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The Memory Palaces of Do Ho Suh and Anne and Patrick Poirier

Laura M F Bertens

‘Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.’

Gaston Bachelard¹

According to an ancient story, it was Simonides of Ceos who discovered the art of memory.² While attending a dinner party he was asked to step outside to speak to two visitors. In his absence disaster struck and the dining hall collapsed, killing everyone present, and leaving their bodies beyond recognition. Simonides was able to identify each one of them by remembering where they had sat during dinner. This experience, so the ancient authors tell us, helped the poet develop a method of training one’s ability to remember, by mentally linking locations (*loci*), such as rooms in a house, to images of objects or events (*imagines*). Thus, the concept of the memory palace was born.

This mnemonic device, also called the method of loci, was used in antiquity mostly as an aid to the practice of rhetoric and sophism. It can help the speaker remember, as well as construct, long speeches without the need for written notes. Although descriptions of the technique can already be found in the writings of Aristotle and Pliny the elder,³ the three most influential texts on the topic are Cicero’s *De Oratore*, Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (usually referred to as *Ad Herennium*), of which the author remains unknown. In each of the three, an explanation of the method is provided and these texts have served as the fundamental instruction for the art of memory.

The principle is simple and can be applied by anyone wishing to remember, for example, a grocery list. Cicero provides the following, succinct description:

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Maria Jolas, trans, Penguin Classics, New York, 2014, p 31
- 2 Cicero, *De Oratore*, Edward W Sutton, trans, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1948, II, lxxxvi, pp 351–354; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Harold E Butler, trans, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1979, XI, ii, pp 11–14
- 3 Amongst other places, Aristotle refers to the method in his *Topica*, 163^b, pp 24–30; Pliny mentions the art of memory and two of its experts, Simonides Melicus and Metrodorus of Scepsis, in his *Naturalis Historia*, VII, cap. 24.

- 4 Cicero, *De Oratore*, op cit, II, lxxxvi, p 354
- 5 *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, Harry Caplan, trans, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2015, III, xxi
- 6 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, op cit, XI, ii, pp 23–26
- 7 Two well-known examples, praised by Cicero, were Charmadas and Metrodorus of Scepsis; Cicero, *De Oratore*, op cit, II, lxxxviii, p 360
- 8 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, New York University, New York, 2014, pp 153–155; for more on the development of memory practices in the medieval and early-Modern period, see: Janet Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; Frank Willaert, Herman Braet and Thom Mertens et al, eds, *Medieval Memory: Image and Text*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2004; a special case of the method being introduced in China by Matteo Ricci in 1596 is described in: Jonathan D Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Viking, New York, 1984.
- 9 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, The Bodley Head, London, 1992
- 10 A non-exhaustive list: Barli Bram, Aditya A Sutono and Tabita Hermayani, 'Applying the Principles of Matteo Ricci's Memory Palace Technique', *Journal of Applied Studies in Language*, vol 4, no 1, June 2020, pp 9–18; Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking with Einstein*, Penguin Group, New York, 2011; Xavier Giudicelli, 'Image, Memory, and Reconstruction: Alastair's Illustrated Editions for Oscar Wilde's *The Sphinx* and *The Birthday of the Infanta* as Memory Palaces', *Polysèmes revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires* 21, 2019, online; William B Joyce, *Listening Inside the*

... persons desiring to train this faculty must select localities and form mental images of the facts they wish to remember and store those images in the localities, with the result that the arrangement of the localities will preserve the order of the facts, and the images of the facts will designate the facts themselves...⁴

The structure chosen to store the memories is commonly a building, usually a familiar, existing one, such as one's home, although imaginary buildings are also used. This building is divided into places, so-called loci: separate locations that can be visited by mentally walking from one to the next. These might be rooms, corridors, staircases, alcoves etcetera. Each object to be remembered – an item on a grocery list, a segment of a poem, or an argument in a speech – is turned into an image and is 'placed' in one of the loci. These images function best when they are active, bizarre and exceptional, since banal, everyday images are easily forgotten or mentally overlooked.⁵ Once the connection between loci and images is firmly established, the memory palace is ready to be used. By mentally walking through it, one can now retrieve the images, in their proper order, and thus reconstruct the memorised information.

Some authors, such as Quintilian, were sceptical about the use of such an elaborate and time-consuming technique, when other methods like rote learning were often just as effective.⁶ Nonetheless, the method was popular with orators, and stories of almost supernatural feats of mnemonic gymnastics circulated.⁷ The rules and techniques of the memory palace continued to fascinate throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, although in changing forms and for different purposes.⁸ Despite this, few academic studies had been written on the topic until 1966, when Frances Yates published her influential book *The Art of Memory*.⁹ In it, she traces the history of mnemonic techniques from Simonides to the seventeenth century.

