

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

'Everything Can Always be Something Else': Adhocism and J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island*

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Abstract:

Robert Maitland – J.G. Ballard's main character in his 1974 novel *Concrete Island* (Ballard 1994) – fashions an improvised crutch from an old exhaust pipe, offering him some respite from his injured leg. The novel contains a range of similar tactical survival measures, including the use of a car's windscreen washer bottle as drinking water. This paper explores such practical approaches employed by Maitland on the urban 'island'. It situates his use of pre-existing objects within a wider socio-cultural currency developing at this time in the early 1970s: ad hoc material practices. I specifically examine the confluences between the theme of survival on the island and the turn toward adhocist architectural and design practices identified in Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver's 1972 book *Adhocism: The Case For Improvisation* (Jencks and Silver 2013). The paper locates both books within a moment of critique towards the *tabula rasa* of high modernity, as well as growing assertions of the right to personal freedom through consumer empowerment. Ultimately the paper develops the thesis that the detritus of technological advancement offers potentially creative approaches to the use of seemingly redundant everyday material things.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard; *Concrete Island*; Adhocism; ad hoc design; desert island literature; material culture.

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Introduction

Maitland reached up and began to shake the pipe with his hands. He wrenched it from the bracket and pulled the six-foot section of rusty tubing from behind the rear axle. His strong arms bent one end into a crude handle. (Ballard 1994: 32)

Robert Maitland is a 35-year-old architect who, through excess speed and bravado, finds himself marooned on a man-made island after crashing through one of the temporary barriers used as part of the highway's construction. Significantly, the power of the book lies in the urban context of the island's situation: it is not part of a distant archipelago where geographical isolation is central to the character's psychological breakdown. Rather, *Concrete Island's* ([1974] 1994) key premise (alongside Ballard's other novels of this period, *Crash* ([1973] 2008a) and *High-Rise* ([1975] 2006b) is that isolation and psychological trauma are created by the urban realm. But before such trauma manifests itself, Maitland's initial activities are centred around the immediate need for food and shelter. An exhaust pipe from one of the abandoned cars on the island, transformed into the makeshift crutch, becomes his trusted companion during his incarceration. Later in the novel he is assisted by, but also tormented by, two others who find themselves in this inter-zone: Jane Sheppard, a social drop-out and Proctor, a tramp who is under the control of Sheppard.

For the premise of this paper Maitland's actions also demonstrate a valuable example of the transformative potential of material things: their openness to becoming something else. Although the exhaust pipe came into being through its design and manufacture as part of the assemblage of an automobile, all things possess other functions. This is one of the key assertions that this paper draws from *Concrete Island*. The manipulation of the exhaust pipe is just one of many instances of Maitland's improvised engagement with the material detritus populating the sliver of land that forms the novel's setting. The book itself is a proxy for Ballard's diverse intellectual interests: it is populated with a multiplicity of potential readings. On the one hand it offers a critique of urban planning and the levelling of historic neighbourhoods in favour of 'progressive' infrastructural development. Equally we are also privy to the unfolding frailty of Maitland's psyche (Stephenson 1991: 75). And, in keeping with much desert island literature, Ballard's island is also a metaphor of selfhood and the construction of identity through the presence or non-presence of the Other (Deleuze 1990: 301-1). Such readings demonstrate Ballard's adeptness in eliciting a range of prescient cross-disciplinary discussions that resonate to this day.

The specific focus of this paper is the ad hoc practices that Maitland develops in order to survive his initial internment on the island. My intention is to posit a link between his use of things that are immediately to hand on the island and the wider discussion of ad hoc practices in Charles Jencks' and Nathan Silver's book *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (2013), originally published two years before *Concrete Island* in 1972. Both books offer a counterpoint to the utopian zeal of the arch-modernist, and echo wider strains of disquiet at this point in the early 1970s, including in the work of Ivan

Illich (1973). They argue for a closer relationship with the things that surround us, and a detailed acknowledgement of the inherent potential of the material world. They also advocate a greater sense of individual empowerment, where individuals actively create their material environment.

'Mechanical death-rattle': The Tarnished Sheen of the Modern

In a 2006 article published some thirty years after *Concrete Island*, Ballard spoke – at times almost wistfully – of the way the project of modernism had lost its way, discarding the promise of its early phase in favour of a sanitised authoritarianism where 'human beings were some kind of disease' (Ballard 2006a: n.p.). For Ballard, interwar modernism was the last great utopian project, and one that appeared, at least, to offer a genuine rupture with pre-Enlightenment sensibilities. As is now well established and well-rehearsed, such forms of disenchantment with the apparent irrationalism of the pre-modern period were made manifest through material edifices of architecture, design and material culture. Most notably a key aspect was the relationship between the social and moral values of 'cleanliness, health, hygiene, sunlight, fresh air and openness' (Overy 2007: 9) and the aesthetic qualities of materials and surfaces: lack of ornamentation, minimal decoration, and new materials and finishes such as tubular steel, white walls, and of course concrete (see Forty 2012; Parnell 2015: 371). The reasons for the aesthetic revolution of modernism are complex. The destructive force elicited by World War I, coupled with the development of sanatoriums in the late nineteenth century (see Menin and Samuel 2003) suggest that the combined rupture of historical 'progress' and progressive approaches to health and wellbeing necessitated a fundamental shift in societal values and their expression in architecture, design and the built environment.

