Remnants, Incidents and an Outline for a Future Theory of Critical Conservation

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ABSTRACT
The article argues that a contemporary theory of critical architectural conservation should be based on the theoretical traditions of G. W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger, which maintained the historicality of Being, together with the critique of these traditions by Walter Benjamin. These traditions attest to the otherness of history. History operates outside our capacity to conceptualize it, but nevertheless imposes limits upon and enables possibilities for concrete thought and action. History should not be understood as homogeneous and continuous, however, but rather as comprising allegorical moments and occurrences – remnants and incidents that must be constantly interpreted and performed, and which can therefore be used to construct alternative futures from alternative pasts.

In Tom McCarthy's novel Remainder, *the nameless narrator-protagonist, whose memory has been reduced to traces or phantoms by an accident, uses his financial settlement to reconstruct in the finest detail fragments of moments of memory – full-scale but partial architectural settings with actors to play the parts in what seem like events already seen. The protagonist begins to build a self-identity through these reenactments, staging exacting replications and repeating mundane events over and over again, attempting to "cut out the detour" to arrive at authenticity. "I wanted to reconstruct that space and enter it so that I could feel real again" (2005, p. 67). But as protagonist and reader together come to see, the real is not so easily summoned.*

The meticulous restorations of the remainders of lost sites (acquiring a building that looks like "the original", renovating it to look even more like the original), even the cast of people needed to realize the narrator's project – architects, actors, various technicians and props masters – remind one of the apparatus of contemporary historical preservation. Standard preservation practice today is based on the assumption that, behind the remainders to be restored, there is a historical reality which is consistent and knowable, and that there are various ways of representing that reality, including numerical models of population behavior (the number of tourist visits to a monument, for example), urban morphology (the spatial organization of built form in a historic district) and architectural and landscape typologies and materials. But the complexity of the ambition common to historic preservation and Remainder*'s protagonist alike means that the performances of each are, from the start, similarly compromised, for the fact is that the scene to be recreated cannot now be known; it is irretrievably past, if, indeed, it ever existed. The preservationist impulse is predicated on a paradoxical anteriorizing process that takes a present remainder – a building or district designated as significant – and assigns it present meaning by declaring that this meaning was already given in the past. The goal of preservation (as of reenactment) is to make a world just like it was, albeit without knowing how it was. The mark of success is not just feeling that you got something right, but that things* mean, *the feeling of "an almost toxic level of significance" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 148). The consequence, then, is that the remainder inevitably is perceived in a kind of pure present, a piece of time compressed to a sliver with no actually perceptible past and no predictive power.*

A contemporary theory of historical experience and critical conservation must be based not on a model of meaning, but on the longstanding ontological position I will call "deep historicity". With this notion, I mean to point to the Hegelian, Marxist, and Heideggerian traditions of interpreting works of architecture, each of which are identified by a strong concept of the historical character of cultural phenomena – that is, the insistence that architecture develops in time and itself has a history, but also that any particular experience of a work of architecture is a singular experience in the context of history. Historicity is not a contingency attached to some artistic

essence but an inherent determination of our experience and understanding of architecture. Heidegger defines historicity as "the temporalizing structure of temporality" through which our being-in-the-world "is stretched along and stretches itself along" (1962, pp. 332, 375). The various symbolic authorities shaping architecture in different epochs – Antiquity, Nature, Reason, epochal Will, Technology, Language – are not mere periodizations of architecture's being located in the stream of world history. Rather all should be seen as productions of history – events, becomings – derived from and submitted to history as to a destiny. For Heidegger, Being itself can reveal itself only in history, and at times only in the manner of its self-concealment, which great architecture can help de-conceal. But in the modern era of science and technology, Being is more concealed that ever, so much so we don't even notice its absence. It is interesting in this regard that Remainder*'s protagonist is damaged by "something falling from the sky. Technology" (McCarthy, 2005, p. 3). "History is what hurts", Fredric Jameson admonishes. "This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them" (Jameson, 1981, p. 192).*

So, on the one hand, deep historicity (which goes, too, by other names like Lacan's "Real", Althusser's "absent cause", Adorno's "natural history", and Jameson's "Necessity") attests to the otherness of history. History operates outside our capacity to conceptualize it, but nevertheless imposes limits upon and enables possibilities for concrete thought and action. That same history, however, can be mediated in the field of imagination and representation, narrativized in the most general sense, with architecture as its primary instance.

