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The Memory Palace: Telling the Story of the Interior

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Introduction: The Architect's Dream

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Cole, Thomas *The Architect's Dream* (Corbis)

At his funeral, *The Architect's Dream* painted in 1840 by Thomas Cole, was described as his masterpiece: 'an assemblage of structures, Egyptian, Gothic, Grecian, Moorish, such as might present itself to the imagination of one who had fallen asleep after reading a work on the different styles of architecture.' [1]

And that is just what the painting depicts. A gothic cathedral partially obscures classical splendour and Roman magnificence is built on the foundation of Grecian reason. The glory that was Greece lies in the shadow of the Ur-Architecture of Egypt. A perspective in time has become a perspective in space, as the past recedes in an orderly fashion, style by style, from the parlour curtain of the present all the way back to the historical horizon of the Great Pyramid.

All the great buildings of the past have been resurrected in a monumental Day of Rapture. Everything has been made new, just as it was intended it to be: each building is a masterpiece, a work of art, a piece of frozen music, a monument, unspoiled by compromise, error, or disappointment. The architect, gazing at them all, knows that that this was what architecture was, and is, and should be.

History as the Architect's Dream

Cole's image still haunts architects: pick up any classic history of architecture, look at the pictures, and you will find yourself lost in a similar panorama of 'the different styles of architecture'. Sir Bannister Fletcher's *History of Architecture* (Fletcher 1945) or Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's *Outline of European Architecture* (Pevsner 1942), or any Taschen Monograph are all illustrated with crisp line drawings in which buildings seem as new and fresh as the day they were born, or photographs, in which blue skies, clear air, and an absence of people lend them the timeless quality of *The Architect's Dream*.

And it's not just the illustrations. These texts are litanies, in which masterpiece follows masterpiece, style is piled upon style, century onto century, from the Great Pyramid of Giza to its glass descendants in Paris or Vegas. Classic histories of architecture provide the reader (the architect, reclining in contemplation) with a canonic catalogue; and in order to do so, the great buildings of history are described as if as if history had never happened to them, however old they are.

It's a timeless vision because timeless is just we expect great architecture to be. Nearly a century ago, the Viennese architect Adolf Loos (Loos, 1977) observed that Architecture originates not, as one might expect, in the dwelling, but in the monument. The houses of our ancestors, which were contingent responses to their ever-shifting needs, have perished. Their tombs and temples, which were intended to endure for the eternity of death and the gods, remain. In *de re Aedificatoria*, Leone Battista Alberti (Alberti 1991) wrote that the delightful – the beautiful – is that to which nothing may be added, and from which nothing may be taken away. Le Corbusier (le Corbusier 1987, p.133) described Modern Architecture as 'the problem of fixing standards, in order to face the problem of perfection', that is, the problem of stasis and death. All architects hope that their buildings will become monuments to their genius, and for this reason they dare to hope that their buildings will last forever.

And it is for this reason that the history of architecture which, after all, is written by and for architects, is written as a catalogue of timeless masterpieces, arrayed in a great imagined city for the contemplation and the improvement of the architect himself, who reclines on his column, ruler of all he surveys. It is no coincidence that *The Architect's Dream* was painted in the very decade in which architecture was first elevated to the status of a proper profession: the Royal Institute of British Architects was established in 1833 and the American Institute of Architects in 1857.

The History of the Interior: Period Rooms

Go to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Geffrye, or the Musee Carnavalet in Paris, or the Met in New York, and you will find yourself parading through a suite of rooms from the medieval hovel to the modern loft apartment. In each of them, everything – the architecture, the linings, furnishings, even the knick-knacks, the flowers, and an implied occupation all share what has traditionally been called a 'period,' be it Louis XIV, Rococo, Regency, and so on.

It is the same with written histories of the interior, from *Interiors: the Home since 1700* (Parissien 2008), Steve Parissien's excellent document of domestic consumption from the 1700s, to the romantic musings of Mario Praz in *Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*, or Anne Massey's intelligent exposition of *Interior Design since 1900* (Massey 2008). All of them share a silent assumption: that interiors are works of art which, at or for a time, may be complete, that is, completely designed, and that the history of the interior is, therefore, the history of the completion of these works of art.

