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Memory, Perception & Intuition

Elizabeth Shotton

If we set ourselves to see as things the intervals between them, the appearance of the world would be just as strikingly altered as is that of a puzzle at the moment when I pick out ‘the rabbit’ or ‘the hunter’. There would not be simply the same elements differently related, the same sensations differently associated, the same text charged with a different sense, the same matter in another form, but in truth another world.


The truest form of memory, according to Pierre Nora, is history, which gathers up and organizes traces of the past to secure an over-arching ideology on which to establish a common identity [Nora, 9]. This is an officially sanctioned version of memory, or collective memory, which has been described by Nora as history-memory. This form of history stands in contrast to what Nora has described as the need to celebrate and enshrine ever smaller pieces of our world in historical text, which speaks to the “loss of a single explanatory principle [which] has promoted every object – even the most humble, the most improbable, the most inaccessible – to the dignity of a historical mystery” [17]. Thus it is no surprise that on the heels of the apparent loss of this seminal form of historical enterprise, Nora suggests that: “We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left” [7]. Though much quoted in the sociological and philosophical debates on memory [Olick & Robbins, 120-121], and beguiling as it is, it deserves to be questioned in light of current psychological research on the nature of memory, which can clarify how this phenomenon may be related to the practice of architecture.

Although history is not memory, it is yet contributory to its formation, in all its various guises. As Connerton has argued, history, being a form of collectively shared knowledge, albeit partial and biased, can influence an individual’s memory, and with it their perception of their own identity and the identity of the communities to which they belong, an affect he describes as the “historically tutored memory” [1989, 16]. Hence the importance of traditional forms of history as supported by Nora, which have acted to shore up the imagined communities of nation-states, whose continued relevance now seems uncertain in the face of globalized markets and the increasing mobility of people world-wide. However, as Connerton

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2 Ibid., 17
3 Ibid., 7
suggests, history influences not only our perception of our community and our place within it, but our understanding of the built environment as well. History, then, has the potential to influence our understanding of architecture, yet the themes taken up by history very often neglect the more material aspects of place, favouring instead to highlight the cultural, political or economic forces that shape societies and their cities [see Carroll-Burke].

This predisposition is perpetuated by the form of evidence used to underpin these narratives, much of it documentary, salvaged and preserved for just such use [Ricoeur 1988, 117]. Yet traces within the physical environment bear witness to past action as well, a theme not lost on archaeologists or anthropologists. Thus, material based histories, though they may appear humble and improbable in Nora’s view as they will, by necessity, be burdened with a complex intimacy, nevertheless may aid in explicating, as well as influencing, the relationship between memory, perception and architecture.

As the activity of history becomes more specific, in an opposite but related trend conservation practice has become increasingly broad and all-encompassing. Conservation has extended beyond the monument to the site, and beyond sites to increasingly larger areas of both cities and rural landscapes. This tendency may likewise be a reflection of the uncertainty of a future identity and of the nature of the collective. As Otero-Pailos has suggested, heritage designation and the conservation efforts associated with it are undertaken in the service of future history, not past history, with the salvaged resources used for potential narratives. Thus, conservation efforts, often alluded to as sustaining collective memory, are simply a form of history-making writ large in the use of building stones and landscapes as traces, in lieu of the documentary trail of the historian proper. Though Nora suggests that the rationale for the enshrining of these “lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, [is] because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory” the truth may be less extreme. Real environments, which are affiliated to direct experience and thus to the formation of personal memory, will persist as long as humanity continues to interact with the physical world which surrounds them. What may be true is that these milieux de mémoire are localized and isolated from one another, leading to an increasingly unstable sense of identity for the larger community represented by the nation-state. Conservation efforts serve another purpose, however, in the salvage of works of architecture that exhibit specific skills and practices of making, and it is here that it may play its most significant role. Cultural understandings of architecture and place are fickle, and will mutate and fray until they are unrecognizable. But the constructive

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practice and materials used within an artefact are akin to a form of textbook, a short history of technology written in stone. This is not memory, but it is a form of knowledge that can also influence perception, as Ingold has described: “In the passage of human generations, each one contributes to the knowledgableness of the next not by handing down a corpus of disembodied, context-free information, but by setting up, through their activities, the environmental contexts within which successors develop their own embodied skills of perception and action”.

