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### Author

Maitland, Padma

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Padma Maitland

## RM1000: Souvenir Nostalgia

Can objects serve as representations of the past? Perhaps they act more as representatives, ambassadors of a time and place, their materials and attributes imbued with layers of extra meaning and significance; outdated fashions, a fingerprint, the decay of clay, the cracking of wood, and layers of dust, all make the past present. In 2012 the Smithsonian Museum unveiled its ongoing exhibition “American Stories,” which attempts to account for the history of America in one hundred objects. The list includes the ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*, Benjamin Franklin’s walking stick, Julia Child’s kitchen, McDonald’s Golden Arches, the Hope Diamond, and Mohammad Ali’s boxing gloves. Some, like Neil Armstrong’s spacesuit (object 77), used during the 1969 space mission, speak directly to a specific historical event, in this case, when humanity broke through the envelope of the atmosphere to wade weightlessly in space. Other objects, like a baseball signed by Babe Ruth (object 56), speak less overtly of a singular moment, and more generally of an important figure, his life, and the widespread admiration for the “Babe.” The caption for Babe Ruth’s baseball reads: “A souvenir marks America’s embrace of a supremely talented sports hero.” The ball on display is inconsequential, as perhaps is the signature. It is the sentiment evoked by the signature and the desire to keep an old baseball for years that makes it a telling part of American history.

Souvenirs help us remember. In a museum, they are usually relegated to the gift shop where one can buy a multitude of copies and counterfeits, often in miniature. How do we make sense of this sudden interest to read history through objects turned souvenirs? Museums like the Smithsonian tend to account for history through the display of artifacts, art and other memorabilia, assembling things in a room to tell a story and offer a larger narrative of the past. The exhibit “American Stories” gave way to a book, *The Smithsonian’s History of America in 101 Objects*, admittedly styled after Neil McGregor’s *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, drawn from the British Museum. Such shows are undoubtedly clever, and appealing ways to showcase the best pieces of collections that include over 137 million objects. More than that, such shows give greater agency to the objects, marking them not as historical evidence, but as narrators of the past. As souvenirs—objects that evoke a certain kind of nostalgia—museum pieces take on an even more active role in conveying impressions of the past.

Objects cluster, one object quickly gives way to others. In the book of one hundred objects from the Smithsonian collection, the discussion of Neil Armstrong’s space suit, for example, is placed alongside images of the Apollo Space Shuttle and a moon rock (both on view at the museum). Depending on their scale, some objects even contain other objects. In 2001 the Smithsonian had another object-oriented exhibition: “Within These Walls...” The show told the story of the past two hundred years through its “largest object”: a house. Inside the house other objects—lanterns, books, teapots, maps, linens—incompletely recreate the lives of five families who lived in the structure between the 1760s and 1961. The appeal of the exhibit, now available entirely online, is the immersive atmosphere it brings; it claims that the house and its contents can let you experience the past. Objects have the ability to suggest connections to history, a feeling of participation linked to the experience of wonder or at seeing *that* thing, that *very* thing: “I saw

the *very* suit Neil Armstrong wore.” It hardly even matters that it was dry-cleaned.

## Size Matters

What does it mean to consider architecture as an object? When the Smithsonian puts a three-hundred-year-old house on display, does it change the nature of the structure? The transformation of a house to an object requires a certain intellectual leap. On the one hand it implies that a house can be contained, not just owned, but actually curated and put on display. A house inside a museum acts differently than a house turned museum. While there is a tradition of considering art and artifacts as objects, the transition to thinking about buildings as objects has rather large implications for the history and theory of architecture and design. It alludes to an easy disconnect from surroundings and a ready scalability. Think of souvenir models and how easily they show an entire structure separated from its context, diminishing the monumental to the hand-held. Such reductions of elaborate forms brings to mind the Beaux-Arts tradition of the architectural *parti*, the ability to capture the essential aspects of a building, or Erich Mendelsohn’s innovative use of thumbnail sketches as the basis for his modern designs. More recently, Rem Koolhaas cast his own buildings as miniature cartoon monsters run amuck in his graphic depictions of the complex lives of cities.<sup>1</sup> Large to small, small to large, scale does matter, and the ability to carry the impact of a building through different sizes suggests that the value of buildings lies beyond its physical engagement with a site.

