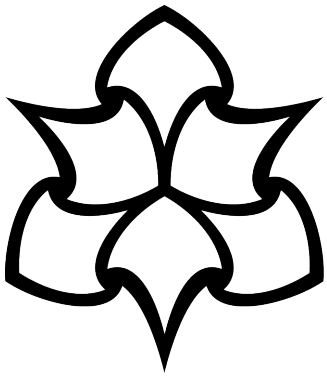

UnDoing:
An Essay by Sally Stone & Laura Sanderson

Opening the doors of Food, 1971.
Image by Richard Landry. Alteration by Gordon Matta-Clark (pictured, right).

'The story adjusts its gait to the slow progress of the iron-bound hoofs on the climbing paths, towards a place that contains the secret of the past and of the future, which contains time coiled around itself like a lasso hanging from the pommel of a saddle.'[1]

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller, Italo Calvino.

In 1972, Gordon Matta Clark, with Carol Goodden, and Tina Girouard published the financial expenditure for the first year of their radical and experimental café: FOOD. The first column of the accounts lists the taxable assets, the payments and the income. The salaries, insurance and advertising disbursements are shown, as are the raw food purchases, the kitchen equipment and the waste disposal, but then so is the income. The books are balanced: $167,120.72 in and $167,120.72 out.

1 Calvino, Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller.* A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc, 1979. Page 224.

The second column is much more specific; it itemises the actual food and quite often the process by which it was cooked, and although specific to the menu and the tastes of the clientele, it is an objective but unconventional inventory of the food consumed: 17,760 yards of spaghetti steamed, 220 bunches of parsley sprinkled delicately, and 15,660 potential chickens cracked.

It is the statistics within the third column of the accounts that are much more personal: 99 cut fingers, and 99 workers, 213 people who needed to get it together (keep it together), 3 unfulfilled promises by good friends, 47 dogs asked to leave, and 7 made up Social Security numbers. Two rebellions are listed, the first was the Dishwasher Rebellion of Feb. '72, and the other one the Radio Rebellion of May '72. This column transcends the formal book-keeping necessary to keep such an enterprise afloat. The reality of what it was actually like to be there, the sense of how life was lived within the café.

A city is made of buildings and streets. It is constructed from concrete and glass, steel and masonry. But a city is more than an itinerary of bricks and mortar, it is greater than the streets and alleyways, it is bigger than the rooms, squares and parks, and the funding needed to construct them. It is formed by the people who occupy it, by what they do, how they feel and the way that they interact with each other and with the environment around them. Buildings and spaces are engrained with the narrative of use over time. Walter Benjamin clarified this relationship between places and the people who occupy them: 'To live is to leave traces.'[2]

FOOD was ostensibly a café, somewhere to buy and consume food, but it was also a destination, a focus for the community who frequented it. This duality allowed the artists who worked there, or those who visited, whether regulars or not, to be part of the ever

2 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

evolving circus of experiment and artistic invention. The tangible nature of the building, the shutters, the counter, tables, light fittings and the quality of the food, were obvious and critical elements of a successful business. However, the intangible nature of the place was also an important part of the installation. Who was there and why they were there, what they were doing and with whom. Life was lived within the confines of the space. The interpretation of this adventure formed the basis of the final column of the accounts, but even these leave much to the imagination.

As individuals and communities, deep significance is attached to familiar places, and complex relationships can develop between the residents and the place that they inhabit; thus, places are defined by the people who live within them. This quality that is present in the nature of the buildings and the streets, is often generated by the ordinary actions of local people, many of who believe that their identity is essentially tied to the place that they inhabit. This local distinctiveness is characterised by the activities that occur within the specific environment. And so, significant markers are formed, in both the present and in the past, which will allow a society to relate to a particular environment.

Italo Calvino in his searching recollection of cities discussed this many -layered relationship between the generation of a place and the manner in which it is occupied. A city, he said, consists of '…the relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past'. He qualifies this '… the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession; the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn; the tilt of a guttering and a cat's progress along it as he slips into the same window.'[3]

3 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

This constant use and adjustment to that use and abuse creates an ever-evolving environment, somewhere that is never finished, not complete nor content. Yet as the city develops it leaves traces and marks of that evolution. It is ordered and reordered, and in doing so displays these uncertainties and patina of time within the very grain of the streets and buildings themselves. Calvino continues: 'As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks up like a sponge and expands. … The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the street, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.'[4]

The city is a crowded complex place full of contrast, juxtaposition, discord and incongruity. Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, describe it as a 'didactic instrument',[5] that is, a place in which a desirable discourse can be formulated. They believe that the constructed environment is charged with narrative content. It is a place in which certain elements come to the fore, while others are more modest, more unassuming, but no less important or carefully considered. It is created from the collective endeavours of many generations; each of which has its own priorities, focus, or agenda, and it is the interpretation of these priorities that proves to be the impetus for further evolution or change. Alterations, adaptations, additions, embellishments and undoings all accumulate in the ever-developing city.

