

*By Douglas Murphy / October 2016*

The city is often said to be a repository of memory. This applies in the individual sense, urban form considered as the source of the collection of sense impressions around which lives are built. Spaces are bound by walls, we respond to their appearance and their touch, and our experiences and interactions are draped around and across them, relying on them as scaffolding for recollection. But the statement also means that the buildings of a city play a role in archiving the collective memory of a culture - monuments, statues, and their application to the facades of buildings, all create a significant web of historical memory that is intended to help ground the population of a city in a project of collective meaning.

But the city is also oriented towards the future - new buildings are invariably built as responses to perceived future demands and requirements, whether economic or cultural, and construction is nearly always a prospective activity. And indeed there are entire fields within architecture that have come from attempts to provide glimpses of future social, technological and political structures: these are memories of latent worlds, poised to be brought into being, even if the course of history has long since bypassed their particular moment of opportunity.

Construction sites have always been barricaded spaces - for safety and for protection, but in recent years the art of decorating the hoardings behind which a new building rises has reached a period of high-style. This medium, particularly in its residential form, presents memories of the future on a small scale, site by site, aspirational rather than revolutionary, but their methods and visions tell us a great deal about our world.

Today, the stock photos of happy couples on their generic designer sofa, sharing a glass of wine on the balcony, or getting away from their stressful finance job in the gym, are still present, but they are part of an increasingly sophisticated tapestry of ambitions and deflections. The language of place-marketing uses memories of previous uses and occupations as a narrative device to give various forms of generic space a character, even as new buildings sweep away the communities and spaces that constituted that character - a quiet violence in the form of 'local character' and value realisation.

The slickness of the communicative language, presenting images and rhetoric not of future owners and occupants but of an image of the city into which they are supposed to invest, presents an uncomfortable image of coming change, utilising character as part of a project of abstraction and commodification. But it is entirely strange that we have reached a point where the computer generated images of architectural space emblazoned on the hoardings have become indistinguishable from its final appearance, where the perfect image of a future space not only works to concretise that future but almost seems to render the space itself unnecessary.

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