

**MNEMOSYNE VS MIMESIS**  
**On Memory in Architecture**

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## MNEMOSYNE VS MIMESIS

### On Memory in Architecture

Memory is an indispensable tool for all architects. An architect without memory is worthless or less than worthless.

When speaking of memory in Architecture, people generally associate it with mimesis, the direct imitation of past models. Architects have done this time and time again, believing that by means of mimesis, the pastiche, they will be able to resolve the problems posed by new architecture when it must be inserted into an historic city-scape. Many politicians have understood it as such and so encouraged it. Today, architects of this ilk are uniformly applauded by an ignorant society that, having forgotten the ebb and flow of history, protests any new action.

When I propose memory as an indispensable instrument for architecture, I actually refer to Mnemosyne,<sup>1</sup> the Titan daughter of Gaia and Uranus who after spending nine nights with Zeus, spawned the nine muses that contemplate us today. Our rebellious Mnemosyne is far from the docile Mimesis who can't depart from her scripted lines. That Mimesis, which Aristotle calls "*imitation of nature in classical art*", has resulted all too often in mere imitation or the literal copying of forms that belong to various and sundry historical styles.



That said, it is important to realize that the architecture of the historical city is a still living history. In fact, it's more than that: as a faithful reflection of its time of construction, I argue that architecture is the motor which also drives the history of cities. If Rome is the Pantheon, Bernini, and Piacentini, it is simultaneously also Richard Meier and Zaha Hadid, much in the way that if Madrid is Sabatini, the Marques of Salamanca, and Sáenz de Oiza, Lisbon must be equally Pombal and Siza.

We could compare the indispensable tool of memory to a treasure chest from which architects continually extract material to be used appropriately. To distill its best essences while always striving to place new treasures in the chest.

Becoming a true architect, then, requires an enormous amount of knowledge and wisdom whose largest part consists in history and whose natural locus is memory. One retrieves the knowledge which is necessary to distill, along with other vital ingredients, the materials for making the artistic creation of architecture.

Far from anchoring him in the past, memory inspires the architect to soar up and fly into the future by supporting himself in it. Reinhold Martin fittingly diagnoses the architect's relationship with memory in his book *Utopia's Ghost* where, besides providing a very accurate image of the current situation in which "*there may indeed be no escape from this hall of mirrors*", he concedes an encouraging role to history in the creation of future Architecture: "*With such a turning of the tables, history itself, far from having come to an end, would also turn and return in the feedback loops of a slightly offset periodicity. Caught in these loops, we may eventually realize that if the post in postmodernism means anything, it means learning to live with ghosts, including the ghosts of futures past and present, the ghosts of others alive and dead, and with them, the ghosts of our former selves. It means, in other words, learning to think the thought called Utopia once again*".

## ARTISTIC CREATION

Many people confuse artistic creativity with wild gestures, ingenious inventions, or capricious forms. On the contrary, as noted above, truly artistic creativity like architecture requires an immense amount of background knowledge and wisdom for which the young architect will need to sacrifice his time and immediate ambition to be praised for his new ideas. Wisdom and knowledge reside in the memory.

Goya conserves all of Rembrandt's work in his memory, and vividly so. However, though Goya knew Rembrandt well, no one would dare claim that he simply copied him. According to Goya's son, Goya claimed himself that one of his genuine teachers was Rembrandt, who preceded him by a century. Likewise, according to his friends, Picasso reported that when he worked in the studio, he felt all the great masters of the past there with him, Rembrandt among them. For both Goya and Picasso, Rembrandt was a kind of living ancestor in their memory.

It is not accidental, then, that the two great masters of modern architecture, Le Corbusier<sup>2</sup> and Mies van der Rohe<sup>3</sup> had their photos proudly taken in front of the Parthenon. They never copied it, but it was always alive in their memory.



The best works by architects, those remembered by posterity, are their most mature works. Mature works, and by “mature” I mean the late works of an artist made with time and memory, are extremely rare in our present day.



