

ON THE MEMORY OF THE ARCHITECT

Memory. Aula ingenti memoriae

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“Memory is the faculty of the mind that stores and remembers the past”. That is how it is defined by the Spanish Royal Academy. Memory is a necessary tool, essential for every creator, and especially for every architect.

Memory is the main tool with which reason and, by extension, the human being works. With memory, man can do everything, or almost everything. Without memory we can do nothing, and less than nothing. And architects less still. Like a needle without thread.

OUR MUCH MALIGNED MEMORY

In order to write about memory, about the memory of an architect, I have decided to start from memory, from my own memory. In the words of Quintilian, “man's most powerful and effective tool”.

In its day, in the chapter of my book Principia Architectonica, entitled “Mnemosine vs Mimesis” I already highlighted several themes relating to memory that now appear here in greater detail.

I see clearly that in our time, the age of computers, with the capacity that these artifacts have to accumulate vast quantities of information, it is more necessary than ever to have a tool capable of ordering all that information and, after studying it, producing what we understand by learning, and then making it effective in order to reach the knowledge of wisdom. That marvelous tool is memory. Greater, much greater, than the hard disk of computers. Memory, helped by reason, is infinitely superior to any other instrument.

For this reflection on memory, I have resorted to texts as evocative as T.S. Eliot's *What is a classic*. And I've turned to my old friend Saint Augustine, because if there is anyone who has written copiously and very well and very clearly about memory, it is he, especially in “Book X” of his *Confessions*.

The clear distinction that T.S. Eliot makes between information, knowledge and wisdom, describes to perfection the value of memory in obtaining the coveted goal of wisdom. In *What is a Classic?* he writes: “In our age, when men seem more than ever prone to confuse wisdom with knowledge, and knowledge with information”.

I still remember how, when I was a child at school, we used memory as a very effective learning tool.

Let from its dream the soul awaken,
And reason mark with open eyes
The scene unfolding,
How lightly life away is taken,
How cometh Death in stealthy guise,
What swiftness hath the flight of pleasure/

That, once attained, seems nothing more/
Than respite cold;
How fain is memory to measure
Each latter day inferior
To those of old.

I write by heart these verses by Jorge Manrique that I learned at school, and I am almost frightened by the accuracy of my memory. What can one say about the beauty of these couplets? With each passing day they seem more beautiful to me.

And yet in these past few years, memory has become maligned. They say that we used to learn like parrots, and that an education based on memory was inadequate. How wrong they are. Memory, together with reason, is more than just a useful tool; it is essential for intellectual life, and for the life of the architect.

I tell my students repeatedly that reason is the first and most important tool with which an architect works. And I am also telling them today that by this I mean reason assisted by memory.

MEMORY CONNECTS

I have written more than once that, after such a long time together on my bookshelves, my books speak to each other. This is also true of the ideas stored in our memory. They relate to each other in a mysterious way, and new ideas emerge from them.

In 1770, Mozart listened to Allegri's Miserere and on his return home he promptly transcribed it from memory, not to copy it but to draw inspiration from it.

In 1655, Rembrandt traced the edge of the Lithostrotos with a ruler in his etching of the presentation of Jesus by Pilate. And Picasso in his Ecce Homo, where he paints the same theme as Rembrandt, the Lithostrotos, drew on his memory and copied it, and he performed the same operation using his ruler to achieve a perfect horizontal line. All very architectural. Both knew that the horizontal plane at eye level becomes a perfect horizontal line.

Mies van der Rohe visited the Athens Acropolis in 1950, and since then applied the theory of the flat horizontal plane that, at eye level, becomes a line. And he ended up raising that horizontal plane aloft, floating, in his Farnsworth House, and in so many of his other works.

Alvaro Siza is a pure reminder of Alvar Aalto in his early works, in his beautiful Boa Nova Tea House in Matosinhos. And his restoration of the Chiado district in Lisbon is a clear memory of Rome.