In the North American context, the designer Walter Teague, in his book *Design This Day* (1940), explored these rational, ordered approaches to social and cultural organisation. For Teague, 'light, cleanliness, order, healthful conditions are already the accepted objectives of intelligent industrial planning' (212). The suggestion is that the *tabula rasa* of rational planning would elicit a stronger social body. Central to the logic of industrial planning was the ability to enforce new forms of social organisation through the design of brand new systems, processes and goods. Hence the aesthetic parallels to the social order of mass industrialisation came with the sweep of the American freeway through the landscape (Easterling 1999), a fact clearly demonstrated by the context of the new driving experiences associated with the motorway in *Concrete Island* (Groes 2012: 127). It is also evident in the monumentality of civil engineering projects, and the sleek smoothness of streamlined design in the guise of Ford's and General Motors' experiments in automobile styling. These are admittedly still quite alluring images: it is clear in Ballard's work more broadly that he had a penchant for the allure of modern architecture and design, going as far as stating: 'I have always admired modernism and wish the whole of London could be rebuilt in the style of Michael Manser's brilliant Heathrow Hilton' (Ballard 2006a: n.p.). This building, constructed in 1991, possesses many features associated with high modernism, and particularly those of Richard Meier's work, including new advances in materials technology, spatial and organisational

efficiency, and a large, light-filled atrium. For Ballard the allure of such a building appears to be its purity of form and clarity of expression. However, he is also acutely aware of the failure of such gleaming structures, further noting:

I know that most people, myself included, find it difficult to be clear-eyed at all times and rise to the demands of a pure and unadorned geometry. Architecture supplies us with camouflage, and I regret that no one could fall in love inside the Heathrow Hilton. (Ballard 2006a: n.p)

This statement will be familiar to scholars of Ballard as it resonates with the complex renderings of the modern environment and the modern subject seen across much of his *oeuvre*. For Sebastian Groes, Ballard's work more generally 'is an attempt to understand the ways in which contemporary social relationships are mediated and distorted by new forms of urban space at a highly specific moment in the post-war period' (2012: 124). Instead of the sanitised imagery of modern infrastructural design Ballard unearths the buried uncertainties of these utopian projects, the latent presence of the pre-modern sensibility. He trains our eye on the irrationality, mystery and illusion of modernity's enlightenment dream. This is particularly evident in the role of concrete as a material form in *Concrete Island* (as well the reference to Brutalist concrete architecture in *High-Rise*). For David Pringle (1979: 26), concrete was the preeminent symbol in Ballard's fiction at this moment. And as Parnell (2015: 372) notes, although concrete was seen as the quintessential modern architectural material, 'by the early 1970s, [it] was being defined more by dystopian than utopian narratives in the public consciousness'. Parnell positions these narratives within the work of Kubrick's 1971 film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*, as well as Ballard's work at this time in the early-to-mid 1970s.

Ballard scholars such as Luckhurst (1997: 134) also note how *Concrete Island* was 'the shadowy double of *Crash*', the suggestion being that both novels critiqued the systems of modernity, including large scale infrastructural and technological mechanisms such as automobility.¹ Luckhurst goes on to argue that *Concrete Island* was a refutation of the 'ideal society' (137), but at the same time it was also a critique of seemingly naïve attempts to withdraw into a Thoreauvian idyll, something that Luckhurst terms 'a useless sovereignty' (137). Herein lies the power of Ballard's ideas: rather than a binary separation of modernity and its antithetical Other he deliberately creates a zone of tension. Such spaces of social friction continued in Ballard's later writings, including the architectural counter-Eden of *Super-Cannes* ([2006] 2014), which bears a striking affinity with the Heathrow Hilton, as well as the erotic fetishisation of chrome in *Crash*. Alongside the pristine gleam of a car's chromium window pillar Ballard hears the 'mechanical death rattle' of technology (Ballard 1994: 8). Although Ballard's entropic sensibility does occasionally veer towards a dualistic materiality (chrome and rust; concrete's material degradation), the overarching sensibility of *Concrete Island* is a critique of the one-dimensional nature of modernity's technological promise. Instead of Teague's visionary programme where 'drudgery and mere-burden bearing will have disappeared: [where] machines will do all the work of beasts, [and] men will do the work that only rational animals can do' (Teague 1940: 212), the determinist social logic of such ideas is

refuted by Ballard. His is a multilayered rendering of technology: he sees the 'rusting doors leaning open' (Ballard 1994: 10); the blackened wiring of a car's distributor; the surface gleam of the 'white heat of technology' tarnished – smeared with that which was apparently eliminated. Rather than the *tabula rasa* of Teague's modernism, the palimpsest of disregarded technology, architecture and the built environment is central to *Concrete Island*.

