MONUMENTAL MNEMONICS

The acceptance of antagonistic change
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Spring 2016

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Master Thesis in Architecture, advanced level, 30 credits
Umeå School of Architecture
Umeå University

Masters program
Laboratory for Sustainable Architectural Production

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STRUCTURE

This booklet is featured as an equal descriptive part together with the posters that contain the investigative research material.

Phase I
The introduction - explains the intent of the project with defined research questions and methods used in order to develop meaning to the subjects.

Phase II
Describes the context in which the research has been conducted.

Phase III
This conceptual portion consists of annexed posters starting with an emphasis on death, a perspective of the collective and the individual, mappings together with a brief history and statistical values forms a base for interpreting attitudes and regional differences towards mortality. The following posters touches on issues of authority, control, time and value working further on the experiential aspects of loss and change. Preservation and memory round up the final posters of expressing conditions and ramifications of renewal.

Synopsis
Final conclusions and thoughts gained throughout the process.
ABSTRACT

This project explores the intricacies of experiential, political and spatial effects renewal has to our sense of place and fear of forgetting in the setting of a neoliberal concept of death considered a mistake or failure.

The methodology has been led by an immersive experimental process, with a focus on suffering, challenging a narrative conveying death lacking in value and meaning. Confronting death may have a great meaning to life; what benefit can embracing it have to our society?

Examining the critical issue of choice contra authority and in a deeper sense how freedom over death can ignite an obscured possibility of exchange between environment and perception, the proposal investigates whether exposure to voluntary death of the past may spark a desire to become active in the present transformation of place.
PHASE I
INTRODUCTION

(...) essence of life is not a feeling of being, of existence, but a feeling of participation in a flowing onward, necessarily expressed in terms of time, and secondarily expressed in terms of space.

Gaston Bachelard 1968:213
BACKGROUND

Setting out from a paradoxical thought experiment addressing the relationship between the urban and its rapid inherent transformations with a desire for a sense of place with a controllable permanence, this need for both an adaptable past and future in the present is a subject that has sparked my interest due to globalizations effects of accelerated growth.

An immediate response to antagonistic change is that the current status be preserved, but I will challenge this comforting reaction in order to dig deeper below the reassurance of control. In context with renewal a desire for preservation in the name of heritage is often denounced and associated with nostalgia, romanticism and anti-growth from a developer point of view or heritage is embraced and marketed into an attractive tourist industry. That which is perceived as perishable gains a value of being preserved so that its memory will be accessible for everyone to take part in.

But what happens to memories that are attempted to be frozen from an evolution in time? What becomes of our future when others decide the importance of past memories and how they are valued? Within developments global heritage proclaimers such as UNESCO gains in this sense an agency far greater than decisive powers of the political elite, as far as development is considered, as this establishes a price tag on history.

Due to the rapid changes of the present and thus increased threats over past the categories of what is considered to be of value have also grown to encompass almost anything that is at risk of being lost. But what becomes of our sense of place when others decide which memories are of most importance?

Neoliberal obsessions with renewal for profit and fear of loss integral to change and decay is the foundation to which this thesis attempts to express its manifestations.

1. Sense of place existing on the account of human engagement. A special and unique place where one feels belonging and attachment.
Umeå was awarded Cultural Capital of the year 2014. The positioning of a city in a social superiority compared to other residential landscapes and populations with claims of uniqueness is a strategy of exclusion, the opposite of the intention of a cultural capital. Prior to this event of cultural instrumentalism dissertations, many of which have sparked ongoing discussions about what this situation has meant for the city, have brought up the importance of common spaces for cultural activity. But the consequences of the Cultural Capital are questionable to whether the development of Umeå is headed in a direction of inclusion. One detail in this oppositional discussion is that it is partaken by only a handful citizens and I wonder with concern what the opinion of the “silent majority” of Umeå is? If they do have an opinion why do they not speak it, and if not, why not?

For me Umeå as a sense of place along with its cultural vibrancy is disappearing. The amount of architectural and cultural history that has been demolished throughout the decades lives on as a phantom limb only in the eyes of its narrative holder; branding. The qualities of space and culture once present have not been revered and the indifferent development has left the city contesting for a prize in generic characteristics based on what once was.