This idea that the built environment, which initially appears to be permanently fixed in an unchanging static and immobile state, and yet is actually a constantly evolving entity, hurrying from one

4 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

5 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

manifestation to the next to avoid the process of scarification was discussed by the Irish architect John Tuomey. He suggests that 'when we say that we think of a building as a permanent thing, that is not to say it must stand intact forever or that it cannot be changed'.[6]

Throughout history, places, buildings and situations have been reused and adapted: they can survive as cultures and civilisations change. The city is created as layers of archaeology, formed one upon another – a palimpsest of discourse, alterations and networks. The buildings may radically change, but the underlying nature of the place is still present within the street patterns, the position of the river, the direction of the wind, the predominant patterns of the surrounding hills, the building materials and the accents and the actions of the residents. Tuomey then deliberates upon this relationship with the past by invoking Seamus Heaney, who 'has described one function of memory as a kind of disassembly and remaking of the past in which parts of our history are dismembered in order to be remembered in a way which is useful to our present.'[7]

Memory and anticipation are a forceful combination that create associations, connections, and affiliations. Places that exist and places that we imagine will exist, (or indeed we imagine did exist) induce a sense of melancholia; that is a longing for a half-forgotten past, for a time just before memory begins. The 'already built' provides a direct link with the past; it is a connection with the very building bricks of our society. The existing tells the tale or story of how a particular culture evolved. A simple building may depict a certain moment in time; it may relate the particular sensibility of specific era. A more complex collection of structures and spaces may have a much more elaborate

6 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

7 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

13th Floor Century House, 2018.
Image by Sally Stone.

story to tell. Christine M Boyer ruminates upon this: 'The name of a city's streets and squares, the gaps in its very plan and physical form, its local monuments and celebrations, remain as traces and ruins of their former selves. They are tokens or hieroglyphs from the past to be literally re-read, re-analysed, and re-worked over time.'[8]

The use and re-use of a constructed site creates a direct connection with the identity of the place. It is a strategy that establishes an explicit relationship with history and context, not just with the site, the building and its immediate surroundings, but also with the society that constructed it. Art and architecture facilitate the exploration of identity

8 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

through the examination of the specificity of the context in which it is embedded. The reading and understanding of the message of the city, the individual building and the spaces in between them provides the basis for any discussion. And thus, an interactive discourse is constructed between the past, present and future needs of the site, one which transcends the mere preservation of the site in the found condition.

This material, emotional, political, and conceptual response is a sort of close reading or mapping of the already existing situation. Giancarlo de Carlo refers to the 'revelatory capacity of reading . . . if one is able to interpret the meaning of what has remained engraved, not only does one come to understand when this mark was made and what the motivation behind it was, but one also becomes conscious of how the various events have become layered, how they relate to one another and how, through time they have set off other events and have woven together our history.'[9]

The artist or architect can choose to work with uncovered identity, to create new buildings and spaces, installations, images and constructions that are appropriate to their location and which do not destroy the nature or character of an area. It is possible to create works that have the capacity to condense the artistic potential of the region while reinterpreting cultural influences coming from the outside, for new works to show a great understanding of both place and tectonics, and to evoke the essence of the site, together with the inescapable materiality of situation. Interventions, conceptions, constructions, exhibitions and documentation can be conceived and created through this approach.

The process of examination that the architect will employ is not dissimilar to that the artist may use. It is about understanding and interpretation. An architect may begin any project with an examination

9 Benjamin, Walter. *Paris Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 1986. Page 155.

of the site. In an initial survey physical qualities are recorded; measurements taken, light levels, quality and direction assessed, surrounding building heights logged, access, drainage and services noted. It is this incomplete catalogue of information that creates the 'as found' or 'constructed' site for a given project. The artist may feel the site in a more oneiric manner, possibly a more instinctive connection, but eventually it is one that is comparable. Apparently, when asked about the difference between art and architecture Marcel Duchamp, is alleged to have stated: 'drains'.

This understanding and then adaptation of the conditions of the site can be condensed into an easily remembered saying: Remember, Reveal, Construct. Remember the characteristics of the site, look closely at the attributes, explore the nature of what is there, examine the place and find out what it is saying. Reveal the situation, analyse the findings of the investigation and discover what it means. Use these to exploit the very qualities of the situation. Construct new elements that are appropriate to the situation, that heighten the experience of what is there, that become part of the continual evolution of the place.

Manchester has a long tradition of reusing buildings. Just as it was one of the first industrial cities and as a consequence constructed large numbers of mills and warehouses, equally, it was one of the first to embrace the post-industrial condition and remodel these massive edifices as flats, galleries and premises for small businesses. Manchester is a city that has completely redefined its agenda, and much of this is based upon the adaptation of its existing architecture

One of the most pressing concerns for our 21st century society is the challenge of the huge stock of existing buildings that have outlived the function for which they were built. Their worth is well recognised and the importance of retaining them has been long debated, but if they are to be saved, what is to be done with these redundant buildings? Whether these are edifice of character and worth, or ordinary straightforward structures that have simply outlived their purpose;

demolition and rebuild is no longer seen as the obvious solution to the continuous use of the specific site. It is now a commonplace architectural approach to re-use, adapt and add-to, rather than the building being razed and a new structure erected in its place.

Issues of heritage, sustainability and smartness are at the forefront of many discussions about architecture today and adaptation offers the opportunity to reinforce the particular character of an area using up-to-date techniques for a contemporary population. Issues of collective memory and identity combined with ideas of tradition, history and culture mean that it is possible to retain a sense of continuity with the past as a way of creating the future. Building reuse is an environmentally supportable method of regenerating the built environment. It is intrinsically healthy in that it retains the collective memory of the local population, and sustainable in that much of the embodied energy within the structure will not be destroyed.

Manchester has moved far from the image of a dark and gloomy, northern English city built upon hard work and dirt, synonymous with just three things: industry, football and music. The place was known for its warehouses, cotton mills, railway viaducts, and canals – as would be expected from the first modern, industrial conurbation, however the continually evolving city has been reinvented as a significant situation that embraces the new while recognising the importance of this architectural and environmental heritage. This mid ground is an architectural bricolage, where a series of existing built elements are collected and reworked, where everything is of importance and everything is relevant. It is a wondrous combination of new and old, of the worthy, modest, exciting, significant, unimportant, and the almost invisible. Manchester is a vigorous and vibrant environment that is continually adjusting itself to the gait of the evolving narrative of urban life.

Sally Stone and Laura Sanderson