Ecstasy of Influence," 61.

4 Marshall Brown, "Creative Miscegenation in Architecture: A Theorem," in *Authorship: Discourse, a Series on Architecture*, ed. Monica Ponce de Leon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 113–25.

5 Jesús Vassallo, *Seamless: Digital Collage and Dirty Realism in Contemporary Architecture* (Zurich: Park Books, 2016), 171–72.

6 Vassallo, *Seamless*, 175.

7 As in the title of the recent book; see Andreas Beutin, Wolf Eiermann, and Brigitte Franzen, eds., *Mies van der Rohe: Montage=Collage* (London: Koenig Books, 2017).

8 To describe something as seamless is an apophysis—a negative statement that acknowledges certain contemporary phenomena by naming what cannot be said about them, as opposed to what can. Nonetheless, philosophy has long asserted that positive statements are more valuable than negative.

9 *Seamfulness* is a term attributed to the computer scientist Mark Weiser, who in the 1990s proposed the concept within the world of ubiquitous computing. According to Matthew Chalmers and Ian MacColl, in an address to the 1995 USENIX Conference, Weiser "suggests that making things seamless amounts to making everything the same, and he advocates *seamful* systems (with 'beautiful seams') as a goal. Paraphrasing Weiser's talk slides only slightly, and retaining his emphasis: making everything the same is easy; letting everything be *itself*, with other things, is hard." Matthew Chalmers and Ian MacColl, "Seamful and Seamless Design in Ubiquitous Computing," paper presented at the Workshop at the Crossroads: The Interaction of HCI and Systems Issues in UbiComp (2003).

a provocation, a disruption of the real. Digital collage on the other hand is seamless, concealing its own traces and thus merging portions of the real into a plausible alternative."<sup>6</sup>

Vassallo correctly observes that seams grant what he calls "traditional" collage its capacity to disrupt reality. After that point, however, is where Vassallo and I part ways. The word *collage* originates from the French *coller* (to glue). *Montage* also comes from the French *monter* (to mount or to affix). Together these terms circumscribe both the material and method by which collages are created. Indeed, the two words are often used to describe the same works, that is, montage or collage.<sup>7</sup> Paper cannot be uncut or unglued, so collage is a struggle of trials and errors. These errors and their unintended consequences are an essential source of collage's creative power. The same cannot be said of digital images, whose production requires substantially less risk, since every action can be undone immediately or in the future. Subsequently, I question whether a digitally composed image should carry the label *collage* at all, even if preceded by the word *digital*. Digital manipulations like those for which Vassallo advocates consist of pixels. When one zooms in closer to digital compositions, the hard edges between elements eventually dissolve, even at the highest resolutions. The seams in collages are minute but physically tangible, and they give collages a perceivable depth that digital images have never possessed and can only approximate at best.



*The Principle of Inconsistency*, 2019  
Collage under construction

As a material condition, seamlessness ironically undermines architecture's power to synthesize disparate conditions. As formal and spatial complexity increase in response to social and technological conditions, architecture will need more seams, not fewer. I still believe in the theory of medium specificity, which insists that the judgment should

be based mainly on the degree to which it expresses and exploits the particular characteristics of its medium. Seamlessness has been a popular conceptual and aesthetic trope since the ubiquitous introduction of software to art and design from at least the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Periods of cultural lag occur when societies struggle to comprehend the full implications of new technologies. One of cultural lag's most apparent symptoms is linguistic. In the absence of new language, we attach a modifier to something already known: digital drawing, digital modeling, digital collage, etc. The modifier—"digital"—implies that one is doing the same work or making similar artifacts as before, just faster or easier, for example. Such linguistic sleight of hand can effectively promote the adoption of new technologies, but it also delays the fundamental assessment of differences between legacy media and new media. Every medium has an intrinsic set of capabilities and limitations.

Seamlessness sidesteps the political imperative of distinguishing between creative methods. As an alternative conceptual framework, *seamfulness* would encourage us to actualize values by maintaining distinctions and strategically choosing some methods over others.<sup>9</sup> Though collage is a popular metaphor for all things heterogenous, I am arguing for clearer distinctions between what collage is and what collage is not. My motivations stem from concern for the politics of representation in art and architecture. Pious indifference to aesthetic, methodological, or cultural difference is a false cosmopolitanism that perversely undermines pluralism. Such ideological seamlessness only reduces our understanding of the world, much like the disintegration of over-enlarged screens into meaningless pixels. Seamfulness, on the other hand, implores us to embrace the challenge of articulating differences between what we are for and what we are against. Collage making and collage thinking have, for me, exposed seamlessness as a counterproductive architectural concept. Informed selection of media and methods produces radically different material results, formal propositions, and spatial conditions. All of these together, and in turn, represent distinct worldviews. Collage has been valued because it uniquely embraces complexity and uncertainty. Since collage always begins with selection, it also teaches us the necessity of making choices in an increasingly complicated world.