In the wake of this publication, interest in the study of mnemonic techniques, the memory palace in particular, has increased and a general search for academic publications on the topic now yields a modest list of results in a wide range of fields, from psychology, to literary studies, to music theory.¹⁰ In fiction, the technique has also gained popularity, featuring for instance in the BBC series *Sherlock*, the books about Hannibal Lecter by Thomas Harris and the novel *Memory Theatre* by philosopher Simon Critchley.¹¹ Art has been no exception and many artists have become fascinated with the concept of the memory palace, having been introduced to the topic through the writings of Frances Yates.¹² It is this use of the memory palace as an artistic trope that will be the focus of this article.

The current interest in the memory palace is mostly theoretical, however, and the active construction of memory palaces as aids to memory has fallen largely out of use. Nonetheless, we are still unconsciously practicing this art in everyday life, using the homes we live in to store memories. Every house turns into a memory palace as soon as it becomes a home. The various rooms and corners become the loci which contain the images that preserve our memories. It is this automatic understanding of the house as memory palace that we find in musings on the significance of the house by Gaston Bachelard and Georges Perec.¹³

Memory Palace, dissertation, Princeton University, Princeton, 2005; Eric L G Legge, Christopher R Madan, Enoch T Ng et al, 'Building a Memory Palace in Minutes', *Acta Psychologica* 141, 2012, pp 380–390

The description of the bedroom by Perec is a clear example:

The resurrected space of the bedroom is enough to bring back to life, to recall, to revive memories, the most fleeting and anodyne along with the most essential. The coenesthetic certainty of my body in the bed, the topographical certainty of the bed in the room, these alone reactivate my memory, and give it an acuity and a precision it hardly ever has otherwise.¹⁴

- 11 *Sherlock*, (BBC, 2010–2017); Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1981; Simon Critchley, *Memory Theatre*, Other Press, New York, 2014. Other contemporary references to the technique can be found in works by Italo Calvino, Carlos Fuentes, Hilary Mantel, Philip Pullman, Penelope Lively, Harold Bloom and Madison Smartt Bell.

- 12 Peter Matussek, 'Inventing Interfaces: Camillo's Memory Theater and the Renaissance of Human-Computer Interaction', in Charlene Villaseñor Black and Mari-Tere Álvarez, eds, *Renaissance Futurities*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2019, pp 52–55; Peter Matussek, 'Memory Theatre in the Digital Age', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, vol 17, no 3, 2012, pp 8–15

- 13 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op cit, pp 20–21, pp 25–38 and p 30; Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, John Sturrock, trans, Penguin Books, London and New York, 2008

We live our lives in memory palaces, constantly storing memories in the various rooms we inhabit. Although this might seem a strained use of the concept, this common and unintentional link between places and memories was in fact already noted by Quintilian, as the very origin of the method of loci:

This achievement of Simonides appears to have given rise to the observation that it is an assistance to the memory if places are stamped upon the mind, which anyone can believe from experiment. For when we return to a place after a considerable absence, we not merely recognise the place itself, but remember things that we did there, and recall the persons whom we met and even the unuttered thoughts which passed through our minds when we were there before. Thus, as in most cases, art originates from experiment.¹⁵

The art of memory is thus modelled after everyday experience and based on the naturally occurring association between loci and imagines. Although all the buildings we regularly frequent will 'collect' memories in this way, the home is an especially powerful container of personal memory, due to its emotional connotations and its role in the formation of individual identity. When passing a former home, who has not stopped and thought back on the life lived there and the memories attached to a building which has now become someone else's memory palace?

The understanding of the home as an instinctive memory palace can be found in contemporary art, where both the home and the phenomenon of memory – individual and collective – are important themes. In the following sections, I will look at works by the South Korean artist Do Ho Suh and by the French artist duo Anne and Patrick Poirier. In both oeuvres we find a strong interest in the memory palace. Taken together, they provide an insight into the use of the home as memory palace in contemporary art and the diverse ways in which the home can be connected to the construction of our personal and collective identities.

The work *Passage/s* (2017–2018), by Do Ho Suh, will help us understand the relationship between home and memory on a personal level. Outlines of rooms in his former homes, made from colourful, transparent fabric and combined into new structures, allow us to study the nature of individual memory. In these artworks, the link to the original method of the memory palace, as described by Cicero and Quintilian, is explicit and of immediate relevance to the work's interpretation.

The second analysis concerns a selection of artworks by Anne and Patrick Poirier, displayed during the exhibition 'Exotica', which visited museum De Pont (Tilburg, The Netherlands) in 2018 and 2019. These works combine interests in architecture, archaeology and psychology,

- 14 Perec, *Species of Spaces*, op cit, pp 21–22

- 15 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, op cit, XI, ii, p 17

bringing together memories from vastly diverse periods and cultures. Models of fantastical cities and archaeological remains resemble the human brain and function as architectural metaphors of memory. Here, we feel the influence of the Renaissance fascination with memory palaces, microcosms and collection practices, most well-known from Giulio Camillo's *Theatre of Memory*. An esoteric understanding of our collective human life is created, in which the individual disappears and the human species – its memories, home and future – are centralised.

