ARCHITECTURE AND MEMORY: REFERENCES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION: A SCENE TO REMEMBER

The scene takes place in a park that looks more like a desolate lot, where many houses stood side by side, stretching out for a couple blocks. The land looks flat and fresh, silenced by the void that substitutes human voices that once moved around. Some trees stand in the middle, unaware of an unclear future.

The lot is fenced in, protecting nobody or nothing, but the empty property. This description could picture many of the scenes that we daily come across in urban landscape, if it were not for the striking central element in the photograph: that which seems to be the remains of a three-story house. In the Fall of 1993, on the corner of Grove and Roman Roads in East London, England, Rachel Whiteread created a temporary urban art work titled HouseS that has more than three stories; it informs a great deal about memory and architecture.

(slide of the site with work: House, 1993)

Whiteread filled in with concrete and plaster one of the terraced houses that once stood on the lot. The original walls were removed, but their intimate inner surfaces were imprinted on the hardened concrete. No more houses on the block, only a concrete block that looks like the negative image of a residence. Though, more than a negative film still to be developed, the concrete block seems to present the real picture: the picture of space, captured in its void, then become full. The solidified picture captured the absence in its matter, the infinite things and actions that were and were not in that place, like the Alef described by Borges, or the immaterial found in the meaning of things.

(slides of the work: House, 1993)

Less than four months later, the concrete block was torn down, after much controversy, and passionate responses to the reception of the work, sometimes very insightfully, other times very disturbingly. The House and the solid negative picture of a home are gone but the memory of its controversy still resonates.

(slide of the empty site: House, 1993)

ARCHITECTURE AND MEMORY IN THE CONDITION OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE.

To think about memory raises important questions for the making, understanding, and teaching of architecture, because memory has become an important issue concerning time and space in contemporary culture. Nevertheless, specific literature sources about the relationship between architecture and memory
are not largely available, reminding us of how relevant the subject is and that it is still to be explored. Memory relates to many different issues, inviting us to consider it from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Contemporary thought challenges the boundaries of traditional disciplines which limit and reduce the understanding of complex situations.

Architecture alone does not contain the answers to the questions about space and memory. Some enlightenment can be found in the context of cultural, philosophical and historical approaches. This paper focuses on two issues that concern architecture and memory: on the one hand, the production of space as a field of action to which both social and economic forces converge, and on the other hand, architectural thought and practice, with project / design as a questioning action. Both approaches are important references to the debate of architecture as a cultural representation, in which architects have a fundamental critical role.

According to the philosopher Henri Lefebvre, the notion of representation is more than the idea of reflexion. It implies and explains a language, which can be useful to understand the dynamic logic of architecture. For the cultural historians Marc Bloch and Pierre Bourdieu, representations go beyond isolated facts and economical issues, they are part of political and institutional actions of different social groups.

The exploration of memory in contemporary thought and culture fosters the discussion about history, time, cultural heritage and values, as a means to advance in the critique of modernity. To understand the relationship between architecture and memory in the context of cultural representations means to consider the production of space and of collective memory (both materially and immaterially), and to deny the notion of linear chronological time.

In the field of social practices, there seems to be a growing need to compensate the depersonalized homogeneity of mass consumption and the instabilities of the present time with the feedback of images of the past. Wendy Wheeler comments that postmodern nostalgia is defined as the return of Modernism’s repressed affective desire for communal identifications, in search for the non-alienation of individuals. David Harvey describes the conflict of cultural yearning as a defensive response to the new burst of the globalization of capital and to a accelerated phase of time-space compression.

Ironically, the economic practices have quickly absorbed this desire, taking memory as a thing and transforming it into a commodity. This action traps the longing for memory, and imposes a new homogeneous need for images, that contradictorily devalues and erases spontaneous and resistant social habits and practices. Architecture is one of many cultural representations, which has more directly dealt with the question of memory in the last few decades, discontented by the tabula rasa of modernist paradigms, instigated by the palimpsest of urban development and struggling with the presence and composition of forms of a ‘certain’ past.

Architecture is in a privileged situation, but at the same time at great
risk, because it associates thought and practice, with all the ambiguities and contradictions of the confrontation between critical thought and a powerful production for consumption. In architecture one has to be careful, because the need for nostalgia can be problematical. As Doreen Massey comments about the impact of Whiteread's House, memory can be politically mobilizing, but it can also respond to reactionary claims, excluding social groups and erasing other memories and identifications. One of the greatest risks about the built space is to consider memory as something inherent to objects of the past, as a fixed fact, and not as a constituting element of space that informs us about the present and what is to come.