So if the monuments, the buildings and the areas of “special conservation status” that are carefully preserved do not harbour memories, but rather act as repositories of knowledge, material for use in future narratives, or, most critically, frameworks for perceptual experience, what then of the link between architecture and memory? Rossi has argued that monuments exist in part because of their endurance and, as Otero-Pailos argues, endurance allows the building, place or object to be experienced on repeated occasions, which is the only means by which memory is developed within the individual, to be shared across the collective. Thus architecture participates in memory formation in the individual only by virtue of its relative stability. Does it then stand to reason that when a building or space is altered beyond all recognition, that memory is lost, because the monument failed to endure? Rossi may well argue for this position with reference to urban artefacts, which appear to resemble something closer to Nora’s lieux de mémoire, being iconographic elements in the city landscape which have been used to construct an over arching “image” of the city. But, as Halbwachs suggested, when the physical environment that forms the locus for a community is destroyed, space is rendered anew, perhaps elsewhere, to accommodate these memories, insinuating that it is not within the form itself that memories lie suspended; rather the mnemonic potential of architecture, that is the ability to sponsor recall of ideas, feelings or experiences, lies in the eye and mind of the observer.

As Lavenne et al. have suggested, the fluidity between individuals, groups and their environments is critical to understand, as: “we perceive our past in light of the present: as we change, as we belong to new groups or occupy new positions in the group to which we belong … the way we perceive the world changes, elements we had never perceived seem to emerge”. Thus, equal in importance to the endurance of the artefact is its relationship to the

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13 Op. cit., Otero-Pailos, 249


activities of individuals and groups. Rather than a condition of stasis, as implied by the conservation agenda, could the role of architecture in enabling the identity and structure of the social group be better served by a process less intent on safeguarding historical events and more responsive to present conditions? Otero-Pailos has argued that the endurance of the artefact is wholly artificial and requires continuous financial investment; otherwise, places “are constantly transformed to accommodate the changing requirements of our lives”.16 Perhaps a more studied and articulate form of managing change in the physical environment would better enable the fluidity of social groups and their attendant memories. As Lowenthal has suggested: “heritage is better stewarded when seen as part of life rather than standing outside of life, eternal, permanent, and remote. We need to see our heritage as an ever-changing array of evanescent buildings and new creations”.17 The considered stewardship of building resources, on social, technological and environmental grounds, could liberate the profession from the anomalous claims of collective memory and serve to underpin a more promising strategy for the evaluation and reuse of buildings or sites. Equally, such an approach could cultivate a regard for the future, and the built context upon which our successors will hone their own skills of perception and action.

Casting aside ideas of the embodiment of memory in history and architecture liberates us to recognize their function as containers of knowledge, and to understand more precisely the role they play in shaping, rather than sustaining, memory. The initial structuring of memory at the hands of society, through the agency of history and by engagement with the environmental context, has consequences in forming our perceptual horizon, thus attuning our sensibilities and predispositions. According to Schwartz, it appears that the brain structure is strongly influenced by the manner in which a person interacts with the environment,18 and this neural structure will, in turn, influence what will be attended to in the future. In contrast to the more explicit form of autobiographical memory, this underlying structure is understood by psychologists as implicit memory, which, despite being largely unconscious, influences both thought and behaviour.19 As Toth has illustrated: “neither awareness of a prior event nor an attempt to remember that event is a necessary condition for prior experience to exert a significant influence on performance”.20 Toth’s conclusions bear considerable similarity to Merleau-Ponty’s definition of perception, that it “is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out,

16 Op. cit., Otero-Pailos, 253
20 Ibid., 247
and is presupposed by them”. This suggests that the two disciplines may be describing the same phenomenon under the aegis of different labels, thus implicit memory as described by Toth can be understood as subsumed within a phenomenology of perception. Based on Gibson’s understanding of perception as being an exploratory and interactive process, Ingold postulates that “if perception is a mode of action, then what we perceive must be a direct function of how we act. Depending on the kind of activity in which we are engaged, we will be attuned to picking up particular kinds of information”. Thus, though there may be no memory embedded in architecture, it will nevertheless influence memory through the agency of experience, developing our perceptual horizon, which, in turn, effects the manner in which the environment is attended to and acted upon.