The development of Umeå (or any city for that matter) is exclusive, where individual interests of agency and values conquer over the common good. Sure, one can demonstrate, occupy and debate over changes being made but how can the common good prevail over individual interest? I will argue that the majority no longer value common good. If they did history would not be so easily erased, municipalities would not sell of land to private developers and diversity of all kinds would be embraced. I believe this to be rooted in the loss of sense of place among other things as environments experience abrupt transformations. Connection is lost to the place that was, as well as the ability to care for our surroundings when we are not participating in its developments.

Development timeline along Storgatan, Umeå
“The key to growth is the city’s identity.

The synergy between the new development and the city’s older buildings, streets, avenues, parks and squares that have existed for over 100 years becomes part of Umeå’s identity - which we can influence through conscious choices.

The debate is often strong when new plans are perceived as conflicting from traditional lines, especially when buildings differ in height. In the 50’s it was Bågenhusen around the Railway Square and in the 80’s it was Hotel Plaza that caused concern. The same phenomenon occurs in present planning processes with high building types. The great interest that this indicates is positive. Umeå residents cherish their common environment and public space.

However, it can be perceived as an obstacle to development when a planning process takes a long time because of protests and appeals. A shared vision for the city is therefore necessary to speed up the pace of development and contribute to a long-term process of sustainable transformation.”

Master plan of Umeå Municipality
QUESTION OF INTEREST

The research sets out from the following question;

How is antagonistic change effecting our perception of sense of place?
HYPOTHESIS, AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The aim has been to synthesize over my own fears of change and build an acceptance over antagonistic transformation as my emerging role as an architect is analogous to directing the change of the environment.

My objective is to analyse the intricacies of choice and acceptance regarding the development of my surrounding environment. I embark on doing this by deconstructing an allegory between the needed service of what today is termed assisted suicide and the development of our surroundings. By placing assisted suicide within the province of medicine and the medical profession, there emerges a risk of losing the very autonomy that assisted dying is designed to effectuate\(^1\) \(^2\). Similarly in response to changes in our environment an external paternalism of preservation as well as renewal may disrupt the inherent autonomy of sense of place. I will test the hypothesis that the controversy of suicide as a valid choice is a reflection of fear that it could have been avoided if confronted with a solution. The aspects of fear will be looked at through themes of preservation; memories, objects, storage and archiving. Preservation is in this sense an attempt to protect what is at risk of being lost with an advocacy that it is of importance for the sake of remembrance.

Who has the right to decide whether a historical building can be demolished or not? Who has the right to decide if another persons life should be ended or sustained? Whose sense of place is most accurate and true?

CONDITIONS

The master program of Laboratory for Sustainable Architectural Production (LSAP) explores architecture in a holistic way including cultural, social and economic sustainability on all scales. Focus on production processes, social and economic aspects as well as historical and cultural contexts leads to a built environment in which other values besides economical gains establishes a deeper meaning to its existence. In the conjunction between art and science, the program provides the opportunity for testing and evaluating these environmental impacts of projects.

I believe a step further than focusing on the sustainable, sustaining to endure, is needed in order for a complex system of interdependent substances to thrive. Although a holistic view counts on the participation of all interests, these interests need to be listened to, evaluated and acted upon.

The city as an index for decay is an aspect of investigation that has a direct link to sustainability in terms of unnecessary demolition with ramifications not only evident in the social sphere but also in material production and recycling for replacement buildings.

The urban environment is in constant renewal whether it be renovations, extensions, exchange of interiors, users and functions or demolitions, preservations and regenerations. Keeping a city alive also depends on another very important unexplicable dimension; sense of place, which is extremely vulnerable to imposed changes without involving all affected stakeholders.
METHODOLOGY

My chosen topic of death is extremely subjective in nature so the working method naturally reflects my own values and meanings connoted in the process. A reflective practice and deductive methodology has been led by an immersive experimental research starting in the fall semester. One phase of the research mediated a dialogue with the next phase which enabled an outcome of unpredictability, and to decipher what is being communicated I have had to constantly revise previous research.