The introduction of the architectural imagination as a mediating field of history is the most powerful component of a prospective theory of critical conservation. Standard preservation practice itself takes advantage of this component but in a very particular way. At least tacitly (for it has not provided a theory) historical preservation holds to the possibility that a deep meaning exists within a kind of recoverable historicity, an originary and authentic meaning that stands in antithesis to the continually changing and therefore corrupted object which is the building, landscape, or district to be restored and preserved. This preservation project sees a chance of winning historical dignity only if the assumed originary deep meaning is indexed and restored through a form that is a replica of the original; that is, if the historicality of the experience of architecture can be restored along with the architectural object. To develop an alternative to this position, we must, first, avoid the essentialism of a search for unchanging deep meaning, and second, offer a different account for the practical imbrication of architectural elements in the concrete historical world. Walter Benjamin's work provides both a critique and a way of modulating the commitment to deep historicity to accommodate these two requisites.

Benjamin rejects certain aspects of deep historicity which he calls "historicism", understood as an epic history of accumulated narrative, the "once upon a time" (as he calls it) of an aestheticized and conceptualized, coherent and linear totality. The claim of historicism to describe "history as it really was" is in fact an ideological ruse, yielding a petrified picture of a past used to justify an equally reified present. Benjamin's counter to epic history is a highly idiosyncratic historical materialism: a set of specific material experiences and the construction of a historical moment out of them – not a history of concepts but a history of material incidents experienced in the historical present, a slice of temporality itself lifted out of smooth diachrony.

> *"Historicism presents the eternal image of the past; historical materialism presents a given experience with the past, an experience which stands unique. The replacement of the epic element by the constructive element proves to be the condition for this experience. The immense forces which remain captive to historicism's once upon a time are freed in this experience. To bring about the consolidation of experience with history, which is original for every present, is the task of historical materialism. It is directed towards the consciousness of the present which explodes the continuum of history" (Benjamin, 1975, p. 29).*

For Benjamin, the study of history should not involve subsuming the various incidents of the past into a totalizing concept of epoch or style, which is then construed as the determination of the production of works of art. Rather the effort should be to study how the individual works – including architectural ruins, remnants, and profaned images and events – can incorporate the given world, the present world as well as the past, and are themselves forms *of production. For Benjamin, the remnant and the incidental image can contribute to*

creating the atmosphere and mood of a moment in all its singularity. Historical understanding is then an "after-life" of that which is understood incidentally, "whose pulse can still be felt in the present" (1970, p. 62).

The constellation of present and past further articulates Benjamin's theory of historical experience. Let us think of deep historicity diagrammatically as a bundle of thematic lines (trajectories of economics, politics, culture) running horizontally, exerting a determining force on our everyday lives, but unable to be experienced or represented as such. For Benjamin, this means that any particular temporal slice of that bundle of lines is empty, and the whole movement through is smooth and homogeneous. "That things just go on, this is the catastrophe" (1970, p. 62). His diagram of the historical moment, in contrast, is a vertical surface replete with content but arrested in time, at a standstill. For Benjamin, there can be no history without the capacity to arrest historical movement, to bracket off the material event from the continuum of history. The break enables the performance of historical understanding, the description and reinscription (on the vertical surface as it were) of present and past that can "set in motion an experience with history original to every new present" (1977, p. 352). In such an account, the issue of meaning is moved from reference to affect. Let's say that the original object of which we now have only a remnant, had a meaning. For Benjamin, this meaning was never authentic or intrinsic or stable; the meaning and its conveyance in time interrupt and explode one another; the remnant is given new life by being passed on in experience. What marks the difference between historicism and Benjamin's historical materialism is the decisive articulation of the present, the becoming-now that disrupts the homogeneous flow of time.

