

Memory and Simultaneity in Post-History

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Foreword

On a sunny winter morning, anticipating a cold, dry crispness in the air, I step outside into surprising warmth. I pause, mystified and comfortable, and consider the weather. I am reminded of a late snowfall in my youth. I remember, at my great aunt's house, waking up to the surprise of a fresh blanket of snow over everything, and after breakfast, coffee for the grown-ups in the front room, and my mother showed everyone: the pear tree, in full bloom, its blossoms curiously pink in the blanched landscape, and everything centered on it.

Mystery intensifies the experience of architecture by heightening the tension between appearance and reality; by making extraordinary the ordinary. Appearance and the reliability of one's continued expectations depend on memory. Mystery depends on reshaping memory by delivering the unexpected or withholding the delivery of the expected.

By formal and architectonic reference and by the anecdotal conveyance of personal recollection, the Wohnner House narrates a history, a mythology, a melange of fact and legend, rich and mysterious. It tells a tale of a culture's evolution.

A project to restore the original two rooms of a Greek Revival shotgun cottage (ca. 1840), to renovate a nondescript addition thereto (ca. 1920), and to undertake a new addition (1990) could be approached in a number of ways. The building's history of uses as, in sequence, a dental clinic, a

school office, a music studio, a residence, a beauty parlour, an art gallery, and a savings-and-loan office, and its proposed use as either a law office, a guest house, or both, suggests that preoccupations with program be moderated. The shotgun's ancestry comes from Africa, through the Carribean, to the Gulf Coast, and up the riverways. This example is

distinguished by its carefully crafted facade (exactly one hundred dentils adorn the cornice) imported from England via Italy and Ancient Greece. The building itself is on its third site, having been relocated twice. The goal, then, is to extend the meaningful life of the building as a cultural artifact.



An addition to this shotgun cottage might demure to its carefully crafted Greek Revival front as background. Alternatively, it might transform, enliven, and truly modify the original work of art.

*To you, to me,
Stonebenge and Chartes Cathedral,
the Acropolis, Blenheim, the Albert
Memorial
are works by the same Old Man
under different names: we know what
He did,
what, even, He thought He thought,
but we don't see why.
It's our turn now to puzzle the
unborn.*

W.H. Auden,
Thanksgiving for a Habitat,
1962¹

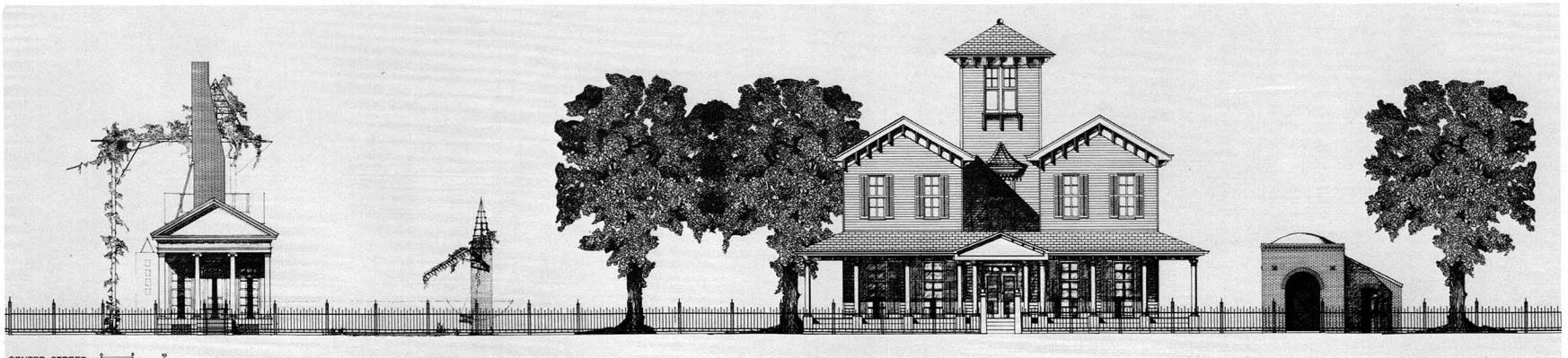
Memory

Memory is a process of time — time is a product of memory and consciousness. And, architecture, as a product of its time, is translated through memory. In this way the collective built environment provides interpretation restructured through the inveterate process of memory, time, and consciousness.

