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EDITORIAL TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

REPAIR: TOWARDS A VERNACULAR SUSTAINABILITY*

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REPAIR AS CONDITION

Repair has always been present in everyday life, yet it has only recently become a sustained object of academic enquiry. Across social sciences, including anthropology, as well as science and technology studies, and history, a growing body of work has examined how material things are maintained, mended and kept in use, drawing attention to forms of labour and knowledge that dominant frameworks of production and consumption have tended to overlook (Jackson 2014; Mattern 2018; Vinsel and Russell 2020). This scholarship has made visible the ongoing work involved in sustaining socio-material environments, and established repair as a meaningful object of study in its own right. And yet, much of this literature continues to position repair as a secondary or corrective moment, understood as a practice that follows breakdown, compensates for obsolescence or interrupts the otherwise unimpeded flow of consumption and replacement. The implicit baseline remains a world organised around novelty and growth, against which repair figures as exception, resistance or remainder.

Starting from a different premise yields a different picture. Material worlds do not exist in a default state of smooth functioning that is occasionally disrupted by breakdown. They are sustained – continuously, unevenly, and through considerable effort – by ongoing practices of maintenance, adjustment, care and repair. Breakdown is not the origin of repair; it is one moment within a broader condition of material precariousness that characterises socio-material life across very different contexts (Graham and Thrift 2007; Denis and Pontille 2015). The routine adjustment of a building to the needs of its inhabitants, the careful maintenance of a wooden window frame across seasons, the intergenerational transmission of mending skills within a family, the creative repurposing of objects under conditions of scarcity are practices of repair, reuse and maintenance that belong to the ordinary fabric of everyday life. Some are increasingly framed as resistance or ecological commitment, while many more remain unremarked, embedded in the routines and conditions of specific material and cultural worlds. Both are undertheorised by frameworks that take breakdown as their primary analytical entry point.

The contributions gathered in this special issue proceed from this starting point. Rather than asking when repair, reuse and material care occur, they ask how these practices are organised, distributed, recognised and valued across a range of everyday settings. Their empirical contexts are varied: heritage buildings in Sweden and Finland, domestic environments in Estonia and Chile, education programmes and digital communities in the United States and the Nordic countries. What they share is an empirical orientation toward repair as an ongoing dimension of how material worlds are made and remade in practice, and a willingness to follow that orientation into contexts, registers and scales of practice that repair studies has not always reached.

REPAIR STUDIES: PRODUCTIVE TENSIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

The field of repair studies has developed rapidly. Douglas Harper (1987) has framed repair practice and skill as specific working knowledge; Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift (2007) established maintenance as an analytically serious object of enquiry; Ste-

ven J. Jackson (2014) proposed "broken world thinking" as a philosophical reorientation that takes breakdown rather than innovation as its starting point; Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell (2020) have made the most sustained case for redirecting public and scholarly attention from novelty to upkeep; Jérôme Denis and David Pontille (2015) have shown how repair operates as distributed, often invisible labour; Francisco Martínez (2018) has demonstrated the political and social significance of repair; and Heike Weber and Stefan Krebs (2021) have highlighted the historicity and persistence of repair in Western society. Alongside this largely Euro-American theoretical lineage, a parallel body of work has approached repair from contexts of infrastructural precarity and material improvisation in the Global South. AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) account of people as infrastructure in Johannesburg, Brian Larkin's (2013) analysis of the politics and poetics of Nigerian infrastructure, and Nikhil Anand's (2017) ethnography of water infrastructure in Mumbai have all demonstrated that repair and maintenance are not peripheral activities but constitutive of how material systems function on a daily basis. This body of work has shifted the terms of debate in adjacent fields including design, heritage studies, and sustainability research. Without disregarding their contributions, what follows is an account of the limits they leave open; in particular, three limits that the articles in this special issue collectively address.