Such taxonomies of style, such narratives of progress, are ultimately derived from the vision of *The Architect's Dream*. In the introduction to his *History of Interior Design* written as late as 2000, John Pile justifies the use of architectural categories of style by the fact that interiors are contained by architecture.

It has ever been thus. *Homes Sweet Homes*, published in 1939 by the cartoonist and designer Osbert Lancaster is, despite its modest and humorous intentions, something of a classic of the history of interiors. It is a slim volume, each page of which contains a satirical cartoon of a particular period of English interior design. True to the narrative structure of traditional interior histories, architecture, linings, furnishings, and people all correspond to that period to the exclusion of all others. In one image Norman knights feast at a rustic table in a great hall whose round-headed windows echo their pudding-bowl haircuts. In another, the raised eyebrow of an eighteenth-century courtesan matches precisely the rocaille panelling of her boudoir as well as all of her furniture. The melting expression of an art nouveau beauty is so styled as to be indistinguishable from the decor that surrounds her.

(Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here): omit these figures

Imagining the Ephemeral: the Interior

(Insert Figure 4 about here)omit these figures

But Lancaster was well aware of the ironies of the position, for while interiors are generally contained by architecture, they are not exactly the same thing, and may not be so neatly slotted into a progressive narrative of history. His 'period' pieces of the twentieth century are anachronistically entitled: 'Vogue Regency,' 'Curzon Street Baroque,' and 'Stockbroker Tudor', and are as full of ersatz objects out of period with their stage-set-like decor as their titles might suggest.

In a paired set of images entitled 'reconstruction' Lancaster draws the same old lady sitting on a chair in what is evidently the same room. Nothing about the architectural disposition of the space has changed. However, everything else has. The room in the top image entitled 'ordinary cottage' is filled with knick-knacks, every surface is patterned, the window is swathed in upholstery, and the old lady warms her toes at a roaring fire. In the lower image that fire has been replaced with a ventilator, the window freed of its textile infestation, the surfaces cleared of ornament, and the space of bibelots.

(Insert Figure 6 about here) omit these figures

Both of these images were drawn at the same time, and were drawn of the same time for, as Lancaster was keen to point out, the 'ordinary cottage' was quite as much of the interior landscape of the mid-twentieth century as was its modernised counterpart, even though it was filled with the detritus of earlier periods, and was therefore not truly 'modern.'

Lancaster's drawings raise, and attempt to answer, a simple but important historical question. If the history of interiors is a story about the development of styles that respond to and express different periods, then how do the vanished interiors of the past ever leave traces behind them? How did medieval furniture survive through the Renaissance? How did all those Chippendale chairs and Georgian panelling outlive the hideous heights of the Victorian Gothic revival? Why and how was there an antiques craze in the 1980s? How, indeed, do we know about the history of interiors at all?

Firstly, the interiors we live in have always been ephemeral affairs. In the Middle Ages, aristocrats lived on the move, travelling from castle to castle as the whim took them. They would take their family, and their servants, and their clothes; but they would also take all their furniture. They even took their windows: the glass in them was so precious that, often, they could only afford one set. They would arrive at some fortress or other, the servants would get to work, and soon enough a bare stone shell would have been transformed into a rich and luxurious habitation. When the lord left, his interiors would disappear along with him.

We are the same. When we move, we fill our new homes with objects from the old one; we repaint or paper the walls; we might even knock them down. Then we lay the table, light the candles, and sit down to eat. We know that, soon enough, we will finish the meal, and wash up, and the flowers will wilt on the table. Others will replace us in the house, bringing their own possessions with them. They will repaint some walls, demolish some, and build others. One day the house will be gone; and the many interiors that passed through it will be remembered in nothing more than fragmentary clues.

