

Nostalgia in Architecture

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/
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, NG

An object of nostalgia

Crafted in pocket size, this *énoncé* is designed to subtly fit in the palm of one's hand, intended for convenient portability and storage. Yet, its ultimate intention is to metamorphose into ***an object of nostalgia*** as time unfolds — not for the others, but my future self. The cover bears no printed title, signifying the complexity of grasping a comprehensive understanding of nostalgia in general, needless to say in the realm of architecture.

Nevertheless, the quote featured on the rear cover encapsulates a fundamental insight gleaned from delving into this subject as evidenced in my concluding confession. It underscores the imperative for an individual to take a stance in the quest for the meaning of nostalgia (in architecture). Otherwise, the term remains devoid of significance, regardless of the myriad definitions provided by the others. It is also crucial to indicate that the written expression herein represents solely my current stage of contemplation regarding to the topic. Therefore, the final

pages are deliberately remained blank to serve as canvases for forthcoming musings¹, at the same time standing as a reminder of this ongoing voyage, though potentially bereft of a definitive conclusion, echoing Rossi's reiterated assertion that nothing can truly be deemed "finished."²

In either scenario, being nostalgic of this particular period is inevitable and anticipated. With that in mind, fabric cover is meticulously selected, envisaging its endurance over time as an ideal curator of patina — a tangible representation of lost time. Its beige hue serves a dual symbolic purpose. On one hand, it poignantly underscores the bittersweet nature of nostalgia, residing between the colours of 'happiness' (yellow) and 'sadness' (grey). On the other hand, it is psychologically associated with the ability to evoke feelings of calmness, comfort, cosiness, warmth and security, reflecting the potential roles that can be played by **Nostalgia in Architecture.** ■

¹ Notes, thoughts, sketches, photos and so forth.

² Maura Lucking, "Alcuni Dei Miei Progetti": Aldo Rossi and the Editorial Impulse," *Getty research journal* 11, no. 1 (2019): 154.

To my family and friends,
for your constant support all along

To Alexandre and Adrien,
for your precious advice and guidance.

To my past, present and future,
for whom this object is made to.

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Looking back at my own life, particularly the last decade, constantly moving from one place to another for study and work, was and still is a common occurrence to me. Upon residing in a foreign land, I realised that one transcends the roles of tourist or traveller, yet far from being a native. Irrespective of the duration of stay, the individual remains in the interplay of their former life and the unfolding one. Consequently, one is embedded within a collective that has undergone this unique journey and intimately familiar with the paradoxical feeling of belonging yet not belonging, realising that the dual sensations of homesickness and feeling at home, can coexist concurrently.

Gradually, I come to the awareness that it is not ‘home’ what I am longing for as it, too, keep changing. Moreover, the longing emerges for all my other ‘temporary’ homes in the past, after all, they had seen me grow. It is the atmosphere and ambiance of the lost experiences that I yearn for — the moment when ‘everyone’ and ‘everything’ were at ‘that’ place, at ‘that’ time and possibly doing ‘some’thing — irretrievable in reality but vividly exists in one’s memory bank. This is the juncture where I realised it’s the sense of nostalgia that has accompanied me along the journey, inherently intertwining with and becoming an integral part of me.

In the same way, nostalgia must have latently shaped my sentiments towards architecture. As this chapter of my life — the phase of ‘formal’³ architecture education draws to a close, I would like to take this opportunity of composing an *énoncé*, as an endeavour to understand what nostalgia means and its influence on the spatial aspects of architecture. Regardless of the outcome,

this *énoncé* serves as a chronicle of my present with reflections on my past and certainly stands as a ‘nostalgia’ trigger in my future.

In the past few months, I notice that writing about nostalgia and attempting to grapple with it necessitates a certain level of personal nostalgia. This, in turn, engenders a sense of longing, occasionally prompting a gentle slide into daydreaming. I was initially uneasy till encountering a parallel sentiment expressed by the late Russian professor of comparative literature, Svetlana Boym, in her book “*The Future of Nostalgia*”, a sentiment I resonate with deeply and prefer to quote at length here:

“The study of nostalgia inevitably slows us down. There is, after all, something pleasantly outmoded about the very idea of longing. We long to prolong our time, to make it free, to daydream, against all odds resisting external pressures and flickering computer screens...Nostalgic time is that time-out-of-time of daydreaming and longing that jeopardises one’s timetables and work ethic, even when one is working on nostalgia.”⁴ ■

³ Here acknowledges that architecture education as a life-long matter.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xix.

nostalgia
(noun) /nɒ'stældʒ(ɪ)ə/

“a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness
when one thinks about things that happened in the past.”

Growing up in Asia and being fortunate enough to live and travel across some of the major cities across the continent, it is not hard to observe the phenomenon of Asia's metropolitans being taken over by clusters of skyscrapers, where any difference is hardly perceived even though each has its own unique and distinguishable culture. Indeed, the accelerating rate of urbanisation and densification creates wealth to the land, yet it fails to justify the creation of vast, anonymous and characterless urban landscapes.

While there are preserved iconic monuments, they frequently fall victim to commercial exploitation, reduced to mere tourist products rather than genuine representations of cultural depth. Acknowledging that this trend continues unabated, seemingly without an end in sight, prompts contemplation on the sacrifices being made — specifically, the erosion of cultural identity, bringing a crisis in defining distinct characteristics of local architecture, which supposedly should serve as the representation of a city:

“The union between the past and the future exists in the very idea of the city that it flows through in the same way that memory flows through the life of a person; and always, in order to be realised, this idea must not only be shaped by reality. This shaping is a permanent aspect of a city's artefacts, monuments, and the idea we have of it.”⁵

Conversely, in Europe, grappling with an already saturated urban context and stringent cultural heritage protection policies, most of the tasks given to the architects are dealing with building

preservation. Practising at this critical moment, paying homage to history and the vernacular by solely reconstructing the past, to mimic its physicality without traces of contemporary translation will only hinder the progress of architecture. In this regard, architects often find themselves caught between “the optimisation of advanced technology and the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism.”⁶ In the discourse surrounding the preservation versus adaptation debate, Aldo Rossi's seminal work, “*The Architecture of the City*,” remains notably pertinent:

“It is hardly surprising that this concept of context is espoused and applied by those who pretend to preserve the historical cities by retaining their ancient façades or reconstructing them in such a way as to maintain their silhouettes and colours and other such things; but what do we find after these operations when they are actually realised? An empty, often repugnant stage.”⁷

Hence, my quest here is to seek an alternative interpretation of historical typologies, one that is not devoid but teeming with narratives, vitality and memories as these are the unique fragments that formulate our humanity. In devising a strategic approach to engage with historical contexts or lineages, I derive insights from the concepts of *Restorative Nostalgia* and *Reflective Nostalgia*, as articulated by Boym.

Despite the contentious nature of nostalgia, often disparagingly regarded, as noted by Charles Maier: “Nostalgia is to longing as kitsch to art,”⁸ I contend that there exists a potential for harnessing nostalgia in a constructive manner, transcending mere reductionism. The pivotal factor lies in the dynamic and

⁵ Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (London: MIT, 1999), 131.

⁶ Kenneth Frampton, “Toward a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1987), 20.

⁷ Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 123.

⁸ Charles S. Maier, “The End of Longing?,” in *The Postwar Transformation of Germany*, ed. John Brady, Beverly Crawford, and Sarah Elise Wiliarty (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 273.

thoughtful interactions between the past and present, antiquity and innovation to emphasise an approach that goes beyond merely venerating historical artefacts on a pedestal:

“Fantasies of the past, determined by needs of the present, have a direct impact on realities of the future. The consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales.”⁹

Embracing nostalgia as a productive lens in architecture, this research seeks to function as a fertile means of critically comprehending the continuous evolution of each complex entity across space and time. It endeavours to interconnect these entities with a broader historical context and lineage. Through the accumulation of diverse layers of collective experiences and memories, it strives to guide a path forward, fostering a sense of continuity that bridges the present and past while aspiring towards the future. ■

⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

The word nostalgia finds its etymological roots from the Greek words, *nostos* — return home, and *algia* — pain (of longing). However, it did not originate in ancient Greece, nostalgia is only pseudo-Greek, or nostalgically Greek.

It was coined by a Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, in his medical dissertation in 1688. He argued that it was possible “from the force of the sound Nostalgia to define the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one’s native land.”¹⁰

Although *nostos* has its ties to a mythological ritual, contrary to what one might expect, nostalgia originated in the field of medicine, rather than in poetry or politics.¹¹ ■

¹⁰ Carolyn Kiser Anspach, “Medical Dissertation On Nostalgia By Johannes Hofer, 1688.” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2, no. 6 (1934): 381.

¹¹ Gregory Nagy, *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 219.