The first limit concerns the relationship between repair and breakdown. Jackson's (2014: 221) proposal to "start from a world of brokenness" has been enormously productive and widely applied, but it has also reinforced the idea that repair becomes analytically interesting primarily at the moment of failure. This focus risks obscuring a wider field of material practice, i.e. preventative maintenance, which forestalls breakdown, the daily adjustments that keep things functional, the continuous care that extends the life of buildings and objects through attentiveness rather than intervention. Whether these practices are best understood as repair, maintenance or care is itself a question worth holding open; what matters is that they share a temporal logic quite different from the breakdown-and-fix sequence that much of the literature has privileged. In the Inspirational Insight section, **Steven J. Jackson** proposes rethinking these practices as "working relations" that go beyond repair and aim to address reparative relationships with things and material worlds. In this special issue, Sigrun Thorgrimsdottir's analysis of *byggnadsvård* in Sweden, and Iida Kalakoski and Riina Sirén's study of domestic building renovation in Finland both work in this register: the practices they document are constitutive of everyday life rather than remedial to it, and they resist easy categorisation as repair in the narrow sense.

The second concerns the implicit geography of existing scholarship. Work on infrastructural repair in urban environments of the Global South has shaped some of the field's core assumptions about what repair looks like and where it happens (Simone 2004; Larkin 2013; Anand 2017; McFarlane and Silver 2017), where improvisation and maintenance are understood as constitutive of how systems function rather than corrective to their dysfunction. This work has been invaluable in demonstrating that repair is not a marginal or exceptional activity but central to the organisation of material life. At the same time, it has sometimes produced a geography of repair in which informal improvisation and creative bricolage are associated primarily with the Global South, while institutionalised, formally organised maintenance is implicitly associated with the Global North, a distinction that, as Mary Lawhon et al. (2016) have noted, risks rei-

fying the very asymmetries it seeks to challenge. The effect is a double invisibility: the informal repair cultures of the Global North go untheorised, while the more institutionalised or politically articulate forms of repair in the Global South are underrepresented. The contributions in this special issue complicate this geography in productive ways.

Tomás Errázuriz and Ricardo Greene's analysis of repair and material creativity in Chilean households – both rural and urban, both structurally marginal and deliberately autonomous – does not fit neatly into existing frameworks of infrastructural improvisation. Tenno Teidearu's account of repair in post-Soviet Estonia, where practices developed under Soviet socio-economic conditions with its commodity deficit are being reactivated through cultural memory as a resistance to mass consumption, occupies equally ambiguous terrain. Read together, these two cases suggest that the geography of repair is more uneven and more contested than existing frameworks have recognised.

The third, and most consequential for this special issue, concerns the relationship between repair and sustainability. Repair is frequently mobilised as an environmentally desirable practice, framed in relation to circular economy models or responsible consumption (Cooper 2005; Jonas et al. 2023). This association has generated important research, but it privileges forms of repair that are organised, visible, and explicitly framed as sustainable, while leaving others – embedded in cultural heritage, driven by scarcity, transmitted informally across generations – insufficiently theorised. As Elizabeth Shove (2010) has argued in a related context, sustainability frameworks that focus on individual behaviour and best practices routinely fail to account for the social and material conditions that make certain practices possible or intelligible in the first place. Cindy Isenhour and Joshua Reno (2019: 1–4) have indicated that the official perspective on sustainability and the adoption of the circular economy often disregards existing and long-standing repair and reuse practices, and their social and political significance, which are clearly present in ethnographic accounts. What is needed is an analytical perspective capable of attending to sustainable practice where it is already present, rather than where policy expects to find it.

VERNACULAR SUSTAINABILITY: A HEURISTIC

The limitations outlined above share a common structure: the frameworks most available for studying repair make certain practices visible while rendering others analytically marginal. It is in response to this problem that we introduce the concept of *vernacular sustainability* as a heuristic for the study of repair, reuse and material care in everyday life. We use the term heuristic deliberately. Vernacular sustainability is not a theory, a unified methodology, or a normative model. It is an analytical orientation that directs attention toward situated, often informal practices of material engagement that contribute to ecological sustainability without necessarily being framed or experienced as such.