They will end up, as they always do, in rooms like Osbert Lancaster's ironised, unmodern modern interiors, and in rooms like the one in which I am sitting: a room in an out-of-date building, populated with unfashionable furniture, and inherited artefacts to which I am too sentimentally attached to throw away. Such rooms – assemblages of elements collected from many times and places – evade the taxonomies of style and the linear narratives of traditional art history. Indeed, it is foolish, perhaps, to include them in the history of design at all.

Imagining the Ephemeral: Architecture

(Insert Figure 7 2, 3 about here)

Cole, Thomas *The Past and the Present* (Wikimedia commons)

Or it would be if one were able to omit the word 'history' from the history of architecture and design.

The Architect's Dream represented an historical scene of timeless canonical stasis; but Thomas Cole's other imaginings of architecture told quite a different story, and show that he

was as well aware of the contradictions of the dream as Lancaster was of the ironies of his period rooms. In his diptych *The Past and the Present* he painted the same castle, in one image at high noon, surrounded by jousting knights in shining armour, and in the other at evening, ruined and broken and covered in ivy. His cycle of paintings entitled *The Course of Empire* depicted the same valley in The Savage State, The Arcadian or Pastoral State, at The Consummation of Empire, at The Destruction of Empire, and in Desolation. In these five images, a virgin forest at dawn became a great city at noon. By dusk it is a broken heap of stones, whited under a watery moon.

In *The Course of Empire* and *The Past and the Present*, Thomas Cole paints as if he is well aware that *The Architect's Dream* was just a dream. Buildings are designed to last, and therefore they long outlive the people who designed and built them, the purposes for which they were built, the technologies by which they were constructed, and indeed the aesthetics that determined their form.

Paradoxically, it is the desire to make buildings last forever that ensures that they will not – at least, not in the form intended by their makers. Once the world that made them has passed away and they are liberated from the shackles of immediate utility, buildings enter an existence which is almost entirely unpredictable; and they start to change in ways that their makers could never have envisaged.

The history of art has traditionally been written as if artefacts, once made, do not, and should not, change. But change they do, and it is the responsibility of the historian to set them not in stasis, but in time.

History and Practice in the Built Environment

This is not a question of academic interest alone. As the following example will show, our thinking about time, and history, influences the ways in which we design and build our environments on the ground.

In 2002, a fire devastated a particularly critical corner of Edinburgh. 369 Cowgate was an important address for a number of reasons, not least among which was that it was also South Bridge: crammed into the corner between the medieval Cowgate and the eighteenth-century bridge which had been built across it some six stories above, the site was a labyrinth that had taken centuries of unforeseen consequences to evolve.

The Cowgate was, in the sixteenth century, the finest residential street in Edinburgh; but the construction of the bridge over it condemned it to darkness, social and architectural decline. In the middle of the twentieth century the last few slum dwellers on the Cowgate were expelled to new housing estates on the city periphery; and in their place, new constituencies emerged: students, artists and performers were not slow to take advantage of the cheap rents afforded by vacant property, and in their wake, the street was, and still is, filled with bars and clubs and dives.

369 Cowgate was also the home of the Gilded Balloon, one of the prime venues for the Edinburgh Fringe – the Belle Angele, the Kitchen, the Oyster Bar, 369 studios, and a flat, constructed illegally so deep inside the city block that no-one thought it would be found, the ruins of medieval houses, and the informatics department of Edinburgh University, which, in the 1980s was commissioned by President Reagan to work on the Star Wars project. The fire lasted three days, and destroyed everything.

The three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle posed by the two levels of the street proved a legal and administrative headache which the architect Malcolm Frazer stepped in to solve, initially; but his proposals for the site were superseded, after two years of wrangling, by others provided by Alan Murray Associates. Their scheme, which drew cleverly on the complex history of the site, has been stymied by the credit crunch, and the site remains empty.

Empty, that is, until August every year, when 'C' venues, a London-based entertainment company convert the ruins into a fringe venue for three weeks. Where architects have failed, a troupe of entertainers convert the ruins into five theatres, two bars, two art galleries, a restaurant, and a public garden. This they are able to do, of course, not because they are more ingenious than the architects, but because everything they propose is cheap, and, more importantly, temporary.