Since the 17th century, when the word ‘nostalgia’ first emerged, its meaning has undergone several transformations across different epochs. It would not be inaccurate to assert that the proliferation of nostalgia is linked not solely to spatial dislocation but also to the evolving conception of time. Boym highlighted, the identification of nostalgia as a disease in the late 17th century coincided with a pivotal historical moment characterised by a profound change in the perception of time — “time was no longer shifting sand, time was money.”¹² Below is a description of related events in its chronological sequence:

17th century

Nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, perilous but not fatal. Among the recorded initial victims, they were freedom-seeking students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic workers and servants labouring in France and Germany, and Swiss soldiers serving abroad.¹³ Hofer perceived the spread of the ailment as enigmatic, as he believed it extended “along uncommon routes through the untouched course of the channels of the brain to the body,” evoking “the uncommon and ever present idea of the recalled native land in the mind.”¹⁴

The clinical observations recorded that nostalgia had a tendency to debilitate the body and deplete the “vital spirits” through an intense yearning for homeland which caused patients generating “erroneous representations” that led to a disconnection from the present. They exhibited “a lifeless and haggard countenance” along with “indifference towards everything,” experiencing

a blurred distinction between past and present, as well as real and imaginary occurrences. Some patients even demonstrated “an ability to hear voices or see ghosts.” All these had led to symptoms such as nausea, diminished appetite, pathological alterations in the lungs, inflammation of the brain, cardiac arrests, high fever, marasmus and suicidal behaviour.¹⁵

It was also noted that the ‘nostalgic’ individuals exhibited an extraordinary ability to recall “sensations, tastes, sounds, and smells, along with the minutiae and trivialities of the lost paradise” — details that often went unnoticed by those who remained home, also known as the gastronomic and auditory nostalgia.¹⁶ For example, the rustic mothers’ soups, the thick milk from village diaries, the chiming of cowbells and traditional folk melodies from the Alpine valleys had a pronounced ability to elicit nostalgic responses among Swiss soldiers. The sound of bagpipes resonated with a similar effect for Scottish Highlanders. In these instances, the music “does not act precisely as music, but as a memorative sign.”¹⁷

Swiss scientists believed that purging the stomach, taking opium, treatment with leeches, warm hypnotic emulsions and a return to the motherland would alleviate the symptoms. Interestingly, from the records, Hofer exhibited a sense of pride in his patients, viewing nostalgia as a manifestation of patriotism among his compatriots, signifying a deep love for the allure of their homeland, even to the extent of falling ill. At this time, the surge of nostalgia simultaneously bolstered and questioned the evolving notions of patriotism and national spirit. It remained uncertain how to address the soldiers afflicted with such profound love for

¹² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 9.

¹³ Ibid, 3.

¹⁴ Anspach, “Medical Dissertation On Nostalgia By Johannes Hofer, 1688,” 381.

¹⁵ Anspach, “Medical Dissertation On Nostalgia By Johannes Hofer, 1688,” 386.

¹⁶ Michael Hviid Jacobsen, *Intimations of Nostalgia: Multidisciplinary Explorations of an Enduring Emotion* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), 8.

¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Waring, *A Dictionary of Music* (London: Printed for J. French, 1775), 267.

their homeland that they were unwilling to part from it or, for that matter, sacrificed their lives for it.¹⁸

18th century

Towards the end of the 18th century, nostalgia appeared increasingly resistant to treatment and physicians found that a return to the native land did not consistently soothe the symptoms as the object of longing sometimes shifted to distant lands beyond the boundaries of the homeland. Gradually, it transformed from a manageable ailment into an incurable disease, evolving from *maladie du pays* to *mal du siècle*.¹⁹ It is also suggested that during the Romantic Age, nostalgia began to undergo an evolution as an emotion, aligning with the concurrent rise of mass culture spurred by the industrial revolution.²⁰

19th century

Two centuries after its diagnosis, nostalgia now went through a process of institutionalisation, finding its place in national and regional museums, heritage sites and urban memorials. The past, once elusive, transformed into “heritage,” making it accessible and comprehensible, no longer beyond understanding.²¹ Meanwhile, in the United States, there was a military doctor, Theodore Calhoun, perceived nostalgia as a disgraceful disease indicative of a deficiency in masculinity and unprogressive attitudes. He believed the primary causes of nostalgia were inac-

tivity and a sluggish, inefficient use of time, which fostered day-dreaming, erotomania and onanism.²²

20th century - present

The last century marked the full endeavour of delving into nostalgia shifting from physicians to poets and philosophers with the conceptions of nostalgia started to take shape in today’s understandings. Since then its contemporary conceptual status has brought itself into multiple realms, signifying its expanding emotional complexity.

Therefore, the following chapter is dedicated to explain the current representation of Nostalgia. ■

¹⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4-5.

¹⁹ Ibid, 7.

²⁰ Edna Langenthal and Hagit Leshem, “Three Aspects of Nostalgia: Thoughts on the Work of Aldo Rossi,” *The Plan journal* 8, no. 1 (2023): 155.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Theodore Calhoun, “Nostalgia as a Disease of Field Service,” *Medical and Surgical Reporter* (1864): 130. This article was abstracted and reprinted as “Home-sickness as a Malady,” *Scientific American*, no.10 (April 1864): 215.

Evidently, exemplifying the concept of nostalgia in contemporary terms demands surpassing the original definition as a sentiment of longing for the past. It extends beyond mere reminiscence, encompassing a desire for a past that may not have existed, given our tendency to engage in selective memory. This emotional experience is not confined to an individual realm; rather, it can be collectively felt, emerging when in the company of others who participated in the shared event being recalled.²³ Boym, as a survivor of the twentieth century, encapsulated the last century through her lens of nostalgia:

“The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s.”²⁴

Seizing the spotlight since the nineteenth century and persisting into the twenty-first century, the concept of progress, whether propelled by revolution or industrial development, dominated the narrative of the world. Initially, optimistic scholars held the belief that nostalgia could be remedied through universal progress and medical advancements. However, it was soon proven wrong, as progress not only fails to cure nostalgia but exacerbates the effects. The rapid pace of industrialisation and modernisation intensifies people’s longing for a slower tempo and stronger social cohesion with a continuity to the past and tradition. The more the globalisation being expanded, the stronger the local attachments grow. In other words, nostalgia resurfaces as a defence mechanism during these periods of accelerated life rhythms and historical tumult. It is contingent upon the contemporary understanding of time as unrepeatable and irreversible,

that recontextualises itself into a new genre, transforming from a narrative of potential recovery to a romantic touch with the past. As a result, the present-day depiction of nostalgia diverges from traditional settings like battlefields or hospital wards to the ethereal landscapes, featuring reflective ponds, transient clouds and remnants evoking the bygone eras.²⁵

Modern nostalgia is an expression of grief for the unattainability of a mythical return, mourning the displacement or loss of an enchanted world that involves a romance with one’s own fantasies which can only endure in a long-distance relationship. While nostalgia might appear to be longing for a particular place, it fundamentally embodies a yearning for a different time, such as the unhurried rhythms of our childhood. That is to say, it tends to rebel against the contemporary notion of time, which is entwined with history and progress, by transforming the past into a private or collective mythology, treating time as space and resisting the irreversibility that plagues society.²⁶

This mythology, though chaotic and unsystematic, provides a means to articulate the phenomenology of human experience. Its continued expanding penetration in the society can be seen through its perversion into the popular culture, where the utilisation of technological advancements and special effects are shown in the recreation of past scenarios, ranging from the sinking Titanic to the demise of gladiators and the extinction of dinosaurs. This event certainly echoes what Pierre Nora has suggested that the memorial sites, *lieux de mémoire*, are established institutionally at the time when the environments of memory, the *milieux de mémoire*, begin to fade.²⁷

²³ Janelle L. Wilson, “‘REMEMBER WHEN...’: A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia,” *Etc.* 56, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 303.

²⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.

²⁵ Jacobsen, *Intimations of Nostalgia*, 17-18.

²⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi-xv.

²⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7.

Therefore, to indulge in nostalgia is to momentarily escape the disruptions of the real world and enter into the universe of one-self/selves, by tracing back the memory, imagining being in the old times and eventually realising how far the journey one has been through. There lies a mixture of sorrow and delight, bitter and sweet, memorisation and memory reconstruction. It is this distinct quality that sets nostalgia apart from other emotions. Modern nostalgia, at its core, serves as a mirror reflecting the present that imbued with sentiments in the past. It embodies a yearning for a smoother continuity of identity through the means of looking back to the past that grounds us — providing a trajectory connecting our past, present and potential futures.²⁸

In contrast to melancholia, which is limited only to individual affliction, nostalgia serves as an intermediary between collective and individual memory, bridging the realms of individual biography and the biography of groups or nations. Consequently, this allure often lies in the promise to reconstruct an ideal home which forms the core of many influential ideologies today, enticing us to forsake critical thinking for emotional bonds. The peril of nostalgia here is its tendency to blur the lines between the tangible and the imaginary home as nostalgia tends to communicate through enigmatic language and puzzles, hence one must demand confrontation to avoid becoming its next victim or victimiser. In extreme cases, it can fabricate a phantom homeland, compelling individuals to sacrifice their lives or even take others' — "unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters."²⁹

Meanwhile, nostalgia also carries a utopian dimension, rather than being future-oriented, it fixates on or parallel to the past.