And, where would Barragan be, as he himself pointed out, without his memory of the Alhambra?

And one wonders how could even Le Corbusier have designed his Ville Savoie without his long stay at Eileen Gray's E1027 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin?

For all of these architects, memory plays a crucial role. Furthermore, memory purifies. Of the best architects we remember above all their finest works. The less important ones we tend to forget.

ON INTELLECTUAL ENJOYMENT AND MEMORY

On intellectual enjoyment I have written:

I know well that all this is largely due to memory. As the years go by, our memory fills up in such a way that relationships often occur between things and events, which becomes a reliable source of this intellectual pleasure.

And, like a well, this memory needs to be replenished with the water of knowledge, which requires time and deep study. That devotion to study, considered an obligation in our youth, becomes a pleasure in later life.

Saint Augustine speaks of the enormous space of memory, the *aula ingenti memoriae*. Memory that is not only able to accumulate new knowledge but, better still, to bring it all together. Who has not been surprised on recognizing common themes or ideas in authors that would seem to have nothing in common? To recall - to re-collect - is to travel to the heart, to put the heart back in someone or something that happened.

And St. Augustine is so clear when he speaks of memory that we have only to transcribe his wise words:

And I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the senses.

Men go forth to marvel at the heights of mountains and the huge waves of the sea, the broad flow of the rivers, the vastness of the ocean, the orbits of the stars, and yet they neglect to marvel at themselves. Nor do they wonder how it is that, when I spoke of all these things, I was not looking at them with my eyes – and yet I could not have spoken about them had it not been that I was actually seeing within, in my memory, those mountains and waves and rivers and stars which I have seen, and that ocean which I believe in – and with the same vast spaces between them as when I saw them outside me.

THE POWER OF THE SOUL

We humans have memory, understanding and will. That is what we learned as children. This was referred to in scholasticism as the powers of the soul. And it is easy to understand how memory, aided by understanding, reason and will, is what makes creative work possible and in a very special way, the work of architects.

A sage is someone who not only accumulates information in his memory, but after suitably processing it, makes these data his own as knowledge and retains them. And then he uses them appropriately and efficiently. And the place where that data and knowledge is stored, processed and used is memory.

An architect, a good architect, a wise architect stores information and knowledge in his memory so that, when suitably processed, he can design with rigor.

Memory is capable of recording and storing what is worthwhile from history, from the general history of humanity, and from the history of architecture. Memory has the capacity to supply that distilled, processed information to architects, so that we do not invent gunpowder.

Taking a leap forward requires the momentum we receive when, with one foot in the air, the other leans firmly on the ground, on memory, and so we finally attain knowledge, wisdom.

To dream – and to design is to dream – one has to first accumulate the material with which to build those dreams.

THE BELLY OF AN ARCHITECT

The Belly of an Architect was a gorgeous film by Peter Greenaway, starring Brian Dennehy in the role of the architect Stowrley Kracklite, set around the Pantheon in Rome.

And Saint Augustine, in “Book X” of his Confessions, with its profound pedagogical significance, describes memory as the belly of the soul, where everything is digested (Rainer Sorgel uses the term ruminated), in order to feed man, the soul of man.

It may well be that Francis Bacon, the philosopher, had read Saint Augustine’s text, when he spoke of books in his essays and in particular in his essay Of Studies: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested”. How could a philosopher like Bacon, who sometimes seems so distant, hit the nail on the head with such precision?

THE MEMORY OF THE HOUSE

I was asked at the Venice Biennale 2012 to focus on common ground, which I immediately understood to be memory. Since I was asked to center on the house, I decided to investigate the memory of the house.

An architect is a house. This is the name under which I developed one of my last academic courses at the ETSAM in Madrid. And I used it again for that small pavilion within that Biennial: An architect is a house.