Memory is in time, but time cannot be understood as a line, like a river in the classical Greek metaphor. Memory is in past, present and future, because they co-exist in time. Memory takes place in space, but it is not isolated in things, contained a priori in architectural forms and elements. It is in the experience of things and space. Memory is a value that represents relationships and needs, and therefore constitutes an important element in the production (and why not say the consumption and the destruction?) of space. Memory is related to a temporal sense and a spatial sense, but also to a temporal-spatial sense that is socially constructed by individuals in order to live their lives.

Memory tells about things and people in time and space, about what existed and also about conflicts, tensions, plans, desires, about what was and about what could have been.

ARCHITECTURE, THE CRISIS OF MEMORY, AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Architecture has historically represented the features and reinforced the identity of different social groups and cultural situations. Memory witnesses the practices of economical, political and social forces that can be read in time and space, and it has a critical condition in Western society. The crisis of memory -- as the crisis of historicity -- has two different and complementary moments: in modernity, and in post-modernity (as it is more usually named) or supermodernity (the term used by Marc Augé).

According to the analysis of modernity by Walter Benjamin, 'with the eruption of commodity economy, we start[ed] to realise the monuments of bourgeois as ruins.' His commentator Susan Buck-Morss, points out that already in the 1820's 'the arcades initiated a cult of commodities that gave material expression to the promise of happiness for the urban masses, a social utopia to be delivered by means of the new industrial power.' For Benjamin, the arcades were the "original temple of commodity capitalism", and the industrial metropolis became a 'landscape of techno-aesthetics', noting that in modern times 'experience had fallen in value' replaced by the increasing temptation of the possession of objects, and reinforced one century later, according to Marie-Christine Boyer, by 'the proliferation of information whose quantitative ascendance was
matched step by step with its qualitative decline . Benjamin was interested in the relationship between the devaluation of experience and the loss of memory.

In his analysis of the industrial system, work was isolated from experience, and memory was replaced by the controlled process of production, where “practice count[ed] for nothing”. According to Susan Buck-Morss, this phenomenon implied that “perception became experience only when it connected with sense-memories of the past, [and for the] ‘protective eye’ that warded off impressions, there was no daydreaming surrender to faraway things”. The “protective eye sees too much, [bombarded with fragmentary impressions,] and registers nothing.” “The city [in Benjamin’s thought] once offered pleasurable streets and phantasmagorical visions... but as the familiar patterns of experience declined throughout the nineteenth century, the modern metropolis met the spectator’s gaze with shock experiences.”

Therefore, the loss of memory, empowered by the devaluation of experience, could only be “resuscitated synthetically... in frozen city landscapes where memory had fallen sleep, lulled by the comfort of ‘once upon a time’.” (24-25) With the new “phantasmagorical forms” that organized the human perceptive landscapes, reality became a kind of anaesthesia. Aesthetic reception shifted from being in reality to blocking out reality, substituting the lived world by images of “past experiencing” that demobilized the human power to respond socially and politically. This transformation was crucial to the manipulation of memory as a thing and to the limitation of social practice in the production and representation of space. Susan Buck-Morss notes that Walter Benjamin’s purpose in the Passagen-werk [the Arcades] was political. His goal was not to represent the dream phantasmagoria, but to dispel it.

Benjamin wanted to present the past history of the collective as Proust has presented his personal one: not ‘life as it was’, nor even life remembered, but life as it has been “forgotten.” He claimed for a daydream as the critical awakening of modern society to its own fundamental problems, which has not yet necessarily happened. (99) The contemporary situation can be considered the continuation of this permanent state of sleep. According to Fredric Jameson, the transition between modernity and postmodernity showed a great transformation in the relationship between space and time. The transformation from the experience and expression of space-time into forms of discourse (“writings”) effaced the existential time and the mourning for deep memory and spatialized the temporal, leaving up in the air what is historically original, and at the same time posing questions to architecture. Despite the initial critical commitment of post-functionalist architecture with the improvement of cities as a social space, the economic and political climate was not favourable for urban reform, with clear unfoldings to the way architecture played (and plays) a role in the production of space and memory. Susan Buck-Morss comments that “style has become eclectic, a
melange of neo-, post-, and retroforms that deny responsibility for present history. They produce the dream-image, but reject the dream. In contemporary capitalist society, the appropriation of architectural elements and historical buildings, and the use of image as a simulacrum go beyond the meaning and the identity of socio-cultural manifestations. These contemporary economic practices contradict and throw away the social sense of belonging and the human need for local, communal space-time identifications. Late capitalist society takes advantage of the proliferation of simulacra to model the world, broadcasting specific fixed meanings through the action of an economy of signs and spaces, and of specific politics of representation.