A large part of the research consisted of literature over critical points of views on the subjects of assisted suicide and heritage, but also themes of phenomenology and sense of place. Reflecting at history and statistical development of death during a ten year span gained a perspective of how attitudes have evolved over time. Diagrammatic translations of themes has been used to convey personal perspectives along with artistic interpretations.
PHASE II
CONTEXT

“Death. The certainty of death is the spring of action and therefore of life, and in the implicit religious element in the work of art, life triumphs over death.”

Luis Barragán
A few months after the demolition of Apberget this image appears posted by communicator at Umeå municipality’s community planning office. It resembles the farewell ceremony for the project manager responsible for managing the renewal of the site as he steps down from his position working for the municipality. In what seems to be a lovely event, there stands a lectern that was built and placed at the empty site in protest by art students, but confiscated by the municipality and here used with questionable intent.
DEATHS

My attempt to grasp the concept of losing sense of place in relation to death in architecture¹, a transformation from architecture of meaning and use to a cosmetic architecture, led me to exploring the phenomenon of euthanasia. A majority of public opinion prompting for its legislation² and a political bubble not willing to legislate due to its ethical complexities, assisted suicide is enveloped with arguments between preservation and acceptance, paternalism and autonomy. It stirs up controversial issues of sustaining the present with actively choosing a different future. These choices with immediate effects and affects are imposed by forces of authority, as the individuals’ suffering must be approved (or acknowledged) or the acceptance (or pressures) of family and society may contribute, in which I correlate to changes occurring in the urban realm. Experiencing feelings of not being part of or not being able to impact changes and the desire to control or maintain a status quo are integral to life of the individual and the development of the environment. This allegory is not so much in equalizing the choice of suicide (life of the individual) with the choice of demolition (lifespan of the building), but a comparison of the authority exercised over the autonomy of the individual and selection of changes in our environment.

Connecting fear one may feel of loss to the death of architecture, the growth of junkspace³, activates a desire for preserving any evidence left of life before the surfacing of modernity’s superficialities at the threat of accelerating change. Preservation in order to prevent change is rather cultivating a forgetting of the past. Heritagisation⁴ has over its evolution from preserving monuments, objects, places, environments and cultures expanded to encompass memory as valuable entities, that is; absent heritage. The Ground Zero site in New York City is an example of the memorialization of place and object whose significance relates to their destruction or absence. Maintaining an “absent presence”, that remains symbolic to the present political regime or becomes a symbol of political action against a present political regime, in an effort to not forget is establishing a value in collective memory. Yet, without forgetting remembering has no value.

An iconoclasm as “a symbolic act of collective forgetting” was recently enforced in the speedily destruction of “Aberget” in Umeå 2013, executed by the municipality it still remains a repressed hot topic as the collective memory of its absence and undemocratic removal lives on. Destruction and preservation explicitly acknowledges, through the judgements of value made by majorities or political elites, the connection between particular objects, places and practices with collective memory and by doing so it also acknowledges the symbolic power of that being demolished. Harrison argues that destruction becomes a symbolic violence such as in war with intended violence against architecture as an analogue to the destruction of collective memory. Therefore I am using that analogy to convey how the decisions (violence) of the municipality (authority) over developments (destructions) are affecting the sense of place for the city’s inhabitants.

How is one able to accept antagonistic change?

5. A popular stage, speakers corner and assemblage area in the main city square made 1987 of granite, heated during the winter, named after unruly democratic public maneuvers and an important symbol for that matter.
When preservation is raised as an opposing option attention tends to fall at the ability to utilize the existing conditions instead of discussing the ramifications of destruction. Renewal is in this instance able to argue against preservation as the existing conditions can be promised to abide in the new, downplaying the affects of destruction. When capital is concerned the significance of a permanent architecture is explained by Francis Duffy to be very little since the rate of change within its structures are accumulating financial costs of exchanging services, such as plumbing and wiring and remodelling the interior, which in turn can become an incentive to demolish the whole building if they are too deeply installed to be easily replaced. This advocates for an efficient regenerative architecture easily transformed along with its evolving uses, only supporting the search for profit and affecting the sense of place as it changes.

Preserving old buildings does not preserve history, it is individuals connected to place that keep memory alive through the passing down of stories and traditions related to a place. But, if the individual is to act as a mnemonic to the city, as a whole, then architectural and cultural history must be granted agency. This contradiction can be observed at Gammlia, an open-air museum, where shells of history are displayed for public viewing. Patrons of the arts decide the level of participation through traditional festivities, various events and building preservation courses that are held on site.