This nostalgic perspective prompts a re-evaluation of history that extends beyond the pursuit of novelty and technological advancement, it delves into the unrealised possibilities, unforeseen turns and crossroads in the past. This demonstrates that nostalgia has the potential to be retrospective as well as prospective, either as a barrier on the path between then and now or a bridge linking the unseen insights drawn from the past to the demands of contemporary times.³⁰

Nonetheless, even today, its captivating object remains notoriously difficult to grasp as the term per se embodies a fundamental sense of contradiction, ambiguity and ambivalence — *algia*, signifying pain or longing, is a shared experience, yet *nostos*, symbolising the return home, is what creates division. The attempt to mend the longing with a sense of belonging and the effort to alleviate the anxiety of loss by rediscovering identity, often leads to divergence i.e. the termination of mutual understanding. Perhaps, therein lies the beauty of nostalgia as it eschews simple definitions or categorisations by involving the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialisation of the immaterial, mapping space onto time and time onto space.³¹ ■

²⁸ Wilson, "“REMEMBER WHEN...”,” 303.

²⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

³⁰ Wilson, "“REMEMBER WHEN...”,” 303.

³¹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi-xviii.

The nineteenth century unfolded a perennial debate between proponents of total restoration, who advocate the recreation of historical and artistic monuments from the past in their entirety, and the enthusiasts of unintentional memorials of the past such as ruins, eclectic constructions and fragments imbued with “age value” that enable an affective engagement with historicity, fostering an atmosphere that serves as a space for contemplation on the passage of time.

Based on this, Boym laid out a topological theory of nostalgia, which I find productive and potential in formulating a strategy to navigate within a historic context and lineage. Two categories of nostalgia were introduced by her in which the past intricately contributes to the formation of space and defines “one’s relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, to one’s own self-perception” — ***Restorative Nostalgia*** and ***Reflective Nostalgia***.³²

In her perspective, these terms represent approaches to understanding what appears to be an indescribable homesickness and ways of perceiving individuals’ connection to a collective home. In essence, it extends beyond the internal realm of an individual psyche, to the interrelationship between individual and collective memory.³³ Although these two forms of nostalgia represent polarised expressions and meanings associated with the longing for home, they are not completely discernible or exclusive from each other; rather, they are expressed in a nuanced complexity, within ambiguous zones that occasionally blur their definitions. ■

³² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 15.

³³ Ibid, 41.

The word ‘restoration’ has its roots in the Latin “*restaurare*,” which implies re-establishment and indicating a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment. Restorative nostalgia stresses on *nostos* and advocates for a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Even in its less extreme form, restorative nostalgia upholds the idea that the past does not wither and disregards the indicators of historical time such as patina, ruins or cracks. Its intention is not to expose any indications of imperfection or deterioration but to be freshly painted in its “original image” and maintain perpetually young. For restorative nostalgia, the past is a flawless snapshot, a frozen moment that could serve as a value for the present. This form of nostalgia encompasses two primary narrative arcs — the restoration of origin and the conspiracy theory.³⁴

The restoration of origin

Restorative nostalgia here tries to fill in the gaps in memory, revealing itself through complete reconstructions of monuments of the past. The nostalgics within this category do not identify themselves as nostalgic but perceive their undertaking as a quest for truth. If nostalgia is said to be a sensation arising from temporal separation and displacement, both are addressed by a ‘full’ reconstruction. Restorative nostalgia compensates for distance through intimate experiences and the accessibility of a desired object while displacement is remedied through a return home, preferably one that is collective in nature. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a significant resurgence of the past in various projects involving complete restoration, ranging from the Sistine Chapel

in Vatican City to the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. These endeavours aimed to reintroduce a sense of the sacred which was deemed to be lacking in the modern world.³⁵

The conspiracy theory

This type of nostalgic narrative is emblematic of national and nationalist revivals globally. The revivals involve the antimodern myth-making of history achieved through reverting to national pictorial symbols and myths, and at times, by swapping conspiracy theories. It is typical in many extreme instances of contemporary nationalism fuelled by right-wing popular culture. This form of restorative nostalgia is propelled not by the longing or feeling of distance but rather by the anxiety concerning those who highlight historical incongruities between the past and present, demanding the completeness and continuity of the restored tradition.³⁶ ■

³⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41-48.

³⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41-45.

³⁶ Jacobsen, *Intimations of Nostalgia*, 4 & 12.

The ‘reflection’ here signifies a newfound adaptability, rather than the restoration of stasis. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, in the longing itself and perpetually deferring homecoming. It is called an imperfect process of remembrance as its narrative is often inconclusive and fragmentary, sometimes even ironic and humorous.³⁷ Reflective nostalgia acknowledges that home is not a singular entity, realising returning home does not necessarily equate to a full recovery of identity. Therefore, it stays in its journey of the imagined virtual realm and harbours a fear of departing from there to embrace the supposed one and only true motherland, which might unveil to be deceptive or perilous.

Recognising the divergence between identity and resemblance, this form of nostalgia abstains from attempting the reconstruction of the mythical home, it is “enamoured of distance, not of the referent itself.”³⁸ Whether the home exists in ruins or has undergone extensive renovation to the point of being unrecognisable, this act of defamiliarisation and the associated sense of distance impel individuals to recount their narrative, endeavouring to capture the intricate relationship between the past, present and future. Although a complete recollection of its loss is highly unlikely, there still exists a certain link to the loss of collective memory.³⁹

The core here is not centred on the pursuit of an absolute truth, for it doesn’t adhere to a singular narrative. Instead, its focus lies in contemplating history and the passage of time, embracing the remnants of ruins, the enduring patina of time and history, and the reveries of an alternative place and era. Acknowledging that a contemporary nostalgia individual can experience both home-

sickness and a weariness of home simultaneously, it underscores that longing and critical thinking are not mutually exclusive, just as affective memories do not exempt individuals from compassion, judgement or critical reflection. Compared to restorative, this type of nostalgia leans more towards an individual narrative with their historical time and memory. It grapples with the irreversibility of the past and the limitations of human existence by savouring intricate details, cherishing fragments of memory and imbuing space with a temporal quality.⁴⁰

A utopian aspect is shown in reflective nostalgia by involving the exploration of unrealised potentials and unfulfilled promises of modern happiness. At the same time, it also represents a deep mourning process, engaging in a labour of grief by contemplating pain and projecting it towards the future through imaginative play. Acknowledging that the past isn’t merely a reflection of the present or a harbinger of impending disasters, it instead regards the past as a gateway to a myriad of potentialities and non-teleological avenues in historical development.

In this context, delving into the virtual realms of imagination doesn’t necessitate a computer, as reflective nostalgia possesses the ability to stimulate diverse planes of consciousness. In its entirety, it opposes both the total reconstruction of local culture and the apathetic dominance of technocratic globalism. It confronts this narrow perspective by slowing down, retracing steps, looking sideways and contemplating the journey itself.⁴¹ ■

³⁷ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

³⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 145.

³⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

⁴⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

⁴¹ Fernando Quesada and Andrés Carretero, “Architecture and Nostalgia: The End of History, the End of the Future and the Prospect of Nostalgia,” in *Intimations of Nostalgia*, ed. by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 219.

These two configurations of nostalgia enable one to differentiate between national memory rooted in a singular narrative of national identity, and social memory which encompasses collective frameworks that influence individual memory without wholly defining it. In essence, restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. Comparing these two, it is not hard to realise that restorative nostalgia has a tendency of leaning towards as a medium or tool of extreme political movement, not to mention it is now at the core of recent national and religious revivals and even possesses the risk of distorting the ‘original’ during the process:

“The stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented.”⁴²

In addition, the notion of reverting back to the ‘original’ emerges as a relatively novel concept. During the Renaissance and early Baroque period, artists only saw their work as a collaborative venture with the masters of the past. Instead of attempting to mimic, they chose to showcase the traces of history, unveiling the tactile intimacy of marble and the enigmatic nature of distance concurrently. They also carefully retained various shades of marble to establish a distinct demarcation between their creative additions and the remnants of ancient statues. Moreover, Michelangelo’s peers embraced the personal touch of artistic caprice and imperfections, in contrast to the computer craftsmen today. In their commitment to proven techniques, they avoided the pursuit of dullness and uniformity seen in the contemporary restoration of the so-called “original.”⁴³

On the other hand, reflective nostalgia doesn’t adhere to a solitary storyline. Instead, it delves into the art of dwelling in numerous places simultaneously and envisioning diverse temporal dimensions. It exalts patina not merely as a layer of time upon a painting but also a fusion of soot, dust and even the fragrance of incense, which is not something achievable solely through architecture but together with the temporal touch. At its zenith, reflective nostalgia can “present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias.”⁴⁴

Hence, I posit that in suggesting nostalgia as a factor in architectural design, one should gravitate towards the vantage point of reflective nostalgia. However, this doesn’t imply the exclusion or disregard of restorative endeavours, especially considering their almost-inevitability, especially within the context of references, as emphasised by Boym:

“They are not absolute types, the two might overlap in their frames of reference, but they do not coincide in their narratives and plots of identity. In other words, they can use the same triggers of memory and symbols, but tell different stories about it.”⁴⁵

⁴² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 42.

⁴³ Quesada and Carretero, “Architecture and Nostalgia: The End of History, the End of the Future and the Prospect of Nostalgia,” 220.

⁴⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 49.