Below the grass [Maitland] could identify the outlines of building foundations, the ground-plans of Edwardian terraced houses. He passed the entrance to a World War II air-raid shelter, half buried by the earth and gravel brought in to fill the motorway embankments. (Ballard 1994: 38)

Ballard takes the entropic character of materials further still. Akin to the reality of weather-stained modern architecture (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993), *Concrete Island* is populated by rust, by the forlorn sight of abandoned cars, discarded tyres, and empty cans (Ballard 1994: 39). In the introduction to the novel he states: 'Modern technology [...] offers an endless field-day to any deviant strains in our personalities' (Ballard 1994: 5). It is not as Teague and the other disciples of the modern envisaged: the bureaucratic delineation of the new order through design did not create the clean, polished lustre of progress. The dissolution of the technological modern is particularly prevalent in *Crash* where the violence of speed is fetishised, becoming its own erotic excess. An echo of this violent expulsion of energetic force is also there in *Concrete Island* as Maitland's Jaguar hurtles through the makeshift barrier destroying the pristine quality of the new freeway (Luckhurst 1997: 134). These examples of modernity's entropic, rusty dissolution – its fall into the realm of the irrational – are critical to Ballard's wider project at this period in his writings. What *Concrete Island* in particular also demonstrates is how Ballard was attuned to the buried potential of everyday, material objects. Just as he argued for the possibilities that the intersections of motorways produce (Ballard 2001: 33), his rendering of the material culture of *Concrete Island* counters the functionalism that was seemingly inherent to the project of modernity. Instead Ballard identifies a counter-tendency attuned to the histories and geographies of desert island literature.

Surviving the *Urban Island*

Maitland fashions his crutch from the exhaust pipe protruding from one of the abandoned cars on the island. He casts a canny – perhaps architectural² – eye over the material detritus, recognising the transformative potential inherent in the exhaust pipe. Seeing beyond the singularity of use, Maitland demonstrates a different sensibility that recognises plural instrumentalities: one of course driven by the need for survival, but equally one that is attuned to the material voice of things, a voice that speaks many tongues. Use to Maitland is not fixed. His survival is dependent upon the surpluses of modernity (Scanlan 2005), and on the appropriation of post-industrial salvage to come (Lutz 1989: 187). As a palimpsest the island is awash with waste, a combination of the products of the modern industrial era and the abandoned lives of those now departed

from the ruined Edwardian houses and air raid shelters (see Murray 2014: 91). For William Viney, writing of the role of waste in Ballard's work more generally, 'what is considered rubbish finds itself similarly reconfigured, as radical new ecologies of consumption and rejection are tried and tested' (Viney 2007: n.p). Viney offers a valuable point regarding the creative forms of consumption that the use of waste entails (also see Viney 2014). For Maitland the rusted exhaust pipe is no longer the material edifice of the combustion engine; through its size and form it has a latent, alternative use-value that his quest for survival unearths.

Concrete Island is populated with numerous instances where Maitland utilises the discarded remnants of modernity in his attempt to come to terms with the island as a disorderly space of incarceration (cf. Zhang, Spicer and Hancock 2008). Notably, Maitland's abandoned vehicle – his Jaguar XJ6 – offers a valuable resource. In keeping with the protocols of desert island literature, his immediate survival necessitates the search for food and water. But rather than the natural resources that an island would traditionally extend – a fresh water spring for example – Maitland finds water in the mechanical confines of the Jaguar's engine bay. Just as the earth is an active supply of material presences, so the discarded objects of the technological society themselves afford new opportunities. And in this sense it speaks again to the histories of desert island literature: the ecosystem of the island is both danger and promise. As noted in the introduction to this article, where Ballard's island differs is in the geographical location of the island itself. For Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe's protagonist in the eponymous novel ([1719] 1992), the quest for survival stems from the utter isolation of the oceanic island, whereas for Maitland his incarceration on the urban island is ever more troubling because of its sheer proximity to the normality of everyday life.³ He continually attempts to signal to the passing vehicles on the motorway, at one stage producing a message to drivers: 'HELP INJURED DRIVER CALL POLICE' (Ballard 1994: 62). The closeness to the motorway and the drivers is further emphasised in this section of the book, when Maitland finds a discarded parcel of fish and chips, with only the chips remaining. Although not referred to in the book, there is an almost palpable sense that this foodstuff is still warm: such is Maitland's closeness to other people going about their daily lives. The sight of a driver's eyes or warm food adds further exasperation for Maitland. However, in contrast to other desert island literatures, Maitland does not need to cultivate his own foodstuff. By contrast, Michel Tournier's Robinson develops a profound knowledge of the island's resources, from the sowing of sorrel, turnips and other vegetables, through to the digging of fresh and salt-water ponds for the breeding of fish (Tournier 1997: 62).

