

The Memory of a City / The City as a Repository for Memories

Memory and Identity

Societies construe their histories from pasts reclaimed together. Through the telling and remembrance of these, a collective consciousness is formed. A virtual 'memory space' is created where diverse experiences and moral concepts are taken up, but also suppressed. The virtual discourse on memory and remembrance also needs real things as materialised reference points, to give meaning to the imaginary material. This is why objects that are handed down, and exist outside their time, are preserved. For the historical material to reach from the past into the present, however, it must be continually recontextualised, reinterpreted and renegotiated as being of intrinsic value to society. Only in this way can it provide inspiration for the future.

Materialised Memory

One of the most potent places for collecting and keeping the curious things of the past is, besides the museum, the city itself. In the space of the city, the alien is incessantly assimilated into the existing and the known. Cities are documents of the processes by which differences are redeemed and negated. They embody the traces of history in the form of streets, squares and buildings. Then again, these are subject to unrelenting change through new uses and redevelopment. In the city, the potentials, ambitions, interests, desires and passions existing in a society are reflected in a concentrated form. The way in which differences coexist side by side can be seen in buildings and the way they evolve over time – provided ideologies, acts of aggression or natural catastrophes do not result in their radical destruction. Buildings also disappear for other reasons – because they have lost their function, because they stand in the way of current needs, or because they hold a significance that contradicts the *Zeitgeist*. Every city is marked by the conflicts associated with these facets. In the urban tableau, the claims on the past, present and future are negotiated anew by each generation.

Making decisions about which memories and meanings are particularly worthy of protection has, through the course of history, led to the development of oft-modified moral concepts and criteria, a 'practice of remembrance'. With this in mind, one may see the city in the metaphorical sense as a book in which innumerable past, present and future authors illustrate their ideologies in the forms of architecture and space. To analyse the 'city as text' means, above all, to deconstruct the wide-ranging images, memories, ideas and perceptions of those things that are alien – those things associated with or attributed to a city – so that their symbolic dimensions may be understood. In this, historical culture and the culture of remembrance have a significant role to play.

Cities are, in effect, public stagings of history and remembrance: they reflect the prevailing philosophies and economic interests. A solid commitment is required on the part of the people and institutions who renovate and care for the historic built fabric, so that the past may be imagined in a literal sense, so that it may be interpreted and understood. If, however, the motivation that allows history to be used for the purpose of self-image is lacking, every built monument is in a precarious position and every process of salvage – however complex the restoration – only temporary. In addition, every historic building and every city has to struggle against an all-encompassing pursuit of 'newness', as all societies strive first to seem young, strong and contemporary.

For the role of the 'old' to be acknowledged, one also needs a general social understanding of the importance of history for the present and for the future. History probably holds this social importance all over our world. The question is, how strong in each different place and time is the social need to preserve the traces of history? Another issue arises when the opposite impulse prevails, and the primary goal is to eliminate any building culture as quickly as possible. Where there is no generalised need for a life that includes a materialised history as a matter of course, every monument protection measure is quickly seen as an alien and objectionable intervention, or even simply as irrelevant. In order for buildings or urban ensembles to be valued by an urban society to the extent that they are understood as a cultural legacy and conserved, a broad social, political, economic or cultural consensus must be developed. This can be a long, drawn-out process, taking years or even decades, but without it every monument is under threat.

Demolition or Conservation?

Historic preservation, as it emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was a reaction against the rapid and comprehensive revolution brought by industrial modernisation, where the 'old' was seen as a threat to the new requirements of functionality and efficiency and at risk of comprehensive destruction. As a counterbalance to the upheavals of industrialisation, historic preservation brought the ideas of nation and continuity to the fore. An ideational increase in the value of one's own history and the material evidence of that history led to mechanisms for preservation being instituted and incorporated into municipal administration structures.

In the contemporary context of economic globalisation, it is the field of tourism that emphasises cultural autonomy as a locational advantage. At the same time, this globalisation has contributed to the universalisation of the European philosophy of historic preservation. The programme of UNESCO, for example, has a crucial influence on what is listed as a World Heritage Site. UNESCO's professed goal, and that of many other initiatives, is to preserve cultural variety under the conditions of globalisation and liberalisation. However, whether and how this goal is taken on and interpreted across the globe is also of vital importance.

European societies, particularly in the twentieth century, have developed a number of partial, heterogeneous and often contradictory reasons to legitimise something in terms of its historical value. As such, a building can be valuable because it is especially beautiful or ugly, because it is original or typical for its time, or because its history is associated with important people or events. It can also be valuable because it was once popular or extremely unpopular, because it was designed as a monument from the start, or even because it was first perceived as a monument because its construction was particularly expensive. The reasons for considering a building or an ensemble of buildings worthy of protection are manifold, and there is no general set of rules. What is important is that the monument represents something unusual rather than everyday. However, this in itself means that the monument's position is precarious and always open to question.

Whether or not a building can really have historical importance ultimately depends on whether a lasting international, national and local consensus can be reached on its distinctive character, confirming its status as a building worthy of preservation or restoration. Thus it is only after the renovation of a building – when the city and its residents assume responsibility for its care – that the true survival of the building becomes an issue. For then it becomes clear whether the attempts to register the building in the collective consciousness and create a supportive atmosphere have been successful, or whether, conversely, it is seen as a remote and alien 'implant' and ultimately rejected.

Any project that perceives the historical site as an expression of isolated charitable concerns is almost always doomed from the outset. It is therefore necessary – particularly in regions and federal states where the concept of upgrading material things is new – to introduce site-protection measures on a cautious and broad basis. It is essential to communicate the reasons why a particular building or part of town is important enough to one's own history and to human experience to be preserved. At the same time, the right conditions must be created locally whereby projects, even if they are based on the wishes of others, are appreciated for their qualitative contribution to the revalorising of the city.

This calls not only for a long-term economic concept for the post-renovation period but also for a process that enables all those involved to reflect upon and if necessary modify their own position and the stated reasons for protection. Especially in the world's poorer countries, cities must also actively support these initiatives – a difficult undertaking, as they often lack the necessary organisational, staffing and financial resources. The bureaucratic aspect also requires simplification.

Every historic spatial organisation or work of architecture can be seen as a gift and a special testimony to a city's public space. As such, each city must be able or prepared to bear this distinctiveness – this legacy – and to accept it as a challenge and take responsibility for it.

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