

Preserving without conserving: Memoryscopes and historically burdened heritage

John Sutton 

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Abstract

Rather than conserving or ignoring historically burdened heritage, RAAAF intervene. Their responses are striking, sometimes dramatic or destructive. Prompted by Rietveld's discussion of the *Luftschloss* project, I compare some other places with difficult pasts which engage our embodied and sensory responses, without such active redirection or disruption. Ross Gibson's concept of a 'memoryscope' helps us identify distinct but complementary ways of focussing the forces of the past. Emotions and imaginings are transmitted over time in many forms. The past is not easily washed, blasted or sliced away. By considering other settings and modes of encounter, we can recognise and applaud the novelty of RAAAF's interventions while urging further attention to the variable dynamics and rhythms of remembering and of sociomaterial residues.

Keywords

Past, heritage, memory, memoryscope

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I. Historically burdened heritage

In late June 2019, I was lucky to join a group of memory researchers guided by the forensic anthropologist Francisco (Paco) Ferrándiz. We visited the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's monumental memorial outside Madrid. It is a vast Basilica and pantheon, intended to commemorate and to host the bodies of his soldiers, the winners in the Spanish Civil War. The intense uneasiness of encountering this vast and awful edifice was modulated and enriched by having the deeply informed and passionate Ferrándiz at our side. Much of his career has been devoted to activist policy in the quest to transform, democratise and resignify the monument, while facilitating and studying exhumations of mass graves across Spain (Ferrándiz, 2006, 2013, 2019).

After years of political and legal controversy, Franco's remains were exhumed from the church a few months later (Faber, 2021): the removal had been postponed only weeks before our visit. We saw among the crowds a number of older men standing at his crypt, experiencing profound emotions in worshipping or paying respects. The dome above features paintings of fascist troops and their tanks alongside saints and martyrs. On one of Madrid's hottest days, a wedding party

arrived, ready for a strange celebration amid the grandeur and grim stone (Figure 1). We felt the bodily and affective chill of Franco's Spain more intensely as Ferrándiz told of the bodies buried at the Valley of the Fallen, perhaps some 34,000–40,000. Thousands had been found to be not nationalist but Republican soldiers, their corpses removed from other parts of the country to fill the crypts. He told of the Benedictine monks' case that none of the vaults could be disturbed to identify or rebury the dead because as a result of 'the leaks and seepage the monument had suffered over the decades . . . the ossuary had dissolved into the rock, making one body indistinguishable from another', such that 'the remains are now part of the building's structure' (Ferrándiz, 2019, p. S69, quoting anonymous Valley sources).

Far from permanent stone glorification of nationalist victory, the mutability of porous matter prevails. While Ferrándiz and his colleagues are understandably

Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Corresponding author:

John Sutton, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia.

Email: john.sutton@mq.edu.au



Figure 1. Arrival for a wedding at the Valley of the Fallen.
Source: John Sutton.

uncertain that reconciliation remains possible in such a contested context, their continued and admirable critical engagement in public debate has informed the recent proposal of a ‘Democratic Memory Law’. This law would turn the site into a civil cemetery and ban organisations that glorify Franco’s legacy. Elsewhere in Spain, artists and memory commissioners campaign against fascist symbols in more iconoclastic or carnivalesque ways, responding creatively and destructively – often at once – to the continued and unsettling presence of statues of Franco and other ‘pariah heritage’ (Ferrándiz, 2019, pp. S72–S73).

In the *Luftschloss* project (Rietveld, 2019, pp. 33–38), RAAAF offer a distinctive way to ‘deal meaningfully with historically burdened heritage’. They envision hydro-demolition technology blasting to pieces the concrete remains of the Nazi ‘Flak Tower’ in Vienna, leaving behind only ‘a fragile, elegant and unfolding skeleton’ of steel. This is a material playground indeed, with its associated ‘set’ built ‘to test this technology and its power’, and its associated three-dimensional (3D) world (Rietveld, 2019, p. 37). In collaboration with architectural historians, *Luftschloss* is one of RAAAF’s imaginative reinterpretations of history, ‘toward the future, rather than being stuck in fixated narratives from the past’ (Rietveld & Rietveld, 2017, p. 2). It is also a magnificently violent intervention, of a kind that – I speculate, obviously – someone like Ferrándiz might occasionally have welcomed over the long decades of slow and obstructive bureaucratic debate about the future of the Valley of the Fallen. The skeleton here is metaphorical, but the revenge fantasy no less powerful or gripping.