The term vernacular requires justification. Derived from linguistics, where it refers to a native or indigenous language or dialect as distinct from a prestige or official one (Howard 2011), it has been mobilised across several disciplines to attend to cultural life as it is actually practiced rather than as it is institutionally prescribed. In folkloristics, vernacular has been used to challenge the binary between folk and elite or official cul-

ture, and to attend to "the everyday order of culture, developed in person-to-person interaction without the mediation of institutional codes or controls" (Noyes 2012: 18). While Simon J. Bronner (2022: 10) has warned that the concept risks reproducing the hierarchies it seeks to challenge, many other scholars (e.g. Goldstein 2015; Valk 2022: 2) have shown that vernacular is a useful methodological and theoretical tool in contemporary folkloristics for appreciating and studying narratives and local knowledge. Moreover, Ülo Valk (ibid.: 17; 2023: 7–9) has extended this usage, arguing for vernacular knowledge as a concept capable of crossing disciplinary boundaries and connecting individual experience with cultural tradition without fixing either in stable categories; rather, it can connect multiple, sometimes contradictory, discourses or practices and demonstrate the potential of cultural creativity.

The term has served as a useful tool across different subjects. For instance, Henry Glassie (2000: 20–21, 70) has applied the term vernacular architecture to welcome neglected (folk) buildings into the academic study of architectural history, and to highlight their cultural nature and diversity as products of real people in real situations, accommodating their needs, possibilities and cultural lives. Leonard Norman Primiano (1995) has developed the concept of vernacular religion to study religion, whether institutional church-centred or folk, as it is lived in its mundane, personal, situated and creative dimensions. Following these precedents, we advocate for vernacular as a relational and methodological term that draws attention to what becomes visible when we shift from institutional frameworks to the situated practices through which people actually sustain their material worlds.

Applied to sustainability, this orientation produces vernacular sustainability: sustainability as it is lived, practiced, interpreted and transmitted in everyday settings, often without reference to official sustainability discourse and sometimes in tension with it. The parallel with Primiano's (ibid.: 44) definition of vernacular religion as "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" is deliberate. What distinguishes vernacular sustainability from related concepts such as everyday sustainability or grassroots environmentalism is precisely that it does not begin from ecological awareness as a precondition. It attends to material practices that produce sustainable effects regardless of whether their practitioners frame them in sustainability terms, and it asks what those practices can teach frameworks that do.[1]

As an analytical heuristic, vernacular sustainability has three distinguishing features. The first is its grounding in local and inherited knowledge: craft skills transmitted across generations, material sensibilities shaped by local environments, practices of care rooted in cultural memory. Teidearu's analysis of repair in Estonia demonstrates this concretely. The practices of mending and fixing that developed under Soviet socioeconomic conditions have become cultural memory and intergenerational inheritance, a resource for contemporary ecological practice that grows from within a specific historical experience rather than being imported from outside.

The second is its attention to the relationship between necessity and choice. Much of the sustainability discourse addresses agents who are presumed to have options. Vernacular sustainability attends to contexts in which sustainable practices emerge from material and economic conditions rather than from informed choice. Errázuriz and Greene's Chilean households are exemplary in this regard, as the repurposing of objects, the maintenance of things across generations and the creative resolution of

material constraints produce effects that sustainability frameworks seek to promote, without being motivated by ecological awareness.

The third feature is its treatment of sustainability as a process. Official sustainability discourse operates through targets and measurable outcomes, reflecting a technical perception in maintaining some optimal level of ecological viability (Zwier 2024: 150), implicitly framing sustainability as an end state. Everyday practice reveals a continuous negotiation between people, materials and the conditions of their lives, ongoing, open-ended and resistant to the logic of policy cycles. Taken together, these three features define a perspective that asks what forms of material intelligence are already present in specific cultural contexts before asking how policy might intervene.

