



WHAT IF? WHAT NEXT?

SPECULATIONS ON HISTORY'S FUTURES

SESSION 2A

ROUTES TO THE PAST

**Critical, Cultural or Commercial: Intersections
Between Architectural History and Heritage**

TO CITE THIS PAPER | [Matthew Mindrup](#). "Prolegomena to an Art of Forgetting in Architecture." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand: 37, What If? What Next? Speculations on History's Futures*, edited by Kate Hislop and Hannah Lewi, 216-226. Perth: SAHANZ, 2021. Accepted for publication December 11, 2020.

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND (SAHANZ)
VOLUME 37**

Convened by The University of Western Australia School of Design,
Perth, 18-25 November, 2020

Edited by Kate Hislop and Hannah Lewi

Published in Perth, Western Australia, by SAHANZ, 2021

ISBN: 978-0-646-83725-3

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PROLEGOMENA TO AN ART OF FORGETTING IN ARCHITECTURE

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In contemporary practice, the retrofitting and repurposing of buildings is frequently touted an attractive alternative to new construction in terms of historic preservation, sustainability and a circular economy. For the preservationist, historically significant structures are important loci of individual and collective memory while for an architect those same memories must be held in suspension, albeit forgotten in their search for strategies that will permit their reuse.

A demonstration of this conundrum between memory and forgetting is given by Umberto Eco who, one afternoon while having a few glasses of wine with friends, decided to invent a number of imaginary disciplines including the art of forgetting which he called ars oblivians. In a conference paper which he penned on the subject, Eco finds that there can be no art of forgetting as the counterpart of the art of memory since all signs produce presences, not absences. Eco however, came to the discovery that through “multiplying presences” one can produce a befuddlement of memory that in turn has forgetfulness as its consequence.

In architecture, this confusion of identities is not as a simple matter of covering up but an inventive act of overwriting, interference, re-occupation and re-assembly whose aim is to counter the factual in remaking the meaning of things. In the realm of architecture, this paper explores a history of forgetting in architectural practice by examining the theoretical and physical mechanisms which permit existing structures that have exhausted their perceived utilitarian or cultural value to acquire new roles and identities.

Introduction

Situated prominently in the Roman Forum is the fourteenth-century Chiesa di San Lorenzo in Miranda, built within the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina. This reoccupation of the temple by a church occurred in the seventh century, when Roman structures were appropriated by the Catholic Church in an effort to suppress the memory of pagan religions.¹ Today such repurposing of buildings is frequently touted as an attractive alternative to new construction in terms of historic preservation, sustainability, and a “circular economy”.² For the preservationist, historically significant structures are important loci of individual and collective memory; for an architect, those same memories must be held in suspension, albeit forgotten in the search for strategies that will permit their reuse.³ (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Chiesa di San Lorenzo in Miranda (Tempio di Antonino e Faustina) in the Roman Forum in Rome, Italy; © Alamy Stock Photo.

A demonstration of the conundrum which occurs in this relationship between memory and forgetting is given by Umberto Eco, who, one afternoon while having a few glasses of wine with friends, decided to invent a number of imaginary disciplines—including the art of forgetting, which he called *ars oblivianalis*. In a conference paper penned on the subject, Eco finds that there can be no art of forgetting as the counterpart of the art of memory, since all signs produce presences, not absences.⁴ Eco, however, came to discover that through “multiplying presences” one can produce a befuddlement of memory that in turn has forgetfulness as its consequence.⁵

In architecture, this confusion of identities is not a simple matter of covering up but is instead an inventive act whose aim is to counter the factual in remaking the meaning of things. The term *forgetting*, as used here, refers to strategies of adding to, removing, or reorienting an existing structure’s forms, spaces, or materials by overwriting, interfering with, reoccupying, or assembling them so that their original identity is disremembered and a new one can be ascribed to them. The reuse of a structure is an important method of mitigating climate change and global warming by reducing the energy spent on the transformation of nonrenewable resources into new buildings. While most current research on adaptive reuse considers the conservation of buildings or structures viewed as heritage sites, there are no design strategies for conceptualizing the reuse of existing structures, spaces, or building materials that lack perceived cultural and continued

utilitarian value.⁶ Further, of the few publications that do identify strategies towards adaptive reuse, they are categorized according to formal relationships between new and old (insertion within, building around, alongside, etc.).⁷ This article explores a history of forgetting in architectural practice by examining the theoretical and physical mechanisms which permit the forms and spaces of existing structures that have exhausted their perceived utilitarian or cultural value to acquire new roles and identities.

