

# Waste Streams: Refuse Refuse

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**T H E A R C H I  
T E C T U R A L  
L E A G U E N Y**

*by Purva Jain  
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Last week, Studio-X hosted **WASTE STREAMS: REFUSE REFUSE**, the fifth event in a series of public dialogues on regional and global waste streams, held in conjunction with Columbia's current Architecture and Urban Design (AUD) Studio. The event presented a dialogue between Manuel Mansylla and Dennis Maher, who promote the use of reclaimed, recycled and re-purposed materials in their artistic practices, addressing environmental systems, objects and architectural spaces on a global scale. A conversation between the artists, AUD students and other audience members was moderated by AUD faculty members Angela Chen-Mai Soong and Sandro Marpillero. On display were both AUD student work addressing post-industrial sites in Bushwick and two environmentally enlightening documentaries: *Manufactured Landscapes*, by Edward Burtynsky, and *Waste Land*, directed by Lucy Walker. Overall, the event, as described by Studio-X, intended to "reveal the potential use of waste objects to read, interact, investigate and reconstruct urban conditions."

Manuel Mansylla, Design Director of *La Fantástica*, began by confronting plastic pollution in oceans. He first presented *Trash Patch*, his effort to bring more awareness to the issue through art, design and research. He also screened two videos – one from 1947, which documented the plastic breakthrough, followed by excerpts from *Trash Patch Catch*, Mansylla's documentary film project that tracks the plastic debris patches in oceans and considers our transition into a "throwaway society." All of this led to the question: "How much can we change in a lifetime?" Our grandparents, Mansylla noted, were not so quick to discard things. Today, we default to a disposable mindset, without considering that our trash ultimately ends up in the center of our oceans. Moving on to the history of plastics from a design perspective, he contemplated the dominance of plastic in our lifestyle, a practice we now need to re-think. The challenge is not strictly one for the consumer – Mansylla called artists and designers to action: "I invite the creative community to re-envision the potential of plastic waste and to instigate a paradigm shift – thinking of it as a resource and as a product that people want to keep."

From trash patches in oceans, Dennis Maher took us to his "assembled city fragments" in Buffalo. With approximately 10,000 structures languishing on the official demolition list, Buffalo is an urban landscape struggling with the fallout of industrial decline, like many others along the Rust Belt. Maher's work explores demolition, renovation and restoration through the piecing together of remains of obliterated spaces. (Check out more of his work on [his website](#).)

Maher's interest in the demolition and reassembly of urban places arose as a result of working on demolition sites, a job taken to supplement his income when he first arrived in Buffalo to work as an

assistant professor in 2002. Fascinated by the politics of demolition and shocked by the quantity of waste that resulted from deconstruction, Maher began harvesting scraps from decaying homes and fusing debris into large scale sculptures. Maher, still teaching at the University of Buffalo, hopes his work inspires people to think about how demolition affects the urban landscape and raises questions about the way a city erases visible manifestations of poverty. Urban transformations are cyclical, and the chance to regenerate is an opportunity that shrinking environments present.

Moderator Angela Soong questioned the macro/micro scale of the artists' work. With his work focusing on the macro, Mansylla began answering the question by addressing the wine cup that was being used by the evening's attendees. "These wine cups are nothing but pieces of plastic that get used for a few seconds," Mansylla said. "Product designers and industrial designers need to design materials that everyone wants to keep." Though the problem of plastic pollution presents itself on a macro level, the minutest details are what need to be addressed to bring a change. Maher offered a way to approach his work from both scales: "The City of Buffalo clearly is a part of my work in a very direct way. At the same time, what I've created is relevant to many cities. I'm formulating a practice that combines art, architecture and civic activism. Demolition is a form of cultural erasure. I'm interested in what that does to the urban fabric and communities." When there is so much vacant land, he asked, do we still need to build new? Or do we need to re-think the role of architecture and design?

The works of Mansylla and Maher comment on loss, waste and ruin, and their creations speak of the potential in them. Such environmentally enlightening work of artists dramatically shifts our consciousness about the world and the way we live in it – without simplistic judgments or reductive resolutions. With their modest materials and means, Mansylla and Maher summon a collective spirit to re-think, re-use and re-cycle.

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*The views expressed here are those of the author only and do not reflect the position of Urban Omnibus editorial staff or the Architectural League of New York.*