THE ARTICLES IN CONVERSATION

The articles gathered in this special issue approach vernacular sustainability from a range of empirical contexts and disciplinary perspectives. They do not share a common methodology, nor do they converge on a single definition of repair or sustainability. Presented in dialogue, they illuminate different dimensions of the heuristic while generating tensions that resist easy resolution.

Sigrun Thorgrimsdottir's contribution opens the question of what it means to care for a building on its own terms. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnography centred on the Swedish concept of *byggnadsvård* – literally, 'building-care' – she analyses the stories, images and debates that circulate on Instagram around the maintenance and repair of old buildings. *Byggnadsvård* emerges as a concept that resists categorisation: simultaneously a professional field, a heritage ethics, a popular aesthetic and an everyday practice, mobilised by heritage specialists, enthusiastic amateurs and lifestyle influencers, without being fully captured by any of them. What runs through its different uses is an orientation toward material attention and slow transformation. This means listening to the building, understanding its history and fabric and intervening as little as necessary. Thorgrimsdottir shows how this orientation constitutes a challenge to dominant renovation culture, with its emphasis on speed, novelty and the continuous renewal of interior aesthetics. *Byggnadsvård* is, in Valk's (2022: 17) sense, genuinely vernacular, as it mingles academic, professional and popular uses in ways that no single institutional framework can contain. Thorgrimsdottir argues that building care is a "vernacular heritage practice", a grassroots, ethically charged way of caring for old buildings that blends conservation principles with contemporary concerns about sustainability.

Iida Kalakoski and **Riina Sirén** approach building repair from a different angle, examining how domestic renovation is narrated in Finnish home decoration magazines. The repair narratives value material heritage, highlight a sense of sustainability and domestic care, and frame repair as an everyday practice through which individuals negotiate their identity, continuity and belonging. Where Thorgrimsdottir works with the fragmented, nonlinear stories of social media, Kalakoski and Sirén attend to the structured narratives of print through interviews with homeowners that follow recognisable formulaic patterns while conveying genuine complexity. Their analysis shows that building renovation is consistently framed as a learning process where the self is continuously transformed through a set of new capacities for patience, modesty and

material attention. The house, in many accounts, is an active teacher; a space that proposes its own logic, communicates its needs and shapes the sensibilities of those who care for it. Together, Thorgrimsdottir and Kalakoski and Sirén illuminate two registers through which vernacular building care circulates in Nordic contexts: the image-driven, community-forming space of social media, and the narrative-driven, identity-forming space of lifestyle journalism. Both also surface a tension that runs through vernacular sustainability more broadly. The practices they document are largely associated with middle-class homeowners, raising questions about access and who can afford to inhabit the old and the imperfect. Neither article resolves this tension, but both honestly acknowledge it.

Lizette Gradén and **Tom O'Dell** focus on the craft of thatching, particularly the work of one of Sweden's master thatchers. Thatching is a vernacular technology (Glassie 2000: 25–31) that connects and engages people with nature and the local environment. The physicality of rye as a raw material is reshaping people's understanding of the material and social world around them. Gradén and O'Dell ask in what ways (or not) people's perceptions of crafts such as thatching, timbering and clothes-making are affected by ongoing discussions of sustainable living, and how these might dovetail with critiques of consumerism (Korn 2017). Straw roofs are contingent on the knowledge involved in thatching, a traditional craft that is disappearing. Thatching can be seen as a form of vernacular sustainability or as sustainable vernacular technology. Sustainability is, in this case, not solely about controlling consumption or consuming the 'best' possible products and services in the most responsible way, but about dwindling knowledge and what happens when there are very few people who can teach a craft such as thatching with long-straw rye and pass that knowledge on to others.