Diagram 1,
illustrating the unattainability of **restorative nostalgias**
to the ‘*origin*’

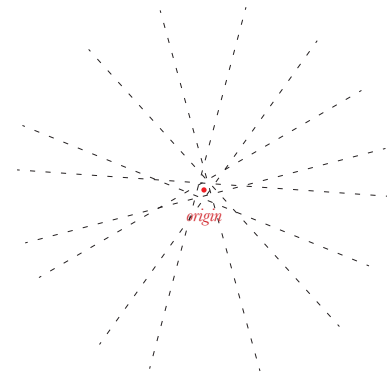


Diagram 1

and the same passion is also shown in

Diagram 2,
by **reflective nostalgias** in sustaining a sense of distance
from the ‘*origin*’

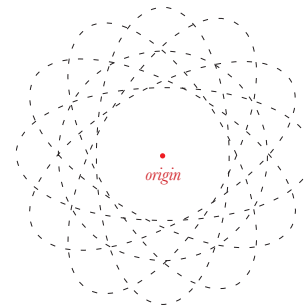


Diagram 2

In *Diagram 3*,
the cross of reference between **restorative** and **reflective**
nostalgias brings an infinite tangent of potential
unseen possibilities

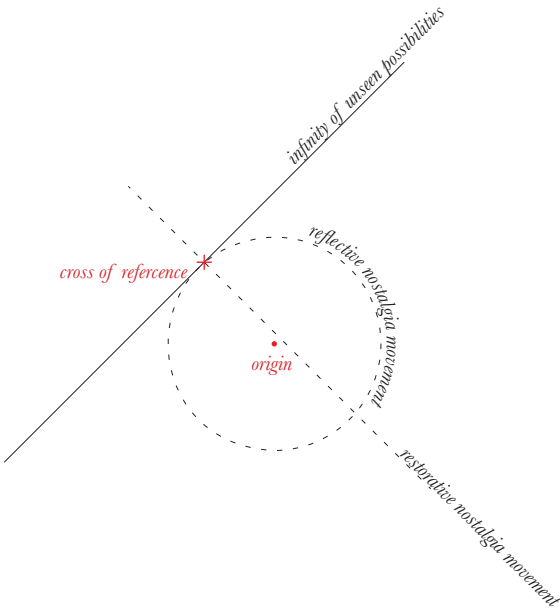


Diagram 3

It would seem, therefore, that architects should strive to establish a delicate balance between the two forms, which I perceive as the pinnacle and sublime of a comprehensive nostalgia in architecture. Consequently, the query isn't one of whether, but rather of how to achieve this nuanced equilibrium.

In order to offer a more insightful comprehension and a vivid demonstration of the potential contributions of nostalgia as a design element in architecture, two case studies are presented next, which, in my opinion, serve as exemplars of these concepts. ■

GALLARATESE QUARTER (1969 - 1973)

by ALDO ROSSI

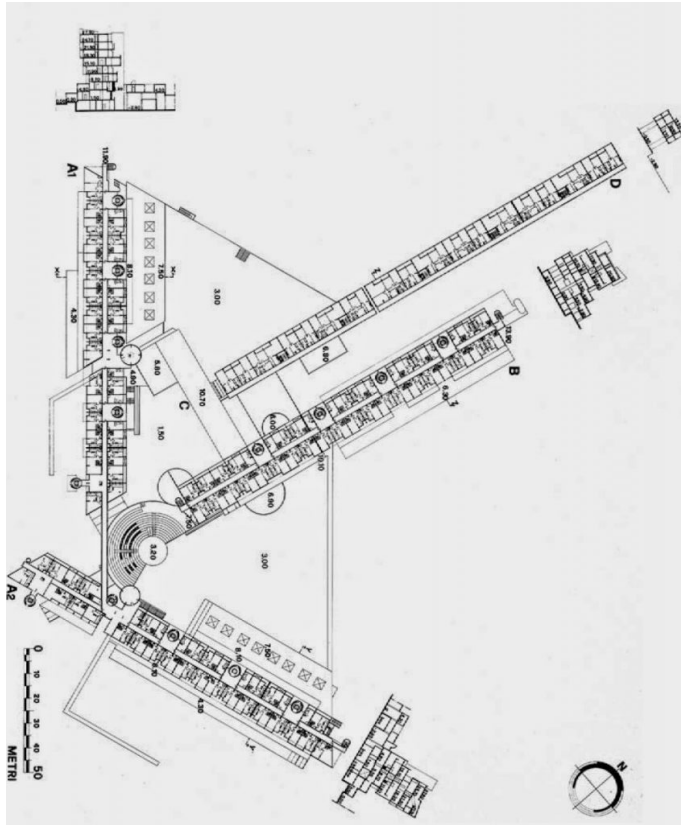


Figure 1. Site plan of Monte Amiata, architectural drawing by Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi, 1967.

Located in the northwest suburb of Milan, Gallarate, Aldo Rossi designed a housing block within the Monte Amiata residential quarter planned by Carlo Aymonino, in response to the housing crisis of Milan in the 1960's. Aymonino's scheme was designed as a microcosmic community, demonstrating a different way of designing a city of the future.⁴⁶ The proposal closed the sides of two interlocking triangular sites and left the centre open. There were five building complexes planned (A1, A2, B, C and D) and still standing today. Rossi's contribution was the fifth element i.e. the block 'D', that extended to the north, paralleling the block 'B' by Aymonino.

Luca Molinari pointed out that both architects' designs representing an approach that looked for "the autonomy of architecture as a plastic, ideological, contemporary monument which could 'save' Italy's peripheral areas".⁴⁷ As known, Aymonino and Rossi were among the renowned figures of the Neo-rationalist approach, which advocated for tracking the history to find a monumental expression of architecture moulded by the collective memory of the city as a logical extension of historical precedents. However, a huge clash of styles was shown with their buildings in this project. Unlike Aymonino's visually and formally complex designs, where most of the fronts featured typologically diverse in the extreme, Rossi's block was derived from a more elementary section that opted for uniformity, looking almost brutal and startling due its simplicity and entirely repetitive.

⁴⁶ Jean Castex, *Architecture of Italy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 83.

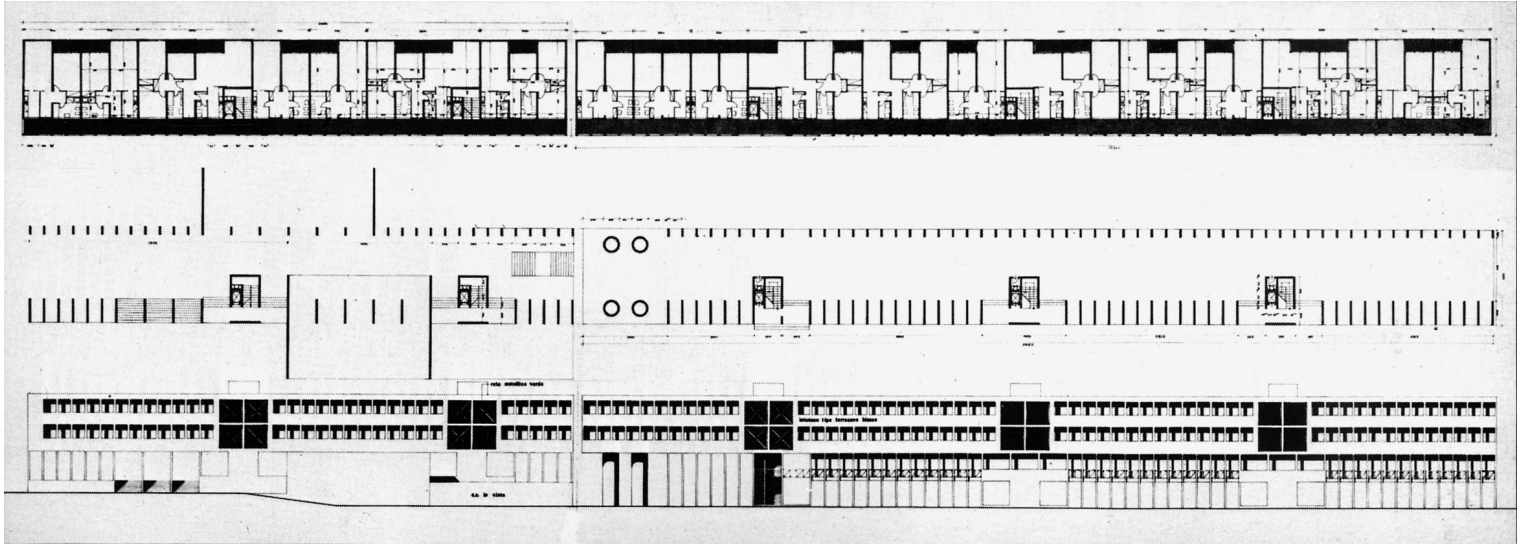
⁴⁷ Luca Molinari, "Matteotti Village and Gallarate 2: Design Criticism of the Italian Welfare State," in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. by Tom Avermaete, Dirk Van Den Heuvel, and Mark Swenarton (New York: Routledge, 2015), 269.

It exhibits a layout within a narrow structural grid, formed by a consistent, repetitive wall that seamlessly links at two different levels. This connection is facilitated by a public staircase, flanked by two sets of imposing cylindrical columns. Every visible element of the block serves a structural purpose and is treated in an archetypal, primitive way. They are devoid of ornamentation that might divert attention from the uninterrupted sequence of identical windows and bays extending the entire length of the building.⁴⁸ The public arcade on the ground floor also reflects the morphological simplicity as the rest by staying in a continuous line. Access to each residential unit is facilitated through the balcony corridors, aligned with the arcade and supported by five staircase cores running parallel with the arcade. Exactly like the minimalist and unadorned design that detaches it apart from the diverse outlook of the rest of the complex, its exterior, bathed in white paint once again distinguishes itself from Aymonino's subdued palette of reds and browns (*Figure 9. page 60*).

