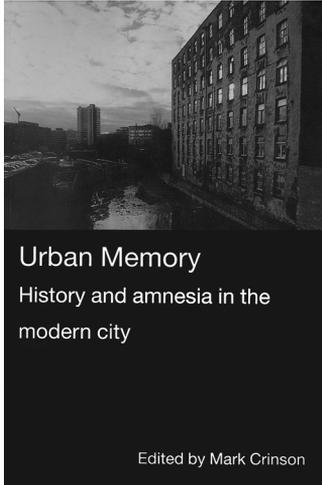


Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City

Edited by Mark Crinson
New York: Routledge, 2005



Throughout *Urban Memory*, the subject of memory never strays far from its obverse, forgetting. In fact, it is the twining of the pair that preoccupies the collection of nine essays, edited by Mark Crinson, where memory and forgetting (or oblivion, or amnesia) are alternately compared, conflated, distinguished, denied, blurred, interpolated, parsed, and totemized. By volume's end, Crinson's introductory remark seems less puzzling than at first glimpse: "We are not so sure that memory has a place in the contemporary city and that is why it is talked about so much."¹

Highlighting the twinship of memory and oblivion, I include the following nine passages, one from each essay in the order of their appearance, as portals to corresponding summaries in the endnotes.

Memory provides neither a simple nor a guaranteed passport to our history.

*Graeme Gilloch & Jane Kilby*²

Memory has its counterpart in oblivion.

*Claire Pajaczkowska*³

A city that has been one thing becomes another.

*Mark Crinson & Paul Tyrer*⁴

Are we any closer to understanding how a medium, concrete, can at once be both a material of memory and of oblivion? Maybe not...

*Adrian Forty*⁵

A totemic model of analysis gives equal emphasis to both memory and forgetting in the creation and maintenance of post-industrial space...

*Paul Tyrer & Mark Crinson*⁶

The industrial gallery space therefore presents a scenario of simultaneous remembering *and* forgetting.

*Richard Williams*⁷

The notion of the *tabula rasa*—the blank slate that hyper-modernity creates in order to build its history-free

edifices—will turn out to be significantly more complex than Koolhaas has allowed. [...] A writing tablet needs to be erased before the new inscriptions can be composed.

*John Phillips*⁸

The exteriors of Manhattan skyscrapers, which had once conveyed so vividly their rich and diverse occupancy, had become increasingly homogenized, so that they concealed that diversity.

*Neil Leach*⁹

Baudelaire defined art as a technique of memorising artistic tradition in the face of loss.

*Mark Crinson*¹⁰

Memory has indeed garnered a great deal of interest in recent years, and its mutability—conjuring many different things to many different people—plays to the heart of debates of planning and redevelopment, preservation, global politics, and cultural identity. Precisely *how* memory is addressed by the various agencies in these debates is a far murkier matter, and contradictions abound. Crinson characterizes memory as “burden and liberation,” noting how the fear of losing memory (the built fabric as well as the computer-stored variety) has stimulated a mania for preservation, generating new institutions and collections of all shapes and sizes. Cities, as the embodiment of and central spawning ground for this “limitless-archive,” have become increasingly polarized into “posturbanist” ersatz evocations of middle-class village-centers on the one hand, and intensified slums filled with unprecedented numbers on the other. He notes how hollow shells of industrial infrastructure have been colonized with nostalgic mythologies—*nostalgie de la boue* (memory with the pain removed). The co-option of memory for *faux* histories and marketing strategies is a central concern of the collection of essays, which brings together “ideas about memory which bear upon the architectural and urban experience,” and proposes “a critical and creative approach to the theorization of memory, and focuses this burgeoning area of studies on the actual forms of the built environment in the modernist and post-industrial city.”¹¹

In addition to the leitmotif, there are several subplots; foremost, the problematic role of modernism. Crinson points out the paradox that leading modernist writers and social thinkers focused on memory in the city, while “modernism in architecture often seemed to erase memory from the city.”¹² More recently, cities that were once modernist in aspirations have turned to historical memorialization while many architects are now designing “monuments to trauma,” and developers and

preservationists, traditionally strange bedfellows, pursue collaborations fueled by the easy sell of nostalgia. Sorting through these twists and turns, the contributing essayists and editor aim to show how “the dynamics of history and memory pervade our ‘post-urban’ and post-industrial cities as never before.”¹³

