Buffalo, New York was thriving just 50 years ago, but this post-industrial city has since outgrown itself. Remnants of out-dated infrastructures and a dwindling population are left behind in the form of abandoned buildings lining entire blocks. It’s a city whose residents and enterprises are struggling financially, a city like many in America facing a great deal of scarcity. Abandoned properties risk arson, drug activity, depreciated property values…and so continues the downward spiral.

To us—two architects who have dedicated themselves to a year of voluntary poverty—it’s not blight or desolation that lines the streets, it’s opportunity. It’s a wealth of materials, increasingly diverse in their histories, applications, and constitutions. It’s a way not only to survive without resorting to typical consumerism, but to realize new breeds of architecture and exchange.

The value of objects and architecture is not as dependent on physical properties as much as on fluctuating social standards. New ideas of aesthetics and modes of living can be proposed, but without the consent of the public they are ineffective. Conservatism within the architectural realm is a direct result of the capitalist framework, including concepts such as resale value, which creates a tendency to treat possessions such as cars and houses with incredible caution. The artist Gordon Matta-Clark observed that "buildings are fixed entities in the minds of most people. The notion of mutable space is taboo, especially in one’s own house. People
live in their space with a temper-erity that is frightening. Home owners generally do little more than maintain their property.” Thus, when painting a room, off-white trumps lime green. And your new Audi—suppos-edly a device of material and personal transportation—resists being touched, having anything put in it, or getting wet. There is a level of preciousness that manifests itself in both product and architecture that we seek to defy.

For $800, we—architects-turned-vagrants—save one of those derelict properties from demolition. We move in without heat, without electricity, without running water, to recreate ourselves not as detached designers, but deprived occupants. It’s the forgotten scraps of material found on the side of the road, in dumpsters, and in houses pending demolition that we use to sustain ourselves. We seek to give “waste” some purpose, to revive a house that hasn’t seen life in over a decade, to understand the needs of the billions of people that architects regularly overlook, to reconsider architectural discourse not as a puppet of consumerist agendas, but as a field capable of rebuilding local economies and cultural values.

The house becomes an architectural laboratory where our interventions are grounded by necessity. We need a dry roof, a place to keep things, a source of heat before Buffalo’s harsh winter kicks in. An old steel-barrel wood stove we find is made into a central hearth. To comply with NYS building code, we can either use insulated chimney pipe to run through the floor or create a clearance to combustibles of 18” from the chimney. Since insulated pipe is $100 per 2’ section, the floor is cut back to accommodate the given clearance. The use of more un-insulated pipe saves money, keeps less heat from escaping up the chimney, opens the space to create a center of activity, and ultimately challenges typical responses to building codes. We quickly find that...
the materials we come upon aren’t just plentiful and diverse, but highly suggestive. It’s the waterlogged firewood that begs to be by our sides: warm and dry a safe distance from the stove. Rubber tires in their complete refusal to deteriorate provide the most resilient foundation for the house to rest. Rotting floor joists and a southern wall volunteer themselves to be removed so that the house can bask in open space and natural light. It’s these compromised materials that actually create really exciting spaces in the house, their very deficiencies fostering creative solutions.

And our transactions, not bound by the rigid structure of a monetary system, allow us to start developing more complex and intimate relationships with the surrounding community. We build up a relationship with Buffalo ReUse by helping remove unprofitable and unwanted materials. We help Dan with his urban farm and learn what amendments are needed to make soil fertile. We become friends with Megan and Nora by giving them a table we found in the trash. And we help Ms. Triggs, who has built a community house down the street in exchange for materials and tips on how to avoid the inspectors. The relationships that form through these exchanges of material, favours, knowledge, and labour start to suggest an alternative economy reminiscent more of barter or altruism. The exchange isn’t some arbitrary number on a tag, but a deeper connection and understanding of different cultures, subcultures, trades, urbanisms—even politics.

Our work may be seen as a sort of exaggeration, a critique of consumerism and the indifference to waste that has become the norm, and of the sterility and preciousness of “high design.” If the responsibility of the architect is to situate material in context, the challenge is not to achieve a trashless space, but more flexible aesthetic and functional criteria to embed it in. We’re starting to see some of the progress that can stem from out-dated infrastructure (the Highline in NYC), vacant lots and unused rooftop space (urban farming), “green” demolition (material salvage), and the programmatic flexibility of economic fluctuations (Detroit’s Car Wash Cafe). To keep society from choking on the very residues that commercialism creates, we need to move past our self-created inhibitions. We may find that waste isn’t something to be shunned, but an underutilized resource capable of far more than we generally admit—not only a driver of ecological systems and financial accessibility, but an instigator for the crucial interchanges between our environment, our homes, and ourselves.

bios: Matthieu Bain holds a masters degree in architecture from the University at Buffalo’s School of Architecture and Planning. His involvement in architecture stems from the merger of interests in the natural sciences and the arts. Recent works have dealt with the issues surrounding the recombination of unwanted materials, objects, and spaces into habitable environments.

Andrew Perkins completed a collaborative Master’s thesis project at the University at Buffalo, which transformed a decaying house into his year-long off-the-grid home, using only found materials. Focusing on areas of blight, depopulation, and economic tension, he uses waste as the common denominator to bridge social and financial gaps. Currently, his work with Flint Public Art Project involves transforming the long-vacant Spencer’s Mortuary into a cooperative art space and model for material reuse.