

Interference in the Interplay of Memory, Forgetting, and Time in Architecture

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“Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees.”¹

In the above cited quote attributed to Paul Valery, he argues that by temporarily forgetting the labels and preconceived ideas we attach to objects and experiences, we open ourselves to a deeper, more direct experience of the world, and the things we encounter in it. Indeed, such acts of forgetting are fundamental to an architect’s adaptation of existing buildings to new uses. Yet, discourse on the historical and contemporary reuse of buildings and found objects tends to focus upon questions concerning the conservation of the meaning, *genius loci*, or DNA associated with an existing structure’s forms, materials and spaces.² Often overlooked in these discussions is that not all existing materials and buildings can accommodate every new set of activities and architects must develop strategies for temporarily forgetting what Paul Ricoeur described as the world behind a work to speculate upon how its forms and spaces can contribute to a new world of activities and uses in front of it.³ These techniques take a variety of forms from selective erasure to masking, overwriting, and the reassembly of an existing edifice’s materials, forms, and spaces. Time’s influence on such activities is particularly evident in the introduction of two or more patterns to an existing edifice that creates a simultaneity of temporal definitions, past and present that interfere with one another. Examples of this temporal overlap are found at seventeenth-century Chiesa San Lorenzo in Miranda, built within the ancient Roman Temple of Antoninus and Faustina; the twentieth-century reconstructed Gothic window intersecting with its the sixteenth-century counterpart on the façade of the Bratislava Castle; and Gordon Matta-Clark’s 1975 *Conical Intersect*

¹ Paul Valery, quoted in Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

² See for example: Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome* (L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2003); Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venice & Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2019); Liliane Wong, *Adaptive Reuse* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017); Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2008); Sally Stone, *Undoing Buildings* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. J. B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 140.

as a space cut from the walls of a seventeenth-century Parisian apartment. As the observer's attention shifts from the form of the church to the temple or the space of Matta-Clark's intervention to that of the Parisian apartment, the former is held in a state of temporary amnesia and vice versa.

In this context the term 'interfere' means to hinder or prevent a process or activity from continuing or being used properly and derives from the mid-fifteenth century German word *enterferen*, meaning "to intermingle or mix (different things), interpose."⁴ We often encounter interference when listening to a radio as a buzzing noise, whine, or hiss caused by unwanted radio signals coming from transmitters on the same or similar frequency. In architecture interference occurs when two visual, structural, or spatial patterns share attributes but one obtains temporary dominance depending upon its use or the attention of the observer. In his essay "An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget it!" the Italian philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco meditated upon such multiplying of patterns as an approach to forgetting.⁵ Compared to the simultaneous presence of more than one figure in the *Kippbilder* of Joseph Jastrow,⁶ those juxtapositions between existing and new, past and present at the Chiesa San Lorenzo in Miranda, Bratislav Castle or Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* challenge the idea of time in architecture as exemplifying neither the linearity of Chronos nor the opportunism of Kairos but a dynamic interplay that has forgetting as its cause.

In literature on memory and forgetting, the latter is regarded as the hero and forgetting is the villain. Yet as Ricoeur has argued in his study *Memory, History and Forgetting*, memory and forgetting are two sides of one process which give shape to in our experience, thought and imagination in terms of past, present and future.⁷ By intervening with the linear progression of time in the making, use and inevitable decay of existing buildings and found objects, interference can disrupt these narratives and introduce a more dynamic and multifaceted experience of time.

⁴ The word 'interference' was coined by Thomas Young in 1801. Thomas Young, "On the mechanism of the eye" in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 91 (1801), 23–88 + plates.

⁵ Umberto Eco, "An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget It!" *PMLA* 103, no. 3 (May 1988): 254–61.

⁶ Joseph Jastrow, *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Houghton: Mifflin and Co, 1900), 275 and 295.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Using film as an example, Walter Benjamin argued in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that techniques like montage and editing contrast sharply with the linear progression inherent in traditional art forms like painting and theatre.⁸ By decoupling time from its linear constraints, Benjamin posited that under the knife of the director, the editing of film and here we include architecture, can foster new ways of understanding and experiencing history, memory, and time. The architect thus similarly disrupts the historical narrative of an existing edifice by actively cutting into it and introducing new spatial patterns into its forms and structure by creating a multiplicity of presences that have forgetting as their cause. Compared to passive forms of forgetting in which spaces are created in an edifice because of neglect and curated decay like those at Orford Ness,⁹ cuts that introduce new patterns can interfere with the user’s attention that shifts from past to present, old to new, one spatial or formal pattern to another. Such shifts of attention, challenge way we think about the reuse of existing structures from a question of memory to one of forgetting.

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⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211-244.

⁹ Caitlin DeSilvey, “Orderly Decay: Philosophies of Nonintervention,” Chapter 4 in *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 75-95, specifically 75-77, n. 1.