The Many Homes of Do Ho Suh

In the nineteenth century, the Korean king Sunjo had a scholar's house built on the grounds of the magnificent Changdeokgung Palace in Seoul. Over a century later, the artist Se Ok Suh obtained permission from the government to study and measure the house in order to have a replica built for him and his family to live in.¹⁶ This is the extraordinary house that his son, the artist Do Ho Suh, grew up in. It is therefore not surprising that the themes of house and home feature strongly in the artist's work. By now, the artist has become famous for his fabric houses and one of his international successes was *Seoul Home* (1999), a life-size replica of this surreal childhood home made from semi-transparent fabric and suspended from the ceiling.

Another inspiration for the artist's interest in the home and its intimate connection to memory was his move, in 1991, from Seoul to the American town of Providence. Since then, Suh has lived in houses and apartments in Berlin, London and New York, frequently travelling back to Seoul, where his parents continued to live in their otherworldly house.¹⁷ The frequent displacement and the variety of houses Do Ho Suh has lived in, have left the artist acutely aware of the transitory and unstable nature of one's home. Talking about his interest in architecture, he explains: 'The space I'm interested in, is not only a physical one, but an intangible, metaphorical and psychological one.'¹⁸

Many of Suh's artistic projects have thus dealt, in one way or another, with the relationship between home and memory. While the concept of the memory palace can be connected to several of his works, it is of particular relevance in analysing the installation *Passage/s* (2017–2018), one of Suh's pieces of fabric architecture. The installation consists of a series of separate works, created between 2015 and 2018, each representing a different former home of the artist. The works reconstruct the outlines of these spaces in brightly coloured, semi-transparent fabric. In *Passage/s*, they have been connected to form a passageway that the visitor is invited to walk through. Each segment has its own distinct colour and presents the visitor with an empty husk of one of the artist's various homes. Although the insides of the houses have been removed, all aspects of their outlines have been reconstructed in astonishing detail, as if the buildings had been stripped of their skin: light switches, power sockets, Yale locks (the letters visible), hinges and their screws, fire exit signs and meticulously decorated door knobs can all be recognised. Together, the architectural structures form a dreamlike, composite home for the audience to explore.

16 Christopher Turner, 'For Do Ho Suh, There's No Place Like Home', *Apollo the International Art Magazine*, vol 184, no 647, November 2016, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/ho-suh-theres-no-place-like-home/>, accessed 7 June 2024; Hwa Young Caruso, 'The Art of Do Ho Suh: Traversing Two Cultures', *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, vol 10, no 1, 2008, <https://ijme-journal.org/index.php/ijme/article/view/131>, accessed 7 June 2024

17 Turner, 'For Do Ho Suh', op cit

18 Ibid



Do Ho Suh, *Passage/s*, 2017–2018, polyester fabric and stainless steel, installation view, Bildmuseet, Umea University, Stockholm, Sweden, image courtesy of Lehrmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong

Do Ho Suh's fabric homes, of which *Passage/s* is an elaborate example, have been compared to the buildings wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude as well as the enlarged fabric copies of household objects by Claes Oldenburg.¹⁹ In their indexicality and their strategy of defamiliarising our everyday spaces, they also strongly resemble the casts of buildings by Rachel Whiteread. But unlike Whiteread's solid concrete casts, which render the reconstructed buildings uninhabitable, in Suh's installations matter has been reduced to a bare minimum and the spaces are accessible. Where Rachel Whiteread *fills* her chosen structures, Do Ho Suh *traces* them with the lightest of touches. This ephemeral quality of the fabric and the possibility of entering the spaces, combined with the modular nature and indexicality of *Passage/s*, turn the work into a memory palace available to artist and audience alike.

The fabric construction can be described as an exact physical manifestation of the classical memory palace, as set out in the original texts on the subject. The ancient authors stress the importance of the places – loci – in setting up the mnemonic device, with *Ad Herennium* providing a detailed account of optimal conditions. The text defines a locus as a place that 'we can grasp and embrace... easily by the natural memory – for example, a house, an intercolumnar space, a recess, an arch, or the like'.²⁰ The loci should form a clear series, which can be remembered in order, so that stored images can be retrieved in their correct sequence. Loci should not resemble each other too strongly (such as the confusing repetition of niches between columns) and should be of moderate size so that the images are not dwarfed by the spaces, but are at the same time big enough to mentally walk through. They need to be clearly separated, but not too far apart, and should not be too brightly lit or too dark since this will make it harder to 'see' the images.

Suh's artwork fits the instructions quite literally and memorising the installation, although a rather pointless exercise, would result in a perfect memory palace. The different segments of the installation form a passageway of distinct and moderately sized spaces, each with their own colour and identity. The artist refers to them as *hubs*,²¹ emphasising their individual yet modular nature, and they correspond well to the loci of the memory palace. While they have a presence of their own, their transparency and lack of solidity make the visitor more aware of the empty spaces inside, waiting to be filled with the images that will bring back stored memories. The original buildings

19 Caruso, 'The Art of Do Ho Suh', op cit; Turner, 'For Do Ho Suh', op cit

20 *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, op cit, III, xvi

21 The segments that make up *Passage/s* are introduced as works by themselves and have individual names like *Hub*, *Unit G5*, *Union Wharf*, 23 Wenlock Road, London, N1 7SB, UK (2015) and *Hub*, 260–10 Sungbook-dong, Sungbook-ku, Seoul, Korea (2016).

have been emptied out and only their husks remain. Despite being physical objects, the ghost-like appearance of the hubs already gives them the unreal, imaginary quality of the memory palace, even without committing them to memory.