Our built environment establishes in memory an interconnectedness between experience and object.

In order to activate memory, a remodeled sense of the present is often required.

Until six years of age, I lived in an old frame home with double, french doors separating the foyer and sitting room. Thirty years later, I moved into a small shotgun apartment in another city that also contained double french doors between rooms. I could see those doors as



The Wohners House (shotgun), shown with the main house and one of its original outbuildings: simultaneity is evident.

I lay in bed. Late one evening, just before falling asleep and thinking of something completely removed from my childhood or those french doors, I suddenly had a vivid memory of the entire house of my early youth. Clearly, I could remember each room and the layout of the house. Through memory, I was walking through the home of my childhood, clearly seeing things that had been forgotten for years. To my utter surprise and with no deliberate effort, those french doors in the later home caused me to recall, with vividness, something I had consciously forgotten years before.

Artifacts connect us with the past. Recall is one way artifacts develop associational relationships. This phenomenon occurs on individual and cultural levels.

The artifacts that constitute our built environment gain significance as time pushes events beyond the realm of individual memory. As significant events pass beyond personal remembrance, their histories tend to become mythicized.

Recently in the downtown area, a modest brick cottage burned. Its design and ornamentation were of little significance architecturally — there were no meaningful historical events to which the house attached itself. Yet, local myth implied that it was perhaps the oldest structure left in the city. This fact alone caused the house to gain importance in the community. Consequently, its loss was more significant than the fact that a dwelling had

vanished. As artifacts pass into collective memory, they gain significance beyond their original importance. Longevity alone was primarily responsible for the sentimental valuation of this older building.

Cultural interpretation transformed into artifact is based on a particular temporal reference.

Each artifact is a product of the historical order which generates it. We remember our present built environment on an everyday basis, but, taken out of the context of its own time, would it be interpreted in the same way? Consider the probability of LeCorbusier designing the Villa Savoye at Poissy had he lived during the time of Louis XVI. Disregarding the tectonics available to both cultures, Corbusier's modernist work was the product of several hundred years of collective memory since the Renaissance. This process made possible the modern movement.

The memory of our collective past is continually reshaped by the present.

T.S. Eliot in his essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, pointed out:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; ... what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens

simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it ... Whoever has approved of this idea of order ... will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.²

In 1902 Joseph Conrad wrote his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, a story loosely based on his memory as a river boat pilot in the African Congo. The journey's destination was a colonial trading camp brutally run by the Mephistophelian protagonist, Mr. Kurtz. Two decades later T.S. Eliot wrote *The Hollow Men*. His epigraph to the poem "Mistah Kurtz — he dead" was a quote remembered from Conrad's novel. In referencing Conrad's work, Eliot implants a tone of disengagement from emotion, a primary theme of Eliot's work. Almost three-quarters of a century later Francis Ford Coppola borrowed liberally from Conrad for his screenplay *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola's character Colonel Kurtz, a disenchanting military commander, also disengaged from the emotion of his acts, sequestered in the dark jungles of Cambodia, spends his time reading and quoting aloud Eliot's *The Hollow Men*. Coppola remembers both Conrad and Eliot through his character Kurtz as Eliot remembers Conrad through his poem epigram. Knowing this, it would be difficult to now read *Heart of Darkness* without being influenced by the subsequent references. Memory is not only sustained but built upon to provide an extended importance to the original work. Remembering is not separated from the

influences of the present.

Similarly, architecture builds upon itself. Each generation of architects lends further importance to preceding artifacts by direct or indirect reference. Each reference leads to the current work memories inseparable from past works, but in each act is also a new discovery. As each generation interprets and reinterprets its history, it re-structures the past in a way that could only occur at that current moment in time.