⁴⁸ Castex, *Architecture of Italy*, 85.



Figure 2. Gallarate Quarter in Milan,
photograph by Burcin Yildirim, 2017.



This dreamlike quality of such an orderly building was only realised by structuring itself under a precise typological principle and following a strict set of technical definitions:

“The building is constituted by a construction 182 metres long and 12 metres wide. The porticoed ground floor has two levels connected by a stair. The portico is formed by walls 3 metres wide and pillars 1 metre wide. Pillars and pillar-walls are 0.20

metres thick. At the top of the main construction there are four columns with a diameter of 1.80 metres. The distance between the axes of the columns is 3.5 metres wide and 8 metres long. The distance between the axes of the pillar-walls and the pillars is 1.80 metres. Every 16 pillar-walls there is a staircase, the first flight is elevated from the ground floor by three steps. Access to the staircases can take place both from the portico and the outside.”⁴⁹

Figure 3. Floor plans and elevation of Gallarate Quarter, architectural drawing by Aldo Rossi, 1967.

⁴⁹ Diogo Seixas Lopes, *Melancholy and Architecture : On Aldo Rossi* (Zürich: Park Books, 2015), 117.

It was understood by Rossi that the site stood in a realm of ‘no man’s land’, a domain devoid of any historical legacy of tradition. Given the absence of this tradition, it lacked an inherent value to inform the architecture hence the variety of design methods being proposed. In the early 1960s, implicitly threading through Rossi’s writings and projects, a pivotal inquiry emerged as an operational basis — what kind of methodologies, tools and forms should be embraced to categorise these sites as cities, endowing them with a quality of life and a degree of interaction akin to that found in the city centres and established peripheries?

In his quest for answers, Rossi directed toward the ‘primordial urban elements’ of the historic cities, viewing them as ‘testimonies to civilisation’ and embodiments of the collective consciousness. He believed that they possessed a unique resilience and were the sole entities capable of withstanding and anchoring themselves within an emerging context of the new urban scale.⁵⁰ By providing forms of urban life that resonated with such civilisation, it reflected the architecture to be constructed which aspires to become permanences.

On this basis, one might argue that Rossi was actually playing the reverse of Kenneth Frampton’s concept of critical regionalism — “to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place,” to which Rossi’s was to treat the ‘no man’s land’ with elements derived indirectly from the impact of peripheral civilisation.⁵¹ The reason of Rossi’s interest in this was the ‘rational culture’ to which these primordial urban elements could impart, given their transmissible and collective nature. In doing so, they

fostered a unique form of rationalism that imbued with the civic meanings derived from the civic significance of the permanences at the core of the city.⁵²

Therefore, in the instance of Gallarate, behind the strong rational and critical thinking shown in its building language, there were traces of the past developed by Rossi, coming from the perspective of longing and contemplation. The city of Milan, where Rossi was born and raised, appeared to serve as the wellspring of influence together with its rich historical context. Subsequently, the features of *portico* and *ballatoi* — forms that persist not only in his memories but also in archaic primal memory, were selected and given the role of primordial urban elements in this project. They were transposed onto the site where such expressions were absent, to revive the memory of these civil spaces. He harnessed these elements to fashion an architecture that aspired to garner understanding, recognition and nostalgia from each individual.

⁵⁰ Beatrice Lampariello, “The Architecture and the City of Aldo Rossi, 1955–1969: The Analogical Locus vs Ambientalismo of the Building Fabric,” *Architectural histories* 11, no. 1 (2023): 15.

⁵¹ Frampton, “Toward a Critical Regionalism,” 20.

⁵² Lampariello, “The Architecture and the City of Aldo Rossi, 1955–1969,” 16.

Portico

a structure consisting of a roof supported by columns at regular intervals

Rossi placed a generous portico beneath the raised structure stands, creating a striking contrast to the compact size of the flats above, serving as a monumental background to commercial activity and collective events, and a meeting place for the foundation of a new community, which is a constituent part of the city. This spacious public walkway together with the deep linear perspective of the block stood as an initial reference and discernible influence of Rossi's encounters and insights gleaned from the cities of northern Italy. As he believed "the front portico, the open corridors meant to function as streets, the perches — will cast into relief, as it were, the dense flow of everyday life, emphasising the deep popular roots of this kind of residential architecture."⁵³

⁵³ Aldo Rossi, "Thoughts About My Recent Work," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*, ed. by Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 356.



Figure 4. Portico of Gallarate Quarter, photograph by Burcin Yildirim, 2017.



Figure 5. The *Ca' Granda* in Milan, also known as *Ospedale Maggiore*, oil on canvas by Lambert Lombard, circa 1670–1690.

Furthermore, Beatrice Lampariello suggests that Rossi's composition of the portico, being an elongated structure imbued with rhythmic elements through consistent apertures, resonated with the order shown in *Ca' Granda* by Filarete.⁵⁴ *Ca' Granda* was constructed out of scale to its pre-existing context, initially a hospital then turned into a university, both at the service of the community.

Rossi once deemed it as a 'stern commemoration of human passions' as "the *Ca' Granda* is above all the house that was built for everyone."⁵⁵ Therefore, the ground level was inspiringly designed as a linkage medium between the dwellings and other amenities of 'the city'.

⁵⁴ Lampariello, "The Architecture and the City of Aldo Rossi, 1955-1969," 27.

⁵⁵ Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 58.

Ballatoi

a long platform projecting from the wall, enclosed by railings or balustrades

The street metaphor on the ground floor continued to be reflected on the upper floors. Here, another permanence of the city was brought into by Rossi: the *ballatoi* from *Casa di Ringhiera*, also known as the ‘railing house’, a popular social housing type in Milan during the 1920’s. The *ballatoi* were more than a functional element, they evoked Milanese collective memory as well his personal one, as he recalled: “In my design for the residential block in the Gallarate district of Milan there is an analogical relationship with certain engineering works that mix freely with both the corridor typology and a related feeling I have always experienced in the architecture of the traditional Milanese tenements, where the corridor signifies a life-style bathed in everyday occurrences, domestic intimacy, and varied personal relationships.”⁵⁶



Figure 6. *Casa di Ringhiera* in Milan,
photograph by Gianni Berengo Gardin, 1976.

⁵⁶ Aldo Rossi, “An Analogical Architecture,” in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*, ed. by Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 350.

Back then, *Casa di Ringhiera* was very widespread to house the working class with shared bathrooms for everyone and often lack of running water. Due to its limited public space, the social activities among its residents were usually restricted to the courtyard and *ballatoi*. Hence, its unique composition tells of a lifestyle of sharing with neighbours.

Today most of them have been renovated and equipped with modern 'comfort' i.e. private bathrooms, lifts, etc. Although the original exterior is retained, the spirit that had once animated these places unfortunately has well-nigh died out. Therefore, Rossi attempted to revive it by transposing the nostalgic form into his Gallarate building to absorb the essence of its urban and collective condensation, laying the foundation for the 'new city' in its unique form.⁵⁷



⁵⁷ Lampariello, "The Architecture and the City of Aldo Rossi, 1955-1969," 21.

Figure 7. *Casa di Ringhiera* in Milan,
photograph by Paolo Monti, 1970.



Figure 8. *Ballatoi* of Gallarate Quarter,
photograph by Burcin Yildirim, 2017.

“Only very recently, walking in front of it, I saw the first open windows, some laundry hung out over balustrades to dry... those first shy hints of the life it will take on when fully inhabited. I am convinced that the spaces intended for daily use...”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Rossi, “Thoughts About My Recent Work,” 356.



Figure 9. Bird's-eye view of Monte Amiata, photograph by Daniel Annenkov, 2020.

Conclusion

Despite the abundance of the architects' attempts to craft spaces for interaction and mobility, a seamless integration with the rest of Gallarate district has proven elusive.⁵⁹ Begun as a utopia, its initial years were marked as disastrous, following its completion in 1972 were the protests from Communist League groups, leading to forced relocation of homeless people into the housing complex. Consequently, it was abandoned in 1974.⁶⁰ Few years later, homeowners opted to gate the housing complex, rendering most of the envisioned commercial and public uses unsuccessful, and thwarted the original idea of the complex serving as an active fragment of a new and emerging city.⁶¹

In the past decades, the autonomous presence showed by the Monte Amiata complex exemplifies the limitations in imitating the complexities of urban conditions. Nevertheless, it is also exactly the autonomous architecture that promotes a sense of community with the means of strong symbolic elements that evoke an attachment and orientation. This shows an ambition of Rossi to transcend the architectural traditions of the last centuries and return to their fundamental 'origins' which were found on the elements of urban significance and treated them as a conceptual alternative to the centre of Milan.

In this project, Rossi had shown his methodology of dealing with a site where he considered lacking any immediate prominent context or value of reference. His design then approached a making of a public memory, equally influenced by his personal memory and motivation, underlying the overall idea —

⁵⁹ Aurora Fernández Per, Javier Mozas, and Javier Arpa, *This Is Hybrid: An Analysis of Mixed-Use Buildings by A+t* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: a+t architecture, 2011), 99.