Benjamin's theses on the experience of history could have enormous potential for a contemporary theory of critical conservation, promoting new approaches to future projects but also providing more adequate understanding of existing works. Consider a project like the Neues Museum, *Berlin, by David Chipperfield (with restoration architect Julian Harrap). Chipperfield famously refused a simple reconstruction of the original building and decided instead to negotiate myriad microinterventions of varying conservation tactics. Whereas the fundamental guidance of historicism would be to situate each intervention within a coherent concept of a historical epoch – in this case, the epoch of the mid-nineteenth-century classicism of Friedrich August Stüler, a student of Schinkel, or of the moment of the building's bombing during World War II –, Benjamin's approach suggests rather that we frame Chipperfield's appropriation of Stüler's bombed museum as itself a specific work isolated from the totality and continuity of a smoothly totalized history. Whereas historicism would require us to conceive of the project as an enchainment of all of its different elements, the meaning of which is overdetermined by the master code or concept that totalizes them in a homogeneous field, Benjamin's allegorical perception frees us from the burden of meaning and enables affective enjoyment (in the Lacanian sense of "enjoy your symptom!") of the remnants of past and present, ambient and unfolding in a multitude of singularities.*

One is clearly aware in the museum of the marks of destruction, of war and subsequent decay, and a broad range of "age values" (Riegl, 1996, p. 72), from fabric left almost as found, to the restored, to the wholly new. It is the architectural details that insist on our attention — details old and new, partial and complete. Examples include the stabilized but not restored decorations, the concrete and marble chip planes of the new central staircase, the coursing of recycled bricks, stone revetments, hinges and brackets, connections, thicknesses, finishes, new insertions into the existing courtyards, as well as thirty thousand new clay pots to supplement the original pots that structure the light-weight domes and were never intended to be seen. The syncopation of the restored old galleries is overlaid at certain points by entirely new elements, most notably the new central staircase and the slender-columned, two-story trabeated frame inserted in the Egyptian courtyard. This austere, luminous white frame has its own incidental geometrical logic (which a student of mine perceptively described as the soul of the old courtyard, for there is something spectral about remnants) which results in moments of counterpoint with Stüler's architecture of the courtyard, as when a Chipperfield column lands symmetrically centered on axis with a Stüler door opening, interrupting passage (on the second floor) and bisecting the view of the enfilade that leads beyond the courtyard.

One's first inclination is to read all this detail with a literal, realist gloss, to directly connect the architectural signifiers with their real in the concrete world of built things, and construct a narrative of continuity between new and old. At second look, however, the same details begin to seem quite excessive and disparate; they do not add up to a larger meaning; they contribute to the ambience of the scene no doubt, but compared with the abstract unfolding of

the sectional sequences maintained from the original design, they are excessive in their inessentiality, and at times even disruptive. Chipperfield's design seems concerned less with the development of a narrative or underlying concept and more with the stark presentation of individual incidents. In a strict conceptual sense, these details have no meaning, since they might have been omitted without detracting from the typological structure of the museum. They are insignificant architectural notations functioning only to denote different instances of tone, mood, and finish – almost gratuitous in contrast to the more abstract deep-structure and sectional developments that reproduce the original building diagram.

And yet it is from these details that we must construct our singular and momentary understanding of the past. The reality of the past, the reality presumed by standard preservationism to have been conserved in the typological fabric and deep conceptual structure of the architecture, is in Chipperfield's museum an effect *created by the interaction of various details that might otherwise seem little more than incidental.*

For Benjamin, history does not disappear because it is absorbed into the remainder or the incident. He famously remarked that the "eternal is in any case far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea" (1999, p. 69), which is to say that history is perceptible only through remnants and trimmings. Something like this could be said in relation to Chipperfield's museum: Rather than meaning and memory, History is far more the column centered on an aperture, an image at a standstill that retains a stubborn resistance to literal representation or lyrical petrification.

Benjamin's microevents and incidents, much like McCarthy's, illuminate the larger conceptual structures of a situation but are not reducible to them; the incidents and remnants are the material differentials that can arrest a historical dialectical movement. The architectural remainder is isolated and broken off from its original context, yet its very isolation has the essential function of focusing our present perception on prior movements – the patterns of material transformations and events in the past, inscribed now like the singular magnetic resonance imaging of mutating organs. As the incidents disintegrate historical continuity and causality, they nevertheless enable the gathering together of prior, present, and future events within the experience of the image at a standstill. From such singular events, we might begin to construct a different kind of future. Preceding the final reenactment in McCarthy's novel, the protagonist declares, "The actions we'd decided to perform had all happened already" (2005, p. 281). But then he qualifies: "It had never happened – and, this being not a real event but a staged one, albeit staged in a real venue, it never would. It would always be to come, held in a future hovering just beyond our reach" (2005, pp. 281-282). Chipperfield's details, read through Benjamin's materialism, make visible otherwise irretrievable images of the past, not that have lived on *but that have been* brought back *by and in the singularity of present experience.* m

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