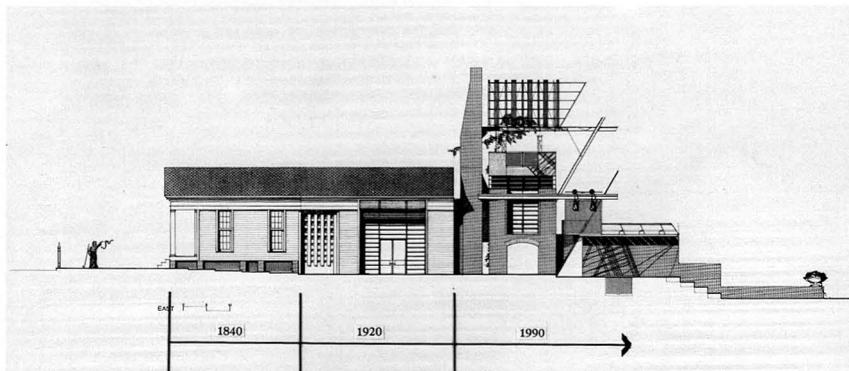
T.V. creates: a reality of non-construction disguised as construction; contextualism disguised as contextualism; collective memory delivered as entertainment.

But you were not listening, because you knew it all already, had learned, absorbed it already without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it, with it, as children will and do: so that what your father was saying did not tell you anything so much as it struck, word by word, the resonant strings of remembering.

William Faulkner
Absalom, Absalom!, 1936³

Contemporary society nurtures: contradictions of overlapping abstractions; pragmatic theories of tradition. Remembrance becomes a commodity offered to make us remember what we never knew.

Recently, I stopped to admire an old railway station in a small community



Two rooms restored; a volume remodeled; an addition created in our time, out of images grounded in memory — not sentimental but, ultimately, sympathetic. An apparent dichotomy becomes a dialogue and, eventually, a new entity: an artifact modified ... a new artifact.

located in northern Mississippi. It was an extremely humid summer evening; the sun was going down. As I was considering the turreted facade (abundant in late Victorian detail that so many stations of that era had) with portions of the masonry walls covered in English ivy and jasmine, I was caught off-guard as the building suddenly captured the ephemeral, amber light of sunset in just a certain way. For an instant, the whole structure seemed electrified and to momentarily vibrate like excited atoms set in motion. A similar occurrence on a similar evening at the same station, experienced just a few generations ago, could have neither been described nor perceived in exactly the same way. My personal memory, coupled with the technology that provided me the air-conditioned automobile (and made obsolescent the train that once made its daily departures from there); the four-lane expressway that allowed me to rapidly get from the city to this small town; and the television that educated me to the problems of segregation in that same community thirty years before, has shaped my perception of that experience quite differently with that of someone who might have visited that same station a lifetime before. My memory of that experience is forged in the unique present.

Society nurtures a culturally created artificiality — an acceptance of convention through disassociated remembrance.

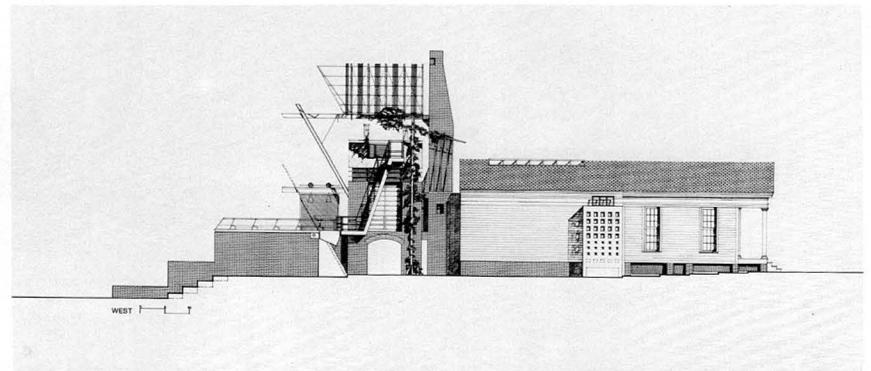
Every town in the South has its venerated Confederate cemetery. The events that

gave cause to those gravesites have become, over time, mythicized. As the past recedes, memorabilia is collected, battles re-enacted, heritages bantered about. Glimpses of that past are romanticized and trivialized in ways inconsistent with the documented reality of that historical experience.