⁶⁰ Jean, *Architecture of Italy*, 83.

⁶¹ Molinari, "Matteotti Village and Gallarate 2: Design Criticism of the Italian Welfare State," 274.

“certain characteristics, memories, and above all associations have proliferated or become clearer, often yielding unforeseen results.”⁶² Meanwhile, his historical sense of Italian architecture also played a crucial role to facilitate his adoption of “references from the existing city as if they were placed in a flat and unlimited surface.”⁶³

This project was thus regarded as an interface between the polarities of conceptual notions and individual’s emotions — “an objective analysis of the city as well as the free course of imagination.”⁶⁴ In my opinion, it represents a delicate performance of subtle play between both the concepts of Restorative Nostalgia: the selection and transpose of the *portico* and *ballatoi*, and Reflective Nostalgia: the reinterpretation of the traditional locations of civic life onto the ‘no man’s land’ — overall an attempt to re-inject an atmosphere that evokes the lost memories of Milanese including Rossi himself. ■

⁶² Rossi, “An Analogical Architecture,” 348.

⁶³ Aldo Rossi, “Q2 Architettura, 26 novembre 1968,” in *Aldo Rossi : i quaderni azzurri*, ed. Francesco dal Co (Milano : Electa, 1999). Translated by Diogo Seixas Lopes in *Melancholy and Architecture : On Aldo Rossi* (Zürich: Park Books, 2015), 119.

⁶⁴ Aldo Rossi, “Due progetti,” *Lotus*, no. 7 (Winter 1970): 64. Translated by Diogo Seixas Lopes in *Melancholy and Architecture : On Aldo Rossi* (Zürich: Park Books, 2015), 118.

168 UPPER STREET (2015 - 2017)

by GROUPWORK



Approaching along Islington's Upper Street from the north, the plot of 168, is located at the northern end of a Victorian terrace. Its previous building was significantly destroyed during the Second World War and eventually demolished in its entirety. Since 2017, it is a terracotta-toned concrete building designed by Groupwork that takes over the site. Its colour tone intentionally harks back to its brick neighbours with its massing being identical to that of its equivalent on the other end. The scheme contains a showroom on the ground floor for Aria, a local furniture designer and retailer, with three apartments above.

The project manages to complete the nostalgia of built form on site yet actively engages with its questions of style and material. This synergy is pronounced in today's architectural scene, particularly when the greater the historical significance, the more pressure on the inclination to replicate them. In this case, a site with peripheral Victorian structures remain intact, the architect, Amin Taha doubted the meaning of full remembrance and questioned the possibility of reaching the 'originality'.

Figure 10. Elevation of street facade,
architectural drawing by Groupwork, 2017.



Figure 11. 168 Upper Street in London, photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.

“... simply under the nebulous if not menacing guise of fitting-in, the aim and result is the idealisation of a past. Imagined and inevitably stripped of challenging social realities and physical or historical anomalies, many restored or reconstructed buildings are, in effect, monuments, necessarily simple in narrative and consequently exclusionary and flawed.”⁶⁵

Taha challenged the use of the same materials and methods to meet today’s standards and even the necessity of the act itself, given the opportunities available nowadays. Similarly, the idea of looking to the past and the past looking back appeared teeming with potentials and possibilities. Nevertheless, the dilemma here was — how to maintain “a critical and fascinating observation without falling through in an attempt to recreate?”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Amin Taha, “Exploring, Building, Completing: Context and Craft,” *Architectural design* 91, no. 1 (2021): 73.

⁶⁶ George Kafka, “Misremembrance of things past: 168 Upper Street by Amin Taha,” *The Architects’ Journal*, January 21, 2019. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/misremembrance-of-things-past-168-upper-street-by-amin-taha>.

Considering the intact condition of the terrace and its well-preserved details, the suggested approach proposed involved a blend of *remembering* and *misremembering* of the absent piece. Beginning with tracing the terrace to its original symmetry, encompassing both form and intricate detailing. However, it did not proceed as an attempt to mimic the past nor a celebration of reviving the neoclassical language as the choice of construction and fabrication processes later showed that this process of memory was part of an overall critique.⁶⁷ Rather than just alluding to memory, it was then ‘misremembered’ with its finish — being monolithic and imperfect as part of a nostalgic stance to create the myth of lost ‘home’.

⁶⁷ Isabelle Priest, “Body & soul,” *The RIBA Journal*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.ribaj.com/culture/body-soul-amin-taha-profile>.



Figure 12. Facade detail of 168 Upper Street, photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.



Figure 13. Concrete casting,
photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.

A virtual model of the lost block was constructed by carrying out an archival study of historical site photographs and a three-dimensional point cloud laser survey on both the site and the structure of the terrace southern end. It managed to collect the familiar Victorian façade elements like pilasters, capitals, pediments, cornices, bay windows and doorways as well the internal skirting, dado rails and anaglypta wallpaper. The model served as the basis for generating over 300 polystyrene panels, amounting to 450 square metres of formwork and being assembled on site in 1.2m high horizontal bands before an in-situ cast was performed. The cast façade bore the marks of the tooling head which was traced against the formwork geometry.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Taha, “Exploring, Building, Completing,” 73.

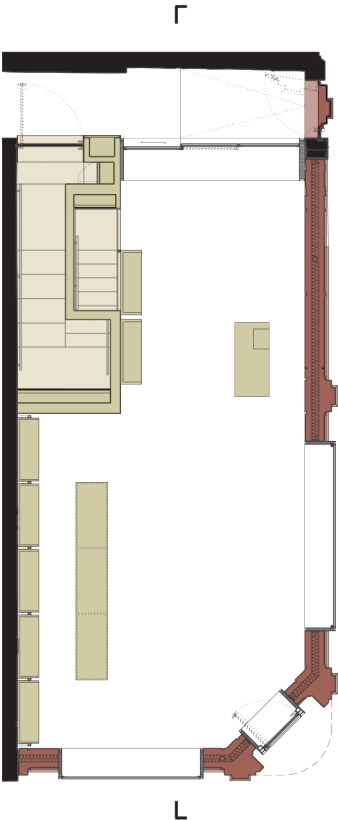


Figure 14. Ground floor plan,
architectural drawing by Groupwork, 2017.

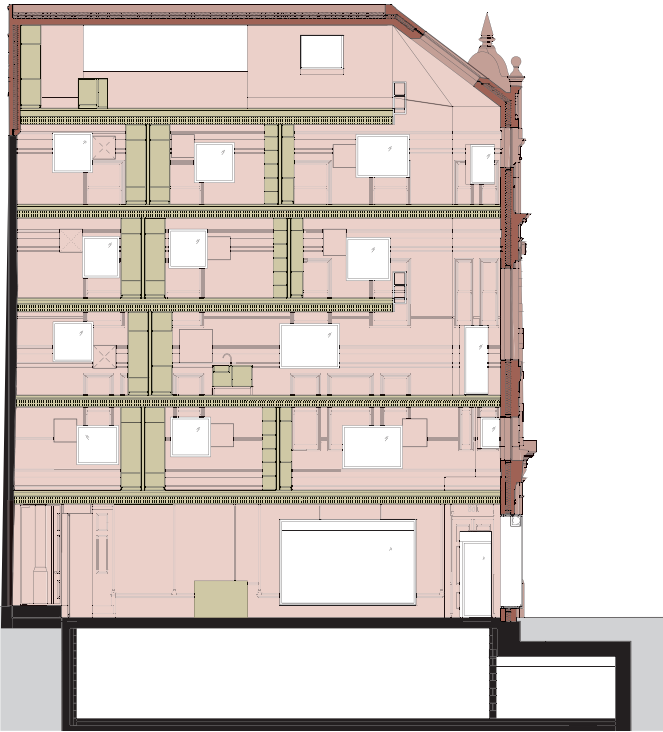


Figure 15. Long section,
architectural drawing by Groupwork, 2017.

This restoration approach defied any straightforward sense of nostalgia, paving the way for what Taha aptly characterised as ‘deliberate misremembering’. As he acknowledged, similar to the *House* by Rachel Whiteread and the *Hotel Fouquet* by Edouard François, the architectural intricacies of the original structure were reshaped into a cohesive entity — “there is no gap between the columns of the rooftop parapet and the sash windows no longer open.”⁶⁹ While the building’s shell was conceived as a visual replica, a monument cast or a sculptural interpretation, it also functioned as the load bearing structure, thermal insulation, external and internal finishes.⁷⁰ Despite the technical challenges of the construction methodology, the undertaking provided an avenue to delve into a different notion of representing historical traditions. The monolithic character of both the material and the construction approach served as a deliberate imitation of individual elements and components that fused together to form the complete entity.

⁶⁹ Kafka, “Misremembrance of things past.”

⁷⁰ Andy Pearson, “Ghost In The Shell,” *Concrete Quarterly*, no. 262 (Winter 2017): 8.