Just as memory never wanders far from oblivion, these inquiries stay close to the path of their patron saint, Walter Benjamin, who appears in all but one essay. Particular emphasis is given to Benjamin’s view of shock as a central feature to modernity, with its “unassimilable stimuli” producing both memory and amnesia. Benjamin’s interest in the haptic experience of the city—a multi-sensorial “appropriation” of the fleeting, the fragment, the non-monumental—provides a central skein for Crinson’s working definition of “urban memory” as an understanding of the city as “a physical landscape and collection of objects and practices that enable recollections of the past and that embody the past through traces of the city’s sequential building and rebuilding.”¹⁴ The fragment—a street name or architectural detail—may trigger “fleeting but critical insights (which are also shocks) into the past as well as a sense of a lost continuity.”¹⁵ Manchester, England—centerpiece for five of the essays—offers a post-industrial setting ideal for examining the urban impact of lost continuity through Benjamin’s complex archaeology.

Interspersed among the nine essays are ten mini-narratives commissioned from collaborating artists Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson. These one-sentence missives convey the simultaneity of a global existence at once densely interconnected and discreetly quotidian. At one glimpse, Louis Mercaville, a chef, opens a package of organic Tunisian dates at a historically preserved waterworks complex in Philadelphia; at another, Qudsiyah Saleh climbs fourteen flights of stairs to check the speed of the wind in the United Arab Emirates. Are these ‘random’ snapshots taken from the same day, at the same time, interlaced by commerce and climate? Their overarching presence, as inferred from Crinson’s closing essay, advocates a form of critique that is incisive while remaining allusive; an oblique mode of research and making that detects and insinuates associations across the historical fabric of a place while avoiding the nostalgic defaults of developers and heritage (preservationist) groups.

At a broad stroke, *Urban Memory* offers a valuable and varied selection of articles that admirably wrestle with the seductive yet slippery notion of memory. For a work devoted to the subject, however, sound definitions are scarce, aside from a few anecdotes that thinly characterize memory as “aleatoric” and “a residue of past experiences that has somehow stuck or become active in the mind.” When speaking of memory, it

serves to recall that the subject itself has a long evolution, as long as human consciousness. In particular, sharper awareness of the history of the memory arts, which has received thoughtful attention in recent years, would greatly enrich the offerings.¹⁶ When comparing psychoanalytic interpretations with these traditions, what is striking is not how much has been learned in the twentieth century, but rather how little is yet known, and how much of what we do know was intuited long ago, even if the mechanics were not in place. For example, Benjamin's notion that the shock implants memory is as old as the arts of memory. Striking, even monstrous, images were the choice materials for building a useful memory: worthy examples are included in basic grammar books from ancient Greece and Rome of the early eighteenth century.

There is a fundamental difference, however. Whereas we now perceive errors of memory (including "inaccuracy" and forgetting) to occur in the process of retrieval (prompting the hunger for ever more RAM), memory-errors were traditionally considered to occur during the process of *storage*, due to a failure to translate sense-impressions into secure mental images. Without careful storage, there could be no retrieval or imaginative application. As Hugh of St. Victor writes in the eleventh century, "Confusion is the mother of ignorance and forgetfulness, but orderly arrangement illuminates the intelligence and firms up memory."¹⁷ Historically, artifacts and memory chambers served as prosthetic stimuli, assisting occupants to envision and preserve dialectics, contradictions, and paradoxes as part and parcel of everyday existence. Artistic works (poems, music, paintings, tapestries) and architectural ornament (*ornare*—to prepare) provided the food of thought, as well as the ethical armature for envisioning one's place in a community. Decoration was not simply a stylistic reference or means of mapping *where* you were in a city, it was the mental furniture by which you imagined *how* you were in a city. Benjamin's "appropriation" of a city and its episodic fragments through touch *and* vision are an extension of the ancient practice whereby buildings, texts, and cities were *digested*, paralleled by cogitational metaphors such as *ruminat*ion and *eating the book*.