The genteel antebellum culture, so thoroughly romanticized and fabricated of myth, stands in distinct contrast to the racial paradoxes, economic injustices, and reactionary tendencies ingrained within that regional culture. A collective past, which relies on myth and nostalgia, forges into it those disjunctive qualities which, ironically, deny a real understanding of the past. In this way the ever-present consciousness of the South's own past is self-consciously absorbed. This self-awareness makes the retrospective increasingly less like the original reality. The South's documented history becomes untranslatable to its present culture.

Simultaneity in Post History

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said, Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; ... I give it to you not that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to



Formal elements appear as voices: columns on the sunset porch quote an aedicula on the site; an overscaled masonry core rises like the chimney of a burnt farmhouse; disjunctive markets stitch the seams of the chronology; stasis accelerates to the dynamic.

conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to main his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.

The Sound and the Fury
William Faulkner, 1929⁴

Werner Heisenberg put forth his Uncertainty Principle in 1927. It places an absolute theoretical limit on the combined accuracy of simultaneous, related measurements. On the scale of elementary particles, the effect of the uncertainty principle is very important. Because of the uncertainties existing at this level, the submicroscopic world emerges as one of chaos, of statistical probabilities rather than measurable certainties. On the large scale of space and time, the principle results from the fact that any measurement requires an interaction between the measurer and the thing being measured. Such an interaction necessarily disturbs the thing measured, even if only slightly.

The uncertainty principle has been elevated by some thinkers to the status of a philosophical principle; the principle of indeterminacy, which has been taken to the limit of causality in general.

Coupled with this concept of statistical uncertainty is the importance of Einstein's relativity theory. Like all eminent ideas, these two contributions affect more than merely scientific thought. As principles, they offer a new frontier in our under-

standing of reality.

For example, measurements of time made by observers in different states of motion will not agree with one another, according to Einstein's special theory of relativity. Time is relative. Occurrences separated by distance may appear to be simultaneous to one stationary observer at his particular location. However, those same events will not appear simultaneous to another observer in motion at a different location.

Heisenberg's and Einstein's concepts abolish the idea of absolutism. In perceiving our physical world, absolute qualities are replaced by indeterminacy and relativity: space and time are inseparable.

These new concepts had an immediate impact on the arts. "Around 1910 Picasso and Braque, as the consequence of a new conception of space, exhibited the interiors and exteriors of objects simultaneously. In architecture Le Corbusier developed, on the same principle, the interpenetration of inner and outer space ... this interpenetration of space at large and space-particles could have further development only in an age whose science and art both perceived space as essentially many-sided and relational."⁵

These new concepts and their philosophical and technological spin-offs have modified our perceived environment drastically from that of just two or three generations ago. Mass-communication, particularly television, has created a

culture bombarded by information. Just as we finish watching a science-fiction fantasy, current events in Europe are brought instantly into our homes. Changing channels during a commercial, we hear briefly about developments in China that occurred just hours before. Events simultaneously occurring, beyond our ordinary reach, now affect our immediate world in ways we have never experienced before. We are no longer able to isolate local events in place or time. The simple knowledge that those simultaneous events occur modify our lives.

Prior to the printing press and its resultant part-literate society, personal memory played the major role in informing culture. This mnemonic process resulted in reinterpretation upon reinterpretation until history became indistinguishable from myth. Eventually, writing enabled history to supplant the mnemonic tradition. Memory and artifact began to give way to documentation as reservoirs and conveyors of cultural meaning.