In addition, the thin fabric makes it possible to fold up the structures in order to transport the installation, an inherent feature of the mental memory palace. This motile nature of Suh's fabric architecture is often discussed in reviews; the works are referred to as 'wandering homes' or 'suitcase homes'.²² In an interview, the artist stresses his continuous need for these fabric memory palaces: 'I proactively try and bring my home with me wherever I go; that's where the idea of making a transportable house in fabric came in.'²³

Walking through the artist's collection of former homes, the visitor senses the intimate character of the spaces. These illusory, ephemeral hubs are echoes of solid houses, containing the artist's personal memories. While the actual events happened elsewhere, the installation functions as a portable trace. For Do Ho Suh, the rooms fill themselves with images from his past, the imagines of the memory palace. They are the result of what the ancient authors called natural memory: the automatic process of remembrance by which we store, often involuntarily and unconsciously, the many events that happen to us, relating them to the places in which they happened.²⁴ It is this natural process that Quintilian points to as the general basis for the method of loci, and the home is its most common instrument.

Such 'natural memory palaces' are available to us all. The various physical houses that we have lived in during our lifetime remain with us as slowly fading after-images. Mentally visiting such a previous home takes concentration and is best done by imagining oneself carefully moving from one room to the next, relying on muscle memory to recall the places of light switches, doorknobs and furniture. The home is still there, preserved in our memories, but no longer solid and definite. And as we move through this remembered home, images of events and people come to mind, turning the spectre of the home into a memory palace. In fact, the memory palace that we used to inhabit has itself become a memory. It is this faded, ghost-like echo of all Suh's previous homes combined, that is made visible and tangible in the installation: a material representation of the artist's memories of earlier homes, the memory palace as memory in itself.

In *Passage/s*, Do Ho Suh's personal memory palace can now be seen and entered by the visitor. However, while the artist has access to both the loci and the imagines, the visitor only gets to see the first – the places of the memory palace – without the images that allow the retrieval of memories. In fact, the emptiness of the hubs and their semi-transparent, apparitional nature seem to emphasise the impossibility of ever fully entering another person's memory palace. We can walk through the rooms and take in the details, but the memories and meanings will forever elude us; these are someone else's ghosts. It reminds us that personal memories can never really be shared, no matter how much we try to explain them. The installation follows the ancient 'rules for places' so exactly that a recollection of the artwork could well be used by a visitor as an actual memory palace, but only ever as the strictly technical mnemonic device, in aid of *artificial* instead of *natural* memory. As a con-

22 Michelle Bae and Greg Dimitriadis, 'Travelling Home(s): Contemporary Korean Art after the Postcolonial', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol 36, no 3, 2015, pp 314–328, p 322; Sarah Newman, 'Do Ho Suh', *Oz*, vol 40, 2018

23 Turner, 'For Do Ho Suh', op cit

24 *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, op cit, III, xvi

tainer of the personal memories of those who lived there, the home remains silent and inaccessible to outsiders.

The impossibility of experiencing another person's memories marks the difference between the home and the house. While the house is a stable object which can be passed from one family to the next, the home is a temporary construct, which leaves the house when the family moves out. When moving into a new house we are presented with an empty memory palace of loci, to be filled with our own imagines. In *Ad Herennium*, the memory palace is described as a wax tablet, which can be wiped clean and used again.²⁵ Images placed in the rooms will fade over time if they are no longer used and new images can take their place. We can endlessly reuse the memory palace. In a similar way, a house becomes a new home with each new group of occupants. Each family creates new memories which come to replace the old ones. Only occasionally are we surprised by reminders of those who inhabited our homes before us – for instance when old notes or drawings are found under layers of wallpaper. It is in these moments that we are acutely aware of Walter Benjamin's observation that 'to live is to leave traces'.²⁶

In his art, Suh is mindful of the way we share our houses with previous and future inhabitants: 'Most of us are just passing through these buildings, and I'm very aware of all the others who have lived there before.'²⁷ This interest in the conflation of layers of time and memories is visible in the installation. The transparency of the fabric hubs enables us to see all of them simultaneously. In reality, the houses belonged to different stages of the artist's life, separated in time. But in this dreamlike representation, these distinct moments come together. From any space in the structure, the artist can see all other loci of his memory palace and thus recollect all memories. It illustrates the connection between home, memory and the self. Throughout our lives, we accrue homelife memories, which help shape our identities. Although we leave houses behind, we carry our home with us. The installation represents the home as a constant factor in our lives, providing us with the mental storage space for the memories that make up our narrative identities. Although nearly two millennia old, Quintilian's thoughts on the natural memory palace still hold true and are illustrated in *Passage/s*.