So how does this translate to contemporary Manchester, England, or post-September 11th New York City? While memory is counterposed to forgetting, these articles suggest that meanings slide across or percolate over one another, as signifiers in constant transmutation, as the city continuously sheds its skin in renewal. The mnemonic quotient of objects and buildings was not necessarily to bear meanings *ad infinitum*, but to stimulate different associations for different people at different times under different circumstances. Crinson and

Tyrer note that “just as [the] arcades were regarded by Walter Benjamin as emblematic of consumption and privatization in nineteenth-century Paris, so the railway arches are emblematic of post-industrial Manchester.”¹⁸ While the built environment may offer palimpsests of the dehumanizing impact of early industrialization, are these infrastructures worth preserving or demolishing? Are we better off with or without the arcades, rail yards and stations, smokestacks, and slums? Do they (or should they) serve to remind us of what had taken place inside of them, or what had taken place before even they came into existence?

New occupants invest and unleash a new range of experiences in the city, reconceiving its myths and mores. A factory may be recast as an ideal loftspace for living and/or for work: with northern exposure, a marvelous studio. Oversized plumbing in a renovated bar provides a new fixture in the imagination of the urban inhabitant, who seeks out (at times consciously and at others subconsciously) episodic niches that offer individuation within community. In this way, the ever-changing urban environment continues to provide a rebus to cultural and personal identity.

“How can any building play a role in the formation of an identity?” inquires Neil Leach, who consults psychoanalytic theory (specifically Lacan) to explain the stages in human identity development, and admirably translates this process to appreciate the role of buildings in the formation of personal and national identity.¹⁹ Here again, however, the tenets of psychoanalysis and film theory echo well-established historical antecedents. For example, the notion that one projects the exterior world into the mind’s perception of self, and then reflexively outward onto the exterior world (buildings, public places, cities) is ancient. Ivan Illich, for one, has eloquently summarized Hugh of St. Victor’s process of *edificatio*, by which one edifies oneself by transmuting everyday experience of the external world into an interior architecture that provides a model for ethical behavior.²⁰ In his 1451 manual on meditation, Nicholas of Cusa describes the eye as a mirror by which God is evidenced through iconic works of art that guide our vision between interior and exterior (and beyond).²¹ Further, Benjamin’s description of the eye as a *camera obscura* echoes Leonardo and Descartes, while the image of the mind as a photosensitive plate recalls an ancient metaphor for the mind, the wax tablet (and, as John Phillips notes, the *tabula rasa*).²² This is not to diminish the significance of Benjamin or the contributions of psychoanalysis, but is it perhaps a symptom of perceiving oneself as a ‘modern’ or a ‘post-modern’ that we consciously or subconsciously forget (or are entirely unaware of) deeper historic precedents of contemporary conditions and practices?

Following on this path, while ‘modernism’ is a central agent in the essays, little qualification is offered. When does “modernism” begin? Is it in the early 1800s, after the French Revolution and the fall of the *ancien régime*, when Durand (and the École Polytechnique) writes off ornament as uneconomical, effectively declaring one of the three traditional Vitruvian architectural principles, *venustas* (pleasure), superficial? Or is modernism marked by the Industrial Revolution and its transformation of the city into “satanic mills”? Or, is modernism that which occurs in the wake of two disastrous world wars, as embodied in an architecture that seeks universal truths by eschewing traditional nationalistic and provincial ornament? The same Walter Gropius who had hand-chiseled his concrete to appear like stone in 1922, later joined forces with Marcel Breuer in throwing out ornamental plaster casts in the 1940s. Does Benjamin stand for modernism? I press the issue because it is during the past two centuries that the cords of memory traditions unraveled, or were cut:

Because memory has been eradicated by history and the bonds of identity collective memory are broken, *lieux de memoire* [ersatz memory locations] have come into being in compensation, as sites devoted to embodying or incarnating memory...²³

A reawakened appreciation for the traditional uses of ornament and design need not generate ersatz architectural details, a fine recipe for mental indigestion, but it would reinforce the long-standing wisdom that the built environment contributes profoundly to the quality of our dreaming.

