Where Were You?

Ryan Carter

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/datum

Part of the Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/datum/vol7/iss1/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Datum: student journal of architecture by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
“Architecture stands with one leg in a world that’s 3000 years old and another leg in the 21st Century… You could say we are the last profession that has a memory, or the last profession whose roots go back 3000 years and still demonstrates the relevance of those long roads today. Initially, I thought we were misplaced to deal with the present, but what we offer the present is memory”
- Rem Koolhaas, Interview, May 2016

Architects are both organizers and archivists. In addition to all pragmatic concerns of building making, architects bear the responsibility of locating a project in relation to history. Architecture flattens the past and present, providing a ‘fixed-position’ in order to understand contemporary structures. Structures ‘fix’ themselves in relation to history through the medium of space. These spaces, or the three dimensional environs that we inhabit, serve as a means to inhabit and manifest ideas, events, or people that no longer occupy the contemporary context. As constructed objects, these manifestations exist in the ‘real’ visible realm for a large length of time. This characteristic means that architecture should serve as a carefully planned physical repository of things that are physically absent; that is, architecture should serve as a memory bank.

Significance of Memory

Why is memory essential? Perhaps the best answer to this question is within cases of extreme memories; those that have had an impact on all humanity. The example of Auschwitz comes to mind. These camps represent a point in history that was the result of the decisions and beliefs of a group of people during a specific period of time. It shows the end result of those actions and stands as a warning to those who would try to walk that road again. Closer to home, the phrase “never forget” immediately hearkens the events that occurred on September 11th. While it is frequently used as a catchphrase to push questionable policies or silence opposition, the fact remains that this event deeply impacted American


2 While space eludes definition, I use it to refer to the three dimensional world. I know that it includes elusive elements that are invisible to humans but are powerfully felt. For the purposes of the argument presented in this essay, I have divorced the two elements to show how they relate to one another in a specific way.
culture. Memory’s significance is that it shows us how those who have gone before made decisions within their context and the outcomes of those decisions. It's a demonstration of social, cultural and political experiences and as such is essential for societal learning.

Association of Memory and Space

In his book ‘The Poetics of Space’ Gaston Bachelard states, “Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.” (pg. 92) 3 Think again of the example seen in Auschwitz. This appeal found on the homepage of the Auschwitz-Birkenau website ties memory with a specific place.

“Memory is not something that is acquired once and stays on forever. The moment that the last eyewitnesses and survivors pass away, we have to work together to build on that which remains: the testimonies of those former prisoners and the authentic artifacts connected with Auschwitz. Each item can have its own enormous meaning and should find its place in the collection of the Auschwitz Memorial. Here, it will be preserved, studied, and displayed. Its place is here.”

The argument of the curators of Auschwitz is that this place serves as a physical documentation of a particular period of time. The structures and ruins here serve as a repository for objects and memories that are significant to all of humanity. This is the draw, to put it crudely, of this place. Its power is not in the ruined and basic structures in empty fields but in the embodied memory of a human tragedy. The fully preserved remains act as a vessel for a finite, yet significant, period of time.

A slightly different perspective on the association of memory to the three dimensional world can be seen in a personal example. Think of a significant occurrence within your own life. For me, it is a Tuesday afternoon. I can see the bright, blue sky, free of clouds through a window in my classroom. An important person – maybe the principal – walks in and whispers something to the teacher. Being a fifth grader, I think nothing of the minor episode. Later that day as I was waiting for my mom to pick me up in our beat up mini-van I heard a couple people talking about some planes hitting a building. Again, nothing serious for a fifth grader with an avid imagination. I was just excited to go home and re-enact famous battles on three-acres of Iowa landscape, surrounded by cornfields. The significance of the events that occurred on that fateful September day sank in that evening as I watched images of planes exploding into buildings with bursts of bright orange flame on television. My memory is tied to a specific and vivid sequence of spaces.

Manifestation of Memory through Architecture

In his book “Genius Loci4,” Christian Norberg-Schulz discusses the notions of dwelling and place. He quotes Heidegger and develops an idea of dwelling and place.

“Man dwells when he can orientate himself within and identify himself with an environment… when he experiences the environment as meaningful. [Place is] the concrete manifestation of man’s dwelling…his identity depends on his belonging to places.” “[Place is] a totality made up of concrete things having material substance…these things determine an ‘environmental character’… A place is a qualitative, ‘total’ phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties…without losing its concrete nature out of sight.” (Norberg-Shulz, pg. 6-7)

Norberg-Shulz concludes that contemporary theories of architecture do not address character which he believes is manifested in the way a structure is put together. (Norberg-Shulz, pg. 15) However,

---

architecture that is realized is highly technical. These technical details can remember. Diener and Diener Architekten’s extension of the Berlin Museum of Natural History’s East Wing is a primary example of this. The architect’s used a latex mold to duplicate the order of the existing façade then used this mold to cast panels to put into the portions of the outer wall that were ruined. The rooms are restored to their formerly closed condition, but the ruin is still evidenced by the contrast of concrete and brick. Through the technical process of making a mold of the existing structure and then casting concrete from this mold, the architecture embeds the memory of its former state of disrepair within itself.

Repository for Memory

Perhaps the best space of memory can be found within the cemetery. A plot serves as a ‘dwelling’ for a person; a place to elicit a memory of them. However, cemeteries can become environments of collective memory. Aldo Rossi studied this process in the cemetery he designed in Modena with Gianni Braghieri. The project could be described at length but the focus here will be on two elements; the conical mass grave and the cubic war memorial. The mass grave which takes the form of a chimney. Italian laws allow for the disinterment of remains after ten years, due to limited burial ground. The conical grave becomes the final resting place for the less wealthy. A single space serves as the marker for many individual memories. So too, does the cube shaped war memorial that sits on axis with the cone. The dead are placed in vaults in the walls of the cube. When arranged within the grid of windows and walls, the deceased lose an individual identity and become a part of the structure.

The memories associated with the individual become a part of the space that the remains occupy. There is no longer a need for an individual plot when the one structure bears the memories for each of the deceased who occupy it. The architecture itself replaces the individual headstone. The structure is absorbed into memory as a manifestation of the immaterial. Its form and spaces are cemented in mourner’s memories and help them recall the one they loved. The structure gains iconic significance within the city, not for its formal qualities alone, but for its function as a repository for collective memory.

5 The project is broken down in an essay by Eugene J. Johnson called “What Remains of Man – Aldo Rossi’s Modena Cemetery” that appears in The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians

Photo Credit: Deiner and Deiner Arkitekten
Conclusion

The relationship of space and memory cannot be split. Architects serve as organizers and archivists with a responsibility to locate contemporary structures within history. Character within a place is related to technical resolution of structure according to Christian Norberg-Shulz. This being the case, architecture can serve as a marker for memory as seen in the Berlin Museum of Natural History’s renovation and extension. Memory’s significance is that it demonstrates the results of various decisions from the past. This relationship suggests an architecture that uses its technical resolution to develop a character that acts as a conscious repository for memory. Architecture becomes a physical representative of things that are physically absent. Knowing this, architecture can take on a character, a someone. In this someone, we can see the roots of why constructing physical marker of our memories is so imperative. I’ll leave you with this quote.

“…Everyone dies alone. But if you mean something to someone, if you help someone, or love someone, if even a single person remembers you, then maybe you never really die at all.”

- Jonathon Nolan and Denise Thé, “Person of Interest,” Fifth Series Finale