Ingold’s thesis, in tandem with the work of Schwartz and Toth, suggests that the types of information attended to in the process of design are therefore related to one’s experience. Given the complexity of the design process, these patterns in attention, which serve to privilege certain types of information over others, will inevitably influence the form of the artefact. Thus the training, formal or informal, of an architect “enables him to discern, and continually to respond to, those subtle variations in the environment whose detection is essential to the accomplishment of on-going activity”. If there is a critical link between memory and architecture, it may be here: the manner in which an architect is trained will inform their perceptual awareness through the agency of implicit memory, which, as Toth has argued, influences behaviour, is context-bound and goal-oriented. This is a form of memory that architecture may actually suffer at the hands of, if it is ill-developed, as there are many forces in the world which give shape to the environment, which we may fail to see if our perceptual awareness has not been structured to attend to such information. Though it is equally true that without this implicit memory, the vast resource of knowledge acquired over the course of lengthy careers and lives could not be summoned in the form of intuition to fuel imagination. There is a need then to both work within the power of this implicit memory, as well as to more actively contribute to its formation in an effort to work beyond its potential limitations; to become, as Ingold suggests, “continually and fluently responsive to perturbations of the perceived environment”.25

Rossi’s use of analogy as an apparatus for analysis in The Architecture of the City was described by Eisenman as a “process [which] displaces the specifics of time and place in the

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23 Ibid., 147
24 Op. cit., Toth, 255
city for another reality, a psychological one based on memory”. Rossi’s work, and Eisenman’s interpretation, served to inspire designers to attempt the impracticable task of enmeshing memory into architectural form in a manner that was somehow imagined to be legible to others. It is uncertain whether or not the practice of architecture has finally surfaced from this preoccupation, though the intensification of conservation efforts suggests that concerns regarding collective memory continue to plague the profession and society. In light of Rossi’s role in this contemporary fascination, his article “An Analogical Architecture” a decade later is revealing since it becomes clear that the memory he was alluding to was not a collective version but rather his own, referring to the sources he drew upon for inspiration as “something between memory and an inventory”. As to analogy, Rossi quotes from a letter from Jung to Freud to explain his meaning, which is well worth reproducing:

I have explained that ‘logical’ thought is what is expressed in words directed to the outside world in the form of discourse. “Analogical” thought is sensed yet unreal, imagined yet silent; it is not a discourse but rather a mediation on themes of the past, an interior monologue. Logical thought is ‘thinking in words’. Analogical thought is archaic, unexpressed, and practically inexpressible in words.

This description from Jung is compelling for the similarities “analogical” thought appears to have for with implicit memory, or perhaps intuition. All are difficult, if not impossible, to express yet nonetheless are present and compelling. It may be that the “analogical” thinking of Rossi’s thesis is none other than the implicit memory which underpins and tempers perception and action.

Our faculties for logic and reason are actively developed in most fields of study and is certainly part of the process of acquiring skill. Yet skill is not merely knowledge-based but depends also on our perceptual awareness, developed through engagement with the world on more than simply an intellectual level because it involves the entirety of one’s body. To be attentive and responsive in a fluent manner, one must recognize that every engagement with the world sensitizes one’s perceptual system to be attentive in very particular ways. If, as Schwartz suggests, the active restructuring of the brain is possible throughout the course of one’s life, perhaps we can train ourselves to attend to the world in a more comprehensive and considered manner, to see, in truth, another world.

26 Op. cit., Rossi, 8
28 Ibid., Jung, as quoted by Rossi, 59