Memory is dependent on stability of place and its relation to the human body.

“We live our lives at great speed; cities have become so enormous that they are unmemorable; consumerism has become disconnected from the labour process; urban architecture has a short lifespan; and social relationships are less clearly defined – all of which has eroded the foundations on which we build and share our memories.” The system of the political economy, opting for constant rapid growth and production generating the next “new” is not only the inducer of a forgetful culture as much as it instigates an endless accumulation of history at the risk of it disappearing, feeding an industry of storing information where over-abundance of past is made redundant.

In reaction to constant change the exponential hoarding of history might be hindering our ability to form collective memories in the present due to the distractions of mixed pasts overbearing the importance of what is intended to be communicated. Resulting in a paradoxical relationship of post-mnemonic and hypermnesiac, the histories that are chosen to be of value can then be used with an intention to spread knowledge and build a value, a relationship, between the consumers of this past with their surroundings. If successful, history should foster identity, meaning and value and one should feel a connection to place. But one starts to wonder if then there is a “true” past that is conveyed or one that acts as propaganda for reaching what is considered success.

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4. Connerton connects the hypermnesiac (extensive archiving of cultural memary) with the post-mnemonic (temporalities of consumption, working careers, information production and the production of modern spaces).
5. The use of history in creating value. See “Umeå Municipality’s application for European Capital of Culture of the Year 2014” on next page.
Image and text from video of Umeå Municipality's application for "European Capital of Culture of the Year 2014."

Source:
"This is a campaign on behalf of northern Europe which does not want to be seen as at the margins and periphery of Europe, but as part of its heart. We believe we have a bid to widen and deepen the concept and experience of the European Capital of Culture. We have a vision, a challenging mission and a strategy based on successful experience. We like to describe ourselves in the northern region as being the northern room in the European house.

The northern region has always been regarded as borderless by its indigenous people the Sami who settled the land millennia ago. Umeå, an unusual place, represents distance and closeness, dark days and white nights, at the edge geographically yet at the cutting edge in how it uses its collective imagination. The earliest mention of the city was by Pope Clement V in the year 1314, to help collect funds to finance the last crusade. But legend has it that Umeå was known way back in time. On a midsummer's day in 1888 a huge unstoppable fire consumed the whole town. Even the archives were lost. The town had to start over. After the fire the flame has been kept alive within the citizens.

New trends in culture were developed in Umeå and some have become mainstream. It has been the birthplace of several youth movements. The most odd perhaps being the vegan-punk movement. From early on the women’s movement had a strong impact and the city became renowned for its focus on gender equality.

We have been able through attitude and programming to democratise what seem like elite forms of art. Our method of developing and harnessing the potential of our people is co-creation. Our co-creation and open source approach to city and cultural development will and has already developed new expressions. We believe it is the next step in participatory democracy. Award winning examples: “The blog opera”; 400 young students in vocational programs jointly composed the libretto and music for a new opera through an innovative blogging process. “My library”; this is a partnership between six municipalities to develop cutting-edge library technology jointly with users.

Our strategy is to develop open source creativity platforms to encourage all citizens to become active participants, initiating changes and improvement on cultural projects rather than being a passive audience. This will lead us to our vision; a culturalized city, an idea ready to be shared.

During the year 2014 Umeå and the four northern regions of Sweden will present an open source program built on curiosity and passion, based on the eight seasons of the Sami calendar. We are large enough to take it seriously and small enough to make it happen. Will you make it happen?"
“Unfortunately, there will be some sacrifices”
- Bo Sundin, Antiquarian at the County Administrative Board in Västerbotten