Practical History: Telling Stories

In September 2009, 50 interiors students and professors from ten countries met in Edinburgh to address themselves to the knotty problem posed by the site.

The students were divided into groups, and set no specific conditions, other than one: duration. The shortest project for the fire site could last for no more than five seconds, the longest for no less than five millennia. In between stretched minutes, hours, days, weeks, years, decades, and centuries. Each group of participants was required to present their proposals in animated films five minutes long.

The first group designed an event: as noisy crowds gathered for the opening of the fringe festival each year, sonic apparatus would be set up around the site to create, in one spot only, and for no longer than five seconds, the condition of absolute silence.

The second group staged a flashmob, using umbrellas to stop traffic on the Cowgate. They knew they would get away with it: they would be gone by the time the police arrived to remove them. The third group proposed a party, five hours long; and the fourth designed an installation that would last five days, replacing every window in the Cowgate with a screen that would play back, with a twelve-hour delay, everything that could be seen from it. At night, revellers would glimpse themselves walking to work in the morning, and in the morning, they would be confronted by the sight of their antics the night before.

The fifth group proposed a revolution lasting five weeks, the sixth a flood lasting for five months – just long enough to compel the householders on the street to adapt their lifestyles, or leave. The sixth group proposed a garden that would grow to maturity in five years, and could easily be removed when the time came to for development. The seventh group proposed a staircase around which future buildings could be built, and the eighth group, working on the scale of centuries, proposed a monument to the fire.

The final group devised a way of sending messages to people who, living five millennia hence, might occupy a world in which there was no Edinburgh, no writing, and, perhaps, no architecture. They invited people to think of messages to send to the future, and then proposed to inscribe them into blocks of gold that would be buried in the vaults of the bridge. In 5,000 years they would be discovered amid the ruins, and perhaps people, if there were any, would find a way of decoding them.

In *How Buildings Learn*, Stewart Brand argues that the built environment must be understood in terms of rates of change, and he uses a famous diagram devised by Frank Duffy to show how the built environment exists on several timescales at once. In Duffy's diagram, various parts of a building change at ever increasing rates: landscape (millennia), structure (decades to centuries), façade (decades), fitout (decades to years), furnishings (years to weeks), objects (momentary).

The student groups who participated in the workshop found that they themselves repeated this association of genre with timescale: monuments last for centuries, gardens for years, and parties for hours. They are all spatial interventions – interiors of a sort – but their nature is determined less by their materiality than the medium in which they all move: time.

Finally, the students were then asked to represent their proposals not in drawing or models, but in short films. Working to scale is hardly new; but here the dimension in question was time rather than space: the five-minute group were working at 1:1, the five-second group at 60:1, and the 5,000-year group at 5,256,000:1.

But more importantly, the use of the moving image to describe their projects compelled the students to narrate them. They had to bring the designs out of the fixity of the architect's dream, and turn them into stories.

And this returns us to the notion of history, the word which, of course, always haunts the word story, and is haunted by it. The history of the environments we inhabit, as we have seen, has long been told as a story about the progression of style from period to period, excluding from the story of the interior and the building any notion of human agency – of occupation, inhabitation, alteration, or appropriation. The rest of this paper will explore two other narrative structures which challenge this approach.

Folk Tales

Bertolt Brecht once said of the act of alteration: 'Anyone can be creative, it's rewriting other people that's a challenge.' [2]

Every performance of every play is a reinterpretation, a rereading and rewriting of an original script or score; and this takes place without any of the anxiety we associate with architectural rereading and rewriting: actors are regarded as creative heroes without ever having had to create anything new. It is accepted that their interpretations of a script are as valid a contribution to the culture as any 'lost' original.

Parallels may be drawn with the rereading/alteration of existing buildings. The problems that face early music ensembles or 'period' performances of Shakespeare are very similar to those that faced the preservationists of the nineteenth century, while 'modern' performances of ancient classics, from Karajan's renditions of Beethoven to *Clueless*, may be compared to the operations of the Renaissance architect trying to translate the gothic church into the classical temple.