2. Preservation without conservation

Rietveld’s (2019) rejection of quiet liberal silence about difficult pasts is welcome: ‘leaving this kind of

inhumane heritage untouched’ (p. 37) is not ethically or politically responsible in our burdened world (compare the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa – Marschall, 2019). RAAAF rechannel our embodied and sensory responses to and in particular sites, buildings, objects and practices, engaging emotions and senses and provoking productive bewilderment and imaginative engagement. But this is no anti-historical impulse. As at the dissected monument *Bunker 599*, the aim is to add layers of meaning, to complicate, to reopen a difficult past rather than fixing it on a pedestal.

As the architect and design historian Edward Hollis (2009) notes, it should not be ‘a dirty secret . . . that all great buildings mutate over time’, that buildings in use must remain ‘capricious, protean, and unpredictable’ to stay alive (pp. 9–10). In their interventionist mode, RAAAF are not only acknowledging the inherent dynamism of matter, places and artefacts but also strongly nudging or redirecting it. They do not merely latch on to ongoing processes of change, but actively initiate new ones.

These projects mesh with Rietveld’s accounts of embodied intelligence and situated anticipation, integrating cognitive theory and practice in a genuinely applied philosophy of worldly minds. In any activity, on Rietveld’s view of affordances in practice, the operations of the past shape our readiness for ongoing unfolding actions. They orient us within shared sociomaterial environments, but do not determine what is to be done (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2018; Rietveld et al., in press). Individual skills and the material constraints of a situation both inform the processes of coordination by which action unfolds in one of many possible ways (van Dijk & Rietveld, 2021). Thinking, imagining, speaking, making and remembering alike are trajectory- or history-dependent processes, for sure, but the paths by which past events and situations influence or play in and on our ongoing activities are neither pre-set nor linear.

As with architecture and places, so (we might suggest) with the operations of memory. Preservation does not require conservation. Preservation might be all the more honourable, productive and interesting if we stop dreaming of either past experiences or objects as immutable. The mechanisms of transmission – the paths of influence by which past affects present and future, and which we hope sometimes to track as we bear witness to or make claims on the past – are multiple and complex. In and across our cognitive ecologies, across brains, bodies and the physical and social worlds, such processes of transmission may in the end not look much like ‘preservation’ at all, either (Mingon & Sutton, 2021; Sutton, 2015).

3. Memoryscopes

The artist and cultural theorist Ross Gibson has deployed the concept of a ‘memoryscope’ to catch

interventions that focus the forces of the past. A good memoryscope channels and communicates ‘meanings and feelings implicit in the past’ to the people of the present in moving ways that stimulate imagination. Working with memoryscopes in art or history is a ‘forensic activity’ that detects ‘some lurking change’ in a remnant or a trace, and somehow channels it as ‘a surge that zings some vivacity or aggravation’ (Gibson, 2015, pp. vi–vii). Gibson offers examples from immersion in ‘memory-soaked’ Australian landscapes and ‘ragged places’, from archival and database art, from music and police photography, to evoke and delineate the interplay between imagination and ‘historical back-fill’ in doing justice to the lively past. His memoryscopes are less grand than Rietveld’s, as befits the ‘piecemeal ecologies’ of Australian places that, after European invasion and indigenous dispossession, ‘have long been denied custodial care’ (Gibson, 2015, pp. 14–17).

Compared to RAAAF’s interventionist artworks, Gibson’s (2015) ‘aesthetics of seepage and submergence’ offers alternate registers or modes of sensing how ‘the past is abroad in our present-day experience’ (p. 60, p. 143). Like the laborious democratising of the Valley of the Fallen, Gibson’s memoryscopes are more modest channels. Rietveld and his RAAAF colleagues know that the past is not easily washed, blasted or sliced away: and it is not their intention or wish to do so, or not wholeheartedly or consistently at least. But positioned as they are between the elite worlds of art, architecture and the academy, they are among the artists who effortfully help us ‘to see through normalcy’ in our habitual interactions with technologies and situations, who ‘develop alternative designs that reopen stabilities’ (Rosenberger, 2020). Their collaborations deliberately collapse craft and art, practice and theory, engineering and design, matter and form and ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ cognition. Yet the forms of thinking that produce and are encouraged in their material playgrounds can look like ‘a luxury of peacetime’ (Artaud, 1947/1976, p. 505). Such self-consciously unconventional art requires and puts into generous circulation both rich histories and significant freedoms.