Ballard's use of the *urban* island is clearly central to his critique of both desert island literature more broadly, and the psychological isolation of the modern industrial and post-industrial eras. Crucially, existential separation does not come solely from geographical distance, Ballard's implication being that a more profound and disturbing sense of isolation is present in the nascent age of consumer culture in the postwar period. This is evident when comparing Tournier's description of Robinson's resourcefulness in cultivating crops and his intensive labour with Maitland's relative ease of access. Where Tournier's Robinson embarks on the cultivation of foodstuffs due to their scarcity on the

isolated island, Ballard appears to suggest that Maitland's alienation and general malaise comes from the growing abundance of consumer goods at this time (including the bottles of Burgundy in the boot of his Jaguar). *Concrete Island* comes at the critical juncture where the scarcity of resources in the immediate post-war period was changing and leading into the era of mass consumerism, post-industrialisation and the loss of traditional manufacturing skill-bases, as well as the growing distance between the production of goods (be they foodstuffs or not) and their consumption. Further still – and specifically for the purposes of this paper – the urban context of the island is critically important in relation to Ballard's positioning of the detritus of the consumer society. Where Defoe's use of the shipwreck as the bearer of potential offers somewhat limited resources (guns, wood, foodstuff), in *Concrete Island* the island itself is the shipwreck, offering a plethora of man-made and resources. It is the warehouse of Maitland's survival, albeit a store of consumer society's waste.

Rather than advancing a straightforward critique of modernity, consumer society and the impact of urban infrastructural development, then, Ballard points to a range of man-made potentialities amidst the apparently beleaguered life of the urban island. As noted above, rather than attempting to find water from natural sources Maitland looks to the Jaguar's radiator. Displaying knowledge of the vehicle itself he considers where water might be amongst his own car and those others in the breaker's yard:

The radiator. Slamming down the lid of the trunk, Maitland picked up his crutch and swung himself to the front of the car. He edged himself under the fender, with his bruised hands searched among the brake lines and suspension units for the lower edge of the radiator. He found the stop-cock and forced the tap, cupping the liquid that jetted out. (Ballard 1994: 33)

This proves futile, for unlike the purity of the fresh water spring on a desert island this is an urban island with its own man-made consequences: 'Glycol! He spat away the bitter fluid and stared at the green stain on his palm. The sharp tang of rusty water made his throat ache' (Ballard 1994: 33). He may differ from Robinson in his lack of agricultural resourcefulness but instead Maitland displays a knowledge base in keeping with the context of the post-war period of mass produced goods. He knows the workings of the Jaguar and the other cars on the island. He can cultivate them instead.

His continued search for water is rewarded through a further form of practical knowledge and application. Maitland jams the bonnet from one of the wrecked cars into the open windscreen of the crashed Jaguar, thus producing a channel for rainwater (Ballard 1994: 46). This he directs into the windscreen washer bottle water, ultimately providing him with a two-day supply of drinking water. Not only this, the bourgeois trappings of his lifestyle afford a makeshift first aid kit. His overnight bag, an accompaniment to his extra marital affair, provides him with a towel which he then cuts into strips before soaking in aftershave: these become the bandages used to cleanse his injured hand (44-45). Critically, then, his survival depends on the discarded material culture of the island: the rusting car body parts and the dented fenders.

Beyond the immediate necessity for survival and first aid, Maitland's growing presence on the island continues to echo many of the themes and motifs of desert island literature through his need for shelter:

Maitland sat back in the rear seat, watching the rain hit the window glass three inches from his face. He stared passively at the storm, grateful that he had even the minimal shelter of this crashed car. (Ballard 1994: 45)

Once again the Jaguar is full of potential. Further still, as with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the construction of a dwelling is critical to Maitland's rationalisation and growing control of his place on the island. The material fecundity and potentiality of the island is central to this. Proctor builds Maitland a 'pavilion of rust':

Two hours later, Maitland lay back in the small shack, a pavilion of rust, which Proctor had built around him out of the discarded sections of car bodies. A semi-circle of doors formed the sides, tied together by their window pillars. Above, two hoods completed a primitive roof. (Ballard 1994: 162)

Later, in his attempt to set the car on fire to act as a beacon, Maitland recognises the capacity the car holds within its material assembly: 'The car was *alive* with electrical points' (Ballard 1994: 51-52, my emphasis).

