

Sous la pave, la plage?

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Now we are firmly into the academic recess when summer is upon us, I recently decided to build a large patio in my garden with the help of some friends after being put off by the price a local builder was asking. Hiring a cement mixer, kango and compacter, we set to work demolishing tons of broken concrete, earth, and brick, then lug it by hand through my modest London terraced house where we loaded it all into a skip outside. The plan was to replace the old patio with a lorry load of new paving and cobbles which I ordered from a local builders merchant – a task that could only be completed by hauling it all back through the house and into the garden.

Originally estimated as a three-day job, though ending up as five twelve-hour days of total work, what I had anticipated as an arduous task ended with some pleasant surprises. On day two, after digging down through layers of concrete, sand and dirt, we were amazed to find some Victorian ironmongery, York stone and other architectural salvage. Amongst the rubble, my garden had been hiding an old Victorian fireplace – broken into several pieces though with paint intact – a fireplace poker, the tip rusted away but with a neat decorative design at the handle, and some sizeable chunks of York stone which previous owners had poured concrete onto.

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As a form of archaeology of the recent past, this discovery in the garden made me wonder not only of what lay under our urban gardens, paths, and roads, but also made me think of the thriving trade in architectural salvage in the UK. On many street corners in London, traders are selling anything from brass doorknobs, four-panel doors, brass light fittings or red quarry tiles. I have even heard that because of the price fetched by old London stock, people now scavenge the banks of the River Thames at low tide searching for building materials for re-sale or use.

Given my emerging fascination with the material culture underneath my garden, I wonder if any readers knew of any studies in this area or indeed, on architectural salvage? Has anyone read, *Moving Rooms: the Trade in Architectural Salvages* by John Harris (Yale University Press) – it was recently reviewed in *Museum Practice* (Summer 2008: 42, 68-9).

Those of you more interested in building patios, a word of warning... now I see why builders charge so much....