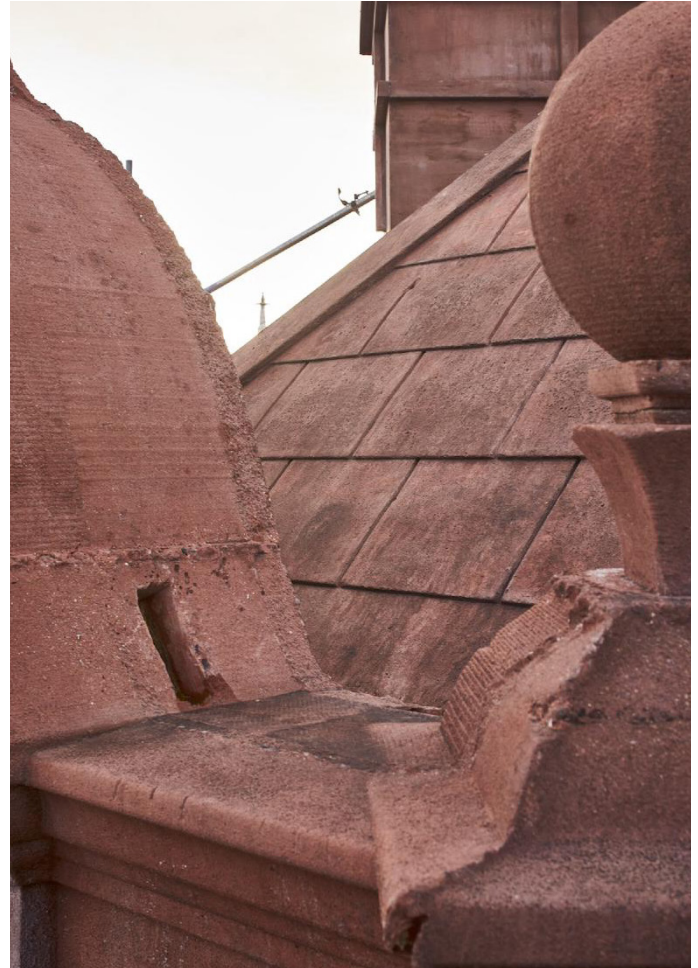


Figure 16. Roof detail,
photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.

- 1 - internal in situ terracotta mix concrete
- 2 - rigid insulation board
- 3 - external in situ terracotta mix concrete
- 4 - hardwood flooring
- 5 - grooved insulation with underfloor heating
- 6 - CLT structural floor
- 7 - steel bracket
- 8 - skirting board moulding cast into in situ wall
- 9 - cornice moulding cast into in situ wall

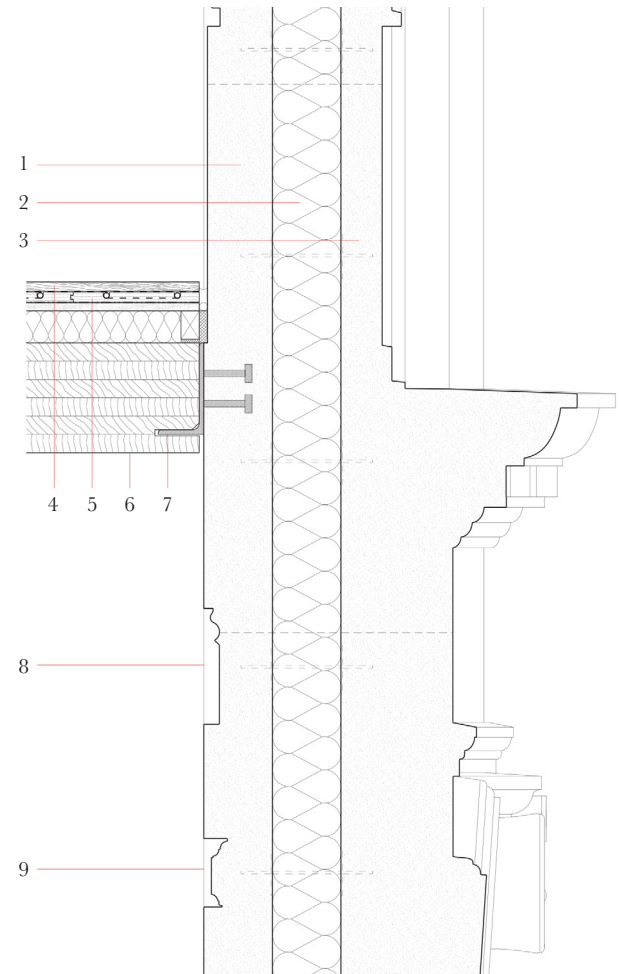


Figure 17. Detailed section of concrete wall,
architectural drawing by Groupwork, 2017.



Figure 18. Construction on site, photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.

To ensure the ‘restoration’ wasn’t an attempt of a total reproduction, imperfection played a major theme on its facade as a reminder that ideas and memories of the past are often edited and adjusted to suit the present and future. Therefore, a series of accidental and deliberate errors was reinforced in the digital fabrication process to introduce imperfect traces in the manufacturing process, depicting a notion that the ‘making or construction’ was misremembered implies what seems rational and controlled is also fluid. The digital file was altered to move, skew or over-simplify selected architectural details, sometimes even losing them altogether. Similarly, the complex details shown on the Victorian façade struggled in their translation of the CAD information to the manufacturing equipment, resulting in lost and distorted details during routing and construction. Pieces of formwork were also intentionally positioned in the wrong place, creating an effect akin to a dislocated pixel amidst a computer screen malfunction.⁷¹

⁷¹ Manon Mollard, “168 Upper Street in London by Amin Taha + Groupwork,” *The Architectural Review*, August 21, 2017. <https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/168-upper-street-in-london-by-amin-taha-groupwork>.

For instance, a part of the rooftop parapet is not shown on the building's north façade because the corresponding formwork was erroneously positioned and ended up at ground level. In other areas, the connections between concrete pours were deliberately left unfinished, aiming to reveal the imperfections inherent in the human construction process.⁷² Both the use of digital manufacturing method and the physical handling of formworks, were fraught with many possibilities for 'failure', exposed the construction process and emphatically expressed the flaws in monumentalising the past, underscoring the overall concept of misremembrance.

⁷² Jessica Mairs, "Moulded terracotta facade imperfectly remembers its predecessor," *Domusweb*, May 22, 2019. <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/gallery/2019/04/02/upper-street-amin-taha.html>.

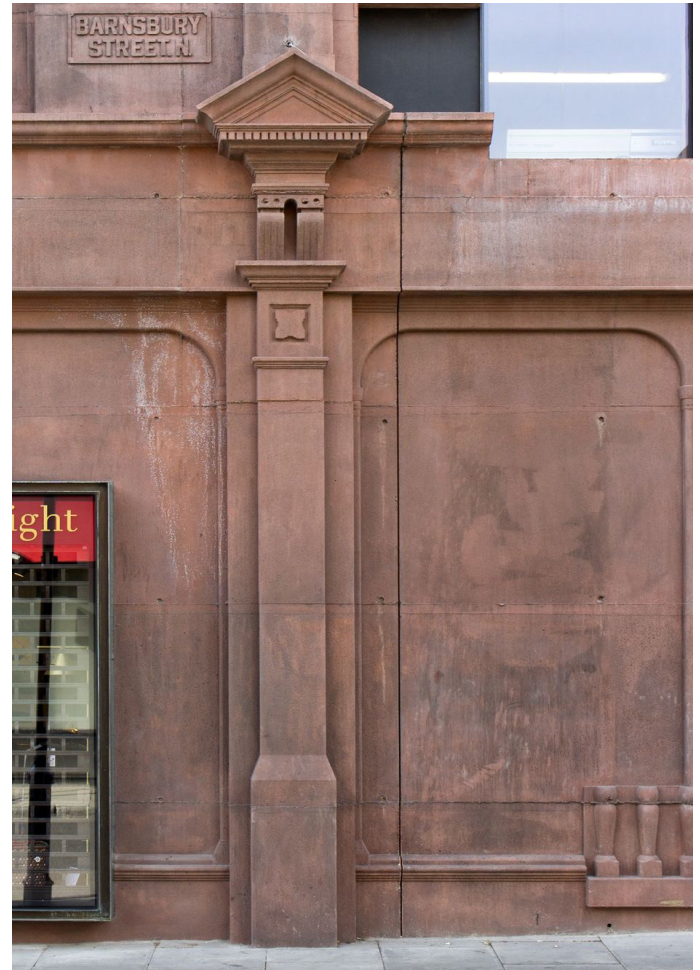


Figure 19. Facade detail,
photograph by Timothy Soaz, 2017.

New cross laminated timber floor plates were introduced in the internal space, appearing to be a more gentle material to the monolithic concrete shell. They were placed where convenient and literally represented a new habitation pattern. The anaglypta wallpaper between dado and picture rails was presented as a visual cue of the older levels against the timber floors and ceilings in the three newly created flats situated above the retail shop.⁷³



⁷³ Mollard, “168 Upper Street in London by Amin Taha + Groupwork.”

Figure 20. Apartment interior,
photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.

In addition, the placement of new windows corresponded to contemporary functional needs, featuring sleek and recessed frames within the façade. They were punched through the building's shell, often interrupting the rhythmic alignment of Victorian windows and disregarding neoclassical details on the facade, signifying the presence of modern volumes inside.⁷⁴

All of these seem unresolved and imperfect, allowing the completed building to subtly misremember (*reflective*) of an idealised (*restorative*) past.