## CPU

In this computer age there is an obvious comparison between Memory and the CPU,<sup>4</sup> that Central Processing Unit without which a computer is nothing. Like a person with Alzheimer’s, who through loss of memory can hardly do anything. And if a computer without CPU is nothing and proves to be innocuous, then an architect without Memory should send a shiver down our spines. It is that dangerous. Almost all the rubbish and whimsical nonsense that we see constructed today is the fruit of a lack of memory on the part of some architects, their lack of culture. Because Memory is, in effect, Culture. And Architecture deeply rooted in Memory is artistic creation, is Culture.



As Cicero said: *“Not to know what happened before you were born is to be a child forever”*.

## BACHELARD

Far from limiting our imagination, Memory awakens and complements it.

*“All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home, because there Memory and Imagination are joined to intensify each other mutually. In the order of values, they both constitute a community of Memory and Image. Thus the house is not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places of our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. Thus the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind. Without it, man would be a dispersed being.”*

These sound words from Gaston Bachelard's seminal text for architects, *The Poetics of Space*, speak clearly to the need for memory. In discussing the centrality of the home as metaphor for all inhabited, hence social, space, Bachelard underscores the mutually intensifying relationship between memory and imagination. Bachelard repeats what we had said before, but with words of greater authority and beauty. We can qualify as "deracinated" those architects who, with excess imagination and inadequate memory, erect those monsters to the fanfare and acclaim of the uncultivated masses of our society. Imaginative architecture centered in memory is the wheat of artistic creation; outside of it the chaff.

## EXAMPLES

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The wonderful and gigantic Pitti Palace<sup>5</sup> in Florence, although attributed to Brunelleschi, was actually erected in its original design by Luca Fancelli in 1458. Almost a century later, in 1549, Vasari enlarged it, repeating its already existing elements. Similarly, after a competition in 1616, Giulio Parigi remodeled it, only to be enlarged once again in the 18th century by Giuseppe Ruggieri. In all its permutations, the mechanism used, in one way or another, was that of mimesis which clearly guarantees the linguistic continuity of the whole.

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However, here we must insist upon the value of Mnemosyne over Mimesis, so let us consider contemporary examples of good use of memory in architecture, drawing from Spanish and Portuguese works.

When Juan Navarro Baldeweg designs the Convention Center of Salamanca, the masterfully distilled memory of the suspended dome of Sir John Soane's Museum in London effectively collaborates in making it a wonderful space.<sup>6</sup>

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When Portuguese master, Alvaro Siza, makes the Boa Nova restaurant in Oporto,<sup>7</sup> one of his first works, the presence of Alvar Aalto in its spatial conception and details does not detract one bit from its originality or extraordinary quality.

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When Eduardo Souto erects the Burgo Tower<sup>8</sup> in Oporto, its strong Miesian flavor does not in any way detract from the originality and quality of his architecture.

## FUTURE

Not only are the roots of Architecture to be found in Memory, in the past, but the future of Architecture also calls for Memory.

Architecture's desire to endure depends upon its ability to last in the memory of men. *Le Dur désir de durer*, the difficult desire for duration, the will to last that Paul Eluard considered the first impulse of poetic creation, belongs to every artistic creation, and particularly to architecture. As the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade so eloquently put it: "*I have tired of being modern; now I want to be eternal*".

To walk one must always have one foot in the air and to leap, both feet. To make architecture of our time is to leap forward with both feet. As this operation shows, without memory of past, present, and future, imagination becomes either too free or too regulated. Memory, the awareness of time, functions like this in architecture. Far from being a hindrance, it intensifies and complements imagination, as we have just read in Bachelard.

An architect who wishes to make the most cutting-edge architecture today must deeply work with memory like that generous Mnemosyne of yesterday. With the help of Zeus he will conceive wonderful buildings to house the muses, and so make us mortals happy.

## ADDENDA

Naturally, in my works, sometimes obviously and sometimes more subtly, memory of history effectively intervenes.

In the headquarters of the Caja Granada Savings Bank,<sup>9</sup> the four large columns match in height, diameter, and distance between them with the columns of Diego de Siloe's Cathedral of Granada a marvelous Renaissance piece built nearly five centuries ago. The latter of stone, its counterpart with reinforced concrete: nonetheless both constructions are equally capable of moving us profoundly when we stand before them, and when we are in them; even more so when the sun shines across them both. Bathed in sunlight, as if they were musical instruments and the sun were the musician, they create heavenly music in glorious harmony.