Anne and Patrick Poirier as 'Archaeologists-Architects'

After its earliest descriptions, the concept of the memory palace underwent a slow transformation. Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, interest in the method persisted, resulting in new meanings and uses. Kept alive by authors like Augustine, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, the technique came to form the basis for the medieval scholastic memory treatises.²⁸ Renewed interest in and knowledge of the ancient texts on memory, including the *Ad Herennium* and the writings of Aristotle, Quintilian and Cicero, allowed early-Modern and Renaissance authors a better picture of the original uses of the art of memory.²⁹ Some authors advocated a practical, secular use of the memory palace, based on Quintilian, while others continued its medieval application to religious

25 *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, op cit, III, xviii

26 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, Peter Demetz, ed, Schoken Books, New York, 1986, p 155

27 Turner, 'For Do Ho Suh', op cit

28 Yates, *The Art of Memory*, op cit, pp 68–92

29 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, op cit, pp 153–155; for more on the development of memory practices in the medieval and early-Modern period, see: Janet Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories*, op cit, 1992; Frank Willaert, Herman Braet and Thom Mertens et al, *Medieval Memory*, op cit

studies. In the sixteenth century, a new interpretation of the technique was developed among authors interested in Neoplatonism, mysticism, Cabala and the occult. It is to this last category that the great Giulio Camillo (circa 1480–1544) belonged.³⁰

Influenced by the mystical writings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, as well as Neoplatonic and Cabalist theory, Camillo designed and built a memory theatre, which if used properly should allow its visitors to gain complete and divine knowledge of the universe. In Camillo's theatre, the spectator stood in the centre, looking out over rows of objects – paintings, statues, drawers filled with texts and small artefacts – which functioned as tangible memory images. Taken together and in their proper and complex mystical ordering, these objects formed a microcosm, elucidating the macrocosm they represented.

Although Camillo's memory theatre was lost, his notes on the accompanying book were published posthumously as *L'idea del teatro*.³¹ This text has formed the starting point for Yates's exploration of the art of memory and it is through her book that most contemporary scholars and artists have come into contact with the memory theatre.³² While academics have criticised Yates for overstating the magical dimension of Camillo's work, thereby neglecting the importance of logic and reason,³³ it is Yates's understanding of the theatre that comes back time and time again in artistic reflections on the topic. Peter Matussek provides a comprehensive list of works inspired by the writings of Camillo via Yates, including Jean Dubuffet's *Théâtres de mémoire* (1975–1979), Bill Viola's video artwork *The theatre of memory* (1985) and the musical composition of the same name by composer John Fuller (1981).³⁴

Interest in Camillo's memory theatre and the workings of memory in general can be found throughout the work of the artist duo Anne and Patrick Poirier. Inspired by their stay at the Villa Medici in Rome, the couple started focusing on the interplay between memory, architecture and archaeology.³⁵ Graeco-Roman ruins and architectural designs feature strongly in their works and connections to the memory palace are numerous. For an exhibition held in 2021 at Chateau La Coste (Aix-en-Provence, France), the Poiriers described their art projects as follows:

They are imaginary constructions inspired by real archaeological sites that we have come across over the course of our lives as 'archeologists-architects' [sic]. Since the very beginning of our careers, we have harboured a passion for archeology [sic] and ruined cities, both of which have served our love of architecture, as we recognise the close relationship between archeology, architecture, memory and the psyche. Through this link we understood that architecture, be it in ruins or not, could act as a metaphor for memory and the psyche.³⁶

The use of archaeology as a way to represent memory is not uncommon. It is found in the writings of Walter Benjamin, who tells us that memory is 'the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.'³⁷ Sigmund Freud used archaeology as a metaphor for probing the psyche, comparing the past of a city to the past of the mind.³⁸ And Carl Jung, in turn, likened the human soul to a building, developed over time and reflecting different periods of its existence in its various shapes and styles.³⁹ Inspired by these

30 Yates, *The Art of Memory*, op cit, pp 140–144

31 Giulio Camillo, *L'idea del Teatro*, Lorenzo Torrentino, Florence, 1550

32 Matussek 'Inventing Interfaces', op cit, pp 52–53

33 For a concise overview of critical responses, see Matussek, 'Inventing Interfaces', op cit, pp 51–52. See also: Seth Long, 'Excavating the Memory Palace: An Account of the Disappearance of Mnemonic Imagery from English Rhetoric, 1550–1650', *Rhetoric Review*, vol 36, no 2, 2017, pp 122–138

34 Matussek, 'Inventing Interfaces', op cit, pp 52–55

35 André-Louis Paré, 'Anne & Patrick Poirier: Singulier/Pluriel / Anne & Patrick Poirier: Singular/Plural', *Espace Sculpture* 46, 1998, p 28; Marcella Manni, Anne and Patrick Poirier et al, *Anne e Patrick Poirier*, Damiani, Bologna, 2007, pp 11–13

36 Château la Coste, 'Exhibition Mnésosyne – Anne & Patrick Poirier', <https://chateau-la-coste.com/en/news/exhibition-mnesosyne-anne-patrick-poirier.html>, accessed 7 June 2024