4. Tough work over time

Not all burdensome heritage is mounted on pedestals. The more subtle and implicit influences of the past in everyday practice may be just as painful or confronting, pulling memory into use when it is not explicitly in question. Places, buildings and objects accumulate their own histories, often on timescales distinct from our own (Basso, 1996; Liao & Huebner, 2020; Sutton, 2020; Turkel, 2007). Not long after Madrid, I was lucky to visit Johannesburg, to speak at the fantastic, challenging first meeting of the new African chapter of the international Memory Studies Association, and to

explore that extraordinary city with all the hope and the horror of its histories. One of our insightful local guides works with the Dlala Nje community organisation in Ponte City tower, a spectacular building with a deeply troubled past, and a future that is being forged strenuously day by day. The cylindrical 55-storey skyscraper, built in 1975, was a desirable address for the White beneficiaries of apartheid, until rendered unsafe by crime and urban decay in and after the regime’s final years. With years of neglect, debris piled up many storeys high in the hollow central interior. Slowly, through obstacles and reversals, disparate groups have sought to revitalise the building and it is now gradually becoming a centre for thriving progressive communities in Berea and Hillbrow. Since 2012, Dlala Nje has used this brutalist icon as a base for immersive local tours, and to support safe arts spaces and learning environments for local children and youth. Their sophisticated history takes ‘the building’s resilient nature’ as the heart of the story, from grand opulence and oppression through years of abandonment into the present uncertain political and economic times (<https://www.dlalanje.org/>).

Even without conservation, the past is always at us, saturating both landscapes and fields of affordances, wherever we find ourselves. In Steven Brown and Paula Reavey’s brilliant ethnographic study of distinct ways of managing and living with difficult pasts – in surviving terror attacks or child sexual abuse, negotiating the memories of adopted children or having your past eroded in a forensic psychiatric unit – there are profound but variable ‘consequences of the irreversibility of particular kinds of experience’. Individuals and communities find resources to cope, to forge on, in ways that astonish those of us living more comfortable lives. But even sophisticated ways of coping with events that ‘leave a mark’ in one way or another can always be undermined, bringing lurching pain at experiences too ‘troublesome to accommodate’, just as ‘you can’t unring a bell’ (Brown & Reavey, 2015, pp. 1–3; compare Keightley & Pickering, 2017; Tumarkin, 2018).

Transmission is often more a matter of mutation than of preservation, and even the monumental Valley of the Fallen succumbs to material decay and transformation. The interventionist impulse can be complemented by more modest aesthetics like Norman Klein’s notion of ‘bleeding through’, of sensing the scars and feeling back to what is been imperfectly erased, in cities, bodies and stories alike (Klein, 1997, 2003). More intense or sudden change is sometimes needed, for sure, and sometimes happens anyway with no engineering or initiation required. But even then, there are always slower processes in play too, tough human work over time alongside material operations.

RAAAF’s remarkable interventions offer one dramatic way of tapping and redirecting such uneven histories. Working as they do alongside local and cultural historians, attuning to the intrinsic dynamics of their

sites and attending to the variable movements of remembering and of sociomaterial residues, RAAAF can keep these channels open. Like other sites with difficult pasts across our complicated, saturated, beautiful world, the places and the materials that become Rietveld's playgrounds have their own rhythms, their own momentum and their own sounds. We can hope for many further surprises as RAAAF find enriching, unnerving and breathtaking ways to help us sense, feel and hear these transmissions as well as to mould and change them. RAAAF will thus continue to embrace the thrill and the danger that some of their projects, their unique memoryscopes, might appear as entirely external forces, dropping on and disrupting specific situations, as strange art gods with their extraordinary machines.

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ORCID iD

John Sutton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3046-9785>

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Author biography

John Sutton is a professor of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University in Sydney. He studies memory and embodied skills. Current projects include work on Maurice Halbwachs, on collaborative performance (with Kath Bicknell), and on cognitive history (with Lyn Tribble).