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The relationship with the Cathedral of Granada was something I discovered *a posteriori*. Following a visit to the Cathedral, I was so overwhelmed by the wealth of coincidences that I asked the architect in charge of the restoration work for a copy of the plans. When I transferred both sets of plans to the same scale the coincidences were so extraordinary that they could only be explained by the mechanisms of Memory.<sup>10</sup>

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And in Andalusia's Museum of Memory, also in Granada, to dominate the elliptical courtyard with a circular ramp, I decided from the start to take the dimensions and proportions of the circular courtyard of the Palace of Charles V by Pedro Machuca in the Alhambra.<sup>11</sup> Having visited it numerous times, I discovered how, in addition to its stylistic values, there was also a tremendously effective physical component to the space. In this courtyard, its dimensions and the proportions are such that from any point, even the most removed, the entire space always fits in our angle of vision.<sup>12</sup>

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I often make my students do a test where, putting their open hands at eye level, they must retract them to the side, always at the same level, until they disappear from sight. There is a precise point of greatest visual angle, a magical moment, just before they disappear. That is what Machuca uses in his courtyard for Charles V and what I use in my own: the visual control of the space is materialized by the viewer himself. It is a very simple mechanism that history teaches us and that we can continue using, guided by Memory.

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Also present through Memory in that spiral ramp is Lubetkin's penguin pool ramp at the London Zoo.<sup>13</sup> Although on quite a different scale I use the device of a circular ramp within an elliptical courtyard open to the sky. The combination of upward movement with the compression-dilation of the walls achieves a remarkable spatial effect.<sup>14</sup>

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And in my most recent work in Zamora, the recourse to memory was immediate. We made a stone box with high walls out of the same stone as that used in the Cathedral of Zamora which stands directly across from our site.<sup>15</sup> And, as testimony to our time, we opted to erect the largest stone possible that could be cut from the quarries. In the corner, like a true cornerstone, we placed a piece measuring nearly three by two meters that made the intention of our operation unmistakable.<sup>16</sup>

16



Like the glass sheets inside, measuring six by three meters –the largest that technology allows us to manufacture at this moment.<sup>17</sup> In any event, along with the most advanced technology, the mechanism is that of memory, Mnemosyne, to produce a work in accordance with our time.



The memory of works from the near past also influences architects. I'm not referring here to the usual formal influence of the most fashionable architecture which is soon forgotten. I refer, rather, to the healthy influence of the most recent masters.



And so, with the help of Mnemosyne, I turned to Farnsworth House<sup>18</sup> in Plano, Illinois for my most recent American house, the Olnick Spanu House in Garrison, New York.<sup>19</sup> However, though they share many features, (namely total transparency, light, white structure, horizontality, and the operation of underlining the landscape), there are many other aspects that differentiate them.



While Farnsworth House stands like a raft, unattached to the terrain, floating in the air, Olnick Spanu House, in contrast, is anchored to the earth by means of the strong podium, so that it is moored to the terrain.

Where Farnsworth House has an indefinite space, open to the woods equally in four directions, Olnick Spanu House has a dominant focus of juxtaposition as it stands on high over the Hudson River, to which it opens on the west, producing an overpowering view of extraordinary beauty.

While the structure, the white pillars, of Farnsworth House restrict the entire house along its exterior edge, caging it in, the pillars of Olnick Spanu House appear inside and outside, so that the roof expands out in all directions.

While the glass plates of Farnsworth House extend from pillar to pillar, in Olnick Spanu House they are unconnected to the structure. Furthermore, in our house the band of pillars in the front is outside of the glass box, and the band in the back is inside, accentuating the sense of transparency even more. We did this before at the Centro BIT in Inca, on the island of Mallorca.

While the pillars of Farnsworth House are laminated extrusions painted in white, marking a clear direction, the pillars of Olnick Spanu House are circular, also white, but marking all and no directions at once.