Erase and Replace

Any recollection or chronicling of the past involves selection, both deliberate and unintended. Choosing what to remember must also entail the choice of what to forget. This act is not like that of a doctor who amputates or replaces parts of a body that continues to function. Rather, to physically remove or replace words from a poem, elements of a painting, or parts of a building is to enable the entire work to change and acquire new meaning and uses.

One of the earliest employments of erasure in the arts was the expurgation of a name or portrait in political or cultural acts of censure. The ancient Egyptians thought that after death, the human soul could inhabit a statue or portrait of the dead person. It was believed that once damaged, a body part of the statue or portrait was no longer able to do its job; even more, its total effacement could aid the efforts of ambitious rulers (and would-be rulers) to rewrite history to their advantage.⁸ Similarly, elite members of Roman antiquity periodically chose to limit or destroy the memory of a leading member of society through *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory).⁹ This act of censure was not casual, for Senate approval was required to condemn the memory of a person as a tyrant, traitor, or other sort of enemy to the state. In physical terms, sanctions against the memory of an individual could lead to the removal or mutilation of portraits and public inscriptions, such as those showing or naming Emperor Geta.¹⁰

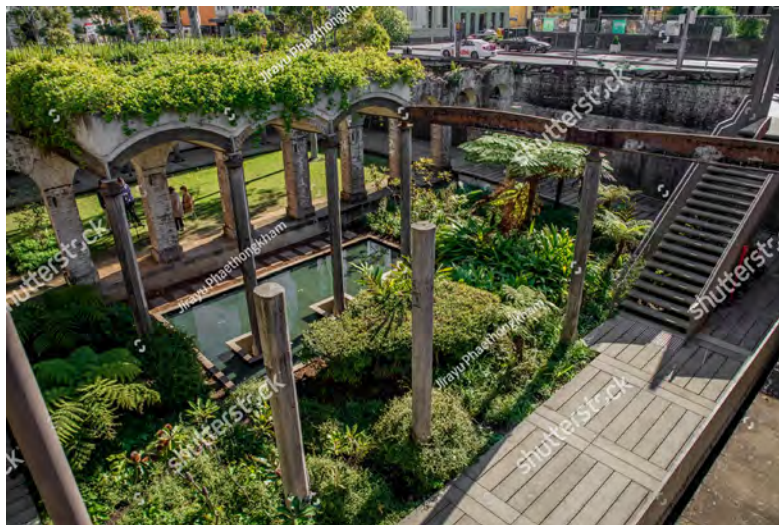


Figure 2. Paddington Reservoir Gardens or Walter Read Reserve in Sydney, NSW, Australia by Tonkin Zulaikha Greer and JMD Design. 2006; © Shutterstock photo.

The absence created by the removal or erasure of a name or image is not always just a matter of disremembering—it can also be an opportunity for generating new meanings with the remaining elements. This is exemplified by a series of artistic works from 1965 titled *Dictionary Columns*, in which the artist Doris Cross began experimenting with the opportunities that erasure and the replacement of paragraphs, sentences, or words could afford in the creation of new art.¹¹ In an act similar to an ancient Roman *damnatio memoriae*, Cross paints over or crosses out words from vertical columns of dictionary pages, not to condemn them but to trigger new relationships between either the words that remain at the head of the dictionary columns or the words remaining within them.