Survival. Dwelling. Maitland's mixture of fulfilling basic needs and the partially symbolic nature of dwelling as homemaking demonstrate the complexity of his interactions with the numerous material artefacts of the island. In his interrogation of how things can be put to use beyond their immediate or assumed function, Maitland's actions resonate with the literature on the potentiality of things more broadly, or as noted above, their 'aliveness'. Maitland's crutch, fashioned from the exhaust pipe of the car, is a valuable way in which to consider the liveliness of things (Bennett 2010). The discarded things on the island cannot be separated from the geography of the urban site itself: the plethora of potentially useful things on the island draws our attention to how things have specific geographies and vice versa (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004; Tolia-Kelly 2011). Whilst Maitland's knowledge of the inner workings of a car enables him to seek out and find a source of drinking water, there is a further aspect to this that speaks to the quotation already noted above, emphasising the life of the car. The car itself provides the means for Maitland to light a beacon. So rather than simply recognising the potential of the car's flammability or the ability of the exhaust pipe to become a crutch, we might consider this focus on becoming a little differently: the exhaust pipe *contains* the potential crutch.

Gilles Deleuze, in his discussion of Tournier's *Friday*, deals with precisely this point when he writes of 'the preexistence of objects yet to come' (1990: 305). For Deleuze, we recognise the potentialities and virtualities in things, and their ability to be actualised, to become actual, albeit in ways that contain their virtuality. Inhering in the exhaust pipe is the crutch, but Maitland has to realise and release the potential crutch. To argue this is to recognise the relational ontology of subject and object. Moreover, the example of the

exhaust pipe is instructive because it highlights how things, whilst perceivably stable, are always undergoing change (Bergson 2002), be it through an entropic unfolding, or more potently in this case through Maitland's manipulation of matter and the spatial contexts in which matter unfolds. To see this in relational terms is to overcome the privileging of the subject over the object and vice versa, and to see things as inherently open to change, albeit whilst maintaining their semblance of stability (Tonkinwise 2005). The agency of *things* is critical here, for it speaks to Ballard's wider project of exploring the interzones of the social realm. Just as the neglected spaces of urban and suburban life for Ballard are alive with possibilities, as are the crashed carcasses of automobiles in *Crash*, the suggestion in *Concrete Island* is that the abandoned objects of modernity and the embryonic consumer society are also active forces in the unfolding entanglements of the posthuman social.

Waste, detritus, abandoned Edwardian houses and rusting cars are far from benign or spent forces. For Ballard they continue to hold potential as they build up an anticipatory palimpsest of future uses. The crashed car offers a further form of communicative capacity. The blackened wires that hang from the distributor cap in the engine bay are recognised by Maitland as potential writing implements (Ballard 1994: 61). In their charred state they become something other: a charcoal-like tool with which Maitland believes he can communicate to the outside world. Although his effort ultimately fails when the message is washed away by the rain, it is the potentiality inherent in the blackened distributor leads that is an important facet of this sub-narrative. For above all, Maitland's survival on the urban island is in part predicated on his recognition of the potential of the man-made realm. The important role of mass-produced things is of course a reflection of the period in which Ballard was writing *Concrete Island*, particularly when compared with Defoe in the early eighteenth century. It is also a reflection of Ballard's interest in the industrial products of this time in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the sweep of the new motorways through central London, or the styling and engineering of contemporary automobiles such as Maitland's XJ6.⁴ However, in contrast to the previous section's discussions of the grand design gestures of industrial planning that modernity promoted, Ballard also signals a move away from top-down design principles. For Maitland's actions on the island, his manipulation and reconfiguration of existing things, is a refutation of high modernism. Instead, it speaks to longer traditions of architecture, design and making that often approached specific problems through a localised method, driven by the resources to hand and the immediacy of need.

Ad Hoc Material Practices

To replace the *given* by the *created* is a universal problem, and most *especially* a human problem if it be true that what sets man apart from the animals is his need to supply by his own efforts those things which Nature bestows gratuitously on the beasts of the field – clothing, weapons, daily nourishment. Alone on my island I could sink to the level of the animals by creating nothing (Tournier 1997: 111, emphasis in original).

Within the context of Tournier's *Friday* this statement is profound: it highlights the growing tension between Robinson's inner state and the need for the companionship of others (see Deleuze 1990: 305). Applied to *Concrete Island* the quotation also elicits an important facet of Maitland's practical knowledge of the island's detritus. To create – to 'supply by his own effort' – is to be human. Although this is decidedly anthropocentric in tone, and questionable in terms of creativity being a solely human trait (see von Uexküll [1934] 1957), Tournier nonetheless offers a way to consider Maitland's actions on the island in the wider context of the relational entanglements between things, humans and spatiality. In particular, the role of creativity as a form of self-empowerment draws out a direct relationship between *Concrete Island* and other socio-cultural critiques of the structures of bureaucratic societies at this period in the twentieth century, but particularly the early 1970s as I discuss in this final section. Many of these critiques advanced a reformulation of how everyday practices were inscribed within ritualised engagements with material things. A common thread tying together these critiques was the moment of politico-economic change from modernity into what we now know as the postmodern, an aspect that continues to reverberate with contemporary social practices.