As a particular affect, nostalgia has a direct relationship to scale. In fact, smallness seems to heighten feelings of nostalgia. In her text *On Longing* Susan Stewart discusses how the diminutive perception of things elicits pangs of nostalgic longing, for a childhood past, say, when objects felt larger, or the schoolyard that seems out of scale when we

visit it as adults.<sup>2</sup> Nostalgia's relationship to scale is part of what makes it such a powerful emotion for souvenirs, and the huge draw for carrying an object that represents something that was previously experienced as monumental. This issue of *Room One Thousand* investigates some of the ways architecture engages with souvenirs and nostalgia.

## Attics and Drawers

Objects are not always needed to elicit nostalgia. Architectural spaces can also be the sources of memories, filled with personal anecdotes and emotions. This particular issue queries the link between built spaces and objects, moving between the realms of architectural affect, emotions, and things, to consider how objects help us to remember. Marta Figerlowicz's essay "Landscapes and Ladles" starts the volume off by following Joan Didion's memories as they dance between the landscapes of California and the terrain of a particularly poignant curve in a ladle's handle. In *Where I Was From*, Didion reflects on the significance of the ladle, passed on to her by her mother. Pointing to the fragility of memory and the inconsistency of nostalgia—making it both more personal, but also more incomplete—Marta writes of Didion's experience as she walks through her old home town: "The city blocks [Didion] had once thought of as part of herself seem by now to have fragmented into a set of disconnected objects of which her body is only another, smaller instance. She marvels at herself for having at some prior time believed these streets and buildings to be inalienable from herself."

Following memories into still other realms of elision, Susan Stewart's "Reading a Drawer," reprinted in this issue, explores a set of objects that accumulated in a drawer outside the front door of her home.<sup>3</sup> Ruminating on the capacity of objects once meaningful, now discarded, leads Stewart to reflect on how collections of things accumulate in architecture's hidden spaces—the attics, cupboards, and

drawers of houses. An excess of things relates to an excess of spaces. Moving between the two meanings of *oikos* as “home” and “economy,” Stewart approaches the question of value in an unusual, intimate way. As she writes, “Only through the establishment of the *oikos* as holding/household can the *oikos* as economy begin to work.” Attics and drawers become important realms, not just for materials to accumulate, but also for imagination and memory to gather, and for architectural worth to accrue, suggesting something about the relationship between human psychology and the structures we inhabit.

In “Environmental Biographies,” Clare Cooper Marcus leaves objects behind to consider how spaces inform personal histories. Discussing a series of classes she lead as a professor of Architecture and Landscape Design, Marcus recounts how asking her students to draw their favorite childhood places, and then their ideal spaces for the future, revealed some surprising links between early childhood environments and later design sensibilities. The drawings by students with crayons on butcher paper became records of personal journeys into individual lives, which, as Marcus recounts, was the first time for many students that they realized their own lives had some broader significance.

How far can we carry the link between personal and architectural biographies? In “House 103” Kathleen James-Chakraborty looks back at her own childhood home at 103 North Queen Street in Chestertown. Remembering the history-laden home she grew up in, she begins to believe that it may have shaped her academic love for modern architecture, and disdain for buying a house. As her childhood memories run through the reconstructed house, and subsequent phases of remodeling, James-Chakraborty places the spaces of her home in relation to historical events the house witnessed.