Comparable to the erasure of paragraphs, sentences, or words in a text, the removal of rooms, walls, or bricks in a building can transform the meaning and intention of an entire configuration. Through the selective removal and conservation of a nineteenth-century water reservoir in Sydney, Australia, Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects and JMD Design created the Paddington Reservoir Gardens in 2006 as a series of sheltered pergolas, lawns, flower gardens, and a pond surrounded by a precast concrete boardwalk.¹² Like the deletions in Cross's dictionary columns, erasures of the reservoir structure permitted the architects to develop new relationships between the parts and introduce new elements in the absences. (Fig. 2)

Already during Greek antiquity, philosophers questioned whether the exchange of elements from a work also constituted its erasure. In this vein is a thought experiment attributed to Plutarch that is known as the Ship of Theseus: he asked whether Theseus's ship remained fundamentally the same object if, over time, all of its individual boards were replaced.¹³ In his seminal nineteenth century work, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, the English art critic John Ruskin decidedly argues that no, a building is not the same after its stones have been replaced in the name of restoration, which he argues is "the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed."¹⁴ If Ruskin had his way and an edifice avoided the hands of a restorer, it might be similar to a book missing some of its pages that thereby requires its reader to imagine the absent connections. One solution to this dilemma is offered by the bright white, newly carved stones replacing the lost parts of the Parthenon, which aim to reconcile the opposition between erasure and exchange by conflating the past and present, memory and imagination, in the same structure.¹⁵

Although the initial impression of any erasure or exchange in a work of art or architecture is that an act of destruction has occurred, such a work can also be the site of invention. This is certainly the case for MVRDV's Crystal Houses on PC Hooftstraat in Amsterdam, completed in 2016. The housing and retail project involved the careful demolition of three existing buildings, followed by the meticulous construction of a near full-glass façade of glass blocks blended incrementally with traditional terra-cotta bricks higher up to mimic the original design, down to the layering of the bricks and the details of the window frames. As Winy Mass, an architect and cofounder of MVRDV, explained, "We said to the client, 'Let's bring back what will be demolished but develop it further.'"¹⁶ The resulting façade is not a prosthesis for something absent, nor a replacement of existing materials, but an exchange of fired clay for cast glass that transforms the structural mass into a translucent curtain of light. As in the previous examples, by considering the removal or exchange of one material, part, or section of a building, the identity of the entirety is momentarily forgotten, inviting the architect to speculate about new meanings and uses that the structure now affords. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Crystal Houses, by MVRDV, in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2016; © Daria Scagliola & Stijn Brakkee.

Overwriting, Masking and Interference

For anyone who has played a game of Scrabble, the feeling of frustration and surprise after an opponent transforms a word by adding a letter at either end is all too familiar. Suddenly, and for the rest of the game, the original word is no longer relevant. It hasn't disappeared, but the letters are sublimated into a new configuration and its meaning overwritten. At first glance, it would seem counterintuitive that the addition of words, materials, or elements to a thing would cause an observer to disremember its presence. But this was the beginning for the uses of cosmetics as a method for enhancing bodily features; perfumes, for hiding foul smells; and spices, for transforming tastes. These treatments are, as this section will show, also analogous to overwriting, masking, and interfering with the formal and spatial meanings of existing structures in the history in art and architecture.

A particularly widespread practice of overwriting in the arts was the early Christian sublimation of important pagan celebrations, including Saturnalia and Brumalia into Christmas and carnival into Lent.¹⁷ In her book *The Craft of Thought*, Mary Carruthers describes this activity as “crowding”: when too many similar images, events, or spaces overlap one another in a given location, they “will confuse and even cancel one another out.”¹⁸ In architectural terms, this was an act of *translatio* (from *transferre*, “to carry over, transfer”) for early Christians; thus, for example, the meaning of the Roman basilica as a familiar center of public power with a hall for public meetings and an apse at one end for dispensing the law was translated into a Christian religious structure for large religious gatherings, which emphasized axially the importance of the liturgy.¹⁹