The length of Benjamin’s shadow also raises a question. With the intellectual genetics of this collection of essays so pronounced, how inclusive (and enduring) are their reflections on urban memory? *Whose* urban memory? Are there alternative cultural forms of memory and forgetting? Here the odd balance in subject matter is curious. Why is Singapore included among the post-industrial meditations on Manchester? Why not Dubai? Or Istanbul or Astana? While John Phillips’s essay is one of the more provocative entries, Singapore raises issues of colonialism and cultural superimpositions that don’t quite fit, at least on the surface. Following on this question of structure, Crinson distinguishes American urban redevelopment practices from the “significantly different British experience.” If the differences are indeed significant, what does the emphasis on post-industrial Manchester portend for other cultural and historic conditions? Should the essays have been limited to Manchester, British post-industrial cities, or expanded to include further comparison with post-industrial cities worldwide? Perhaps this volume augurs another.

Ultimately, it is the malleability of memory that binds this collection. For this reason, I return to Adrian Forty's summary about concrete and memorials: "Are we any closer to understanding how a medium, concrete, can at once be both a material of memory and of oblivion? Maybe not..." The same may be asked of this ensemble of articles: Are we any closer to understanding the relationship between memory and oblivion, as embodied by the city? Maybe not, but that is the mercurial nature of the subject and perhaps the editor's intent that the essays provide substantive food for thought, achieving their stated objective: to spur critical thought and theory about memory.

Will this volume inspire palpable responses? What would the editor and authors wish one to *do* with this material? A professor once proposed that good theory should compel you to pick up your pencil and draw. It is not certain whether, or how, these observations will deter developers and preservationists from co-opting memory and history. As often happens with critical writings in ethically charged fields (such as preservation and sustainability), there is a tendency to preach to one's choir. Does this limitation matter? The care with which these articles were composed and their concern for the quality of urban fabric suggests that it might.

Author biography

Robert Kirkbride, Ph.D. is director of the architectural design firm *studio 'patafisico* and Associate Professor at Parsons The New School for Design, where he coordinates thesis year in the Product Design Department. Kirkbride's works center on the mutual influences of thinking and making; specifically, on the role of architecture, design, and ornament in equipping humans to navigate the world. His design and scholarly investigations have been published and exhibited widely. Kirkbride is an editorial board member of the Italian-based *Nexus Network Journal*, a Fellow of the Canadian Centre for Architecture and was architect-in-residence at the Bogliasco Foundation in Genoa, Italy. His dissertation on architecture and memory received the Gutenberg-e Prize from the American Historical Association and will be published by Columbia University Press (2007).

Endnotes

¹ Mark Crinson, ed. *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (London: Routledge, 2005), xx.

² *Ibid.*, 17. In their study of the writings of Winfried Georg Sebald, Graeme Gilloch and Jane Kilby examine the relationship of trauma and memory, and the capacity for a city to confound an inhabitant's desire to escape from or preserve the past. When asked to assist in forgetting, a city may serve instead as a constant mnemonic. For example, a Jewish refugee hoping for a new start in Manchester, England is surrounded by émigrés with similar pasts and predicaments, with the industrial chimneys of Manchester offering ever-present reminders of the concentration camps. On the other hand, when consulted to aid memory, a city may offer only forgetfulness. The Parisian warehouses, where occupying Nazis stored loot from imprisoned Jews, is replaced in a grand gesture of urban renewal by a new "Babylonian" library, "a pristine, glistening monument to western culture" that is nonetheless useless in assisting a man retracing any evidence of his father, who had died in Auschwitz.