Where James-Chakraborty mined her memories to see what she could uncover about her home, in “Architectural History Through the Lens of Souvenir,” Martina Hrabova dove into the national archives

of Prague to discover her childhood home was nothing like what she imagined it to have been. The large yellow and brown house she grew up was a far cry from the original design, which was a proud example of early Czech Modernism. Where Stewart's piece on "Reading a Drawer" discusses how we relate to the proverbial attics of our houses, Hrabova's poses the question of what it means to actually install an attic on a piece of modernist architecture that fought so hard to reject them. Does the addition of a pitched roof make a building more nostalgic? Can we consider Corbusier nostalgically, and the additions of personal touches as acts of radical design, moving the past forward so to speak? Hrabova's quest to find the true history of her home reveals the ability of memory to both hide and project multiple accounts of the past, and architecture's ability to take on different layers of history.

Katarina Burin's "Into the Plan, Through the Door" uses architectural practices to upend traditional histories entirely, merging archival material with new artworks to blur the line between fact and fiction. Her catalog of material questions the notion that objects always talk truthfully, even while speaking of the past. In a similar vein of mapping the personal, the artistic, and the historical, Nathan John considers how his own experience of Berlin and the artistic interventions he carried out engage with the history of the city. In his piece "One Way of Walking," he links his own wanderings through Berlin with its historical post-war development. Movement is key, merging narration and cityscape, altering how and where memories are attached to city as he moves through it. As a record of his explorations, John photographed empty lots, spaces for cultural debris and, surprisingly, personal expression.

The eponymous act of making and marking spaces has a huge impact on the ability of an object to transmute meaning and significance. In "Fear and Bernard of Clairvaux's Living Stones" Jason Crow relates how the building of a church was a way to enact the spiritual transformation

of the monks of Bernard of Clairvaux's monastery. Sanding down stones to be placed in the walls, the monks would often inscribe their names into the stones before they were fixed in place. The transformation of materials was akin to the transformation of the human soul, in this case through modesty and fear. The careful marks of human hands on carefully constructed stones, sealed into walls, is a poignant reminder of the silent ways humans enter history, their traces often lingering, yet unidentified. Putting one's name on a stone—whether through inscription or graffiti—or capturing it through drawings, photographs, models or recollection, accelerates the process of becoming affective, transmuting material into a social marker. But, for whom? Is it the memory of the monk who is lodged in the wall or does the wall become an embodied memory of successive monks who all strove for some sort of perfection or insight through the contemplation of light in stone chambers. Like Babe Ruth's baseball, or other objects in a museum, such human marks seem to elevate materials beyond themselves, if only by referencing personal nostalgias.

Offering another take on the relationship between monks and their monasteries, John Flaherty's photo essay of the Cistercian Monastery in Nový Dvůr, designed by John Pawson, highlights how the hallowed interiors of the monastery—crisp, white, and open—contrast the gritty textures of its exterior grounds. The move from interior to exterior—the daily routine of the monks—merges the two spaces through ritual, and are reflected in the architecture of the church itself as the surfaces and finishes shift from crisp white walls to exposed wood and stone.

Religion has a long history of creating potent objects, a term Jason Young uses in his discussion of the "macro-phenomenal." In his short thought piece, Young defines the Macro-Phenomenal as the "quality within things—objects, spaces, and relational assemblies—with which one has definitive experience even as that experience is predominated



by the dotted lines of escape that pull away from the thing's quiddity, pushing experience towards the macro conditions that shape and contour its presence." Using a taxidermied elephant as his starting point, Young suggests our experience of such souvenir objects depends on a phenomenological experience of history imbued in the object that we may or may not be privy to without further digging.

The reuse of potent objects is the basis for Duo Dickinson's conversion of an old warehouse into the new home for the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. Giving an account of the Diocese's earlier remodel of a mansion into a church through the introduction of sixty stained glass windows, he uses those sixty panes as the basis for a new design, which embodies the history of the church in the area, while also giving it new meaning by incorporating the panes of glass into moving partitions in a refurbished factory building. While Dickinson's essay focuses on the glass panes, it is also a piece on placement and how a change in venues can give new meaning to old objects. The old objects become nostalgic, a quality of remembering that is as much about indexing the old, as reframing the future.

