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EDITORIAL

Inscription: Tracing Place

History and Memory in Architectural
and Literary Practice

Klaske Havik, Susana Oliveira, Jacob Voorthuis

*Memory as a place, as a building, as a sequence of columns,
cornices, porticoes.*

*The body inside the mind, as if we were moving around in there,
going from one place to the next, and the sound of our footsteps
as we walk, moving from one place to the next.*

*Paul Auster, **The Invention of Solitude**, 1982*

The topic of the *Writingplace Journal's* second issue, *Inscription: Tracing Place* focuses on the role of history and memory in literary and architectural practices.

The interest in memory has branched out from the overlapping of the humanities and the neuro- and social sciences to include increasingly popular forms of writing and discourse such as personal memoirs and autobiographies. Recollection, confession and being a witness help us to reflect upon the meaning of both individual and collective memory and experience. Memory and its manifestations also touch very significantly and deeply on questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority – issues that nowadays fracture our public space as well as our social tissue.

The view that memory is *factual* is common. But it is also more or less common knowledge that it is or may be in part *fictional*, an invention in the sense that it is built upon subjective impressions, indirect and fragmented reminiscences and retellings. According to Edward W. Said, in 'Invention, Memory and Place': 'To this whole matter of memory as a social, political, and historical enterprise has been added a complication . . . namely, the role of invention.'¹

However, even if invention assumes worrisome aspects when it comes to the utilitarian fictionalization of the past and the manipulation of the collective memory, the interplay between place, memory and invention is nevertheless the substance and condition for both literature and architecture.

The philosophical thinking on the topic of place tends to adopt a similar dual perspective. On one hand, place is thought of as an empirical idea, which has a reality independent and external to human experience. On the other hand, place is thought of as a constructive product of human perception, so that without human participation, place would lose its sense and definition. In *Place and Experience*, the Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas emphasized this co-dependence of memory, the temporal and the spatial, on place, which held both together. As such, intangible or disembodied memory, that is memory that is unplaced, is no memory at all.² This idea goes all the way back to where the thinking about space and place began in Ancient Greece (at least in written form). When Plato, in his *Timaeus*, gave us a speculative reconstruction of the genesis of the world, he proposed a space of becoming, *chora*, a kind of tea-cup model of a storm, *chora* dissolved into a space of completion, *topos*. *Topos* is where the whirlwind of becoming settles into a philosophical equivalent of 'and they lived happily ever after'. Aristotle took *topos* a step further, defining it as the receptacle of a thing without the thing itself, a kind of negative that could locate things in their proper order.

To understand this elusive idea, we might refer to the other meaning of topos, that of referring to the subject of a story or discourse. It is remarkable that, in the etymology of this word, both aspects of place manifest themselves as indissolubly linked: places can only form in things through stories entangled with them. For something to be somewhere we need a story to be able to tell about it. Similarly, all stories locate and situate themselves in a place. That is why placeless memory is such a contradictory concept. Our mind only holds half of a memory, the other half resides in the taste of the *madeleine*,³ in the building where we had coffee or in the street where he kissed her. Buildings and urban spaces become places in the stories that come to be attached to them.

The writings of W.G. Sebald merge, overlap and confound fact and fiction, invention and memory, by means of document, text and image, and the relations with the events of experience and the processes of narration. Such narrative devices produce both the possibilities of communal memory and allow us to relate to as well as empathize with, regardless of being factual or fictional. In *Austerlitz*, the featured places, seen through the eyes of the protagonist on a journey through Europe, are described with the intensity of reviving memories.

Before him, Marcel Proust revealed the character of memory as deeply tied to space as to time, and the truthful possibility of a recovery of time and of self through place.⁴ Gaston Bachelard's equally zealous explorations of intimate space in *The Poetics of Space*, an exploration that he himself defined as a form of 'topophilia',⁵ is also grounded in the concept of memory and its related phenomena. From these authors, the reader undergoes a sense of the remembered, and of the process of remembering, as experienced only in the dense materiality of places, spaces and things.

These and other evocative literary descriptions bring to light aspects of atmosphere, activities, memories, rituals and emotions related to place.

This issue of *Writingplace* seeks to investigate how literary evocations of memory can be or have been used in site analysis or architectural design. Like the tracing of history in lines and stones is depicted in the writings of contemporary authors, architects, urban planners and landscape architects, the question of local urban cultures, histories and stories may be explored with a literary lens. This approach offers the possibility to understand, not only how urban places are experienced and remembered, but also how they can be produced or transformed.

In particular, this issue contains articles that identify and explore trends, authors, key concepts and theories discussed across the disciplines, thereby engaging with, interrupting, and unsettling notions of place and space, history and story. It shows how place is re-imagined and re-experienced through different practices and disciplines, both materially and through memory; how cultural, political and economic histories and stories are experienced by and inscribed upon and through place and building; how theoretical and experiential uses of place expand and challenge perception, memory and storytelling.

In this issue of *Writingplace*, the authors look for traces of architectural memory in literary works as well as in particular cities such as Diu, Juiz de Fora, Glasgow, Ohrid, Nicosia and Bogotá. Within these contributions, we have observed three overlapping practices: reading, walking and responding.

Readings

Thus, this issue opens with its readings of architectural memory, most explicitly addressed in the piece on melancholy by Henderson Downings, 'Melancholy Inscriptions: Memory, Place, and Temporality in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*', which reminds us that literary and architectural investigations into place have the capacity to excavate and decode melancholy inscriptions usually inaccessible.