It may be objected that the difference between architecture and literature or music is that, while scripts or scores exist independently of performances, buildings are not independent of the alterations wrought upon them, which are always irreversible.

There is one field in which performance and the object performed exist contiguously, and that is in the oral tradition. If a story is not written down, then the only script that exists for the subsequent performance is the last telling. This means that the development of an oral story is iterative: each retelling conditions the next, and oral stories from the Iliad to Little Red Riding Hood have been both preserved and altered by every retelling until they arrived on the written page. The classic case is the tale of Cinderella, which first appears in the European written record in the Middle Ages. The glass slipper about which much of the plot revolves is golden in German, and a rubber galosh in Russian. In German, the ugly sisters even cut off their toes to fit them into the slipper, and spatter it with their blood. There is a ninth-century Chinese telling of the tale in which 'She gets her slippers from a magic fish instead of a fairy godmother, and loses one of them at a village fete instead of a royal ball' [3] but she is still recognisably Cinderella, all the same.

Buildings are less portable than stories, and infinitely more ephemeral; but there are significant parallels between their modes of transmission. Christopher Alexander's timeless way of building offers a model of incremental iterative change in vernacular buildings that closely models the ways in which folk tales are passed on in the vernacular language. Each alteration is a 'retelling' of the building which exists – and when it is complete it becomes the

existing building for the next retelling. In this way the building is both preserved and transformed by the repeated act of alteration and reuse.

The Memory Palace

The interior, as we have seen, is a quite a different beast. It is not a unitary artefact like a building that may evolve over centuries, but an ephemeral assemblage; and, in narrating its history, quite different narrative strategies must be adopted

In ancient times, people remembered the stories they had to tell by imagining them as rambling palaces, each room of which contained objects that stood for a chapter or a point to recall. Once the story had been told, the imaginary building was dismantled, and the chambers it contained passed into oblivion. Frances Yates' classic *The Art of Memory* traces this device, the Memory Palace, from its mythical invention by the Greek poet Simonides, through the rhetoricians of Rome, from Cicero to Quintilian, to Ramon Lull, the medieval mystic, and renaissance magi like Giordano Bruno, Giulio Camillo and Thomas Fludd, who constructed, or imagined, memory theatres, interiors in which the whole universe might be remembered and therefore magically controlled. Yates argues that the memory palace, variously remembered, forgotten or transformed down the centuries, provides the basis for the classificatory systems and instincts of modern science.

Interiors, like the rooms in a memory palace, last only for a while, and when they are gone, they leave fragmentary clues as to their nature. The interiors assembled by collectors are filled with objects taken from other, vanished, interiors, and every interior ends up, somehow reconfigured, in others.

Those fragments might be no more than lumps of ancient concrete, lying unregarded in a Roman garden. They might be a word: the colourful names of the institutions of British government, from the Star Chamber to the Exchequer, refer to the rooms and furnishings of a long-lost medieval palace. Sometimes, like the mirrored halls of Versailles, sets remain from a play that has long since come to an end. Sometimes interiors are remembered in the objects that once filled them, each of which, dispersed, carries with it traces of its momentary home. Time and time again, interiors are remembered in images: on film, in fading watercolour, in a stream of pixels.

The history of the interior may be imagined then as an anthology of vanished rooms, of aftertastes to be savoured even as they fade on the tongue. It is a rummage through haunted houses and piles of bric-a-brac in search of places and occasions that have long since withered away. It is a wander through a memory palace, in each room of which we find traces of others.

This memory palace may be retrieved from the clutter of a sitting room. It could be any sitting room; but for the purposes of this exposition, it belongs to my grandmother. She calls her home the Doll's House, in only half-joking reference to its diminutive size. Granny is getting too old to live on her own, but she refuses to leave the Doll's House, for she spent years turning this generic brick box into her own home. Granny painted the walls and hung the curtains; she collected and arranged the furniture; and now looking after her home has become her chief activity. The Doll's House is a treasury amassed over a lifetime; and each of the treasures assembled there has a story to tell, for Granny's sitting room has been created, like the memory palaces of antiquity, to bring tales of the past, both real and imagined, to mind.