Now, the far superior capacity and worldwide accessibility of the electronic media to transfer information has forced culturally significant artifacts to become even less consequential as conveyors of the cultural continuum — culture tends to rely less and less on artifact for its collective memory. Film, video, and television are so authentic and ubiquitous that they have replaced the need for memorialization that artifact and memory once provided.

Television makes life simultaneous in that you are bombarded with numerous images from the past, present, and future all at once.

Telefacsimile machines obliterate space by making distance inconsequential.

Computers remember for us now what we never had to remember in the past.

In an electronic age, all that properly moves is information. The massive overlay of antecedent and existent technologies takes on a peculiar character of simultaneity; in the electronic age. All technologies become simultaneous, and the new problem becomes one of relevance in stress and selection, rather than of commitment to any one.

Marshall McLuhan,
*Letter from Toronto, 1960*⁶

Until the advent of recent technologies (primarily motion picture and television), all art, architecture, painting, literature, etc. created its artifacts based on collective memory. In turn, this re-presentation of cultural identification (transformed into artifact) preformed as the primary means for educating and maintaining the cultural continuum.

As the electronic media replaced art's ability to act as this conduit for providing cultural identity, art began to question its own credibility. Art became aware of itself, self-conscious of its own history. Art became an object for itself. The conventional role of history that previously provided direction and cultivated interpretation was discarded, thus *post-history*.⁷ Art, for the first time, required internal development in order to achieve cultural understanding. Once this occurred, the making of art no longer was based on cultural memory.

Television represents an interpreted fragmented reconstruction of reality that provides a present space lodged between an untranslatable past and an indefinite future.

Remembering is never separated from interpretation and relative position in time.

The concepts of quantum mechanics and relativity altered the precepts of causality and absolutism. They are replaced by indeterminacy and simultaneity. A viewer sees things affected by his particular posi-

tion in time and space. This interaction between the artifact and the observer impacts the object in ways that modify the original artifact, even if only slightly.

What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

T.S. Eliot,
*Burnt Norton, 1936*⁸

In this age of electronic media, which would ostensibly inhibit mythicizing and romanticizing, we have the ability to recall the more recent past factually without the veil of passing time. The past has become the present.

Paradoxically, this documented past becomes less approachable. More elusive, this past cannot be directly confronted from the present. Lacking the rich elaboration of myth, the recent past must be modified, and for the past several decades the substitution has been contrived nostalgia.

If art has served its earlier purpose of representing and educating, then the role of memory in informing art may change. And if the electronic media has replaced our ability to re-present by mythicizing, then the role of memory in informing culture may change.

Each artist constructing an artifact brings his interpretation of the past to bear on what he makes. This interpretation may respond to contemporary human needs by translating the concerns of our technologically-dependent society into new metaphor. Each individual who experiences this artifact, in turn, draws on his personal emotions, intellect, and memory in interpreting the work. This process over time provides a cultural interpretation, what we call collective memory. As culture continues to confront its inability to interpret the present, of

necessity, memory may again adopt mythical or metaphysical qualities that translate our cultural accomplishments and ideals. Memory, though transformed through new media, will again play a necessary role in telegraphing our cultural essence to future generations.



Sources are infinite.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Selected Poems-New Edition*, W.H. Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson, p. 252, Vintage Books, New York, 1979.
2. T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, first published in the *Egoist*, 1919, from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, Third edition, p. 2199, W.W. Norton and Company, New York.
3. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 212-213, Vintage Books, New York, 1936.
4. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 93, Vintage Books, New York, 1929.
5. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, p. 510-511, fourth edition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965.
6. Marshall McLuhan, letter from Toronto, 1960, from *Community and Privacy*, p. 102, Doubleday & Company Inc., Garden City, New York, 1965.
7. For a thorough analysis of post-history refer to Manfredo Tafuri's *Theories and History of Architecture*, "Modern Architecture and the Eclipse of History," Harper & Row, New York, 1980.
8. T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets — Burnt Norton," from T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1965*, p. 117, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1971.