³ *Ibid.*, 25. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Claire Pajaczowska explores "the dysfunctional amnesia that impedes recognition of the links between subjective and historical realities" through three works: a site-specific installation by Lubaina Himid in the CUBE Gallery in Manchester, a brick wall in Deptford, and W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*. Her analysis of these projects describes how a work of art can conceal and/or reveal the histories behind its making. Considering the

Deptford wall, she notes, “the building of a memorial may serve to focus attention on just one place, thereby relieving the culture of a more widespread and individuated historical memory.” Her inquiry leads to a comparison of urbanity with suburbanity and their effects on the formation of personal identity. Where urbanity consists of a group condition giving birth to the individual, the author asserts, suburbanity consists of a (maternal) condition from which one must escape to gain individuation. Pajackowska concludes with the observation of suburbia as a culture of latency rather than oblivion: “Boredom means latency and latency is a pregnant silence quite different from the mute silence of oblivion.” Latency, she describes, is a childhood phase during which ‘nothing happens,’ a ‘trauma of eventlessness.’ As such, she finds a psychoanalytic silver lining in the cloudy future of the suburbs. Perhaps this reader finds the cup less than half full, but if traumas (painful or marvelous) are vital to establishing memories, will Pajackowska’s optimistic interpretation of eventlessness find purchase beyond theoretical supposition?

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49. In the third article on Manchester, England, Crinson and Tyrer sharpen focus on the area of Ancoats, “the first industrial suburb,” whose form was “...unplanned but driven by the logic of profit.” Embodying “the intensely claustrophobic, inhuman, and alienating effects of modernization,” Ancoats was largely untouched by Victorian attempts at humanizing public spaces, such as may be found in the center of Manchester. In their critique of recent renewal projects in Ancoats, Crinson and Tyrer describe how “concepts of heritage time and developers’ time with their seemingly contradictory attitudes to the past—one preserving memory, the other demolishing it—are only apparently opposed.” They chastise planners and developers for using memory “to aestheticize and co-opt the past into new forms of place-making,” and for their advocacy of a design sensibility that celebrates “the defeat of the past at the same time as it appears to mourn it.” The authors offer several examples where heritage strategies to preserve “characteristic” architectural features and legislate material selection achieved the opposite of their intent, by precipitating unintentionally the demise of the very structures they aimed to protect. Implicitly, Crinson and Tyrer caution against an oversimplified bureaucratization of development and preservation procedures, invoking Michel Serres’s argument that time is not a linear flow of monuments and events, but rather a simultaneous “percolation” of past, present and future: “Ancoats is not merely ‘post-industrial,’ certain of its industrial forms are no more obsolescent (as a modernist might believe) as its modernisms are anachronistic.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 93. Adrian Forty explores the association of concrete with modernity and its current ubiquity in the design of memorials. Through an analysis of three twentieth-century memorials, Forty traces the evolution in the application of the material: “It was not for memory-bearing properties as such that concrete was chosen as a medium for memorials, but rather for contingent reasons: for cost, to make monolithic objects, for its nature-suppressing qualities, its political associations [...]” At first, concrete prompted experiential associations seen as counter to memory: its neutrality in color, its muteness and anonymity, its mutability, its ‘artificialness,’ its ‘modernity.’ But after a century of use, it is perhaps *precisely* for all these reasons, Forty speculates, that concrete is “particularly suited to mental projection and reflection.” Interestingly, one of the primary qualities of concrete—its capacity to preserve impressions from its formwork—was at first seen as a problem, and even modernists such as Walter Gropius (following WWI) specified that the concrete for the Märzgefallenen Memorial be hammer-finished as if it were stone. While early advocates admired the seamless, mutable character of concrete and capitalized on its lower costs (as compared with stone and bronze), they nonetheless willed concrete to convey the essence of a monolithic block of stone. Not until after WWII did concrete emerge as a material in its own right, as a material whose neutrality might better memorialize the destructiveness of war than the traditional figures of stone and bronze, which tended to glorify national identities (and foreshadow further warfare). Observing the twists and contradictions in the evolving iconography of the material, Forty notes: “Whatever concrete strives to do it invariably manages to be, at the same time, the opposite.” Are the characteristics of concrete applicable to the notion of memory and its mutability in the debates and practices of development and preservation?