Tomás Errázuriz and **Ricardo Greene** shift the terrain considerably, both geographically and analytically. Drawing on a decade of qualitative research in urban and rural Chilean households, they examine how practices of repair, reuse and material creativity emerge in contexts characterised by isolation, scarcity and structural exclusion from consumer markets. Their argument engages directly with dominant sustainability narratives, which they find systematically inadequate. Oriented toward technological innovation and individual behavioural change, these narratives render invisible the practices of communities that have long lived outside consumer culture. The cases they document – agricultural workers repurposing broken equipment across multiple use cycles, elderly urban households maintaining objects across generations, protesters reconfiguring urban furniture during the 2019 Chilean uprising – are responses to material constraint, driven by necessity and a practical relationship with things that consumer culture tends to discourage. Errázuriz and Greene make two contributions that are central to vernacular sustainability. First, they demonstrate that sustainable practice is already present, unremarked, in the everyday lives of communities that mainstream sustainability discourse consistently overlooks. Second, they propose that conditions associated with old age, isolation and market disconnection – conditions that capitalist modernity has systematically devalued – may offer more productive resources for imagining sustainable futures than the innovation-oriented frameworks that currently dominate the field. Errázuriz and Greene propose rethinking sustainability itself through a more participatory material and consumer culture that maintains human–object and social relations. This shows the potential of "sustainability as it is lived", advocating for a more ecologically viable future.

Tenno Teidearu's article on the changing meanings of repair in Estonia offers a different but complementary account of how vernacular sustainability is shaped by historical experience and cultural memory. Analysing repair and reuse stories collected at the Estonian National Museum, alongside interviews with repair activists and ethnographic observations at public repair events, Teidearu examines how the meaning of repair has shifted in the Estonian post-Soviet context and how it relates to local cultural memory and the Soviet past. In the Soviet era, DIY mending, fixing and making were normative and a necessary part of consumer culture, which Gerasimova and Chuikina (2009: 59–61) have defined as 'repair society'. Contemporary vernacular understandings and interpretations of domestic, individual and collective repair practices are seen as resistance to consumer society, planned obsolescence, and the capitalist economic system, fostered by the recently emerged repair movement. Importantly, this resistance is partly inspired by local cultural memory and traditional technologies (i.e., handicraft skills and techniques), demonstrating how repair is linked to cultural heritage in the Estonian case and is perceived as a form of "vernacular sustainability". The author proposes that the link to the heritage of repair practices can serve as a cultural resource to empower contemporary sustainable consumer culture and inspire government legislation that supports this practice.

The juxtaposition of Teidearu's Estonian case with Errázuriz and Greene's Chilean analysis is analytically productive precisely because of what separates them. Both document repair cultures that developed under conditions of constraint and have acquired new meanings in the context of sustainability concerns. Both highlight the role of cultural memory and inherited knowledge in sustaining repair across generations. What differentiates them is the political register in which repair is articulated: in Estonia, repair is increasingly narrated as conscious resistance to mass consumption and capitalism, drawing on a shared historical experience of living outside consumer abundance; in Chile, the relationship between practice and political articulation is more ambiguous, with many of the practices Errázuriz and Greene document not framed as resistance at all. This difference is itself analytically significant. Vernacular sustainability operates across a wide range of political registers, from explicit counter-cultural activism to the quiet, unremarked maintenance of things that consumer culture would rather see discarded. Its analytical value lies precisely in its capacity to hold this range without collapsing it into a single political narrative.

The transmission of repair knowledge is the central concern of **Sam Bennett**, **Rachel Meade Smith** and **Gabriele Ferri**. Drawing on an autoethnographic account of their own mending studio, and a case study of a repair education programme in a New York City public high school, they examine the conditions under which mending skills can be taught and transmitted in contemporary educational contexts. A 300-year historical timeline traces how the sites of mending knowledge – household, printed publication, formal school curriculum, alternative learning spaces, social media – have shifted in response to technological change, economic conditions and cultural politics. Their case study reveals a sharp friction. Slow, embodied, tactile repair work encounters education environments organised around speed, productivity and digital competency. The same students who struggled to sustain attention for the twenty minutes required to darn a small hole were nonetheless moved by the experience when they reflected on it, recognising something in the slowness and difficulty that their everyday environment rarely

provided. The contribution reinforces one of the central claims of vernacular sustainability. Repair knowledge is a form of embodied, relational learning that requires conditions that contemporary institutions are not configured to provide and that policy frameworks have not yet learned to protect. Time, community, material engagement and a different relationship to pace cannot be assumed; they must be deliberately cultivated.