37 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, op cit, pp 25–26

38 Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, Wien, 1930, pp 13–15

39 Carl G Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*, Helton G Baynes and Cary F Baynes, trans, Harcourt, New York, 1928, pp 118–119



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Ouranopolis*, 1995, wood, car paint, plexiglass, brass, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp, 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven

metaphors, the Poiriers incorporate them in their art, ‘taking,’ in Bachelard’s words, ‘the house as a *tool for analysis* of the human soul’.⁴⁰

In 2018, the retrospective exhibition ‘Exotica’ was on show at museum De Pont in Tilburg, The Netherlands. All exhibited works dealt with memory in one way or another, and I have chosen the following three due to their different connections to the memory palace: *Ouranopolis* (1995), *Mnemosyne* (1990) and *Janus* (2018). Archaeology, architecture and the theatre are recurring themes in these works and links with Camillo’s memory theatre are evident. Unlike Do Ho Suh’s art, the works do not comment on the individual home and house. Instead, they can be said to reflect on a broader concept of home and its meaning to human culture and memory at large.

Ouranopolis

Although visually quite distinct from *Passage/s*, the work *Ouranopolis* (1995) shares with Suh’s installation an interest in collecting and safeguarding an archive of memory and bringing this together in one surreal architectural space. But while Suh’s fabric houses collect only his own individual memories, *Ouranopolis* is an attempt at archiving the collective memory of the entire human species in an idealised memory palace.

The ‘city of the sky’ is a large doughnut-shaped spaceship, a UFO constructed from white wood and plexiglass. Suspended from the ceiling at eye level and tilted slightly, the floating ship seems ready to take off at any moment. It is designed for a time when our planet will have become uninhabitable and we will be forced to make a home for our species elsewhere. All around the ship small fish-eye lens windows allow visitors glimpses of miniature rooms inside the structure. Within these rooms all that is worth remembering of the human race is archived: collections of archaeological treasures, manuscripts, books and remnants of sculpture. Some rooms remain empty, perhaps reminding us of what has been lost or allowing us to store what is yet to come.

Do Ho Suh’s loci are traces of real houses, devoid of objects. Located in the most private of memory palaces, the imagines and therefore the

⁴⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op cit, p 21, emphasis in the original



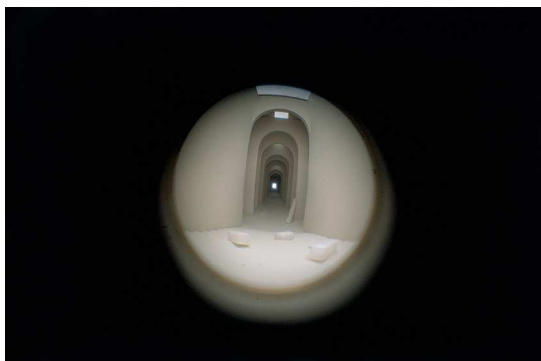
Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Ouranopolis*, 1995, detail, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven

memories which the installation contains are only accessible to the artist. The spaceship, on the other hand, is an entirely fictional structure, almost alien in design. It consists of imagined, idealised loci, but unlike Suh's empty rooms, most of these are filled with a multitude of objects, tangible imagines of our species and cultures. The artists themselves describe the structure as a 'Bibliothèque – Musée idéale... capable de s'envoler vers d'autres mondes avec sa moisson de mémoire, au moindre signe de catastrophe.'⁴¹ Planet earth, containing the many layers of history that have shaped our identity as a species, has been harvested for the memories that we should preserve.

The various miniature rooms represent the realms of archaeology, the museum and the library. Together, these domains are presented as an archive of placeholders for our collective memories. As we lose the planet that has housed us as a species, it is essential that we bring with us our memories, if we want to retain the connection to our home. While the house is physical, the home lives, as our memories, in our minds. The cultural objects function as *aides de mémoire* and one can imagine passengers on the ship wandering through the various rooms of this futuristic memory palace, studying the objects within and remembering the cultures that produced them. Like the family photo albums and the small treasures that move with the individual human from house to house, we bring our cultural texts and artefacts to new planets, as the tangible memory palace of our species.

One aspect in particular reminds the informed visitor of the memory theatre of Giulio Camillo. Built into the top of the elliptical structure of the ship, at equal distance from each other, are four round amphitheatres. The roofs are open and inside we see the empty podia, surrounded by rows of seats. Unlike Camillo's memory theatre, no knowledge is stored here and the emptiness and complete absence of any human life in the four theatres or the rooms of the ship adds an element of suspense – are we looking at a space ship not yet finished or used, built for a future disaster, or at the archaeological remains of a space ship, used and abandoned, perhaps under catastrophic circumstances? What has happened to the home we once shared?

41 Christian Jacob, 'Ouranopolis (Anne et Patrick Poirier): exploration d'une bibliothèque', *Lieux de savoir*, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.58079/qw49>, accessed 7 June 2024



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Ouranopolis*, 1995, detail, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven

Mnemosyne

Ouranopolis is concerned with the preservation of cultural artifacts that function as the externalised memory of our human species, represented in the carefully designed collection rooms of the ship. The work *Mnemosyne* (1990), on the other hand, focuses on the internal structuring of our mind and memories. In this model, the size of a small room, a city has been designed to resemble a transverse section of the human brain. Here, the human mind, and with it the memory palace, becomes a space to inhabit.