Memory is therefore trapped by the rhetoric of these politics, which determine its own fictional constructs. Meaning in this logic is not produced in the relationship between needs and values of different social groups, neither according to transforming identities, nor to collective actions. The meaning of memory corresponds to a pre-established and controlled order of values that can be manipulated by the convinience of political and economical interests, far from individual narratives, from the right to a discourse of space and to the plural construction of culture and society.

This kind of procedure responds to a logic different from the social practice, and is related to the circuit of production, consumption and exhaustion of commodities, affecting the production of space, and specifically in our case the relationship between architecture and memory. The criteria of permanence and the destiny of architectural and urban elements and situations are primarily guided by the accommodation of dominant economical and political practices. Some buildings stay, some buildings are torn down mainly according to the intricate interests, mechanisms and games of investments, and not to collective, social and historical significance. A new rhetoric is constructed to justify these actions, which chrystalizes and gentrifies architectural and urban spaces in a kind of present view of the past with no future.

A very striking phenomenon has been happening in the last few decades. The recognition of old or historical urban areas as a new field for investment, has turned the eyes of developers and politicians toward the transformation of some well structured but problematic and empoverished neighborhoods into the new and pristine image of their cities. This phenomenon can be seen in any of the corners of this compressed and globalized world. The casinos in central Detroit, the renewal of the historical center of Sao Paulo, the Beaubourg and the Marais in Paris, or the waterfront of Hong Kong are considerable examples, not to mention the molecular transformations in a smaller scale.

The similarities and differences among them tell more about the nature of investments than the existing social, historical and spatial situations in which they take place. Memory is affected by the understanding of the historical or, more simply, the "old" as a thing or
as a commodity, and it is destabilized by conflicting fictional constructs. On the one hand older buildings are converted into new architectural and urban uses, such as housing, cultural institutions and commercial organizations, generally serving wealth and excluding less represented groups with their narratives, memories and identity.

The fact of being an old building or urban area becomes an asset and its age may be more important than what it represents. On the other hand, the new buildings and the new urban areas (mainly suburban) reproduce the values through which capital imposes the rules of social space and representation, picturing the images in circulation, and producing simulacra of lived worlds. These practices interfere in the production of space and of architecture as a cultural representation. Architecture faces today the production of continuous social exclusion of unrepresented communities, for example from inner cities, slums and shanty towns. At the same time, architecture gives room to the creation of a phantasmagoria of Ersatz that haunts us instead of inviting us to daydream. None of them seems to be comforting.

The exclusion of certain populations constitutes a fabricated oblivion of difference. The Ersatz (artificialization) of space creates illusive images that can be seen from the citation of historical styles in post-functionalism architecture to the disneyfication of downtown areas transformed into theme parks, from shopping malls and corporate architecture, to the urban sprawl. Architecture and cities go under the pressure of the materialization of cinematographic landscapes to be perceived as images, protected as assets, but not lived as spaces that are socially represented in its complexity, leaving little room for the construction of genuine memories.

Memory and architecture are also commonly associated to monuments, museums and memorials, which are important elements for the interpretation of history, and for the construction of urban images. History is a projection, and it denotes the perspective through which certain cultural dominants organize their actions. Memorials and museums have become center pieces in contemporary urban renewal, and not rarely they are compromised by specific agendas. In the analysis of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example, Greig Crysel and Abidin Kusno examine the role played by the museum in the construction of public memory as national identity. The memorial lays out a “pedagogy of citizenship that is both an-historical and lacking in political agency.”

The building is turned to the inside, away from its immediate urban presence, and it offers all citizens a parade of “perpetual happy ending, differentiated from each other by [their] respective memories of unhappy pasts.” This is a case of how architecture and memory may serve specific agendas, supported by pre-given narratives. Monuments, museums and memorials have become part of an “industry of heritage culture” commented by Kevin Robins as the “attempt to construct or to respond to the felt need for protective illusions.”
The same happens to the approach to buildings of specific historical relevance, making works of preservation and restauration problematic and controversial. Ulpiano Menezes describes this phenomenon as the “cultural uses of Culture”, taking historico-cultural elements, documents, even buildings from their complex situation and inserting them inside a pre-conceived narrative. Heritage is taken as a particular reading (or more) of those social relations which constituted a particular space-time that is preserved and re-presented. This strategy leaves little space for the problematization of tradition and identity, and offers benefits mainly to political and economical agents. Going back to Whiteread’s work House, what happened was clearly the opposite, given the controversy caused by the “disruption of a specific social time-space”, according to the analysis of Doreen Massey. Memory and nostalgia were “difficult and dangerous things” in East London when the work was completed, questioning how to subvert what could have been in the neighborhood.