Ann-Helen Sund examines domestic reuse practices as they are shared and negotiated in online communities. Analysing social media content focused on creative reuse and repurposing of domestic objects, she shows that sustainability, in these contexts, is neither a fixed value nor a stable category but a fluid and contested concept negotiated within communities of practice that develop their own norms, aesthetics and ethical frameworks. Reuse is framed through the values of creativity, resourcefulness and material care, values that resonate with sustainability discourse without being determined by it. Sund's contribution demonstrates that online communities can constitute forms of vernacular knowledge production, generating shared understandings of what it means to care for things responsibly without reference to official frameworks and sometimes in productive tension with them.

Read as a collection, these articles trace three recurring tensions that define the terrain of vernacular sustainability. The first is between knowledge and institution: repair and reuse are understood across all contributions as forms of knowing – embodied, relational, culturally situated – that are acquired through doing and sustained through community, and that formal institutions have repeatedly failed to transmit or protect. The second is between necessity and choice: the most ecologically significant practices are often those least visible to sustainability discourse precisely because they are not driven by ecological awareness but by material constraint, economic necessity or cultural tradition. The third is temporal: the articles consistently attend to the long-term, open-ended character of vernacular sustainability, in contrast to the target-driven temporality of official frameworks. These tensions are held open as conditions of the enquiry.

A COLLECTIVE WAGER

This special issue does not deliver a unified theory of vernacular sustainability, nor does it claim to. What it delivers is something more useful: a set of situated perspectives that, taken together, show what becomes visible when repair is treated as a constitutive condition of everyday life rather than as an exceptional response to breakdown or consumerism. The practices documented here range from the careful maintenance of a Swedish timber building to the creative repurposing of a broken Chilean kitchen, from the intergenerational transmission of mending skills in Estonian families to the negotiation of reuse ethics in online communities. What they share is a material intelligence that existing frameworks have not known how to recognise or value.

Vernacular sustainability, as a heuristic, insists that official sustainability frameworks are insufficient on their own. They miss the repair knowledge embedded in cultural memory, the sustainable practices that emerge from necessity rather than choice, and the slow, open-ended temporality of material care that resists policy cycles and outcome measurement. Attending to these dimensions requires an analytical practice that is ethnographically grounded, culturally informed, and willing to start from what

people actually do. This is what this special issue, taken as a whole, proposes: a supplement to existing repair studies and sustainability research that takes seriously the material intelligence already distributed, unevenly and often invisibly, across the fabric of everyday life. The resources for a more sustainable material culture are not located exclusively in the future. Many of them are already here.

This special issue arises from the Sustainability in Practice: DIY Repair, Reuse and Innovation conference, held at the Estonian National Museum on 30 October – 2 November 2024. The conference brought together scholars, practitioners and activists from a range of disciplines, creating a space in which different approaches to repair, reuse and material practice could be discussed in relation to contemporary social and environmental challenges. The contributions here reflect the diversity of those encounters. They share a conviction that the study of how people maintain, mend and transform their material worlds is not peripheral to the urgent questions of our environmental moment but central to them, and that addressing those questions will require a more generous understanding of where sustainable practice already lives.

NOTES

1 We acknowledge that some individual and domestic practices perceived as sustainable may, in fact, be unsustainable. However, our point is that, as a heuristic, vernacular sustainability involves individuals negotiating and mingling different discourses, knowledge and practices.

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