Less subtle than overwriting one architectural program with another is the integration of an existing formal or spatial pattern into an entirely new matrix. In an essay exploring a theory of remodeling existing structures, Rodolfo Machado proposed the idea of a palimpsest to describe the way a structure may be “retrofitted,” “recycled,” or “rewritten.”²⁰ In this context, however, the term *palimpsest* is confusing, as it traditionally refers to remnants of words or drawings, like those for the Cathedral of Reims, whose ink has been scraped from a manuscript so that its folios can be reused.²¹ By contrast, overwriting is a creative act of repurposing the formal and spatial characteristics of an existing structure. A familiar example of this approach in the arts is Pablo Picasso's 1902 *La Miséreuse accroupie* (*The Crouching Beggar*), in which a landscape scene from another artist was painted over and the curves of a mountain were incorporated into the back of a crouching, cloaked woman. In architectural terms, the aim of overwriting is to disremember the roles ascribed to the formal and spatial attributes of an existing structure in order to integrate them into a new set of uses and meanings. This approach to adaptive reuse is exemplified by Leon Battista Alberti's design for the completion of the Santa Maria Novella facade, begun during the thirteenth century in the Gothic style.²² Taking his inspiration from the dimensions of the niches and pointed arches on either side of the portal, Alberti used their measurements to define a classically inspired pyramidal configuration of three squares, a frieze, and a pediment circumscribed by (an imaginary) square. The primary aim of this new arrangement was to create a sense of *concinnitas* or, as Rudolf Wittkower argued, *eurythmia* which he defines as “a uniform system of proportion throughout all parts of a building.”²³ Herzog & de Meuron employed a similar tactic with the façade of the former three-story Mediodía power station in their CaixaForum Arts Center project in Madrid, Spain. After removing the base and reoccupying the entire building with a new seven-story structure, the architects sought to unify the new façade, which extended some three stories beyond the power station, by using the edges of its bricked-up windows, doors, and openings to define the ridges and valleys of the new rusted steel superstructure above.

To take another example, mask making has long played an important role in art and architecture as a means of imparting a new identity to an existing person or place. In primitive culture, a mask is a key prop in rituals, not just giving its bearer the appearance of a character but also serving as a catalyst to transform them into the personality the mask represents.²⁴ This was the intention of the sixteenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio's so-called Basilica Palladiana in Vicenza, Italy. Tasked with the reconstruction of a medieval structure known as Palazzo della

Ragione, Palladio proposed to cover the entirety with a new outer shell of marble classical forms, a loggia and a portico. Palladio's solution was to repurpose a window motif known as a *serliana* as a loggia that is, a structure composed of an open, true arch flanked by two lateral rectangular openings, the latter of variable breadth and thus capable of absorbing the differences in bay widths.²⁵ Palladio wants the loggia's bearer—like an actor wearing a mask on stage—to become the building he includes in his *Four Books on Architecture*. A survey of the extant structure shows how different these two actually are. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Basilica Palladiana, by Andrea Palladio in Vicenza, Italy, 1546-49.

Standing a stone's throw from another Italian piazza, Siena's popular Piazza Del Campo, are the remains of an abandoned, half-complete cathedral, the so-called Duomo Nuovo around the extant Santa Maria Assunta. Originally intended to replace the Santa Maria Assunta by incorporating its nave as the transept for a new, larger structure, the project was abandoned when significant structural defects began to emerge.²⁶ What is remarkable is that both structures' formal and spatial characteristics retain their independence and interfere with each other's presence. In 1963, Robert Slutzsky and Colin Rowe introduced the concept of phenomenal transparency to describe this multiplying of presences in art and architecture.²⁷ Unlike the literal transparency of light through a substance, phenomenal transparency occurs when, as Gyorgy Kepes explains in *Language of Vision*, "one sees two or more figures overlapping one another, and each of them claims for itself the common overlapped part."²⁸ Le Corbusier's painting *Still Life* (1920) demonstrates this condition of transparency at the moment when the circular plate overlaps with the sound hole of a guitar. However, as Andy Goldsworthy's alignment of broken stone tiles for *Faultline* (2005) demonstrates, to create a befuddlement of presences it is not necessary that the formal and spatial attributes of each rock are overlapped in space; what matters here is that each of their broken edges contributes to the entire line of the crack. An example of this approach to interfering with the intended use of an existing structure is the organically shaped ten-story-high atrium that Heatherwick Studio removed from the cylindrical concrete silos of a disused concrete grain silo complex for its Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (2017). Much as Goldsworthy's broken stones or Corbusier's guitar sound hole showed, interference is not intended to erase or hide the historic structure or its parts but instead ascribes a new use for them as necessary elements in defining a new space. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, South Africa by Heatherwick Studio, 2017; © Iwan Baan.