Differently from the comfortable approach of official heritage, the House is very provocative, creating an unsettling situation for that specific time-space, questioning memory, and claiming for public responses to tradition and identity.

This approach is relevant, because it suspends the current official practices and it considers memory and space as problems and not as reified commodities. It is a counterpoint to the abuses of historicism, and the proliferation of simulacra that have contributed to the creation of doubtful fantasies of memory in Western culture. Marie-Christine Boyer reminds us that, in the contemporary metropolis “memory is no more considered to be collective, in the sense that it is linked to the social and physical space of a people and related to the transmission of values and traditions.”

According to her comments on Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze “our memory crisis seems to be based on our need to establish counter-memories, resisting the dominant coding of images and representations and recovering differences that official memory has erased. If the purities of modern urban planning have left us face with displacement, disengagement, and disenchantment when it comes to the urban [and architectural] experience, if the visualization of multinational capitalism presents an array of oppositions..., then today’s memory crisis seems to rest on our need to interweave disjunctive and noncommensurable images to establish connections across the [spaces of the] city and reappropriate its utopian promise.” (29)

ARCHITECTURE, MEMORY AND THE CRISIS OF PROJECT

The crisis of paradigms in contemporary culture, which includes the crisis memory, raises important questions to the notion of project in architecture. Projects have historically represented the logic of predicting order,
under the influence of the Cartesian notion of space, the practice of objective
science and the idea of progress. Western thought has been dominated by Reason,
and it has carried out the process of disenchantment of the world initiated by
the Greek philosophy, with the passage from myth to science, from the
mysteries of the world to a world with no mysteries.

In the realm of urban and architectural Modernist space, Marie-Christine
Boyer explains that “the pure vision imposed by Modernist theories... destroyed any
relationship that might have existed between form and figure, or a
rational and subjective view. By erasing historical references and linguistic
allusions, the modernists constructed a disciplined [landscape] of pure form that
displaced memory and suppressed the tug of the fantastic. They relied too heavily on
the power of science to reduce perception to that which could be
conceptualized or visualized.”

In this same logic, rationalization compromises the aesthetics or the
experience of space and time in the contemporary world, while time is challenged by a
culture dominated by a spatial logic, and an aestheticized ideology of
production and consumption takes over. Postmodern nostalgia relates to the
return of the repressed which takes place, according to Wheeler, in the
form of those "other sides" left out from the dichotomies that have guaranteed
"Modernity's assertion of the dominance of unsullied Reason". The
recognition of this panorama claims for a redefinition of the role and of the activities
of contemporary architects and planners, by questioning the rupture between
objective and subjective views, and by reconsidering how we write and read
memory.

The identity of space and place, according to Roemer van Toorn, changes
under the continuous expansion of a new kind of modernity which is not born from
revolutionary impulses, but instead tip-toes into our daily life via the
backdoor of normality, disencouraging conflicts and critical impulses and
reinforcing the primacy of Reason.

The "normality" of this supermodern world creates a social loneliness more striking than the
flâneur's in Walter Benjamin. This is the loneliness
of a disenchanted, and decentered subject melted into the mob, different from
the lonely confrontation of a strolling subject in the mob. The public realm,
important for the constitution and questioning of memories, is no more
essentially public and there is a convenient general disbelief in the
permanent critique of society. The public realm has become the individualized and
hypnotizing aesthetic sublime of sameness that cooperates to the
reproduction of social unawareness and to the staging of ready-made memories.

Nevertheless, it is from inside this world of 'normality' that, according
to van Toorn, the critique has to emerge. He claims for responsibility, inviting
us to leave the safe autonomy of the profession, with its own protective
rhetoric against the impossibilities posed by the real world, which in the case of
architecture is supported by sophisticated formalist discourses. He calls
for 'getting hands dirty', avoiding the "trap of adulating simulation [and the
obsessive] nostalgia of historic [images]". Responsibility, within late
capitalism, that "relates the social world of the individual and that of collectivity" is necessary, even though the oppositions between public and private, and between reality and virtuality, have vanished.

For Gianni Vattimo, project has become problematic because of its affiliation to rationality. He discusses the state of project in the light of the contemporary cultural situation, and focuses on the phenomenological critique of Modernity according to Heidegger, Gadamer and Nietzsche as a way to understand post-modernity. He reinforces the importance of the ontological, and challenges the legitimation of Reason and universals in humanist aesthetics, by contraposing the notion of "strong thought", dominated by the primacy of Reason, with the notion of "weak thought", which reconsiders perception, imagination and ambiguity as part of an enlarged sensitivity.