What and how is the memory of the house? What is an architect's common ground when he creates a house? I must confess that every time I build a new house, all the great houses in the history of architecture parade through my memory. Not to copy them, but,

assisted by memory, to take a step forward and attempt to do something different and better.

From Adam's house in Paradise, as Joseph Rickwert described and studied it for us, to the prehistoric caves. And Abbot Laugier's primitive hut. But also Palladio's Villa Rotonda and Adolph Loos's Villa Moller. And Soane's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London. And so many others.

The houses that one thinks of are sometimes the ones that architects built for themselves. Even if occasionally, as in the case of Mies van der Rohe's client, Mrs Farnsworth, the client's name may figure in the title.

And to order and center that work, I link the houses of the history of architecture to the four elements of Greek philosophy: earth, air, water and fire. These, when translated into dwellings, can be the cave and the hut, the boat and the ruin.

The cave, which first Semper and then Frampton identified with the stereotomic, embodies our dwelling on earth. Heavy architecture speaks of man's dominion over the earth. We identify it with earth as the pre-Socratic element that best suits it.

The cabin, to which Semper and Frampton assigned the attribute of tectonic, addresses the concept of a change of place, the possibility of deciding where man wishes to settle. In short, it speaks of freedom. And air will be the pre-Socratic element that we link it to.

The boat, the raft, immediately reminds us not only of Noah's ark where the inhabitants of the earth survived the Universal Flood, but also of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoie, or Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, because both houses float and sail. I myself, in my House of the Infinite, presented the upper horizontal stone plane as the deck of a grounded ship facing the Atlantic Ocean, facing the infinite sea.

FROM TRACES TO RUINS

Ruins are the material, indelible traces, and the memory of the architecture that stood there once upon a time. These traces are the embodiment of the architects' ideas with exact measurements. They are, let me say, the memory of what was there.

When archaeologists discover, analyze and value a ruin, they rarely speak of architecture. Yet it is architecture, the most fundamental element of it, which appears there. The most basic thing about the creation of architects, its traces, is what causes ruins to exert such a power of fascination over us. What attracts us to ruins is the intensity of those few basic, radical elements of architectural creation.

What is the mysterious power that so directly connects the beginning and the end of a creation? Ruins display the very essence of architecture, the structure. Because when we talk about architectural ruins or traces, what we are talking about is the structure that establishes the order of space, which is central to architecture, the most essential thing that has been able to resist time. Just like the skeleton in the human body, ruins, traces,

are the memory of that architecture that strongly evokes the spaces that had been built there.

FINALE

To conclude I will return once more to St. Augustine who ventured to speak of architects in chapter 12 of “Book X” of the Confessions entitled: “On the Recollection of Things Mathematical”.

I have seen the lines of architects, the very finest, like a spider's thread; but those within me are still different, they are not the images of those lines which the eye of flesh showed me: he knoweth them, whosoever without any conception whatsoever of a body, recognizes them within himself.

How I would have liked to have talked with a man with such a keen intellect as the Bishop of Hippo about the plans of architects drawn, as he tells us, with lines as delicate and subtle as a spider's thread. Precise lines and detailed plans, essential elements in the creation of architectural works that constitute the memory of architecture.

I will conclude with a quote from Cicero's *De Oratore*, in which I dare to introduce the terms architects and architecture, *architecti* and *architecturae*, instead of *oratori* and *rhetoricae*, since memory is a necessary tool for all architects.

Memoria est firma animi, rerum, et verborum et dispositionis perceptio. Est haec maxime architecti necessaria. Nec sine causa thesaurus inventorum atque ómnium partium architecturae custos. [Memory is a firm perception of the spirit of things and of words and their placement. It is extremely necessary to the architect. And not without cause is it the treasure of discoveries and the guardian of all parts of architecture.]

And so Cicero concludes, and with him so do we: “It is beautiful what Solon says in a verse, that he grows old learning many things every day. In truth, there can be no greater pleasure than that of the intellect”.