⁶ *Ibid.*, 101. Tyrer and Crinson apply Freud’s model of totemism to illustrate the transition of the industrial city to the post-industrial city. The totem of “new architectural forms, materials, detailing and other symbols that *reproduce the industrialism that has been torn down* [authors’ emphasis]...help to smooth over the dramatic rupture between the two periods of economic production.” Drawing parallels between the two conditions (the voiceless women in Freud’s patrimonial model become the voiceless working-class in the industrial city), the authors use the Trafford Park district of Manchester to illustrate a method of foregrounding

issues of class “as it is expressed spatially,” and to draw “attention to the way development fetishises particular elements of industrial production at the same time as it suppresses others.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132. I include only the following comment from Williams’s discussion of the modern gallery and its embrace of the marginal as reason enough to inspire a reading: “Where Tate Liverpool very consciously evokes the past, and Tate Modern obliterates it, Tramway does both simultaneously.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, 148. John Phillips considers memory and forgetting in Singapore’s history and planning by comparing the writing of Rem Koolhaas and the poetry of Arthur Yap: “If [the Singaporian] Yap addresses the outside from the partial anthropocentric perspective of inhabitant, then [Rem] Koolhaas comes across as the outsider looking down on all he surveys.” Koolhaas’s interpretation of the *tabula rasa* metaphor to indict Singapore’s city planning and governance falls under Phillips’s scrutiny: while Koolhaas views the erasure of the built fabric as the erasure of cultural history, Phillips cites Yap’s poetry for its more subtle assessment of *tabula rasa* as a writing tablet: “a writing tablet needs to be erased before the new inscriptions can be composed.” This is less an absolute erasure than a continuous sliding of meanings and uses of the urban fabric, which (as Baudelaire is referenced), “changes faster than a human heart.” These changes are cumulative in daily life, endlessly juxtaposing familiar with unfamiliar stimuli. Here, Phillips provocatively suggests that “consciousness...functions not for the reception or perception of stimuli—which would...become permanent traces and as such the basis of memory—but for protection *against* overwhelming stimuli.”

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170. Neil Leach’s essay embodies in its sound composition the principles he seeks to understand: the mutual edification of the built environment and the formation of identity. “I want to argue that the destruction of these towers has had a radical impact on the American psyche, and that it is against the backdrop of the now absent twin towers that a new sense of American national identity seems to have been forged [...]. I hope to elucidate certain general principles about the potential of buildings and monuments...to symbolize a set of common values and define a collective sense of identity.” Leach argues convincingly how “identity is built upon a process of identification [that is] consolidated as those identifications are severed or come under threat.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195. In the final essay, Mark Crinson considers a series of recent artworks—primarily gallery installations—for their critical engagement “with the co-optation of memory to the advertising-speak of developers or to the *musee imaginaire* of the heritage lobby.” For Crinson, these projects represent alternative approaches to rethinking memory and the city that are research-driven, yet also “playful, quizzical, or self-reflexive.” While consciously giving rise to local histories and conditions that might be easily overlooked or forgotten, the works remain allusive and avoid asserting simplistic dialectical viewpoints, acting instead “as searching supplements and oblique commentaries.” It is as tempting as it is difficult to imagine how the nuances of subjective and objective interpretations manifest in these works might stimulate alternative practices of development and preservation.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, back cover.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii

¹⁶ Including the research of Lina Bolzoni, Mary Carruthers, Ivan Illich, and Jonathan Spence, among others.

¹⁷ Hugh of St. Victor, “De Tribus Maximis Circumstantiis Gestorum,” preface to *Chronica* (c. 1130), quoted here from Mary Carruthers, *Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 261.

¹⁸ Crinson, xviii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁰ Ivan Illich, “Mnemosyne: The Mold of Memory,” in *In the Mirror of the Past* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1992).

²¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Dei Visione Dei* (*The Vision of God*), trans. Emma Gurney Salter (New York: J.M. Dent, 1978).

²² W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Collins, 1992), 233.

²³ Crinson, xiv.