Re/again

There is a certain novelty or surprise experienced as one discovers while using an object or place that it was originally intended for some other purpose. The familiar picture of a duck and rabbit, taken from the Polish American psychologist Joseph Jastrow's *Fact and Fable in Psychology*, illustrates this duplicity of meanings.²⁹ Some see the image as a duck, which becomes a rabbit only when they are shown how viewing its bill as a pair of rabbit's ears transforms the entirety into the head of a rabbit. The lines on the paper have not changed; rather, their meaning in the entire composition has changed in the same way that the bicycle seat in Pablo Picasso's *Bull's Head* (1942) becomes a bull's head, or the lawn in Le Corbusier's *l'appartement de Beistegui* roof terrace becomes a carpet when it meets a fireplace on the parapet.³⁰ For an architect adapting existing architectural form, space, and material to new purposes, the aim is not to "see as" but to "see in" the object or place an ability to be "reused as" something else.



Figure 6. Boekhandel Selexyz Dominicanen, by Merckx-Girold in Maastricht, Netherlands, 1998; © Alamy Stock Photo.

The conservation of an existing structure by ascribing a new purpose to it is an important approach to retaining its cultural value. The challenge of finding a suitable new use for these structures is that architectural forms and spaces are not well-suited for every activity without significant alteration. Subtle interventions, like those in the artist Banksy's *Hammer Boy* (2013), seek to extend an existing object's or place's meanings. This is the approach as taken by Amsterdam architects Merckx and Girod in their reuse of a thirteenth-century Dominican church for their 1998 Boekhandel Selexyz Dominicanen project in Maastricht, the Netherlands. In order to not just preserve the heritage significance of the structure but also to satisfy the requirements of commercial square footage, the architects erected a two-story, black perforated steel "bookcase" that winds itself around one side of the nave and transforms the church into a monastery library or reading room as if it had always been that way. This duality of meanings is a boon for historic preservationists, since it makes possible the simultaneous appreciation of what Paul Ricoeur refers to as a world both behind and in front of the work.³¹ (Fig. 6)

In architectural terms, a *world* refers not to the planet but to a system of meanings for and events that a group of people experience at any given place throughout a day, year, or lifetime. The world behind a structure or place would be the historical causes that brought it to its current state, including the materials; their methods of transformation, applications, and purpose; the social, religious, or economic activities for which the structure was intended; and so on.³² But an architect seeking to find a new use for the existing structure will attend to the world in front of it by asking how the physical and cultural world behind a work will contribute to a new set of uses.³³ This process is exemplified by the New York City High Line Park project designed by the New York firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro in collaboration with the landscape architects James Corner Field Operations and Piet Oudolf. The park occupies the former West Side elevated rail line, which had been out of use since the early 1980s. Inspired by the wild overgrown landscape of the abandoned line, the team sought to create a promenade through discrete units of original rails, paving, and planting along its 1.5 miles with a variety of gradients and surfaces, from 100 percent paving to 100 percent vegetated biotopes. As was true of the overgrown rail line encountered by the architects at the beginning of the project, the original use of the structure is neither completely forgotten nor completely present. The world behind the work as a rail line is retained in the new world that the architects and its users create for it as a park.