In "A World of Play," Lauren McQuiston interviews Robert Vale to talk about Brenda Vale and his book *Architecture on the Carpet: The Curious Tale of Construction Toys and the Genesis of Modern Buildings*. Architects are famously cited for having been inspired by childhood erector sets or blocks sets as the basis for their innovative designs. Frank Lloyd Wright famously grew up playing with Froebel blocks, Norman Foster and Richard Rogers played with Meccano. McQuiston's interview attempts to trace how "toys project the values of their creators."

What we choose to remember, and how, likewise suggests something about personal design values. Considering objects as means for remembering and intervention, as "object forms" and "active forms", Thomas Murdoch reviews a recent lecture by Neeraj Bhatia, before interviewing the architect about new models for responsive and resilient

design. Bhatia's work finds innovative ways for buildings to work with, rather than against, their environments. Where walls tend to fight the elements, Bhatia's architecture adapts, using natural forces to find new opportunities for harvesting untapped potential. Such responsiveness is a kind of material memory, the building itself "learning" how to adapt to changing conditions. While acknowledging the potential of such resilient designs, Murdoch questions what it means when such models are asked to tap resources related to global, political and economic forces. Innovative solutions typically tend to cut across the grain. We are told that they require an abandonment of nostalgia, and yet, what if memory became the basis for innovation, and a tool for more adaptive infrastructure?

What does it mean to return to a place, a point of origin, and reflect on change? Sanda Iliescu, *Timeline: June 18, 1996*, is a careful study of self-reflection and change over time. Phoebe Crisman uses Illiescu's studies—a series of portraits drawn and redrawn over two and a half years—to think about the experience of repeatedly entering a physical space as a possible moment of reflection. A building we enter daily begins to record our own shifts in perception, as well as the building's slow decay. As buildings changes, our perceptions of then also evolve. Like the monks of Clairvaux, or Didion's return to her childhood home, our environments become a gauge for our own experiences and triggers for memories.

Early souvenirs of buildings were ways to remember visits to far off places, to recall and also study art and architectural marvels back home. In "The Miniature Monuments of Ace Architects," Kevin Block discusses Lucia Howard and David Weingarten's collection of architectural souvenirs. Amassed over years, it fills their home, and includes everything from Piranesi etchings to cast-iron piggy banks. Their collection was shown at the SFO Museum in the San Francisco International Airport in 2010. Block muses, that the display of Howard

and Wiengarten's collection in the airport must have inspired travellers to think about their own souvenirs, and the memories they bring with them as they travel.

Both souvenirs and nostalgia speak of a certain disconnection from place. While specific, it is their dislocation that makes them potent. Think of the Golden Gate Bridge. Its magnificence is in part due to its form, but also largely due to its position at the cusp of the San Francisco Bay and between two peninsulas of rolling hills, a city on one side, open hills on the other. Its form also embodies successive generations of dreams. The Golden Gate Bridge is symbolic of California's golden hills and the limits of westward expansion. Do such connotations carry over into the small souvenirs of the bridge you can buy in Chinatown or at the airport? Does the nature of the bridge change when it is removed from its original context, and put inside the glitter blizzard of a snow globe? Perhaps it is the ability of objects and forms to retain the atmosphere of their sites and historical contexts, while not being tethered to them, which makes them powerful as souvenirs for remembrance.

[Endnotes]

1 Koolhaas, Rem. 2004. *Content*. Köln: Taschen.

2 Stewart, Susan. 1984. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press.

3 Susan Stewart's essay originally appeared in: *Architecture, Ethics, and the Personhood of Place*. Edited by Gregory Caicco. Hanover: University Press of New England. 2007.

[Chapter figures part of "Souvenir Nostalgia Photo Series." Photograph by Andrew Manuel. 2014.]