Whilst Maitland's engagements with the objects that populate the island speak to the fundamental demands of need, they also resonate with a wider reconfiguration of material practices in the twentieth century. In the face of the hegemony of centrally planned design strategies during the middle of the twentieth century, there developed a variety of social experiments that questioned the bureaucratic timbre of modern industrial planning. One early example of this was the 'make-do-and-mend' movement from the 1920s and 30s (Hackney 2006). This was particularly associated with domestic handicraft and adaptive practices, where DIY-based forms of labour offered cheaper alternatives to the consumption of new products. Practically speaking, 'make-do-and-mend' emphasised the value in reconfiguring and transforming already-existing artefacts in the home (35). Although later forms of DIY practices have become part of an established lifestyle industry (Atkinson 2006: 4-5) early manifestations such as 'make-do-and-mend' were the result of economic and social necessity: literally making do with what was to hand. 'Making do' may be one way of conceptualising Maitland's use of an exhaust pipe or a windscreen washer bottle, but more pointedly still, Ballard's allusion to the value of extant things in aiding Maitland's survival on the island echoes that of a book published in 1972, just two years prior to *Concrete Island*.

Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation, written by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, is a biting book. Like *Concrete Island* and Ballard's own later reflections, it challenged the pervasive homogeneity and failed promises of high modernism. It identified instead the long history of individual consumer creativity, particularly in relation to one's engagement with existing resources. Wresting away the notion of creativity from the centralised and standardised institutions of modern industrial society, Jencks and Silver argued that an adhocist approach foregrounded the localised immediacy of need. So, rather than deploy universal solutions to concrete problems by designers, architects, or planners, *Adhocism* advocated a method that was orientated towards the direct needs of the circumstance. For Jencks and Silver, the consumer was not passive in the face of

professional bureaucratic planning – rather, they were active participants in the material engagement *with* and constitution *of* the world. Clearly adhocism is part of the anthropological tradition associated with the *bricoleur* (Levi-Strauss 2004), where the fabrication of the material world from pre-existing things is an everyday activity, and necessity. Simply put, adhocism is ‘a method of creation relying particularly on resources which are already at hand’ (Jencks and Silver 2013: 9). As opposed to a privileged group of professional practitioners trained in the ability to shape our material world, the adhocist jettisons the need for the professional (Beegan and Atkinson 2008). In doing so she or he demonstrates a highly attuned knowledge and practical understanding of material objects, in much the same way as Maitland recognised the inherent potentiality of an exhaust pipe or the car’s engine bay. An adhocist possesses an intimate awareness of the material potentiality of everyday things.

Examples abound: plastic water containers fashioned into plant pots; the walls of dwellings constructed out of discarded packing cases; a cooking pot made out of a DuPont gas cylinder (Irace 2013: 24); a child’s go-cart built from old planks of wood and redundant pram wheels. Such familiar, everyday instances of adhocism attest to the way in which we intuitively reuse and reconfigure material goods for practical purposes. More pointedly, Jencks and Silver articulate how these acts of reformulation and transformation are both practical and political: ‘the standardised and monotonous product is shifted from the repressive meanings often given it by corporations’ (Jencks and Silver 2013: 68). In this light we can see how *Adhocism* and *Concrete Island* offer a critique of twentieth century bureaucratic culture, identified in particular with the standardisation of technology and its limiting principles. Direct allegiances between both books are also demonstrated by the wider literary geographies of the desert island: the cover flap of *Adhocism* goes so far as to locate adhocism within classic desert island literature: ‘Think Robinson Crusoe, making a raft and then a shelter from the wreck of his ship’ (Jencks and Silver 2013: front cover flap). Clearly the utilisation of resources that are to hand is central to the practical necessities of the classic and reconfigured desert island experience. *Adhocism* even offers the example of a 1954 emergency wireless radio designed for use on a desert island, its parts fashioned from ‘everyday components’ (120). Both this and the examples cited above, as well as Maitland’s own ad hoc material practices, reside at a specific level: that of ‘practical adhocism’ (110). In this guise adhocism operates primarily through need, and often this involves ‘an impromptu combination including ‘unnecessary’ ingredients’ (111). Practical adhocism is not the end in itself, but rather it is the means through which needs are fulfilled. The mundane technological forms at play in *Concrete Island*, such as the windscreen washer bottle, are simply vehicles or conduits towards need fulfilment. Thus practical adhocism is procedural in that it is concerned with the process through which the need is fulfilled. By contrast, ‘intentional adhocism’ (113) is aspirational; that is, it is determined by the end goal. In spatial and temporal terms, practical adhocism is of the moment and bounded by the localised geographical context; it is here and now.