In 2012 during the preparation for the site of a new cultural center in time for “Cultural capital of the year 2014” Umeå municipality moved a listed building labelled with national cultural importance standing on the site but demolished it a few days later, before the building committee completed an investigation of where to place it.
Photo: Per Landfors, used with permission.
An increasing individualism and capital autonomy collaborate in effecting our willingness to participate with, debate and care about things other than those affecting our own situation. Collective responsibility and human equality falls to the wayside as focus on the individuals rights and entitlements are enhanced leading to an degradation of the common. This is a major factor in the acceleration of change and its rampage across our environment. We are distracted from the fact that we all have a say in our collective place, the city and the environment, and that groups acquire influence more powerfully than the individual. By lessening our dependence on one another we promote a society of isolation and indifference where place becomes a representation of place, commodified and ready to be sold when the price is right. When we experience a crisis in identity we take an authoritative stance looking for that which is primitive in order to project superiority, marketing identities into the “latest style”. Torgovnick argues, “as a concept, the primitive seems to be infinitely docile and malleable, as what we want shifts and change”, for example giving indigenous people a place in another populated society but one that is cast accustomed to suit the purpose of their society’s context. As with the removal of the city library in Umeå from one functioning, central, embedded place to a site of representation. As a statement of renewal the symbol of an already existing common cultural center was commodified into a brand entitling destruction of a site labelled with heritage and the construction of a landmark for consumers of preselected cultures.

Just as development and change of the city is dictated by the agency of few, heritage is a concept of authoritarian preservation aimed at memorizing that which is seen as valuable. The official selection of that which is valuable is done by bodies invested in controlling stories told about pasts, such as media, museums and UNESCO founded in 1945 (with affiliates ICOMOS, UICN and ICCROM). When an environment or phenomenon is admitted to be heritage it becomes a universal matter of concern for all humanity according to UNESCO. Diversity and history is given a value in an effort to withstand destruction, spread understanding and uphold peace through the foundation of humanity’s moral and intellectual solidarity. This global interest is one of the most respected cultural tourism advocates influencing the very change of that worthy of protection.

One can say that avoiding change is innate to change. Acknowledging a value to something transforms it from real into the hyperreal; the city library evolving from a place of acquiring knowledge to represent a place of acquiring knowledge as a symbol that culture is of great value, justifying a relocation and destroying sense of place.

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4. UNESCO, Introducing UNESCO
Additionally, opposed states of change foster a frustration that consequently causes one to want to preserve the familiar despite a general development and progress being sought for. The ambivalence of wanting progress but not being able to influence changes can build up an anger towards those seen as “others”, scapegoating and fester chronic emotional symptoms of injustice, hopelessness and resentment eroding the sense of self. The individual experiencing antagonistic change can feel they have lost control of their lives and their destiny where values of meaning, identity and purpose is diminishing as they exist in a condition of existential limbo between a past permanently changed and not yet settled in the future.

How could one expect to be able to accept an inescapable change if one is still lingering in the past?

Accepting change is integral to accepting death; the unknown. The fear of death can be expressed by our need to know the exact time and cause of death and our attempts to delay and conceal it. Letting go of this control requires courage confronting fears and anxiety in order to gain a new perspective.

PHASE III
CONCEPT

A space marking time,
a presence telling of a recent absence.

William Howarth
The thesis makes no attempt to solve the existential strain from the prevailing conditions of renewal. Rather, the contextual interpretation gives form to a design of a kind of euthanization of resentment as an instrumental metaphor of the polemic individual interest feeding the decline of the common good. Initial intentions of common good is either forgotten or deliberately ignored and development embarks on a short-term generative system rather than a conscious inclusion. The question of when and how life ends where it is sustained by technology as analogous to the place existing for the sake of something else, labelled with values from outside its uses, maintains the progress of a future uninterested in real connection.

My own involvements in such developments is yet to be determined as my future role as an architect may very well find its own critical agency, or exert dominion over developments and remain glossing over the practice with a discourse about sustainability while trying to serve the power elites.

I had never really analysed why I felt so strongly for preserving old buildings and still feel a bit of ambivalence of wanting the old to stay alive and renovating its surface. But after this thesis work I have come to the conclusion that demolition is never wrong in itself, only that the reactions to the latent loss can be chosen. Now that I am departing from the safe haven of school my future prospects will with certainty involve as much fear of destroying a possible sense of place through my professional choices as joy of exploring future scenarios achieving changes for creating new places of attachments. Remembering that new attachment and connection is just as inevitable as the future disappearance of them, as long as decisions are based on humanity’s ability to remember and forget, life will move on. My conclusion is; perception is everything. How we perceive change, its origin and implications depicts our reaction to it. If we perceive something to exist then it does.


Images on page 7, 8, 10, 12, 19, 22, 28 & 31 by author