The stories related in the sitting room of the Doll's House are most immediately my grandmother's own, for almost all of the elements that comprise this interior have come from the other houses she has inhabited, the other homes she has created, during her lifetime. Many of these elements were already old by the time Granny encountered them in the nursery at her own grandmother's house, already marked with the traces of interiors that had

vanished long before she had even been born. So the stories that begin in the Doll's House extend by association way beyond the compass of my grandmother's own life, and her sitting room is antechamber to a boundless palace of lost interiors.

Five corners of the sitting room in the Doll's House call to mind the vanished interiors of five palaces. A telegram lost in a bureau calls to mind the film sets of 1940s Hollywood, flickering on a white wall in a dark cinema, in a blacked-out London. Souvenirs arranged in a glass cabinet recall the Crystal Palace, once the radiant vision of a technological future, whose ruins, complete with concrete dinosaurs, lie forgotten in distant suburbs. The colour of the paint that covers the walls was copied from the private apartments of Marie Antoinette at Versailles, perfectly preserved, but vacant since her removal from them two hundred years ago. A table set for cards recalls the draughty halls and abstruse rituals of the medieval Palace of Westminster, remembered now only in the curious anachronisms of British government. A disused fireplace surrounded by family photographs sounds a distant echo of the blackened hearth-shrines of ancient Rome, the origin of the building on the Palatine Hill that gave its name to our very idea of Palace.

Each of these remembered palaces, from Rome to Studio City, is not just a dwelling, but the representation of a dwelling: the home not of a private individual, but of a state, an institution, or a collective being. Palaces remember life not just as it was lived, but life as it was imagined to have been lived, and how it was meant to be remembered. Each of the palaces in The Memory Palace, variously ruined, abandoned, or altered beyond recognition, is, of course, a memory palace all its own, filled with fragments that recall its former hearths, halls, masques, expositions and extravaganzas; and the vanished structures of power and propriety that brought them into being.

Every room in this memory palace contains reminders of every other, and in the end, they lead back to my grandmother's sitting room in the Doll's House; but it may be too late, for it is possible that Granny will have gone to the Home. The interior she so patiently assembled over decades will be dispersed, and the contents of her Doll's House incorporated into other rooms: even the one in which this is being written. Granny's sitting room in the Doll's House will prove a moveable feast, constructed out of the memories of others, and destined itself to become nothing more than a memory.

This Memory Palace is an attempt to tell its story. Being, like all palaces, a rhetorical device as well as a private habitation, it is a history of interiors from the public exhibition to the private cabinet of curiosity. An imagined building, it traces the changing relationship between architecture, objects and people. A pageant of faded beauties, the Memory Palace is an attempt to remember something of the ephemeral splendours of this fleeting art and, like the rhetorical palaces of the ancients, to meditate on the nature of memory itself.

Conclusion

Buildings, and the interiors that inhabit them, have traditionally been considered as static objects; and their history has traditionally been assembled as a canonical toolbox for the designer, timeless because its contents must be recalled from the past in their pristine state for use in the present. The *Architect's Dream* and the period room are images of a history that, being fixed, has been made ahistorical.

This approach is not just of theoretical interest, for as the example of the Cowgate in Edinburgh attests, practising designers subconsciously follow this model, and all too often make proposals that, since they do not take the medium of time into account, become impracticable. The built environment does not just exist, it comes into being, changes, and dies. It is Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire*, or Osbert Lancaster's *Reconstruction*; and to design it as if it is *The Architect's Dream* is to propose a fantasy.

The Memory Palace and the folk tale are attempts to bring the history of the built environment out of its trance into time, and to reconcile the dynamic reality of change and human agency with the continuity of the canon. The built environment is not just the scenery for our changing lives, but something we make and alter and destroy. What is more, it has a life of its own, a story which needs to be told and retold, as protean, as infuriatingly ephemeral as its subject.

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