Although its remit and function can of course extend beyond this, the critical facet of practical adhocism is the immediacy of need – even more so when the question of survival is taken into account. Its remit is fixed. Intentional adhocism is, by contrast,

open, its intentions and goals ambiguous. And there are different intensities of adhocism. Clearly Robert Maitland's engagement with the material culture of the island is practical adhocism in that it is primarily need-oriented. Where Jencks and Silver's adhocist is part of a wider social movement that challenges the 'conventional orthodoxies' (Jencks and Silver 2013: 23) of repressive bureaucratic formations, Maitland is ostensibly scrabbling around in the dirt searching for things he can use to survive.

Whilst the qualitative experience *of* and investment *in* the materiality of things is an important register of different adhocist tendencies in these books, there are also clear points of convergence. Both *Concrete Island* and *Adhocism* came at a time when the failed promise of advanced technologies was being recognised by a growing number of scholars, creative practitioners and social activists, many of whom advocated a different sensibility towards the material world. These critiques were part of a wider political turn towards forms of individual freedom and autonomy wrested from bureaucratic structures. The writings of Ivan Illich form an important intertext for both *Adhocism* and *Concrete Island*. In *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich (1973) called for a fundamental reformulation of how individuals engage with their environment, predominantly through their deployment of creativity. The 'tools' of industrial society were seen as repressive and limiting to the individual. In this regard *Tools for Conviviality* resonates with *Adhocism's* desire for the empowerment of the individual consumer over and above the specialist. For Illich, 'a convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others' (Illich 1973: 20). Like Illich's retooling, *Adhocism* advocates instead a 'displacement of habit' (Jencks and Silver 2013: 68). Where these books differ is in regard to the concrete manifestations of individual creative empowerment, with *Adhocism* offering numerous examples of displaced habits. Of particular importance to Jencks and Silver were social movements emerging from critical architectural and design practices such as the radical building experiments that formed Drop City, a commune started in Colorado in 1965 (Sadler 2006). Practically and politically Drop City is instructive: not only were the buildings formed of abandoned car bodies in the manner of Maitland's 'pavilion of rust', the ideological premise of utilising modernity's cast-offs was decisive, notably in relation to the growing environmental movement in the United States at this time (Kirk 2008). Steve Baer, one of the individuals closely involved with the construction of Drop City (Sadler 2006: 9), also published the *Dome Cookbook* (Baer 1968), a book that offered practical advice on the use of scrapped car parts to form the now-iconic makeshift dome dwellings of Drop City (see Jencks and Silver 2013: 167). Echoing a similar 'open source' philosophy as the *Whole Earth Catalog* (whose key period was 1968-72) the *Cookbook's* instructional nature is a critical facet. In doing so it followed earlier examples of the DIY ethos such as the 'make-do-and-mend' movement, which also relied upon an attendant instructional and information-providing network provided by magazine and other literature (Hackney 2006). The emergence of democratic design at this point in the late 1960s-early 1970s is also testified to by the likes of the Italian designer Enzo Mari's project Autoprogettazione, originally conceived in 1971. The catalogue for the project he produced in 1974 provided consumers with designs, diagrams and instructions for them to produce their own furniture out of off-cuts of timber and other discarded materials,

thus encouraging the consumer to 'look at present production with a critical eye' (Mari 2008: front cover flap). In a less didactic manner *Adhocism* also fosters a sense of how our engagement with things can be driven by forms of creative consumption, as opposed to hierarchically and centrally controlled patterns of traditional top down producer-consumer relations. Whilst inflected with a somewhat transcendental mantra, the adhocist sensibility reframes the consumer as an active producer of the material world: 'By realising his [sic] immediate needs, by combining ad hoc parts, the individual creates, sustains and transcends himself' (Jencks and Silver 2013: 15).

Concrete Island differs in many ways from these other publications and socio-cultural practices of the period: Maitland is not producing furniture or dwelling as a form of critical design, architectural practice, or creative consumption. Like Robinson (both Defoe's and Tournier's), his engagement with the discarded waste of the island is purely needs-based. The objects and assemblages that he fashions serve an immediate purpose rather than entering into the canon of twentieth century cultural critique. Likewise, the instructions, guidelines and information provided by *Dome Cookbook* and *Autoprogettazione?* establish a different dynamic between the designer and the consumer. Maitland does not have the privilege of an instruction manual on how to find water on the island or create shelter, although he does display important forms of practical knowledge in identifying the potential sources of water in the car (possibly due to his training as an architect). Ballard's project does, however, reside in close proximity to these other examples in a profound manner. Notably, Maitland's quest to survive through his ad hoc constructions trains our contemporary as well as historical eye on the inherent value of things: even things we ostensibly see as waste or rubbish. And here the critical acumen of Ballard's book is telling. For in its identification of waste as the excess of a nascent consumer capitalism *Concrete Island* proceeds beyond the aims of *Adhocism*: it offers a greater sense of capitalism's *entropic* character, its dissolution into waste. The materiality of the adhocist projects in Jencks and Silver's book is aligned to a primarily aestheticised approach, where the material juxtapositions they promote stem from the creative combination of differing artefacts. By contrast, Ballard's approach – highlighted by his use of the palimpsest as a key trope – offers a greater sense of the invisible relations that go into the life-world of the island's detritus. As the hidden histories of the island are revealed through his descriptions of the Edwardian houses and air-raid shelter, as well as the 'mounds of truck tyres, empty cans, [and] broken office furniture' (Ballard 1994: 39), Ballard begins to expose the invisible relations of production that are often disguised in the context of the consumer society. Whilst Maitland fulfils the role of the 'creative' consumer in his ad hoc material practices, the overwhelming presence of detritus on the island also foregrounds the fact that all of these discards of capitalism were produced somewhere, and by someone.

