

The Home as Memory Palace: Three Case Studies of Artistic Representations of the Relationship between Individual and Collective Memory and the Home

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Abstract : The houses we inhabit are important containers of memory. As homes, they take on meaning for those who live inside, and memories of family life become intimately tied up with rooms, windows, and gardens. Each new family creates a new layer of meaning, resulting in a palimpsest of family memory. These houses function quite literally as memory palaces, as a walk through a childhood home will show; each room conjures up images of past events. Over time, these personal memories become woven together with the cultural memory of countries and generations. The importance of the home is a central theme in art, and several contemporary artists have a special interest in the relationship between memory and the home. This paper analyses three case studies in order to get a deeper understanding of the ways in which the home functions and feels like a memory palace, both on an individual and on a collective, cultural level. Close reading of the artworks is performed on the theoretical intersection between Art History and Cultural Memory Studies. The first case study concerns works from the exhibition Mnemosyne by the artist duo Anne and Patrick Poirier. These works combine interests in architecture, archaeology, and psychology. Models of cities and fantastical architectural designs resemble physical structures (such as the brain), architectural metaphors used in representing the concept of memory (such as the memory palace), and archaeological remains, essential to our shared cultural memories. Secondly, works by Do Ho Suh will help us understand the relationship between the home and memory on a far more personal level; outlines of rooms from his former homes, made of colourful, transparent fabric and combined into new structures, provide an insight into the way these spaces retain individual memories. The spaces have been emptied out, and only the husks remain. Although the remnants of walls, light switches, doors, electricity outlets, etc. are standard, mass-produced elements found in many homes and devoid of inherent meaning, together they remind us of the emotional significance attached to the muscle memory of spaces we once inhabited. The third case study concerns an exhibition in a house put up for sale on the Dutch real estate website Funda. The house was built in 1933 by a Jewish family fleeing from Germany, and the father and son were later deported and killed. The artists Anne van As and CA Wertheim have used the history and memories of the house as a starting point for an exhibition called (T)huis, a combination of the Dutch words for home and house. This case study illustrates the way houses become containers of memories; each new family 'resets' the meaning of a house, but traces of earlier memories remain. The exhibition allows us to explore the transition of individual memories into shared cultural memory, in this case of WWII. Taken together, the analyses provide a deeper understanding of different facets of the relationship between the home and memory, both individual and collective, and the ways in which art can represent these.

Keywords : Anne and Patrick Poirier, cultural memory, Do Ho Suh, home, memory palace

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