In modernity, "existence is defined essentially in terms of projection activity and a drive towards the rationalization of reality by means of structures founded on thoughts and actions," characterizing the dominance of strong thought, and the abandonment of the transcendent condition of cultural phenomena. In post-modernity, Vattimo proposes that there is a rediscovey of the 'poetic'. He means that one needs "the sensitivity to the poetic, characterized by the impossibility, in a sense, of defining clear-cut boundaries between reality and imagination", because of the "wearing-away of the boundaries between real and unreal ... or, at the very last, the boundaries of the 'real'."

The loss of Being as foundation, or Sein as Grund, to use the Heideggerian terms, is related to the impossibility of speaking of a single-course history. In this sense, history is not the equivalent to the reality of the past. History, according to Gianni Vattimo, "rhetorical [and not rational] schemata", which means different interpretations in time. This situation challenges the notion of a dominant history, and confirms the debate proposed by the Ecole des Annales, which created the notion of micro-histories, re-inforcing the questions about memory, whose cultural "marks", including architecture, should relate more to the values of a place and of a society than to their isolated material elements.

The changes in the notion of history in the contemporary reality is challenged by two complementary conditions: the mediatization of historicity, that contributes to a diachronic perception of reality and the simultaneity of events, which refer to a 'reality of real time'. Our experience of reality has been impoverished, as Walter Benjamin described, and it has also become more mediated, according to Vattimo, by different images diffused via technical means. In this process, the destruction of the aura of the work of art is continuously reinforced, and it is no longer related to an open meaning, but to a fixed inherent content. This is where fiction becomes a constituting element that destabilizes the construction of reality according to a 'strong', rational thought. For the latter philosopher, today's rationality has no longer an internal normative character. There are "rules of games in force", and the issues from the past and from other cultures that "come to life in the world of simulacrum." (152)
After these conditions, Gianni Vattimo comments that projects (‘projections’) have become more complex and less definite. He considers that the ‘strong’ criteria of aesthetic value, which means, the criteria of beauty, ‘beautiful building’ or ‘good project’ with their historically enrooted taste are still based on the Hegelian notion of Zeitgeist” (spirit of the time) and ‘Grund’ (foundation), which imply single and superlative points of “cultural and evolutionary development.” In this critique, the aesthetic criteria can only make sense through the abandonment of the notion of progress, and through the recognition of the “multiplicity” of modes of existence.

Vattimo claims that the Heideggerian berlieferung -- handing down, or heritage of memory -- and the co-existence of different discourses can be meaningful to the legitimation of the project. He points toward a critical identification between past and present and for the recognition that in architecture “one has to work in an intermediate zone between an enrootedness in a place [and time]... and an explicit consciousness of multiplicity,” where experience is considered as part of the meaning of space and time. This means to work toward the recognition of affirmative needs for a symbolic and representative dimension.

Therefore, architects should re-think their pretensions, and be aware of their role as ‘symbolic operators’. Architects, following Gianni Vattimo, can no longer be ‘deductive rationalists’, ‘gifted interpreters of a world-view and for humanity’, but “interpreters of communities” and their complex conditions. Aesthetic principles do not suffice as guidelines to architectural creation, and architects should try to respond more directly to the “cultural conditions of place and community.” For him, architecture should reconsider the project not as something that can simply be “put into action” or ‘applied straight away’ to a place, but as an activity that responds to the notion of a social contract.

It should contain an utopian view, but also create its own rhetoric and argumentation, regarding the cultural meanings and traditions “within the communities that significantly modify and redefine the activity of the contemporary architect and planner.” Architecture must understand memory as a constituting element of space as well as its rhetorical, imaterial condition. The recognition of memory as a critical element, could offer a form of resistance to the reification of space, and the fetishization of cultural heritage, avoiding the growing use of design as a camouflage to the global reality of production, according to SusanBuck-Morss, which provides commodities with national and corporate identities. Memory is problematical, and particular evocations of nostalgia must be evaluated individually, in their specificity.

Architects must recognize the tensions and ambiguities between micro socio-political and cultural movements and the dominant interests of contemporary society in order to interfere in space and time with a critical approach. In the making and thinking of architecture architects can read memory, incorporate it and interfere in it, but there is no guarantee that
design will create memory. This is the critical condition of memory in architecture. Only by approaching “risky spaces”, as debated by Mike Davis and Fredric Jameson, and touched by Rachel Whiteread, one can find the fissures for the location of resistance struggle, and for the problematization of space, time and society, therefore the problematization of memory.