Conclusions

Folding together these two works from 1972 and 1974 allows us to consider from a contemporary vantage point the legacies of a body of thought that was part of a growing critique of advanced consumer capitalism. With the reissue of an expanded and updated

edition of *Adhocism* alongside the fortieth anniversary of *Concrete Island's* publication, the timeliness of reflecting on this moment in the 1970s is ever clearer. Although their importance in the early 1970s was notable, their remit is still active and still current. As present debates on the anthropocene highlight (Whitehead 2014), the impact of humans on the earth is profound: both books fed, and continue to feed, into such debates. Equally the expanded version of *Adhocism* locates its original arguments within a genealogy that reaches forward to the present: Jencks and Silver's contention in the original edition was that, although centralised technological platforms were limiting for the consumer, there was the potential for a radical consumer democracy where individual consumers may design their own products and have them manufactured (2013: 64). Even as many of these potentially empowering technologies (cybernetic production lines, computer-based informational power) have been developed, the freedom that such technologies would supposedly create has not materialised in the way they envisaged. However, their version of the empowered consumer (or 'prosumer' (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010)) fashioning their own goods may be a little closer, notably in relation to advanced production technologies such as additive manufacturing and 3D printing. By contrast, *Concrete Island* does not offer us the same potential dream of the technologically primed consumer. Ballard's vision is decidedly more dystopian than Jencks and Silver's, highlighted by his focus on the waste, the debris of capitalism. In so doing the differences between the cultural-historical account of *Adhocism* and the fictive potential of *Concrete Island* are exposed. Where the former requires an updated foreword and afterword to locate the contemporaneous importance of the book, the novel affords an almost trans-historical perspective through the openness of interpretation: an openness to change that resonates with the broader themes of the potentiality of things to become something else.

To summarise, this paper considered how Maitland's survival on the island is dependent on the throwaway culture of twentieth century consumer society. The ad hoc material practices that he employs offer an important counterpoint to the *tabula rasa* of high modernity. Like the palimpsest of urban change and renewal, things have their own palimpsests: 'everything can always be something else' (Jencks and Silver 2013: 27). Equally, *Adhocism* encourages a profound displacement of habit: perhaps not quite so dramatically as Maitland's internment on the island, but in a way that makes us look afresh at the material world. In doing so, the paper also suggested that both books resonate with wider socio-cultural changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s across a variety of registers, many of which advocated a greater sense of personal freedom through material creativity. This aspect was also dealt with in relation to Maitland's creative endeavours, with the argument that his encounters with the discarded items on the island display a certain form of practical and creative knowledge of consumer goods. Whilst this differed from the protagonists of other classic pieces of desert island literature such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Friday*, whose protagonists often cultivate natural resources, one of the key arguments here is that Ballard is highlighting both the urban context of Maitland's internment and the historical moment of the embryonic consumer society. Maitland's ad hoc engagements with the throwaway culture of the island also resonate with the wider body of scholarship on material geographies and the relational

entanglements between subject and object, as well as the key argument that all things contain the potential to become other things. Above all, then, both *Concrete Island* and *Adhocism* – albeit through differing modalities – foreground the need to consider the active entanglement between things and their use; they propel us into engaging with the inherent openness of things. They draw our attention to the monotony of meaning typically given to objects, and more positively the ‘flood of new possibilities [that] enter the world’ every time we encounter things (43).

Notes

¹ For further discussion of automobility in relation to Ballard's work, see Jarrad Keyes's (2016) contribution to this special issue.

² For a more detailed account of the relationship between *Concrete Island* and the architectural, see Richard Brown's (2016) contribution to this special issue.

³ In his autobiography *Miracles of Life* Ballard (2008b) notes that Robinson Crusoe was one of his favourite books as a child. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

⁴ Joe Day, in the foreword to the 2009 edition of Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* notes how Ballard along with Banham shared an interest in new transportation and infrastructural technologies (Day 2009: xxvi). Interestingly, Day also notes the importance of Charles Jencks' writings on the new geographies of cities such as Los Angeles, a position forged perhaps by the fact that Jencks was Banham's PhD student at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London (xxiii).

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