Walking around the installation, visitors look down at the plan of a large elliptical city, symmetrical across its main axis. The city's architecture is made from wood, painted a monochrome white and distributed over five levels, descending towards the centre. The lowest level of this dreamlike city, which can be reached by its inhabitants via steps coming down from all sides and through two gateways on the far ends of the plan, is an elongated open space with a line of buildings running down the middle. The shape of this level resembles the two lateral ventricles of the brain, separated by the septum pellucidum, with gateways along the brain's longitudinal fissure. At the same time it reminds one of the ancient Circus Maximus in Rome. We can imagine minute citizens inhabiting this ancient architecture of the brain, travelling between its folds, living in its various compartments and watching the spectacles performed in this central hippodrome.

On opposite ends of the stadium, we find the theatres of memory and of oblivion. In between the two, the artists explain, images from the realms of memory and oblivion meet and become transformed into dreams and artistic imagination. The hippodrome and its two theatres are situated close to where the brain's hippocampi – the regions most directly responsible for memory – would be located and this connection between hippodrome and hippocampus adds to the architectural metaphor of the mind. On the levels surrounding the stadium we find buildings of different types where the various cerebral structures would be. Conical and cylindrical constructions look like fantastical libraries and around these vertical structures open, horizontal ones are situated, resembling the foundations of buildings as we find them in archaeological sites like the baths of Caracalla or the ruins of Salona.

The model is as much an architectural plan as an archaeological excavation site and, indeed, accompanying works with drawings and commentary speak of the ‘architect–archaeologist’ who is trying to make sense of this city. As in other works by the artists, the library, theatre, and ancient ruins are used as metaphors for the mind’s functions in general and memory in particular. The city resembles the human brain and its amalgamation of architectural types can be seen as a complex memory palace. Knowledge and memories of different kinds become compartmentalised and stored in distinct segments of the brain, ready to be retrieved when needed. And as in the biological brain, the seemingly distinct zones are connected to each other: beneath the model, the artists tell us, the different rooms and buildings are invisibly connected.⁴²

In *Mnemosyne*, the memory palace has become the actual home. The brain is envisaged here as the town we live in, the collection of houses, streets and public buildings that we inhabit. The mind transforms the town into a memory palace and fills it with memories, found here – one imagines – alongside Jung’s archetypes, Warburg’s pathos formulas and Plato’s Ideas. The streets, steps and invisible passages allow us to wander through the town, from one building to the next, collecting and combining thoughts and memories as we go along. The ruined state of some of the town’s buildings suggests the decay to which our memory palaces are subjected, not unlike the sense in which Do Ho Suh’s semi-transparent hubs seem to be fading away. While some buildings are intact, providing us with stored memories, others have fallen to ruin and hold only oblivion. Mixing these images we create our dreams and imagination.

Janus

The link between the memory palace and the human mind in which it resides is even more explicit in *Janus* (2018). At the entrance to the exhibition ‘Exotica’, the first thing encountered by the visitor are two colossal heads. The pair of white, monumental statues, titled *Janus*, brings to mind the colossus of Constantine and the remnants of classical sculpture strewn about in ancient cities like Rome – an instant reference to the archaeological past. In fact, the heads are highly enlarged representations of the artists’ faces, cast in plastic and finished in a smooth, white gel coating. More so than the marble statues of antiquity they resemble death masks, not only iconically but also indexically pointing to the artists.

Walking around the faces, this resemblance is strengthened. The casts are cut off just behind the ears and the objects are hollow. (In fact, the careful observer will see, from the way the ears have been cut off, that the two heads initially formed one whole, with the faces turned away from one another.) On the insides of the heads we find two miniature theatres, one pristine and ideal, the other in ruins. In an interview with Anne and Patrick Poirier, during the installation of the work at museum *De Pont*, the artists describe the history and meaning of Camillo’s theatre and its relevance to their artistic practice.⁴³ As in Camillo’s theatre, each row of seats in the ideal theatre is divided into sections and each of these is marked with an inscription, in this case of concepts like intuition, ecstasy, reason, creation and imagination. The various functions of the

42 De Pont Museum, *Anne & Patrick Poirier in De Pont*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ7s130zUiA, accessed 7 June 2024, 5:22–5:28

43 De Pont Museum, *Anne & Patrick Poirier in De Pont*, op cit, 3:24–3:48; another description of Camillo’s theatre by the artists is found in Marcella Manni, Anne and Patrick Poirier et al, *Anne e Patrick Poirier*, op cit, p 12.



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Mnemosyne*, 1990, paint, wood, 43.2 x 699.8 x 549.9 cm, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven

mind are compartmentalised, a recurring theme in works by the artists,⁴⁴ and the placement of the words raises questions about the hierarchical relationships between our mental abilities. Featuring prominently among them, in the middle section of the fifth of nine rows, we find memory.