This approach to the reuse and display of architectural building materials was important in the *translatio* of political and pagan meanings in early Christian structures. At the same time as the above-mentioned Lateran Basilica was being built, Constantine was also overseeing the erection of his triumphal arch (315 C.E.), in which newly fashioned works were deliberately integrated with spolia reliefs from the times of the emperors Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, along with imperial portraits refashioned to resemble Constantine, in order to demonstrate how his rule both grew out of the past and also stood for its renewal.³⁴ During the Middle Ages, the recycling of building materials was always practiced wherever there were some good stones or beams lying handy. In the construction of Christian basilicas, reused building materials—for example, the marble revetments bearing inscriptions employed as paving for the sixth-century lower church of San Clemente and the twelfth-century San Giovanni a Porta Latina—were to be stripped "error bare" of their pagan origins and their profane use.³⁵ Another possibility was appropriating and hollowing out large marble capitals to be reused as holy water stoups. Although the original function of such items remained visible in their new contexts, the meanings associated with these objects were disremembered by their creative reemployment with new uses. As in the Eleventh Century Casa dei Crescenzi in Rome, the importance of spolia in these structures is less a question of how well they satisfy a new function than of how clearly, they are a sign of place.³⁶

During the early twentieth century, a handful of German artists and architects began to experiment with, and develop theories to explain their use of, natural or manufactured objects that are found aesthetically satisfying and are used as material to create art or architecture. One of the earliest of these is the Merz artist and amateur architect Kurt Schwitters, who assembled found materials in two and three dimensions as collages, sculpture, and architecture that he called a Merzbau. The foundational idea of his Merz oeuvre was that all physical things had an

Eigengift (own poison) or identity that must be *Entmaterialisiert* (dematerialized) in the imagination of their user so that they may be used as material for making art or architecture.³⁷ This dematerialization is comparable to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl's concept of *Einklammerung* (bracketing), which describes a suspension of judgment about the natural world to examine phenomena as they are originally given to consciousness.³⁸ In a collage novel titled *Une semaine de bonté* (*A Week of Kindness*, 1934), Max Ernst created 182 images to compare this process of *Einklammerung* in reusing found objects as art to the alchemical process of transubstantiation.³⁹ Taking its inspiration from the Aristotelian theory of the four elements, alchemy conceived of a *prima materia* (first material) from which all things were created; an adept was believed to be able to return materials like lead to this primitive form in order to refashion them as gold.⁴⁰ It is this transmutation of material that Ernst extended to the transubstantiation of found objects in their assembly as art.⁴¹ In contemporary architecture, transubstantiation occurs when building materials that have exhausted their intended use value take on new roles. Examples of this practice include Rural Studio's scaling of car windshields into a glass curtainwall façade for its Community Center at Masons Bend, Alabama, or the reuse of black plastic seats to create a sun screen for CHYBIK + KRISTOF's Gallery of Furniture in Brno-Vinohrady, Czech Republic. (Fig. 7)



Figure 7. Community Centre at Mason's Bend by Auburn University Rural Studio in Mason's Bend Alabama, 2000; © Timothy Hursley.

Coda

The built environment contains important loci of individual and collective memory. Yet an architect tasked with adapting an existing structure to a new use must hold any personal, cultural, or political associations attributed to it in suspension in order to search for strategies that will permit its forms, spaces, or materials to take on new roles and identities. To look at the reuse and retrofitting of an existing structure in this way means to “reshape” current notions about adaptive reuse from a strategy of remembering to one of forgetting. Further, it is to understand the mutability of causes that are factors in attributing a new significance to an existing structure, place, or building material. That is to say, to study forgetting in the arts and architecture is to study the substance of things, much as the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon explicates in his theory of Individuation, meaning is emergent in the form-taking activity rather than as given in advance.⁴² When an architect engages in selective acts of erasure, overwriting, masking, interference, and assemblage, they intend to forget the meanings and intentions of an existing structure in order to invite speculation about what new opportunities can be afforded.

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