Nuno Grancho's article 'Early Modern Narratives of Diu's Architecture and Space' is based on the research into traces found within historical archive material. It deals with political and imperial discourses after the cession of the island of Diu to the Portuguese in 1535, by describing how urbanity in the city was shaped by the earliest architectural events.

A close reading of a particular building in London, the Alexandra Palace, is offered by Rosa Ainley in "A Cacophony of the Unheard and the Yet-to-Be": Voicing the Lost and Found in the People's Palace for Future Renewal'. Ainley uses a plurivocal method to paint a portrait of an exceptional building and its uses that could feed its regeneration, while not being subjugated to institutionally imposed practices.

Walkings

A second part of the issue takes the reader on a series of walks. Indeed, walking is one of the everyday practices that may give us an insight of how the city functions on a socio-spatial level. Michel de Certeau suggested that the traces of urban walks form an alternative structure of the city: 'the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other'.⁶ In 'Wherever You Go, You Will Be a City . . .', Maria Gil Uldemolins and Kris Pint revisit poet Lisa Robertson's spatial wanderings in her book-length poem *Cinema of the Present* (2014), arguing that her literary experiments can be translated into an analysis of architectural and urban space that enhances an empathetic sense of embodied community.

Aslihan Senel's 'Travelling through Guidebooks: Reading and Remembering Imagined Topographies of Nicosia', combines her reading of popular guidebooks with her own walks. She explores the divided city of Nicosia as represented in a lineage of popular guidebooks, personal urban memories

and travels along the border between the Greek and Turkish sides. She uses this multiple reading as a critical topographical practice that can question and dismantle the fixed representations in the guidebooks.

While Senel witnesses transgressive practices in these urban border conditions, Nick Dunn, in 'Dark Inscriptions: Placing Theory and Tracing Practice in Nocturnal Glasgow', explores how the city reveals alternative practices at night time. By experiencing the city's spaces at different times, different speeds, and within different lights and degrees of darkness, the described night walks in Glasgow are seen as inscriptive practices of people's temporary occupation and movement through space, enabling interaction and exchange. This evolves a shared sense of belonging and ownership, leading to a stronger connection with their city.

The article by Isadora Monteiro, 'Poetic Cartographies: A Literary Journey through the City', describes an itinerary through the Brazilian city of Juiz de Fora. Combined with the walk, an experimental installation is conceived as a collective reading room to enhance the impoverished urban experience.

Responses

The issue continues with practice-based contributions that explore how literary, poetic and graphic techniques of tracing and inscribing can inform design and produce a critique of the collective experience of place and city. The contribution 'Tracing Spatial Values through Poem-drawing' by Viktorija Bogdanova, Danica Spasevska and Maja Nikova makes the reader witness a collective process of understanding and responding to site specificity in the old city of Ohrid, Macedonia. Through poem-drawings, which combine site-readings with fictional characters of different ages and placed in different temporalities, particular historical traces of the city are not only revealed but also extrapolated to a possible future.

In 'The (Un)homely in Bogotá: A Critical Reading of the City', Noortje Weenink shares how she developed an architectural response to deal with

the traces of a dark history in a conflict-ridden neighbourhood in Bogotá, Colombia, a neighbourhood that was until recently dominated by problems of homelessness, drug abuse and criminality. Building upon the stories depicting this dark history, and reflecting upon notions such as the homely and the uncanny, she proposed an architectural gesture that contains such traces and provides an open space for reconciliation.

Finally, the issue moves to the scale of landscape architecture. Matthew Skjonsberg and Robin Winoground, in 'Between the Lines: On the Explicit and Implicit in Writing and Building', discuss how the Swiss landscape architecture office Vulkan traces different aspects of atmosphere, and how the designers respond to such traces.

To conclude, we might look back to our discussion about memory, place and stories. If memory without place is no memory at all, as Malpas suggested, and if it is through stories that the relationship between place and memory is revealed, there is a task for architects to seek, unveil and present such subtle and complex narrations entangled with the lived experience of place.

In this issue of *Writingplace* we explore how stories emerge in existing cities, urban spaces and buildings and we discover how architects can then respond to places already charged with meaning. It might be useful to note that an architect has, through design, at least some measure of control over how existing stories resonate in the places they intervene in, as well as over the kind of stories that are more likely to shape themselves in their designs. With this in mind, an 'inscriptive' approach to architecture, tracing stories and memories of place as well as allowing new ones to emerge, should not be taken lightly. With the architectural response to memory of place – and thus to the stories unveiled through practices of tracing, reading and walking – comes responsibility. How do architectural interventions influence the reverberance of memory, and how do they influence behaviour by generating new stories, their places and, eventually, their description?

- 1 Edward W. Said, 'Invention, Memory and Place', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26 (Winter 2000) no. 2, 178.
- 2 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 3 Of course, we refer her to Proust's passage, in which the taste of the *madeleine* cake brings the character Marcel back to the places of his youth: 'And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me . . . immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents . . . and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine . . . ' Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Volume 1: *Swann's Way: Within a Budding Grove* (New York: Wordsworth Editions, 2006 [1919]), 48-51.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 8.
- 6 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988 [1984]), 93. See also Angeliki Sioli's dissertation, 'The Architecture of Walking: Embodied Perception in Novels of the European City in the 1920s', defended at McGill School of Architecture, Montreal in 2015, which discusses literary texts describing the experience of walking in the city.