While Camillo's theatre is a memory palace intended to provide knowledge of the universe at large, here the theatres seem to represent the inner workings of the human mind, a structure easily as complex as the universe. And while in Camillo's theatre the observer finds herself within the wooden structure, looking out at the objects, in the case of *Janus* the theatres are themselves located inside the mind. Here the memory palace folds in on itself: it comes to represent and structure the mind in which it resides.

The concept of the original memory palace is in fact more complex than Camillo's wooden building: while Camillo's theatre and its observer are separate entities, the memory palace of the ancient authors is contained *within* the mind and at the same time entered and traversed *by* that mind. Microcosm and macrocosm blend together, as the user observes the microcosm of the memory palace within, while using it to recall representations of the macrocosm outside. The human mind is powerful enough to imagine and thus contain the entire universe in which it lives. This self-awareness – the capability of thinking of the external world and observing oneself thinking – is illustrated in the artwork by two tiny white figures representing Anne and Patrick Poirier, who are standing inside the cast of Patrick's head, on the steps marked *intuition* and *imagination*, respectively. Here are the artists considering themselves within the memory palace of their minds, contemplating not merely their own minds' capabilities, but also those of the human species at large, represented by the inscriptions on the theatre steps.

As we can imagine our own individual minds as well as the human mind in general, we are also capable of various levels of remembering. Our ability to remember stretches from the most individual experience to the most encompassing collective level, connecting the limited time of our lifespan to the *longue durée* of history, archaeology and palaeontology. In *Janus* this aspect of time is visualised by the state of the two theatres. When interviewed, Anne Poirier described the old

⁴⁴ See, for instance, the series *La Fabbrica della Memoria* (2007), or *Memoria Mundi* (2019)



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Janus*, 2018, resin, gel coat, wood, paint, 200 x 400 x 135 cm (in the background *Mnemosyne*), © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven

theatre as ‘a theatre where tragedies and comedies were performed. History took place there. That theatre has lived.’⁴⁵ This is not personal or individual history, but cultural history, preserved for and by us in the form of carefully maintained and studied archaeological remains. The ruined theatre of the artwork serves a dual function in this respect. Not only does it refer to Camillo’s memory theatre, as a metaphor for the workings of memory itself; it is also a model of an ancient Greek theatre, an architectural design which is found all throughout the Mediterranean region and which features heavily in our collective memory of the past.

Like the two-faced Roman god Janus, the theatres of the artwork point both to the ruins of the past and to an unrealised and ideal future. The history and the future of the human species live together inside the human mind. This poorly understood aspect of our identity, both a function of the anatomical brain and so much more than that, is our true home. We all live inside our minds, wandering our individual memory palaces, filled with the images that recall our personal and collective histories. The artists have, in their own words, ‘tried to search and build this Memory, to understand this mysterious function that constitutes our being’.⁴⁶ The two colossal heads, their theatres and the miniature figures standing within represent the outcome of a biological evolution which has given rise to a unique species, capable of self-reflection, memory and collective abstract thought.

Inhabiting the Memory Palace

Do Ho Suh and the Poiriers are just two examples among many of artists exploring the relationship between memory and the home. In these artistic explorations, the memory palace often features, either as direct reference to the ancient method of *artificial* memory or as indirect echo of the workings of Quintilian’s *natural* memory. As a trope, it allows both the artist and the audience to ponder the ways in which our homes become containers of our personal and collective memories, a process so intuitive to our species that

⁴⁵ De Pont Museum, *Anne & Patrick Poirier in De Pont*, op cit, 3:00–3:08

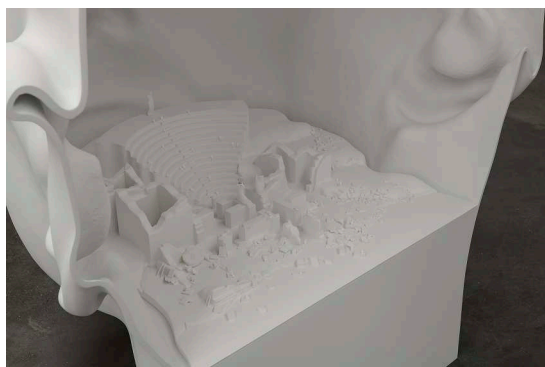
⁴⁶ Marcella Manni, Anne and Patrick Poirier et al, *Anne e Patrick Poirier*, op cit, p 11



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Janus*, 2018, resin, gel coat, wood, paint, 200 x 400 x 135 cm, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Janus*, 2018, detail, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven



Anne and Patrick Poirier, *Janus*, 2018, detail, © Anne & Patrick Poirier, Adagp 2018, De Pont Museum, Tilburg and Galerie Mitterrand, photo: Deidi von Schaeven

it is recognised without expert knowledge by all humans. In Bachelard's discussion of topoanalysis, the intricate connections between memories, the home and the memory palace are elegantly summed up:

Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are 'housed'. Our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms', we learn to 'abide' within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them...⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op cit, p 21