⁷⁴ Kafka, "Misremembrance of things past."



Figure 21. Interior wall,
photograph by Timothy Soar, 2017.

Conclusion

168 Upper Street ostensibly completed the terrace and street scape that had been asymmetrical since its demolition, but as a deliberately distorted version of the previous, which combined neoclassical elements with a modern method of construction. The architects took pleasure in the details and symbols of memory but rejected the actual ‘remaking’. Its outcome, a misremembered copy of the lost building, was created rather than re-created — inauthentic yet powerfully nostalgic in its way. The sculptural façades shown were both energetic and reposeful, contributing to the conversations on the appropriate use of architecture styles. Across its concrete façade, it skilfully engaged in a discourse on monuments, memories and architectural aesthetics.⁷⁵ The treatment of classic architecture in such a playful manner demonstrates a keen willingness to propel the conversation forward. Therefore, it should not be perceived as historical revivalism as it constitutes an evocation, not a pastiche. The deliberate misalignment of its decorative and functional elements, the intentional material dissonance and its inclination for imperfection prompt contemplation on the fallibility of memory, challenging cultural nostalgia. ■

⁷⁵ Kafka, “Misremembrance of things past.”

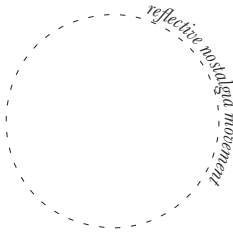


Figure 22. Illustration of facade,
architectural drawing by Groupwork, 2017.

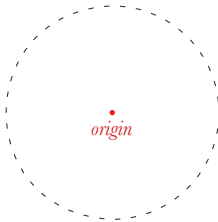
In the case of **Gallaratese quarter**, it portrays that there is a limit for architecture to respond to its immediate site particularly when there is no historical importance. Rather than design from *tabula rasa*, architects should be critical on the context reading, by turning to look at the bigger picture, reading the site within a wider and deeper historical context to detect the primordial elements hence capturing the *locus* of the region — *an act of reflective nostalgia in a restorative way*.

Meanwhile, **168 Upper Street** depicts a totally opposite situation. Its dense historical vicinity puts a strong statement that forces the project to be a mere replication of them. The result of this project has skilfully responded to the demand by questioning the demand per se, showing that architects could, or should, define what value their contribution would deliver onto the site, including its past, present and future. Its mocking outcome of being a pastiche, is already a strategy to bring forward a discussion — *an act of restorative nostalgia in a reflective way*.

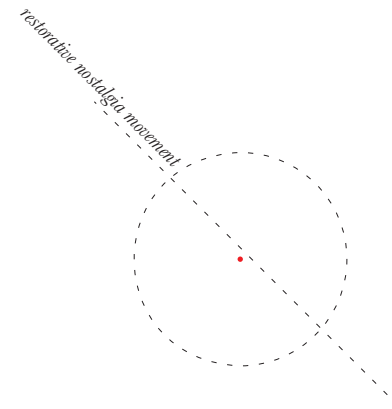
In brief, the context of both projects fell on two very different ends of a spectrum and even showed two very different outcomes. Yet, interesting enough, both managed to instil the characteristic of evoking the memories of the past while marching forward with the core of its cultural identity and the reason here is apparent — both are operating within the same realm of nostalgia, capable of bringing one to a dual state of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ a quality that positions both projects as a metaphor of nostalgia in architecture. ■

Gallaratese Quarter

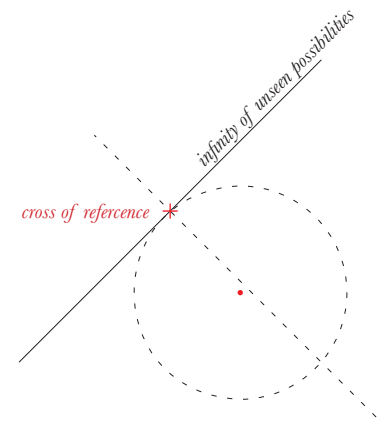
Step 1:
'no man's land' hence initial intention of 'reflective'



Step 2:
architect then identified the 'origin'



Step 3:
input of 'restorative' by architect



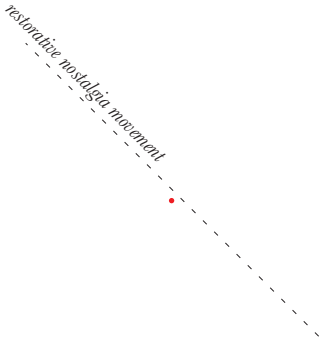
Step 4:
cross of reference opened up unseen possibilities

168 Upper Street



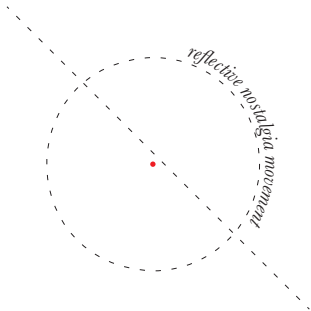
origin

Step 1:
'origin' was apparent on site



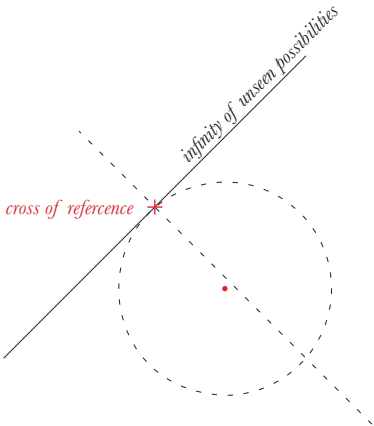
restorative nostalgia movement

Step 2:
therefore total 'restorative' to 'origin' was asked



reflective nostalgia movement

Step 3:
input of 'reflective' by architect



infinity of unseen possibilities

cross of reference

Step 4:
cross of reference opened up unseen possibilities

The Scottish philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie eloquently labelled nostalgia as an ‘essentially contested concept’ — a notion that remains a subject of persistent disagreement and heated debate.⁷⁶ This is not only due to its susceptibility to a myriad of interpretations but also because its worth can be either heightened or diminished, revered or scorned, worshipped or detested, depending on the context, intention, location, timing and the subject to which the concept is being applied. In a similar sense, one might argue that nostalgia is then devoid of meaning if no one is ever willing to take a stand, to grasp what it is.

In the course of this assignment, it becomes evident that nostalgia possesses the capacity to usher in new possibilities that pay homage to the past and are linked to memory. From the perspective of architecture, it means that nostalgia can offer an alternative reading of a repertoire that draws from its history, tradition and stock of technical solutions, which could give rise to a different design process within the context where both present and future engagement are desired.

In other words, embracing nostalgia as a productive lens in architecture, it becomes a mnemonic instrument of its own cultural background.⁷⁷ Rooting in a sense of ancestry, it often recalls the details of the mundane or overlooked, as primordial elements and by inserting them a contemporary translation, a transhistorical object could be formed, which is critically aware of oneself and the society, as Miroslav Šik advocates that: “tradition that doesn’t constantly renew itself is condemned to death.”⁷⁸ It therefore becomes a methodology to formulate a historical continuity by preserving the cultural heritage through the stories it

contains within. As the spaces shape their narratives, it prompts one to contemplate on whether narratives too, can influence forms, leading to a reciprocally constructive and meaningful practice of space-making.⁷⁹

To finish, allow me to quote the words of Robert Burton here: “I write of melancholy by being busy to avoid melancholy.”⁸⁰ This sentiment resonates with what I attempted with nostalgia in the past few months, but apparently not always succeeded; one time, I was staring at the clock, witnessing the time fleeting and carrying everything in its current, realising that, we tend to find ourselves nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic. Perhaps, that is why the past always appears beautiful — it shines, blindingly bright. Yet, deep down, everyone knows that there is no going back, not even for a second. It is within this poignant realisation that the sensation of nostalgia being crystallised.

In the end, I would like to express my gratitude to *Architecture* for presenting me once again an opportunity to navigate myself in this borderless realm of architecture while pondering about life. Though the outcome is not flawless for sure, I have no regrets and actually found contentment during the process. Needless to say, the findings have undoubtedly provided me with a more nuanced design perspective and I anticipate putting it to the test in my future work, particularly the upcoming *projet de master*. ■

⁷⁶ Jacobsen, *Intimations of Nostalgia*, 11.

⁷⁷ Lopes, *Melancholy and Architecture : On Aldo Rossi*, 111.

⁷⁸ Eva Willenegger, Miroslav Šik, and Lukas Imhof, *Analogue Oldnew Architecture* (Luzern: Quart Luzern, 2019), 50.

⁷⁹ Neri & Hu Design and Research Office, *Neri & Hu Design and Research Office: Works and Projects 2004-2014* (Zürich: Park Books, 2017), 9.

⁸⁰ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Angus Gowland (London: Penguin Classics, 2021), 22.

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Gallaratese Quarter

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168 Upper Street

Figure 10. pg 66-67

Figure 14. pg 74

Figure 15. pg 75

Figure 17. pg 79

Figure 22. pg 89

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Figure 11. pg 68

Figure 12. pg 71

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**It is a methodology
to formulate a historical continuity
by preserving the cultural heritage
through the stories it contains within.**